

Forthcoming in *The Routledge Handbook of Practical Reason*, eds., Ruth Chang and Kurt Sylvan, New York: Routledge, March 2021.

What is it to be a Rational Agent?

Ruth Chang

Abstract: What is it to be a rational agent? The orthodox answer to this question can be summarized by a slogan: Rationality is a matter of recognizing and responding to reasons. But is the orthodoxy correct? In this paper, I explore an alternative way of thinking about what it is to be a rational agent according to which a central activity of rational agency is the creation of reasons. I explain how the idea of metaphysical grounding can help make sense of the idea that as rational agents we can, quite literally, create reasons. I end by suggesting a reason to take this alternative view of rational agency seriously. The orthodoxy faces a challenge: how do rational agents make choices within ‘well-formed choice situations’? By allowing that we have the power to create reasons, we have a satisfying and attractive solution to this question.

What is it to be a rational agent? The orthodox answer to this question, at least among analytic philosophers, can be summarized by a slogan: *Rationality is a matter of recognizing and responding to reasons.*¹ When you wake every morning, for example, you have reasons to have a balanced breakfast, be on time for work, and be respectful to the people you encounter throughout your day. You may also have reasons to believe that the sun is shining, that if you don’t hurry you’ll be late for work, and that SARS-CoV-2 virus is here to stay. Being a

¹ See e.g., Susan Wolf (1990), Joseph Raz (1986, 1999, 2000), Thomas Scanlon (1998), Derek Parfit (2011), Jonathan Dancy (2000, 2004, 2018), among many others. Sometimes the orthodoxy is expressed in terms of values or oughts; being a rational agent is a matter of recognizing values/what you ought to do and then responding appropriately to what you recognize. The reasons at issue here are *normative reasons*, and the kind of rational agency of interest is the substantive rational agency relating agents to normative reasons rather than the ‘structural’ rationality relating an agent’s movements of mind.

rational agent is primarily a matter of recognizing these reasons and then responding to them in the right way – for example, by having a balanced breakfast and believing that you’ll be late if you don’t hurry.

This orthodoxy seems both plausible and attractive. After all, what else could the central activities of rational agency be? Of course, the slogan states the view in its barest, skeletal form, and there is more to being a rational agent than simply recognizing and responding to reasons. You have to have certain other capacities, too, like a decent memory and the ability to make inferences.² But the job description of being a rational agent consists primarily in these two tasks: *recognition* and appropriate *response*. Indeed, the bulk of philosophical work about rationality and reasons can be seen as trying to clarify and deepen these two main components of rational agency.

Some questions philosophers have tried to answer concerning *recognition* include: What are reasons? What is the nature of the normativity of reasons? How do we come to recognize a reason? Does recognizing a reason require believing that it is a reason or does it involve having some other form of acquaintance with it? How does recognizing a reason get a ‘grip’ on rational agents – motivationally or by having rational authority? Is the reason that is recognized *evidence* for something? Does recognition require deliberation, if only implicitly? How does automatic action, which accounts for the bulk of our movements as rational agents, figure in an account of rational agency? Is there a special faculty of intuition by which we come to recognize something as a reason?

And some questions philosophers have tried to answer concerning appropriate *response* include: What is it to respond to a reason? Is it a matter of having certain mental states such as intentions that are caused or otherwise responsive to the reason? Does responding to a reason involve mechanistic or sub-personal

² For further discussion of other, arguably subsidiary, capacities rational agents require, see e.g., Joseph Raz (2011).

processes that move us from one mental state to another or from one mental state, like intention, to action? What is it to respond appropriately to a reason? Must we act *for* a recognized reason for our response to be appropriate? What is it to act for a reason? How do we put our reasons together so that we can respond to them appropriately? What normative relations hold among reasons – outweighing, bracketing, cancelling, excluding, defeating, trumping, and more? Do our reasons always tell us what it is rational to do or believe, or do they sometimes ‘run out’? If reasons run out, then what?

It is no exaggeration to say that the orthodoxy about rational agency, sometimes understood in different terms, has enjoyed preeminence for at least the past twenty-four centuries. But is it correct? Is being a rational agent centrally and primarily a matter of recognizing reasons and then responding to them appropriately? Or might there be some other central activity of rational agency that the orthodoxy overlooks?

My aim in this chapter is to explore, in a rough-and-ready way, an alternative view of what it is to be a rational agent. My focus will be exclusively on *practical* rational agency and *practical* normative reasons. (There are interesting – and far more controversial – analogues in theoretical rational agency that I leave aside here.) According to this alternative, the primary activities of a rational agent are not simply recognizing and responding to reasons but also, crucially, *creating* them.

This unorthodox alternative takes as its springboard a fundamental complaint against the orthodoxy: it assumes too *passive* a view of what it is to be a rational agent. In particular, the orthodoxy posits a passive relation between the *agent*, on the one hand, and *which reasons she has*, on the other. The agent plays no direct role in determining *which* are her reasons; reasons are all *given* to her and never *created* by her. We might call this the ‘Passivist View’ of rational agency according to which all normative reasons are given to agents and never created by

them. The alternative, ‘Activist View’ maintains that a central part of being a rational agent is *creating* reasons. It is this Activist View that I want to explore here.³

But can we *create* reasons? I suggest a framework for thinking about reasons, borrowed from metaphysicians, that makes sense of the idea that we can, quite literally, create reasons. I explain *how it could be possible* for rational agents to create reasons and explore some upshots of created reasons for thinking about rational agency and reasons.

