

Practical Cognition as Volition
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Abstract. Practical cognitivism is the view that practical reason is the self-conscious will and that practical cognition is self-conscious volition. This essay addresses two puzzles for practical cognitivism. In akratic action, I act as I understand is illegitimate and not as I understand is legitimate. In permissible action, I act as I understand is legitimate and also do not act as I understand is legitimate. In both types of action, practical cognition seems to come apart from volition. How, then, can practical reason be our will and practical cognition be volition? Practical cognitivists can solve these puzzles because the claims that practical reason is our will and that practical cognition is volition are about the nature of a capacity, and the nature of a capacity establish standards of correctness for its exercises. Akratic action is a type of erroneous exercise of practical reason as tripping is an erroneous exercise of our capacity to walk. Permissible action is a successful exercise of practical reason as stepping first with my right foot rather than my left is a successful exercise of my capacity to walk. The puzzles of akratic and permissible action do not refute practical cognitivism.

1. Human agency.

Animals have wills and can act. As a cat can pounce, so a rabbit can bounce. As a lion can roar, so an eagle can soar. Among the known animals, though, only human beings have practical reason and can act self-consciously. Only we can act as we understand is legitimate. As we might put it, all animals are capable of volition, but only we are capable of practical cognition. What, then, is practical cognition? What is its relationship to volition?

Practical cognitivism is the view that practical reason is the self-conscious will and that practical cognition is self-conscious volition. Our agency differs from that of other animals because we exercise our will through understanding the legitimacy of so exercising it, at least when we exercise it properly. That is our version of the generic volitional capacity characteristic of animals. Human beings thus have a unique type of will which we call ‘practical reason’ and are capable of a unique type of volition which we call ‘practical cognition’

Practical cognitivism has a venerable and varied pedigree. For example, Kant says that “[e]very thing in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act according to the representation of laws, i.e., according to principles, or a will. Since reason is required for deriving actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason” (Kant, 1785, 4:412). Christine Korsgaard follows him when she says that “the judgment that the action is good is not a mental state that precedes the action and causes it” because an “action is an essentially intelligible object that *embodies* its reason, the way an utterance is an essential intelligible object that embodies a thought” (Korsgaard, 2008, 228). Similarly, Aristotle characterizes our action as a constitutive part of the exercise of practical reason when he

describes a practical inference in which “I need a covering, a coat is covering: I need a coat. What I need I ought to make, I need a coat: I make a coat. And the conclusion ‘I must make a coat’ is an action (Aristotle, 1984, VII.701a12-20). John McDowell follows him in this respect, as when he rejects a view on which “[c]ognition and volition are distinct: the world—the proper sphere of cognitive capacities—is in itself an object of purely theoretical contemplation, capable of moving one to action only in conjunction with an extra factor—a state of will—contributed by oneself” in favor of a view on which practical cognition is volition or, as he puts it, virtue is a type of knowledge (McDowell, 1979, 335-6). Finally, despite the uncertain status of reason as a practical capacity in the work of his sentimentalist predecessors, Allan Gibbard says that “*thinking what I ought to do is thinking what to do*” and that “conclusions on *what to do* have an automatic bearing on what to do. ... [D]eciding ... is not ... coming to a belief in some special kind of fact” (Gibbard, 2003, ix-x; 5).

All these thinkers, in their own ways, say that practical cognition is volition or that practical reason is our will.¹ Yet despite their diversity and distinction, many philosophers take two puzzles cases in which I seem to not act as I understand is legitimate to refute practical cognitivism. In akratic action, I act as I understand is illegitimate. Perhaps I take your pudding or down the drink despite my doctor’s directive. In permissible action, I act in one of two ways which I understand are legitimate. Maybe I eat one tasty healthy moral meal over another or opt for entertainment over education in the evening.² In both types of action, my understanding of the legitimacy of acting in some way comes apart from my acting in that way. Practical cognition seems to separate from volition.

The puzzles of akratic and permissible action concern whether practical cognitivism can explain the possibility of such actions. Many philosophers say that it cannot. They opt for *theoretical cognitivism*, which is the view that we have an intellectual capacity to understand the legitimacy of actions whose exercises can influence those of a separate volitional capacity. They explain akratic and permissible action in terms of the exercises of these distinct capacities. In akratic action, these exercises conflict. In permissible action, the exercise of the second selects between options left open by the exercise of the first. Practical cognition would then be a type of intellection which could influence volition.³

I will argue that the puzzles of akratic and permissible action do not refute practical cognitivism. They seem like they might only because opponents interpret the claims that practical cognition is volition as if it is a universal generalization over the exercises of practical

reason. That is not so. Practical cognitivists can solve these puzzles because the claims that practical reason is our will and that practical cognition is volition are about the nature of a capacity. They are not universal generalizations about its exercises because the nature of a capacity establishes standards which exercises can meet or fail to meet. These standards determine which exercises are correct or erroneous.

A capacity is a potentiality to do something. For me to exercise one well is for me to do what it is a potentiality to do, and for me to exercise it badly is for me to fail in doing what it is a potentiality to do. Practical cognitivists can explain akratic action as a type of erroneous exercise of practical reason as tripping is an erroneous exercise of my capacity to walk because in akratic action I fail to act as I understand is legitimate and so fail in doing what practical reason is a potentiality to do. They can explain permissible action as a successful exercise of practical reason as stepping first with my right foot rather than my left is a successful exercise of my capacity to walk because in permissible action I act as I understand is legitimate and so do what practical reason is a potentiality to do. The puzzles of akratic and permissible action thus cannot establish theoretical over practical cognitivism.⁴

2. Self-conscious volition.

In this section, I explain the basic structure of practical cognitivism and introduce the framework in terms of which I later present the puzzles.

2.1 Human beings are animals. We like all animals can know the world and act in it. Unlike the other known animals, though, we can do so self-consciously. Still, our capacities are animal capacities. As our heart is a type of animal heart alongside bovine and vulpine hearts, so our will is a type of animal will alongside lupine and leonine wills. As the nature and proper exercise of our heart specifies the generic function of a heart in a certain way, so the nature and proper exercise of our will specifies the generic function of a will in a certain way. According to practical cognitivism, practical cognition is our type of volition, practical reason our will, as bipedal locomotion is our way of walking and as a four chambered heart is our type of heart. What, then, is a will a capacity to do? How is practical reason a potentiality to do it in a certain way?

A will is a capacity to act. Take my cat. When he hears kibble hit the bowl, he has an end, eating, and takes means to it, escaping from under the duvet, descending from bed to floor, sprinting around the corner, dashing to his bowl, and beginning to chow down even

before he slides to a stop. He succeeds in this exercise of his will only if he takes sufficient means to his end. His will is thus a capacity to think and thereby do. In its proper exercise, he does as he thinks.

If practical reason is our will, it is likewise a capacity to think and thereby do. After all, my cat and I take the same route at meal time. Unlike other wills, though, practical reason is a self-conscious capacity which I exercise properly through understanding the legitimacy of that exercise. Put otherwise, since practical reason is a rational capacity, it is a potentiality to act because of what licenses so acting, where that is the 'because' of rational basing. Still, it is a capacity to act, and to exercise it well, I must do as I think. I thus succeed in my exercise of it only if I knowingly take sufficient means to my end.⁵ So our will is a capacity to think and thereby do on the basis what licenses so thinking and doing. In its proper exercise, I do as I think because of what licenses doing so or, what is the same thing, I act as I understand is legitimate.⁶

One way to understand this account of the self-conscious will is to contrast practical with theoretical reason. As we might state the basic distinction, a proper exercise of theoretical reason *describes* what it represents while a proper exercise of practical reason *creates* what it represents. To exercise theoretical reason is to think that something is some way. My job in an exercise of theoretical reason is to represent what is actual, and my representation answers to what it represents. A tree decaying, say, is what it is regardless of my thought about it, and to exercise theoretical reason about it properly is to represent it as it is.

In contrast, to exercise practical reason, if it is our will, is to think of something so as to actualize it. My job in an exercise of practical reason is to make actual what I represent, and what I represent answers to my representation. To exercise it about walking to the library because I need to pick up a book is to think so as to thereby do it. My walking and retrieving are correct to the extent that and because I do as I correctly think is legitimate. That is why walking North is a mistake if the library is South but would not be a mistake were I heading to the cafe which is in in the opposite direction of the library.

Such, at any rate, is the difference between theoretical and practical reason if practical reason is our will. So practical reason is a capacity to think and thereby do on the basis of what licenses so thinking and doing, where everything after 'to' characterizes the nature of the capacity and is part of its proper exercise. The thinking, the doing, and the grasp of the rational basis are interdependent aspects of one capacity and of its proper exercise as thinking and doing

generally are interdependent aspects of the nature and proper exercise of a will. Thinking and thereby doing on the basis of what licenses it is thus the type of volition characteristic of animals with self-conscious wills.

To understand what I mean, consider the familiar claim that readiness to accept and answer a question which asks for my grounds for acting is characteristic of acting intentionally (Anscombe, 1957, §5). If you ask me why I am φ -ing, I either tell you that I did not know that I was φ -ing or I explain what I am doing in terms of why I am doing it. In the former case, I reject the question and am not φ -ing intentionally. In the latter, I accept the question and am φ -ing because of what licenses so acting, at least if I am exercising practical reason correctly. If I am not self-deceived, my account of what I am doing in terms of why I am doing it explains the event in question as an intentional action. So for me to act intentionally and correctly is for me to act in some way on the basis of what licenses so acting and thus is for me to grasp the basis for my exercise of practical reason in the very exercise of it. This is part of what it is for practical reason to be a self-conscious capacity.⁷

While readiness to accept and answer such a question is characteristic of our intentional action, it is not characteristic of intentional action generally. Other animals can act intentionally. They need only an end and means to it. This condition applies to our intentional action and not theirs because our action is part of the exercise of a self-conscious capacity. I need an end and means to it which I at least tacitly understand as so related and so in terms of which I can explain my action because that is how self-conscious animals have ends and means, at least when we exercise practical reason correctly. The question about my grounds to act asks me to explain my action in terms of what licenses it because I am a being with a capacity to think and thereby do on the basis of what licenses doing so. The question asks me to articulate that at least tacit understanding of the parts of my exercise of practical reason and the relationship between them, on pain of admitting the incompetence of that exercise. The basis of this explanatory condition on our intentional action is thus the self-consciousness of our will.⁸

2.2 A useful way to present accounts of human agency is in terms of what acts of mind the theory takes to constitute answers to certain agential questions. These questions let me give a preliminary case for practical cognitivism, and I will use them later to present the puzzles of akratic and permissible action.

Distinguish three questions. Call ‘What am I to do?’ the *practical question*, ‘What should

I do?’ the *normative question*, and ‘What shall I do?’ the *volitional question*. Theoretical and practical cognitivists agree that the practical question captures what is unique about our agency. They also agree that to answer it correctly is to answer the normative and volitional questions correctly. They disagree, though, about the order of priority between these questions.