Now a number of questions and objections immediately arise in response to the idea that we can create reasons. The most obvious include: i) if we can create reasons, then it seems that we can make it true that maiming, murder, and mayhem are justified, but that is clearly mistaken; ii) creating reasons, if we really do literally create them, is an arbitrary matter, but reasons aren’t arbitrary in this way; and iii) so-called created reasons aren’t created at all but are just ordinary non-created reasons that come about in various ways, such as by our adopting policies for acting or deliberating. I have tried to address these particular objections elsewhere (Chang 2013a, 2013b, 2017), and no doubt more could be said about each of them. For now, I must ask the reader to put these and other worries aside, as my aim here is not to provide a defense of the Activist View. Instead I want to suggest a positive consideration for thinking that the Activist View might be correct.⁴ If we assume, by hypothesis, that the Passivist orthodoxy is true, we quickly run into the problem of how rational agents can appropriately form tractable or ‘well-formed’ choice situations within which they can

³ This distinction between the ‘Passivist’ and ‘Activist’ views of rational agency cuts across many other ‘active’ vs. ‘passive’ distinctions in the philosophy of practical reason. In this volume, Sarah Buss discusses ways in which an agent can be both active and passive that cut across the distinction drawn here.

⁴ Other considerations in favour include ways in which created reasons can i) answer two puzzles about rational choice (Chang (2009)), ii) explain the special reasons we have in committed relationships (2013b), and iii) provide us with an account of ‘hard choices’ (Chang 2017).

contemplate alternatives and choose among them. By allowing that we have the power to create reasons, we have a satisfying and attractive solution to the problem, a solution that, I argue, is more satisfying and attractive than those that the Passivist orthodoxy can offer.

1. A Grounding Framework for Reasons

Suppose that you are good with numbers. Suppose too that your being good with numbers is a reason for you to pursue a career in accounting. In virtue of what is your being good with numbers a reason to do so? What makes this rather ordinary consideration about you a reason for you to pursue accounting, as opposed to, say, mountaineering or in interior design?

Normative reasons have *grounds*; there is something in virtue of which a consideration, like being good with numbers, is a reason for you to do something. Metaphysicians propose that the *ground* of a fact is some consideration(s) in virtue of which that fact holds.⁵ We can suppose that the ground of a fact in some sense *explains* the fact. What grounds the fact that p and q are the fact, p, and the fact, q. Those two facts explain why the fact that p and q holds. What grounds the fact that the substance in the glass is water is the fact that the substance in the glass has the chemical composition of H₂O. Having that chemical composition is that in virtue of which the substance is water and explains why the substance is water.

With respect to the normative, there are two main grounding relations. One holds within first-order normative theorizing, as when we might claim that the ground of being the right action is the fact that the action maximizes happiness for the

⁵ See Fine (2001) for the canonical contemporary statement of the notion of grounding; see also Schaffer (2009) and Rosen (2010). For an overview of the notion, including its history, see Raven (2020). I assume that ‘considerations’, which include facts, are grounds and that what they ground are ‘facts’. There are various niceties concerning ground that need not trouble us here.

greatest number. The fact that it maximizes happiness explains why the action is right. Another holds within meta-normative theorizing, as when we might claim that what grounds the fact that something is a reason is God's command that it be a reason. God's command that being a hoofed animal is a reason not to eat it explains why being a hoofed animal is a reason not to eat it. Our interest here is in the meta-normative relation of grounding, and in particular, in the question, 'In virtue of what is some consideration, such as being good with numbers, a normative reason for action, such as pursuing a career in accounting?' We seek an explanation of why some consideration is a reason.

Grounding theorists allow that multiple considerations may ground a single fact. Any single consideration that is part of a set of considerations that ground a fact is a 'partial ground' of that fact. The fact that p is a partial ground of the fact that p & q. Some partial grounds are 'primary' or critical to the explanation of the fact, while others are 'background' partial grounds, or, to borrow from normative explanation, 'enablers'.⁶ The fact that all crows are black is grounded in the fact that each crow is black but also, it might be thought, in the fact these instances of crows make up the totality of crows. While each fact is a partial ground of the fact that all crows are black, the facts that each crow is black are the primary facts in virtue of which all crows are black. The 'totality' fact is what we might think of as a background or 'enabling' condition that makes the primary grounding facts able to ground the fact that all crows are black. With respect to our meta-normative grounding question, we are interested in the 'primary' partial ground in virtue of which a consideration is a reason, allowing that there may various other partial grounds that play enabling conditions. To mark our interest, we can call the primary partial ground of a reason its 'source'.

2. The Sources of Normative Reasons

⁶ In the context of first-order normative explanation, see Jonathan Dancy (2004, 38-39).

Return to the fact that you are good with numbers. By hypothesis, this fact is a reason for you to pursue accounting. What is the source of this reason – in virtue of what is it a reason? Philosophers have offered three broad answers to the meta-normative question.⁷

The *source externalist* maintains that your being good with numbers is a reason to pursue accounting in virtue of something normative, such as the value of an accounting career for someone who is good with numbers. The ‘source’ of your reason is given by some external normative fact, such as the goodness of pursuing accounting if you’re good with numbers. (It may also be a reason to pursue mathematics, applied physics, or engineering, but we’ll stick with accounting). Some source externalists allow that the explanation of why considerations are reasons bottom out in the normative fact that that the consideration is a reason. It’s just a normative fact that being good with numbers is a reason to pursue accounting, and there is no more explanation to be had. In this case, the reason is ungrounded, or for our purposes, we can say, loosely, that it is grounded in a normative fact – the normative fact that the reason is a reason. Source externalists include Plato, Aristotle, Samuel Clark, Henry Sidgwick, H. A. Prichard, G. E. Moore, David Ross, Jonathan Dancy, David Enoch, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Joseph Raz, Thomas Scanlon, Russ Shafer-Landau, Jonathan Skorupski, Judith Jarvis Thomson, Jay Wallace, and Ralph Wedgwood.