Practical cognitivists take the practical question as basic and think that the others just emphasize aspects of it. They think that practical cognition is volition because it constitutes the answer to that basic practical question. There would then be one agential act of mind with two aspects that we might separate for certain theoretical purposes but which are fundamentally unified.

Theoretical cognitivists flip things around. They take the normative and volitional questions as basic and think that the practical question just conjoins those independent questions. They think that practical cognition is not volition because practical cognition constitutes my answer to the normative question and volition constitutes my answer to the volitional question. There would then be two agential acts of mind which we might treat as unified for certain theoretical purposes but which are fundamentally distinct.

As a preliminary case for practical cognitivism, try to separate practical cognition and volition in a case in which I answer all three questions correctly. To answer the normative question correctly is to determine which actions open to me are legitimate on the basis of what licenses them. It is to determine how to act given the grounds to so act. That is why deliberation involves ruling in or out actions given their properties, as when I think about whether to go to the store since I need glitter and eyeliner for the club tonight or whether to instead work on this essay since the deadline is approaching. I therein consider potential grounds to act to determine which actions open to me are legitimate. So to answer the normative question correctly is to determine to act in some way as I understand is legitimate. It is to conclude ‘ φ because of Γ ’.

So it is as well with respect to the volitional question. This is why I consider the same questions and potential bases for acting in deliberation. So to answer the volitional question correctly is also to determine to act in some way as I understand is legitimate. What else could it be? After all, to ask it is to suppose that I can answer it correctly or incorrectly, and since it is a question about which of the actions open to me to do, to answer it correctly is to determine which action open to me is correct to do. It is to conclude ‘ φ because of Γ ’.

A subject who asked and answered these questions one after the other would be very strange indeed. Say I declare that I mean to determine what I *should* do with my afternoon and

cite potential grounds to act, qualifying and criticizing and all that jazz, until I determine that I *should* walk in the park. That settled, I now declare that I mean to determine what I *shall* do with my afternoon. I cite the same potential grounds to act again, qualifying and criticizing and all the rest of it again, until I determine that I *shall* walk in the park. What do you make of me? Do I ask distinct questions whose answers constitute separate agential acts of mind or do I ask the same question twice, phrased in slightly different ways, whose answers constitute one agential act of mind? I suspect that you will take me to have done the same thing twice. I doubt that you will highly rate my response that to the contrary, I first determined what I *should* do and then what I *shall* do, and although those activities seem similar, they could not be more different as one is a matter of evaluation and the other is a matter of decision.

Practical cognitivism can explain why I engage in one activity when I answer those questions. According to it, they are variations on the basic practical question which emphasize distinct aspects of the exercise of practical reason. The normative question emphasizes the fact that practical reason is the *self-conscious will* whose proper exercise includes its rational basis. It emphasizes the fact that to correctly exercise this capacity is to act *as I understand is legitimate* or, what is the same, to φ *because of Γ* . That is what distinguishes the nature and proper exercise of our will from those of the wills of other animals. The volitional question, in contrast, emphasizes the fact that practical reason is the self-conscious *will* whose proper exercise includes doing. It emphasizes the fact that to correctly exercise this capacity is to *act* as I understand is legitimate or, what is the same, to φ *because of Γ* . That is what unifies the nature and proper exercise of our will with those of the wills of other animals.

There is thus only one practical question, ‘What am I to do?’, which has two aspects independently emphasized in the normative and volitional questions. This is because practical reason is the self-conscious will and practical cognition is self-conscious volition. To exercise such a capacity correctly is to act as I understand is legitimate. It is to think and thereby do on the basis of what licenses doing so. So say practical cognitivists.

3. The puzzle of akratic action.

3.1 The puzzle of akratic action is about how, if practical reason is our will, I can act as I understand is illegitimate. How is akratic action possible if practical cognition is volition?

To present this puzzle, I first must distinguish between two broad types of akratic actions, only one of which is a potential problem for practical cognitivism. In the unproblematic

type, I act as I understand is illegitimate, but my understanding is inoperative. For example, I might understand that jokes at your expense are illegitimate because you thoroughly dislike them. In the midst of revelry and repartee, though, you might make a comment begging for a mocking reply, which I make without a thought about your distaste for being the butt of a joke. In such a case, I understand the illegitimacy of a general type of action, but I do not recognize my action as of that type and so as illegitimate as I act.

Nothing follows about the separation of practical cognition and volition from that type of akratic action. All that follows is that we are finite, fallible animals who can fail to bring understanding to bear when relevant because of inattention, depression, anxiety, forgetfulness, excitement, lust, anger, fraternity, friendliness, intoxication, and so on (Korsgaard, 1997, 49). That no more reveals a distinction between practical cognition and volition than does a similar failure with respect to theoretical reason reveal that thought about general facts is of a different type than thought about particular facts.⁹

In the other, potentially problematic, type of akratic action, I act as I understand is illegitimate, and my understanding is operative. Take an example. Say that as we are sitting in a restaurant waiting for our serve, you confess to me that you are a lifelong participant in a practice which you now realize is hideously immoral. ‘Unnecessarily killing animals is wrong!’ you declare. You then run through the arguments for why omnivorism is impermissible for those human beings who can otherwise live healthy lives. When our server asks for our orders, I say to you ‘Two Reggies the Veggie then?’ You reply ‘I know I should, but it’s still a Full English for me’. Maybe you are insincerely angling for social credit or falling into the trope of a philosopher who understands the immorality of something but cannot give it up because of the limited reach of reason in finite rational animals. That is common and is why philosophers often say such things about killing and eating other animals but not about murder, racism, rape, cannibalism, and other moral wrongs in which the moral patient is a human being. Perhaps, though, you are sincere and understand the illegitimacy of tucking into the bacon and bangers as you do it. Your understanding of the legitimacy of acting in some way comes apart from your acting in that way. That is why you can sincerely say ‘I know I should not’ as you do.