The *source internalist*, by contrast, maintains that a consideration is a reason in virtue of some internal noncognitive state, such as a desire, aim, or goal. Suppose you have a desire to spend your waking hours working with numbers. According to the source internalist, the fact that you are good with numbers is a reason for you to pursue accounting in virtue of your desire to spend your days working with

⁷ Even without the contemporary notion of ground to hand, a long line of philosophers have sought to *explain* in an asymmetric, not merely modal and noncausal way, *why* something is a reason, an obligation, a value, or what one should do in terms that go beyond first order normative theorizing. Some have thought that the notion of ground goes at least as far back as Plato and Aristotle (Correia & Schneider 2012).

numbers. Your desire explains why being good with numbers is a reason for you to pursue accounting. More precisely, what explains why your being good with numbers is a reason to pursue accounting is the *relation* between being good with numbers, the action of pursuing a career in accounting, and your desire to spend your days working with numbers: being good with numbers is a reason to pursue accounting in virtue of the relational fact that doing so under the condition that you are good with numbers will satisfy your desire to spend your days working with numbers. Some leading source internalists include David Hume, W.D. Falk, the early Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams, Peter Railton, Richard Brandt, Steven Darwall, Kate Manne, Julia Markovits, Shaun Nichols, John Rawls, Michael Smith, Mark Schroeder, Michael Smith, David Sobel, Sharon Street, and Valerie Tiberius.

Source internalism is so called because the source of your reasons is internal to you – given by your desires. Similarly, source externalism is so called because the source of your reasons is external to you – given by facts in the normative world. But this contrast between a source being internal as opposed to external to you obscures another important distinction, that between sources over which we have no volitional control and those over which we do. It is this latter contrast that marks the distinction between reasons *given* to us – whether their source is external or internal to us – and reasons we *create*.

Like normative facts, which ground externalist reasons, the fact that we desire something is not something over which we have volitional control. To see this, consider an example adapted from Elizabeth Anscombe. Suppose I offer you a million dollars if you want to eat a saucer of mud *for its own sake*. Try as hard as you might, you are unable to want this. You can of course want to eat it for the sake of the financial bonanza on offer, and you can undertake measures to cause yourself to form the desire – undergo hypnosis, say – but you cannot *as a matter of will* desire to eat the saucer of mud for its own sake. This is because desires are not under our volitional control, they are just things that happen to us, assailing

us, unbidden. The unlucky amongst us find themselves with desires to spend beyond their means, to engage in sexual activities with the dead, and even to murder their enemies. The desires we have are a product of our causal paths and native psychology, but not something we can will in or out of existence.

Reasons whose sources are not under our volitional control are *given* reasons; they are given to us, not created by us. Their grounds are in normative facts or desires you happen to have, not in your own willing. The Passivist View of rational agency assumes that all normative reasons are given in this sense. The Activist View, by contrast, maintains that some or perhaps all reasons are created: their grounds are under our volitional control. The Activist View rejects source externalist and source internalism as global views about the source of normative reasons. In its most plausible form it is hybrid; it allows both given and created reasons.⁸ To see how normative reasons can be created, we must look to a third possible answer to the meta-normative grounding question.

3. Source Voluntarism about Normative Reasons

What we might call ‘source voluntarism’ maintains that a fact is a reason in virtue of the agent’s volition – her willing something. Your facility with numbers might be a *given* reason to pursue accounting in virtue of the goodness of pursuing accounting under this condition or your desire to spend your days with numbers. But it might *also* be a reason in virtue of your volition. In this case, since the ground of your reason – your willing something – is a matter over which you have volitional control, you have volitional control over whether you have this reason. We can call reasons whose normative source is in willing ‘will-based’ reasons. By willing this rather than that, you *create* one will-based reason rather than another. We can, then, quite straightforwardly and literally *create* reasons – will-based

⁸ I moot such a view in Chang (2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2017), where I favour a hybrid of externalist given reasons and created will-based ones.

ones – by willing their grounds. Source voluntarism is the key component of the Activist View of rational agency.

It is worth mentioning two theories that might be thought to be source voluntarist but are not. One is Kantian. According to Kantian and neo-Kantian views, the reasons you have to act are constrained by the supreme principle of morality, the Categorical Imperative. This supreme principle is the law governing the will. And so it might be thought that Kantians ground reasons in the will. But this is not so. There is a sense in which your reasons derive from your will, but crucially what you will is not under your volitional control in the sense at issue. Your will is bound by the Categorical Imperative; it's not up to you to will this as opposed to that and thereby it's not up to you to create this reason rather than that. Put another way, we have no volitional control over our willing; what we will is determined by the law governing our will, the supreme principle of morality.⁹ Kantians offer two explanations of the grounds of this principle. Some, like Elizabeth Anderson (1993) and Barbara Herman (1993), explain the Categorical Imperative in terms of the intrinsic value of persons or of humanity as such. Others, like Christine Korsgaard (2008, 2009), argue that the law governing the will is a constitutive feature of action. Either way, we cannot *create* reasons; our reasons are given to us by the intrinsic value of persons or by a normative principle, the Categorical Imperative, that is a constitutive governing principle of action. On this (admittedly not uncontroversial) way of understanding Kantian views, reasons have their source not in something over which we have volitional control but are given to us.