Many philosophers take the puzzle of akratic action to establish theoretical over practical cognitivism. They think that it shows that even if I *should* answer the normative and volitional questions in the same way, I *can* answer them differently. They infer that the capacities I exercise in answering them are distinct. They often present this argument as an inference to the best, and

indeed the only, explanation. For example, R. Jay Wallace says that “if an agent really accepts that a given action would be best, the identification of choice with normative commitment should entail that that is the action that is chosen, in fact—an apparent denial of the very possibility of clear-eyed *akrasia*” (Wallace, 2001, 89). Gary Watson likewise thinks that if “the will follows normative commitment, then an individual cannot willingly go against practical judgement. ... What is missing ... is the idea of the akratic individual consenting to or forming the intention to depart from practical reason. What is missing ... is the very idea of the will” (Watson, 2003, 132). This is because “having [decisive reasons] to do a thing does not settle magically the question whether to *do* it or not. ... It’s a question of a different *genre*, and is not relative to any system of reasons” (Albritton, 1985, 248).¹⁰

So theoretical cognitivists think that akratic action is possible if and only if practical cognition is not volition. With respect to the claim to explanatory sufficiency, they think that if practical cognition and volition are exercises of distinct capacities, I can exercise them in ways which cohere, as when I act as I understand is legitimate, and in ways which conflict, as when I act as I understand is illegitimate. With respect to the claim to explanatory necessity, they think that were practical cognition volition, to understand the legitimacy of a way of acting would be to will to so act, and to will to act in some way would be to understand the legitimacy of so acting. Practical cognition and volition then could not come apart as they do in akratic action. Theoretical cognitivists thus take the possibility of akratic action to reveal a real distinction between practical cognition and volition.

Practical cognitivists need not deny that claim of explanatory sufficiency. Perhaps theoretical cognitivism can explain the possibility of akratic action. They must, though, deny that claim of explanatory necessity and show that practical cognitivism can explain the possibility of akratic action.

3.2 How can practical cognitivists solve this puzzle? The solution stems from how such action deviates from what practical reason is a capacity to do. The key is to understand that according to practical cognitivism, the proper exercise of our agency has explanatory priority over improper exercises. To understand why this priority matters, consider that theoretical cognitivists work the other way around. Let me explain.

Theoretical cognitivists, or at least those who argue for the view on the basis of the possibility of akratic action, start with an erroneous exercise of our agency in which my answer

to the normative question ‘What should I do?’ seems to conflict with my answer to the volitional question ‘What shall I do?’ When we exercise our agency properly, our answers come together in a way which makes the practical question ‘What am I to do?’ seem like the sole basic question of our agency. In akratic action, though, these answers come apart in a way which theoretical cognitivists take to reveal the real distinction between practical cognition and volition. They take practical cognition to be done and dusted in understanding the legitimacy of acting some way and volition to be as yet absent.¹¹ This is so even when I act as I understand is legitimate, though I might not notice it in those cases because everything runs smoothly. So according to theoretical cognitivists, agential breakdown reveals the true structure of human agency, unlike cases in which I exercise my agency correctly. The improper exercise of our agency thus has *epistemic priority* over its proper exercise for theoretical cognitivists.

Practical cognitivism, as I develop it, instead gives *explanatory priority* to the proper exercise of our agency over its improper exercise. While we can exercise our agency properly and improperly, these exercises are not on a par with respect to each other or with respect to the capacity of which they are exercises. Improper exercises are instead deviations from the proper exercises because they fail to realize the nature of the capacity in question. This is not because of anything unique about our agency. It is instead an ordinary part of our thought about organisms and their capacities.¹²

To understand what I mean, consider that separability does not always have the same significance. Sometimes it reveals a real distinction, as when the separability of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen shows that black pepper is made up of independent more basic parts. When it comes to organisms and their capacities, though, separability does not always reveal a real distinction. The separability of the front half of a worm from the back does not reveal that the worm is made up of independent more basic parts. Nor does the separability of my right foot from the rest of my body reveal a real distinction which I missed when things were still attached. All it shows is that an organism can be in bad, incomplete shape.

That second mode of explanation is also appropriate with respect to erroneous exercises of our capacities. If I slur sounds without making sense, I err in the exercise of my capacity to speak. This possibility does not reveal separate exercises of distinct capacities, one to make sounds and the other to make sense, whose exercises in this case conflict but which in other cases mesh so well that we miss their distinction. There is just a single, erroneous exercise of my capacity to speak, which is a capacity to make sense through sound. Similarly, if I trip, I err in

the exercise of my capacity to walk. This possibility does not reveal distinct exercises of distinct capacities, one to put one foot in front of the other and the other to maintain balance, whose exercises in this case conflict but which in other cases mesh such that we miss their distinction. There is just a single, erroneous exercise of my capacity to walk, which is a capacity to put one foot in front of the other while maintaining balance.