A second kind of theory that might be thought to be voluntarist is existentialism. But existentialists do not think that we create reasons; on the contrary, they think that the very idea of reasons and rational agency is a chimera. Existentialists, on

⁹ Some neo-Kantians allow that you can make a contribution to how your will conforms to the Categorical Imperative by, for example, having a practical identity that guides the reasons you have (Korsgaard 1996) or by choosing things that are good for you but not required by the Categorical Imperative (Hill 2002:260ff).

standard interpretations, are thorough-going nihilists about reasons, rationality, and value. Human life is marked not by rational agency but by *existential* agency. To be an existential agent is to understand that there are no normative reasons that exist antecedent to what we choose to do; each of us simply chooses, unguided by reasons. Of course, after we choose, we may project what appears to be a normative structure of ‘reasons’ and ‘values’ in terms of which our choices are intelligible. But what we spread onto the world has no normative force; the ‘reasons’ and ‘values’ to which we may appeal to make sense of our choices after we have made them are in no way binding on us. In short, existentialists are not source voluntarists about reasons since they eschew the very idea of a normative reason.

The source voluntarist maintains that the activity of willing itself is that in virtue of which something is a reason. Since our willing is something over which we have volitional control, by willing something we can, quite literally, *create* a reason. If I will X, I create reason Y. If I will A, I create a different reason, B. We create reasons by having volitional control over the source of those reasons. The Passivist orthodoxy recognizes only reasons that are given to us, not created by us. The Activist View, by contrast, allows that part of being a rational agent is creating will-based reasons.

4. What Do We Will When We Create Reasons?

The Activist View maintains that rational agency involves the power to create reasons by willing something. But what do we will when we create a reason? I suggest that by willing some fact, F, to be a reason, we thereby make F a reason. More precisely, we create a will-based reason R to ϕ , by willing that some fact, F, be a reason, R, to ϕ . In short, we create will-based reasons by willing *that they be reasons*.

A rough analogy will help. Willing something to be a reason is akin to stipulating the meaning of a word. Take the nonsense word ‘corisplay’. You might stipulate that ‘corisplay’ means ‘the sound of leaves rustling in the wind’. (The Greek word ‘psithurism’ has this meaning but no English word does). By stipulating that in English ‘corisplay’ means ‘the sound of leaves rustling in the wind’, you thereby make it the case that ‘corisplay’ has this meaning (and is thereby a synonym of the Greek word ‘psithurism.’) By your linguistic stipulation, you confer meaning on this expression, and it thereby has that meaning.

Willing something to be a reason is what we might think of as *normative stipulation*; by willing some consideration to be a reason, you confer on it the normativity of a reason, and it thereby has that normativity. By stipulating that something is a reason, it thereby becomes a reason since your willing-it-to-be-a-reason is that in virtue of which it is a reason.¹⁰ The activity of normative stipulation – willing a consideration to be a reason – is the source of that consideration’s being a reason.

Moreover, like linguistic stipulation, normative stipulation confers normativity *only for you*. When you stipulate the meaning of ‘corisplay’, that is its meaning only for you; you can’t make that nonsense expression have that meaning for me. Just as you can’t create meaning for others, you can’t create reasons for others. Of course, when you go around using ‘corisplay’ to refer to the sound of rustling leaves in the wind, your friends might start using the word in that way too. There can be downstream effects of stipulated meanings that end up resulting in non-stipulated meaning. (Perhaps all neologisms are generated in this way). Similarly, when you normatively stipulate something to be a reason, you create a will-based reason, and having that will-based reason may have downstream normative effects; if for example you act on that will-based reason, you may now have given

¹⁰ An alternative way to understand the analogy is to think that by linguistic stipulation, you assign an expression meaning, and that by normative stipulation, you assign normative reasons-giving force to a consideration.

reasons you would not have otherwise had. Compare you and your Doppelgänger, both contemplating whether to pursue a career in accounting. You both have the same *given* reasons to pursue accounting, but if you normatively stipulate that your facility with numbers is a reason for you to be an accountant while your Doppelgänger does not, you will have more reasons, all-things-considered, to pursue accounting than your Doppelgänger.

Now for a significant difference. When we engage in linguistic stipulation, we can be understood as adopting what Michael Bratman (1987, 1999, 2007, 2014) calls a ‘policy’. When you stipulate that ‘corisplay’ means ‘the sound of leaves rustling in the wind’, you decide, going forward, to treat ‘corisplay’ as meaning ‘the sound of leaves rustling in the wind’. Although there is a sense in which, without retracting your stipulation, you make a mistake if you take ‘corisplay’ to mean something else, the mistake need not be one of failing to follow your normative reasons. The normativity at play when you stipulate the meaning of a word is of the same sort as when you stipulate the rules of an invented game – you make a mistake when you violate your own stipulations, but only relative to the game, which you may have no normative reason to play.¹¹ When we normatively stipulate a reason, by contrast, we quite literally create a normative reason. If we fail to give that reason the normativity it is due, then we are rationally criticizable for failing to respond appropriately to our normative reasons.