That second mode of explanation is appropriate with respect to exercises of our capacities because the proper exercise of a capacity has explanatory priority over improper exercises. Why? Because a capacity is a potentiality to do something. In a proper exercise, I do what it is a capacity to do. In an improper one, I err in doing what it is a capacity to do. To walk is to do what I have a capacity to do. It is to put one foot in front of the other while maintain balance. To trip is to fail in doing what I have a capacity to do. It is to err in walking as to slur sounds without sense is to err in speech because tripping and slurring are ways that exercises fail to realize the natures of the capacities in question. Improper exercises are derivative of and explained in terms of the proper exercise because while the proper exercise realizes the nature of the capacity, improper exercises deviate in some way or other. Such errors do not reveal that what seems, in the proper exercise, to be the single exercise of a single capacity is in fact an accidental aggregate of distinct exercises of distinct capacities. They just reveal the fallibility of finitude.¹³

Practical cognitivists understand akrasia on this model. Practical reason, if it is the self-conscious will, is a capacity to act as I understand is legitimate. Its proper exercise includes two aspects, understanding the legitimacy of acting in some way and acting in that way. That does not imply that every exercise has those aspects any more than the claim that the proper exercise of my capacity to walk includes two aspects, putting one foot in front of the other and maintaining balance, implies that I never trip or any more than the claim that proper exercise of my capacity to speak includes two aspects, making sounds and making sense, implies that I never talk nonsense. It just implies that any exercise without both aspects is thereby to that extent erroneous.

Return to the example of akrasia in which you order a Full English despite understanding the illegitimacy of unnecessarily interfering in the lives of animals. You grasp what licenses exercising practical reason in some way but do not act on that basis. Since that basis is part of the proper exercise of practical reason if readiness to answer a question about grounds to act is criterial of exercising that capacity correctly, you are partially but

incompetently exercising practical reason in not acting as you understand is legitimate. Practical cognition requires both aspects, and one is missing. On the flip side, as you order and eat your meat, you are acting but without a basis and are thereby partially but incompetently exercising practical reason in acting as you understand is illegitimate. Self-conscious volition requires both aspects, and one is missing. So as practical cognitivists interpret this exercise of human agency, you are partially and incompetently exercising practical reason given what it is a capacity to do if it is the self-conscious will, not running into a conflict between the exercise of one capacity to understand the legitimacy of acting in some way and the exercise of another capacity to act.¹⁴

Theoretical cognitivists will object that this interpretation leaves akratic action mysterious. Even if tripping is an error in walking, it is not an *intentional* error in walking. Were I trip myself intentionally, I would instead be exercising the different capacity to take a fall, which establishes its own correctness conditions for its exercise. In akratic action, though, I intentionally act in some way which I understand is illegitimate. How can that be a single, incomplete, partial exercise of one capacity? How could anyone do it?

However, the theoretical cognitivist explanation of akratic action is no less mysterious. After all, they interpret me as first understanding the illegitimacy of a way of acting in practical cognition and then willing to act in that way in volition. Since they think that I am acting intentionally, they take me to be ready to accept and answer a question which asks for my grounds for acting. Yet what I would offer in response to that question is something which I *reject* as a potential rational basis for my action. It is something which I think is not an answer to that question since it does not rationalize my action. How can I do that? How can I take as my rational basis for an action something which I understand is no such thing? That is no less mysterious.

I do not think that this mystery is to be avoided. Akratic action is no less mysterious when divided between the inconsistent exercise of two capacities than it is when included in the incompetent exercise of one because akratic action is a type of irrational action. Irrationality has at base an ineradicable inscrutability in which I am at bottom ultimately unintelligible even to myself. In the practical cognitivist explanation, this inscrutability involves exercising one capacity in a way doomed to failure because the parts do not fit together as I know they must. In the theoretical cognitivist explanation, it involves exercising two capacities in a way doomed to failure because the exercises do not fit together as I know they must. In each, I seem to intentionally do something that I cannot do on a rational basis and so seem to knowingly make

an error which undermines the exercise of my agency. Each is equally mysterious because irrationality is at bottom inscrutable.

Hence, the explanatory indispensability argument from the possibility of akratic action to the real distinction between practical cognition and volition is unsound. Whereas theoretical cognitivists explain akratic action in terms of inconsistent answers to two questions, one normative and the other volitional, practical cognitivists explain it in terms of an incorrect answer to a single practical question. Put otherwise, while theoretical cognitivists explain akratic action in terms of the inconsistent exercises of two capacities, practical cognitivists explain it in terms of the incompetent exercise of one. That explanation follows from the explanatory structure of the theory and is not ad hoc. The puzzle of akratic action thus cannot establish theoretical over practical cognitivism.

4. The puzzle of permissible action.

4.1 The puzzle of permissible action is about how, if practical reason is our will, I can act in one of two ways which I understand are legitimate. How is permissible action possible if practical cognition is volition?

Such an action might involve two legitimate means to an end, as when I understand the legitimacy of lemon posset or spotted dick for dessert but opt for the former. Such an action might instead involve two legitimate ends, as when I understand the legitimacy of lives of scholarship and service but take up only scholarship as I only have time and energy for one. In each case, I act as I understand is legitimate and also do not act as I understand is legitimate. My understanding of the legitimacy of acting comes apart from my acting. That is why I can sincerely say ‘I know I could do either’ as I do only one.