The question naturally arises, Why does willing (that something be a reason) confer the normativity of a reason as opposed to the lesser normativity relativized to a game or mere standard? This leads to a key feature of will-based reasons. I suggest that your willing that something be a reason can be that in virtue of which that thing is a reason because willing-something-to-be-a-reason involves *putting*

¹¹ You might make a mistake of what Thomas Scanlon (1998) usefully calls ‘structural rationality’, the rationality governing proper movements of and collections of attitudes of the mind. Structural rationality is the kind of rationality at stake when we take your attitudes, policies, and plans as given, and evaluate whether they properly belong together and support new attitudes.

your very agency behind its being a reason. Put another way, willing that something be a reason is *committing* your very self to its being a reason. When you commit to something's being a reason, you stand behind its being a reason. Normative stipulation differs from linguistic stipulation because the 'commitment' involved in normative stipulation is the commitment of one's very agency: you stipulate with your very agency, as it were, that your talent with numbers is a reason for you to pursue a career in accounting -- you put yourself behind your skill as a reason to pursue this particular sort of career.¹² There is no such agential commitment in the case of linguistic stipulation.¹³ Thus, according to the unorthodox view, being a rational agent involves putting your very self behind considerations and making them reasons. It understands rational agency as *active* in this deep way; rational agents not only recognize and respond to reasons, but they engage their very selves in the activity of creating them.

5. Some Upshots for Normative Reasons and Rational Agency

The possibility that some consideration, such as your ability with numbers, is both a given reason and a will-based one suggests a revision in orthodox practices of individuating reasons. On the orthodoxy, reasons are individuated simply by their 'content', that is, by the consideration that is the reason. Once we allow that something can be a reason in virtue of two quite different sources, it makes sense to individuate reasons not simply by their 'content' but also by their source. In this way, the very same fact – that you are good with numbers – can be both a given and a will-based reason.

¹² Again, willing something to be a reason is not a Bratmanian self-governing policy; such policies are not grounds of normative reasons but elements of an explanation of how an agent acts (see Bratman 2007, 2014).

¹³ You could, of course, commit – in the sense of interest – to your linguistic stipulation that 'corisplay' mean 'the sound of rustling leaves' to be a reason to use 'corisplay' in this way.

We could, of course, continue to individuate reasons by their ‘content’, but in this case we must allow that a single content could have normativity that derives from two sources. Rational agents can endow a reason, which might already have one source of normativity in a normative fact or desire, with ‘additional’ will-based normativity. Your talent with numbers is a given reason to pursue accounting. By putting yourself behind your talent being a reason to pursue accounting, you endow that given reason with additional normativity whose source is your commitment. The Activist View, then, can be understood either as allowing for will-based reasons in addition to given ones, *or* as allowing that the normativity of a reason can be in part ‘given’ and in part ‘will-based’.

Nor must we assume that a reason must be a reason for everyone. Some reasons are reasons just for you or just for me. Will-based reasons are reasons *only* for the agent who creates them. They are ‘agent-relative’ reasons in an extended sense: the source of the reason makes essential reference to the agent for whom they are a reason.

This does not mean that you and I cannot ‘disagree’ about the reasons you have, say, to pursue a career in accounting. But the ‘disagreement’ has to be understood in the right way. Suppose your given reasons do not give you most reason to pursue a career in accounting. But you create a will-based reason for yourself to do so, and now, all things considered, you have most reason to pursue accounting. I might say to you, ‘You’re wrong to think you have most reason to pursue accounting’. What I say can be understood as saying, truthfully, is that you do not most given reasons to pursue accounting. In this case there is no genuine disagreement. Now suppose we have both drunk the KoolAid and are on board with will-based reasons. I might fail to recognize that you have created a will-based reason for yourself, in which case what I say is false. But suppose I recognize that you have created a will-based reason for yourself but nevertheless say that you’re wrong to think that you have most all-things-considered reasons – given and will-based – to pursue a career in accounting. In this case, I might be

saying something along the lines of: ‘From where I stand, you should not have created a will-based reason to pursuing accounting – you shouldn’t have normatively stipulated such a reason at all or perhaps you should have normatively stipulated a reason to pursue mathematics instead.’¹⁴ While recognizing that you have created a will-based reason for yourself to pursue accounting and that therefore you have such a reason, I can nevertheless judge that your creating this reason was misguided or imprudent or silly. I make these judgements about your reasons from my own point of view – how I would see things were I in your shoes.

What is crucial about judgments about created reasons is that there is no neutral evaluative perspective from which one can meaningfully say ‘it was bad or wrong or unjustified of you to create that reason’. This is because the creation of will-based reasons is not itself an activity guided by reasons. (This does not entail that you can create reasons willy-nilly, but that is another story I have tried to tell elsewhere).¹⁵ I can make evaluative judgments about your will-based reasons from my point of view – I would not have created those reasons, for instance. But it makes no sense to say from your perspective that you make a mistake of reasons in creating a will-based reason for yourself. Creating reasons is not itself a reason-based activity. It’s just something you do.

This leads us to the deepest difference between Passivist and Activist Views of rational agency. The Passivist View maintains that what you do as a rational agent is *guided* by reasons. As a rational agent, you recognize reasons, and your response is appropriate insofar as it is guided by the reasons you correctly recognize.¹⁶ To be a rational agent, you just need to follow – be guided by – the

¹⁴ This way of thinking about will-based reasons sidesteps the problem of accounting for disagreement in cases where the evaluation of a claim is sensitive to context. Cf. e.g. MacFarlane (2014).