Many philosophers take the puzzle of permissible action to establish theoretical over practical cognitivism. They think that the possibility of permissible action shows that I can answer the normative question without answering the volitional question because a correct answer to the former is compatible with two incompatible answers to the latter. They infer that the capacities I exercise in answering them are distinct. They often present this argument as an inference to the best, and indeed the only, explanation. Pamela Hieronymi says that “If ... the reasons bearing on practical judgment are equally balanced, inconclusive, or incommensurable, ... there is no fact of the matter about what one ought to do Knowing this, one should suspend judgment on [that] question. Yet one can legitimately decide to act” (Hieronymi, 2009,

202). Watson likewise thinks that “the distinction between practical judgement and will is revealed in circumstances of normative uncertainty or indeterminacy. In these contexts, the question ‘What shall I do?’ is clearly different from the question ‘What should I do?’” (Watson, 2003, 134). This is because acting seems to involve “the exercise of the capacity to choose between equally rational ways of performing an act-type, and this form of choice is not a further step in reasoning. Therefore, the contribution of reasoning generally does not suffice for action to occur” (Paul, 2013, 296).¹⁵

So theoretical cognitivists think that permissible actions are possible if and only if practical cognition is not volition. With respect to the claim to explanatory sufficiency, they argue that if practical cognition and volition are exercises of distinct capacities, I can correctly exercise one in a way which is compatible with two incompatible ways to exercise the other and then exercise the second in one of those ways. With respect to the claim to explanatory necessity, they argue that were practical cognition volition, to understand the legitimacy of a way of acting would be to will to so act, and to will to act in some way would be to understand the legitimacy of so acting. Practical cognition and volition then could not come apart as they do in permissible action. Theoretical cognitivists thus take permissible action to reveal a real distinction between practical cognition and volition.

Practical cognitivists again need not deny that claim of explanatory sufficiency but must deny that claim of explanatory necessity. However, despite the similarities in the setup and structure of the puzzles of akratic and permissible action, there is a crucial difference between them. Whereas I act as I understand is illegitimate in akratic action, I act as I understand is legitimate in permissible action. Akratic action is error, permissible action success, in the exercise of our agency. The response to the puzzle of akratic action is thus unavailable with respect to the puzzle of permissible action. Practical cognitivists must explain the possibility of permissible action in another way.

4.2 How can practical cognitivists solve this puzzle? Whereas the solution to the puzzle of akratic action stems from how such action deviates from what practical reason is a capacity to do, the solution to the puzzle of permissible action stems from how such action conforms with what practical reason is a capacity to do. To understand why, recall the contrast between theoretical and practical reason.

Theoretical reason is a capacity to represent what is actual whereas practical reason is a

capacity to make actual what I represent. With that difference comes differences in the standards for their exercises since what it is to exercise them properly depends on what they are potentialities to do. In an exercise of theoretical reason, my representation answers to what I represent. That is why it is correct only if I represent the object as it is. In an exercise of practical reason, in contrast, what I represent answers to my representation. That is why my action is correct only if I do as I think.

Given those differences, different interpretations of the significance of cases with two possible but incompatible options are appropriate with respect to exercises of those capacities. In an exercise of theoretical reason, if I lack a basis to believe one proposition over another with which the first is inconsistent, I cannot legitimately believe either. I must suspend belief and either inquire further until I find a basis to discriminate or remain agnostic. This is because in an exercise of theoretical reason, I am to represent what is actual, and in such a case, I cannot legitimately take the world to be one way rather than the other.

In more detail, since theoretical reason is a self-conscious capacity to know the world, to exercise it correctly is to believe something on the basis of evidence, testimony, or something else which indicates that the world is as I represent it. When evidence licenses believing something, I believe that p because of Γ , as when I believe that the cat is on the mat because I see him. When I have similar evidence for incompatible but otherwise epistemically possible propositions, though, I must suspend judgment. I cannot correctly believe either on the basis of Γ because Γ does not license either over the other and so does not license either. Either but not both could be actual, and so belief in neither is legitimate.

We can put this point by saying that *truth* is the standard for theoretical reason. Since incompatible propositions cannot both be true, an exercise of that capacity about one of them is legitimate only if I have a basis to believe one which is thereby a basis to not believe the other. Without such a basis, I cannot believe either. I must suspend judgment. Truth, and theoretical reason, *prohibit* belief in one option over another when they are individually epistemically possible incompatible propositions for which I possess similar evidence.

Practical reason differs from theoretical reason in these respects if it is the self-conscious will. In an exercise of it, if I lack a rational basis to perform one action over another with which the first is inconsistent, I can legitimately perform either. I need not remain indifferent between them because practical reason is a capacity to think and thereby do on a rational basis. I exercise it well only if I do something. When I cannot discriminate between two permissible but

incompatible options, I can legitimately act in either way. This is because in an exercise of practical reason, I am to make actual what I represent, and in such a case, I can legitimately make the world one way rather than the other because only then do I make something actual.

In more detail, since practical reason is a self-conscious capacity to act, to exercise it correctly is to think and thereby do on the basis of what licenses doing so. In an exercise in which I have two legitimate but inconsistent options, each action is permissible. I can choose between them because an exercise of practical reason is successful only if I get something done, and that requires doing something. The nature of practical reason thus establishes a standard for its exercises which licenses me to exercise it in any legitimate way open to me. I can meet that standard only if I do something, and since it is a self-conscious capacity, I can thereby exercise the capacity in either way in part on that basis. Either but not both can be made actual, and so doing either is legitimate.

We can put this point by saying that *goodness* is the standard for exercises of practical reason. Since incompatible actions can both be good to do, an exercise of that capacity about either is legitimate without a basis to perform the one over the other. Goodness, and practical reason, *permit* acting in one way over another when the options are individually permissible incompatible actions for which I possess equivalent grounds.