¹⁵ This is probably the most obvious of the three obvious objections mentioned at the outset. I attempt to address it in Chang (2013a and 2013b).

¹⁶ Guidance by reasons arguable holds of automatic action, too. A tennis pro, without deliberation, recognizes and responds to reasons to flick her wrist like so in certain

dictates of reasons given to you. The Activist View sees rational agency quite differently. Being rational centrally involves activities that are *not guided by reasons*; being a rational agent crucially involves *creating* reasons, an activity that is itself not reasons-guided. Central to being a rational agent is exercising our volition, without the guidance of given reasons, to create reasons for ourselves to do this rather than that. It might be said that only the Activist View are rational agents truly free.

6. The Problem of Well-Formed Choice Situations

So far we've outlined some key features of the Activist View of rational agency. But do we have any reason to think it is correct? That is obviously too large a question to attempt to answer here. Instead, I'll end by raising a problem for the Passivist View to which, I believe, the Activist View can provide a satisfying and attractive answer.

The problem can be understood as one of how we should go about recognizing and responding to reasons and, in particular, how we can appropriately exercise paradigmatic rational agency by choosing one option over another. Starting with the hypothesis that the Passivist orthodoxy is true, tackling this problem will lead us to the Activist alternative. Or so I will suggest.

Right now, you are lounging on your living room couch, reading this paper. What reasons do you have, and how should you respond to them? You might think that you have reasons to continue reading, reasons to get up and stretch, reasons to read a novel instead. Or maybe you have reasons to go to the grocery store, pick up your child from soccer practice, fold the socks in your sock drawer, scrub the bathroom floor. To come to think of it, you might also have reasons to get out

circumstances. A reason for thinking that even automatic action is guided by reasons is the phenomenology of failure to be so guided. In a post-mortem of a match, her coach will point out the reasons she had to flick her wrist like so.

your checkbook and make a donation to Oxfam or, indeed, get on a plane to volunteer to help in a place where there are many malnourished children. And so on.

How does the orthodoxy suggest you proceed? There are two main approaches. On the ‘one-tier’ approach, the reasons you have and should recognize are all the considerations that count in favour (or against) *every* action you could possibly perform right now. This way of understanding rational agency arguably lurks behind classic forms of utilitarianism and crude forms of consequentialism. Bentham (1970: 38ff), for instance, thought that the measure of the utility of a possible action depends on the pleasure and pain it would produce not only horizontally across space but also vertically through time into the future. The reasons you have right now are given by the utility of all the possible actions you could perform right now, and the one that maximizes happiness for the greatest number is what you have most reason to do. Since the utility of saving lives is always greater than the utility of reading a philosophy paper your appropriate response is – always – to save lives. It is this kind of one-tier thinking that, I suspect, underwrites many of Peter Singer’s arguments for giving away most of your wealth to the needy and more recent arguments for effective altruism.

The one-tier approach is too demanding. Although we don’t have the capacity to consider all the reasons for all the actions we could possibly perform right now, we have the capacity to see that most of the usual options are not ones that maximize utility or promote the most significant values. An approach to rationality that makes us irrational all the time is no approach at all. As an intuitive matter, when we make a choice, we do so among a restricted set of options, against a restricted background of circumstances, governed by a restricted set of aims, purposes, and values that matter in the choice.

Thus most philosophers adopt a two-(or multi-)tier approach: a rational agent recognizes and responds to reasons within a restricted set of circumstances,

values, and options, that is, within what we might call a ‘well-formed choice situation’. Well-formed choice situations provide a second, restricted tier within which choice takes place. A well-formed choice situation is a circumscribed set of circumstances – as opposed to every circumstance in the world – a relatively small, finite set of alternatives – as opposed to every action you could possibly perform right now, however finely individuated – and a reasonably well-defined set of normative criteria that provide *what matters* in the choice between the alternatives – as opposed to all the values there are. To choose between a relatively narrow set of options, you must be in a well-formed choice situation. If the choice situation is not well-formed, your options are not well-formed, and you won’t be in a position to determine what matters in the choice to begin with. Nor will you be able to justify your choice to others; your choice to drink coffee cannot be justified against a background of severe human suffering that it would be easy for you to help alleviate without your being justified in being in a choice situation in which helping ameliorate suffering is not one of the options.

But now we have a problem. How do you ‘get into’ one well-formed choice situation as opposed to another?¹⁷ And what is your justification for being in one situation as opposed to another?

There are two kinds of answer to these questions, one non-normative and the other normative. Perhaps the non-normative facts – including past actions and human psychology, dispositions, capacities and limitations – make salient certain choice situations over others. You took the action of enrolling at university, became a philosophy major, and now your philosophy professor has assigned you this chapter as homework. Choice situations in which what matters is completing your homework are especially salient to you. But salience need not determine which choice situation you are in, and nor, certainly, whether you are justified in

¹⁷ More precisely, there may be range of well-formed choice situations in which one makes a choice, but the differences between situations within this range will not be important for our purposes.

being in that choice situation. You have the capacity as a rational agent to step back and ask yourself, ‘Is this a choice situation I should be in?’ Being in a choice situation can itself be a choice.

Perhaps normative facts – like the fact that you have a reason to be in one choice situation rather than another – can determine which choice situation you should be in, and then, as a rational agent, you can respond to those reasons and get yourself to be in that choice situation. Of course, it is not enough that you have a reason to be in a choice situation, to solve the problem of justifying being in a choice situation, you have to have *most* or perhaps *sufficient reason* to be in that choice situation.¹⁸ But how could it be true that you have most or sufficient reason to be in a choice situation in which what matters is finishing your homework when there are countless people suffering in ways that you could help alleviate?

¹⁸ Views in the neighbourhood can be coopted to support the claim that reasons determine which choice situation you should be in. For example, in discussing the difference between ‘optional’ and ‘sufficient’ reasons, Joseph Raz (1997:97) writes: “That the chair is comfortable is something good about the chair, and we can say that is a reason to sit on it, but such a reason is not a sufficient reason. If one has reason to rest one’s legs then one has a sufficient reason to sit on this chair because it is comfortable.” Raz’ idea is that some considerations that make action eligible are ‘optional’ – they aren’t ‘sufficient’ reasons to do something – and can be made sufficient only by another reason. This is not the same idea as but close to the idea that something can be a reason for an action only if it is a reason in a well-formed choice situation in which one has a reason to be. The comfortableness of the chair is a reason to sit in it only if you have a reason to be in a choice situation in which being comfortable matters and sitting in a chair is one of your options. Thomas Scanlon (2014:106-108) makes similar points about the optionality of reasons. But he goes on to make further illuminating points about the ‘weights’ of reasons, which can also be coopted to support the claim here. Scanlon (2014:114) suggests that in ascertaining the ‘weights’ of reasons, policies and requirements of valuable relationships can play a role. He writes: “In order to lose weight by dieting, or to become healthier through exercise, one needs to have a general policy of giving greater weight to following one’s diet or exercise plan than to (at least most of) the considerations of pleasure or convenience that provide reasons for deviating from this plan on a given day.” (Scanlon 2014: 114). Moreover, requirements of personal relationships can determine the weightiness of certain reasons: friendship “involves...taking a certain view of the reasons one has. For example, one would not be a good friend if one did not give priority to one’s friend’s needs [over personal cost].” (Scanlon 2014: 114, see also Raz 1986: 345-366). We might adapt Scanlon’s remarks here to support the idea that policies and requirements of valuable relationships, can give us reasons to be in some choice situations over others.

We can begin to answer this question on behalf of the Passivist orthodoxy by affirming that the question, ‘Which choice situation should I be in?’ presents the agent with a distinctive choice that is governed by *agential values*, such as autonomy, well-being, and meaning in life. (The choice, here, of course need not be the kind of deliberative and deliberate choice in which one weighs up pros and cons. It is a choice in the broad sense of a being an intentional human action that is guided by and evaluable by reasons.) With respect to these values, it becomes unclear whether the appropriate choice situation to be in is always one that prioritizes relieving the suffering of others. Respecting agential values does not require us to maximize utility; such values give us the freedom to choose choice situations in which we can live life autonomously, well, and with meaning. Doing the maximal good for others may not always be the best kind of choice situation to be in with respect to these values. We can suppose that these values make a *range* of choice situations rationally *eligible* to an agent at a point in time.¹⁹

What could the Passivist say next? If there is a range of eligible choice situations open to an agent at any given time, then the natural thing for the Passivist to say is that the agent has *sufficient* reason to be in any of them. By hypothesis, you have no more reason to be in one rather than another of a range of eligible choice situations. This leaves us with the following picture: If someone asks you why you chose to be in a choice situation in which your options were to read some philosophy or get a cup of coffee as opposed to being in a choice situation in which your options were to write a check to Oxfam or get a plane to volunteer your services in an area devastated by a natural disaster, all you say by way of reply is, ‘Well, I had sufficient reason to be in either choice situation, and I just chose to be in the one rather than the other. And I could have chosen differently, but I didn’t’.

¹⁹ Cf Raz’s (1997) ‘classical conception’ of rational agency according to which reasons are considerations that make actions eligible. Here, the idea is that rational agency involves reasons that make choice situations, not actions, eligible. We might go further and say that the choice situations are *on a par* with one another (Chang 2002).

This answer strikes me as deeply unsatisfying. If we aggregate choice situations over the course of a life, it would follow that there is no normative explanation of why a given life consists in one set of choice situations rather than another. Indeed, we could imagine a large AI machine whose job it is to randomly select for every agent on the planet one among the many eligible choice situations open to that agent at every point in time. Having such a machine determine the choice situations you face throughout your life would be compatible with the Passivist View of rational agency. Rational life is one very large toss-up. The problem with the Passivist orthodoxy is that it gives us no direct control over which choice situations we are in, and thus no direct control over how we lead our lives.

The Activist View offers an attractive alternative. Rational agents have the normative power to create will-based reasons to be in one choice situation rather than another. By creating a reason to be in one among many eligible choice situations, you create the justification for being in that choice situation rather than the others. And as a rational agent who responds to reasons, you can thereby get yourself into that choice situation since you have most reason to be in it. And as we've suggested, when you create a reason for yourself to be in one choice situation among others, you put yourself behind that reason. By putting yourself behind that reason, you make yourself into the kind of person who now has most reason to be in that choice situation rather than any others. In this way, the activity of your will allows you to *become* one kind of agent rather than another, namely, an agent who faces *these* choice situations and not *those*. You are the driver of which choice situations – and consequently which reasons – make up the story of your life.²⁰ By creating reasons for yourself, you form what I have elsewhere called your 'rational identity' (Chang 2009, 2013a).