Consider another agential capacity such as my capacity to walk. In most any exercise, whether I step first with my right foot or first with my left does not matter. Still, I must step first with one to exercise this capacity competently. Otherwise, I will not move, or if I do, it will be in a face-first fall to the floor, and that is no way to walk. So I step first with my right and thereby exercise this capacity in a determinate way which is legitimate because it is a specific version of the generic exercise licensed by my basis. Whenever I am to walk, I legitimately do so in some determinate way without needing a basis for walking in that way rather than another determinate way open to me. To do so is to exercise my capacity to walk in one of two legitimate ways open to me, not to exercise it in a way which is compatible with then exercising either of two distinct capacities, one a capacity to step with my right foot and the other a capacity to step with my left. It is to do so on the basis of what licenses exercising this capacity. Were it otherwise, my capacity to walk would not be a capacity to put one foot in front of the other while maintaining balance since in its exercise I would not take even a step. It in fact would not be any capacity at all. What, after all, would a capacity to walk be were its exercise to not involve walking?

Similarly, if practical reason is the self-conscious will, to act permissibly is to competently exercise it. To act permissibly is not to exercise practical reason in a way indifferent between two legitimate ways of acting and also to exercise the will in one of those two ways. It is to exercise practical reason in one of the two legitimate ways open to me. In it, I exercise the capacity in a determinate way given the rational basis for so exercising it without need for a basis to exercise it in this way rather than in another determinate way open to me. Were it otherwise, practical reason would not be a will since in its exercise I would not act. It in fact would not be any capacity at all. What, after all, would a self-conscious will be were its exercise to not involve acting?

4.3 Theoretical cognitivists will object that this response just re-describes the puzzle as its own solution. In a way, this claim is true, but it is not a legitimate criticism. The puzzle of permissible action seems like a problem for practical cognitivism only on the assumption that an exercise of reason must proceed on the basis of something which licenses it over every incompatible exercise. After all, according to the puzzle, I have a basis for my exercise of practical reason. I can explain why I am acting in the way in question in terms of what licenses it. I just cannot explain why I am acting *in that way rather than the other way open to me*.

Theoretical cognitivists take the impossibility of discrimination to reveal that the exercise of practical reason terminates in a thought about the legitimacy of acting in either way and that the exercise of a separate will is needed to act. That distinction between practical cognition and volition, though, depends on thinking that the impossibility of discriminating between options terminates any exercise of reason in indifference between them. That is to model reason generally on theoretical reason. It is to take equivalence to *prohibit* electing either option. Truth is exclusive, and it is the measure of exercises of theoretical reason given what that capacity is a potentiality to do. That is why belief between individually possible but jointly inconsistent propositions for which I possess equivalent evidence is prohibited.

Practical cognitivists can reject this argument from the get-go because they do not model practical on theoretical reason. If practical reason is the self-conscious will, its exercise does not terminate when I cannot normatively discriminate between actions any more than the exercise of the feline will terminates in indifference when my cat can take one of two routes to his food dish. When options are both legitimate, I can perform either action because with respect to a capacity to act, equivalence *permits* the exercise of reason with respect to either option.

Goodness is not exclusive, and it is the measure of exercises of practical reason given what practical reason is a potentiality to do if it is the self-conscious will. That is why choice between individually permissible but jointly inconsistent actions for which I possess equivalent grounds is permitted.¹⁶

Permissible performance is common in practical normativity. The law permits me to pay my rent with a check or a bank transfer. I can through recognition of the law perform either action and thereby comply with it. So I pay with a check. The law provides the basis for my particular action and so for my particular way of complying with the law even if I lack a basis for that option over the other. Just so, generally, I can act from a rational basis in performing a specific action even if I lack a basis for performing it over another given what practical reason is a capacity to do if it is the self-conscious will. This is because the correctness of an exercise of a will in general, and so of practical reason if it is the self-conscious will, requires not just the correct end but also sufficient means to it. There are almost always multiple equally good means available because we are finite and act in a world which is neither of our design nor entirely within our control. A finite rational animal often must do one of a number of things which are individually legitimate but incompatible because of a lack of time and energy and expertise and everything else. Since practical reason is a self-conscious capacity, I recognize, at least tacitly, the need to take sufficient means to my end and so the need to take one among any such available means on that basis. Otherwise, I will not do what I set out to do and will not exercise practical reason correctly. And so I step with one foot rather than the other, take one path rather than the other, pursue scholarship over service, and so on. I make actual what I represent by doing it in a specific way because otherwise I will not make actual anything at all. The standard which the capacity establishes for its exercises thus licenses choosing among legitimate options in the very exercise of that capacity. The reach of reason extends all the way to the particular action performed, not because I think of that action as superior to all others but because I know that I succeed in the exercise of this capacity only if I perform a particular action.¹⁷

After all, when I act permissibly, I am still subject to a question which asks for my grounds to so act, which I am as ready and able to answer as I am in obligatory action. I answer by citing the basis for acting as I do. Since readiness to correctly answer such a question is characteristic of the proper exercise of a rational capacity, permissible action is the exercise of practical reason, not of another capacity influenced by that exercise. That is so even though I lack a basis to act in this way rather than in another way. This is because practical reason, if it is

the self-conscious will, is a capacity to make actual what I represent, which often means performing one permissible action among others.