7. The Activist View in Action

²⁰ An alternative, 'Passivist' view of 'becoming' is provided by Aristotelian specificationism (Cf. Richardson (1994), Millgram (2001) and especially Callard (2018)): we adopt inchoate, poorly specified values or ends, and part of our agency involves specifying this end and acting on reasons that are implicated in its specification.

Return to you lounging on your living room couch. There are a range of eligible choice situations you could be in right now. This range is determined by agential values like autonomy, well-being, and meaning in life. In choice situation A, what matters is getting your homework done well, and your choice is between continuing to read or getting yourself a coffee. In choice situation B, what matters is the suffering of others, and your choice is between writing a check to Oxfam or hopping a plane to volunteer your aid. In choice situation C, what matters is having fun, and your choice is between going to a movie or calling up some friends for a party. All three choice situations are eligible to you right now.

Which choice situation should you be in? The Passivist orthodoxy has only this to say: you have sufficient reasons to be in any of the three, so *just choose*. By hypothesis, there is no reason to be in one over the others. But the reasons that render the choice situations eligible on the Passivist View are *given* reasons. As far as your given reasons are concerned, there is no further justification to be had for being in one choice situation over any others. The Activist View, by contrast, allows that you might create a will-based reason to be in situation A, which then justifies your being in that choice situation. By creating a will-based reason to be in situation A, you thereby make yourself into the sort of person for whom it is true that he has most reason to be in situation A. Your friend, similarly situated, might create a will-based reason for herself to be in situation C. She thereby makes it true of herself that she has most reason to be in situation C. Iterated across a lifetime, you may create a rational identity for yourself as a nerd, and your friend, a party animal. The Activist View gives rational agents the power to craft their own identities as individuals who justifiably face certain sets of choice situations rather than others.

The path we cut through life, among the myriad choice situations rationally open to us, is justified by the will-based reasons we create. Those who champion effective altruism have cut one such path. Those who spend their hours on Wall

Street, making as much money as they can in order to live the high life, have cut another. It is only by allowing that there is more to rational agency than recognizing and responding to reasons that we can make sense of how we can be justified in crafting ourselves into the distinctive rational agents we are. Central to being a rational agent is creating reasons for ourselves to be in one choice situation rather than another. By doing so, we can determine for ourselves the reasons we have.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 1993. Value in Ethics and Economics. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1970. An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, as part of The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham, eds, J. H. Burns, J. R. Dinwiddy, F. Rosen, T. P. Schofield, London: Athlone Press; Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bratman, Michael. 1987. Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bratman, Michael 1999: Faces of Intention. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bratman, Michael. 2007. Structures of Agency: Essays. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2018. Planning, Time, and Self-Governance: Essays in Practical Rationality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buss, Sarah. 2021. 'Some Reflections on the Relationship between Reason and the Will'. This volume.
- Callard, Agnes. 2018. Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chang, Ruth. 2002. 'The Possibility of Parity' Ethics 112: 659-688.
- Chang, Ruth. 2009: 'Voluntarist Reasons and the Sources of Normativity'. In Reasons for Action, eds. Sobel and Wall, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 243-271.
- 2013a: 'Grounding Practical Normativity: Going Hybrid'. Philosophical Studies 164 (1): 163-187.
- 2013b: 'Commitments, Reasons, and the Will'. In Shafer-Landau, ed., Oxford Studies in Metaethics, 8:74-113.
- 2015. 'Comparativism: The Grounds of Rational Choice'. In Lord & Maguire, eds., Weighing Reasons. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 213-240.

- 2017: 'Hard Choices'. American Philosophical Association Journal of Philosophy, 92: 586-620.
- 2020: 'Do We Have Normative Powers?' Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume, 94: 280-300.
- Correia, Fabrice and Benjamin Schnieder, eds. 2012. Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality, Introduction, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2000. Practical Reality. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2004. Ethics Without Principles. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2018. Practical Shape. A Theory of Practical Reasoning. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit. 2001. 'The Question of Realism', Philosophers Imprint 1: 1-30.
- Herman, Barbara. 1993. The Practice of Moral Judgment. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hill, Thomas. 2002. Human Welfare and Moral Worth. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 2008. The Constitution of Agency. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- , 2009. Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacFarlane, John. 2014. Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Millgram, Elijah. 2001. Varieties of Practical Reasoning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Parfit, Derek 2011: On What Matters, vols I & II. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raven, Michael, ed. 2020: The Routledge Handbook of Metaphysical Grounding, New York: Routledge.
- Raz, Joseph. 1986. The Morality of Freedom. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Raz, Joseph. 1990. Practical Reason and Norms. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 'Incommensurability and Agency'. In Chang ed., *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 1999. Engaging Reason. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 2011. From Normativity to Responsibility. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Richardson, Henry. 1994. Practical Reasoning about Final Ends. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, Gideon. 2010. 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reducation', in Hale and Hoffman, eds., Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, Thomas. 1998. What We Owe to Each Other. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- . 2004. 'Reasons: A Puzzling Duality?' in Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith, eds., Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2014. Being Realistic About Reasons. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, J. 2009. 'On What Grounds What', in Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman, eds., Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skorupski, John. 2010. The Domain of Reasons. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, Susan. 1990. Freedom Within Reason. New York: Oxford University Press.