Hence, the explanatory indispensability argument from the possibility of permissible action to the real distinction between practical cognition and volition is unsound. Whereas theoretical cognitivists explain permissible action in terms of my answering a volitional question in a way which selects between options left open by my answer to a normative question, practical cognitivists explain it in terms of my answering a practical question in one of two correct ways. Put otherwise, while theoretical cognitivists explain permissible action in terms of the compatible exercises of two capacities, practical cognitivists explain it in terms of the permissible but not obligatory exercise of one. That explanation follows from the explanatory structure of the theory and is not ad hoc. The puzzle of permissible action thus cannot establish theoretical over practical cognitivism.¹⁸

5. Success on its own terms.

Theoretical and practical cognitivists disagree about the role and reach of reason in the agency of finite rational animals. Many theoretical cognitivists take the possibilities of akratic and permissible action to reveal the real distinction between practical cognition and volition and so to refute practical cognitivism. That is not so. Practical cognitivists can explain akratic action as an erroneous exercise of practical reason and permissible action as a successful exercise. To act akratically is not to exercise practical reason in a way in tension with a separate exercise of the will but is to exercise practical reason incompetently so as to undermine its success through internal error. To act permissibly is not to exercise practical reason in a way indifferent between two ways of acting and also to exercise the will in one of those ways but is to exercise practical reason in one of the two legitimate ways open to me. The puzzles of akratic and permissible action thus do not establish theoretical over practical cognitivism.

To show that an account of practical reason can explain the possibilities of akratic and permissible action is not to establish its truth. Still, this discussion reveals some of the power and promise of the explanatory structure of practical cognitivism, both with respect to these specific puzzles and with respect to its broader project in practical philosophy. According to practical cognitivism, practical reason is the self-conscious will and thus is one animal capacity among others characteristic of one but only one of the known animals. Its successful development and exercise depends on contingencies and circumstances just like the successful

development and exercise of any other animal capacity. It is as liable to error, through defect, deficiency, or defeat, as any other animal capacity. To evaluate the adequacy of practical cognitivism, we need to develop it, and to develop it, we need to understand these aspects of that capacity and how they enable it to offer interesting and informative explanations of various phenomena characteristic of our agency. Only with that complete picture of finite, fallible rational agency and of its place in, and dependence on, the world around us as practical cognitivism paints it can we determine whether that agency, and that world, is ours. This essay is one piece of that picture, but it is essential because a fair appraisal of practical cognitivism is possible only if the puzzles of akratic and permissible action cease to preempt development and discussion of it on its own terms.

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1. See also, among others, (Korsgaard, 2009_b), (Engstrom, 2009), (Boyle and Lavin, 2010), (Fernandez, 2016), (Ford, 2016), (Lavin, 2017), (Marcus, 2018), and (Schwenkler, 2021).

2. There can be as many legitimate options as you like. I write about two throughout for the sake of simplicity.

3. 'Theoretical cognitivism' covers two accounts I elsewhere criticize. *Intellectualism* says that practical reason is a species of theoretical reason whose exercises can influence those of our will (Fix, 2018). *Evaluationism* says that although practical reason is our will, normative thoughts about action are exercises of theoretical reason which can influence those of practical reason (Fix, forthcoming, §4). What matters here is the common separation of normative thought from volition. For examples of these versions of theoretical cognitivism, see, among many others, (Wiggins, 1979), (Albritton, 1985), (Raz, 1998), (Wallace, 2001), (Watson, 2003), (Broome, 2008), (Parfit, 2011), (Paul, 2013), (Scanlon, 2014), (Hieronymi, 2009), (Silverstein, 2017), and (Dancy, 2018).

4. Two notes on terminology. First, I write about what *licenses* exercising practical reason and about the *legitimacy* of exercises to remain neutral about the nature of normativity. The puzzles can be put in terms of whatever normative category you like. Second, I write about *understanding* the legitimacy of exercising practical reason because mistakes about whether an exercise is legitimate are irrelevant to the puzzles.

5. See (Fix, 2020_B). As this is only a necessary condition on the correctness of an exercise of practical reason, this is only a partial explanation of the practical cognitivist account of that capacity. Since the puzzles of akratic and permissible action do not turn on a particular account of any further correctness conditions, I ignore them in this essay.

6. See (Schafer, 2019) for an account, indebted to Kant, that reason, generally, is a capacity to understand. In this terminology, the distinction between theoretical and practical reason which I am about to draw is between a capacity to understand what is the case through understanding why it is the case and a capacity to make something the case through understanding why it should be the case.

7. For similar discussions of the significance of this question, (Moran, 2004), (Ford, 2015), and (Lavin, 2015). For a more thorough account of Anscombe's *Intention* which starts from a similar place, see (Schwenkler, 2021_B).

8. For similar accounts of self-conscious capacities, see, among others, (Moran, 2001), (Korsgaard, 2009_A), (Boyle, 2011), and (Marcus, 2012).

9. Compare Aristotle's claim that in (some) akratic actions, the subject possesses knowledge of the general but lacks knowledge of the particulars (Aristotle, 2019, VII.3).

10. See also, among others, (Wiggins, 1979, 251-2), (Broome, 2008, 106-7), (Hieronymi, 2009, 202), and (Parfit, 2011, II.387).

11. Matthew Silverstein highlights this fact by basing his argument against practical cognitivism not on akrasia but

on cases where I judge that I should act in some way without yet deciding how to act (Silverstein, 2017, 357-61).

12. I say more about this type of constitutivism in (Fix, 2021).

13. See (Thompson, 2008), (Ford, 2011, 90-99) and (Fix, 2020_A; 2021).

14. Importantly, I do not claim that every partial exercise of a capacity is incompetent. For one thing, sometimes, the right thing to do is to abort an exercise because circumstances change in a way which makes it no longer viable. That is a correct but merely partial exercise. For another thing, sometimes an exercise is only partially complete because it is ongoing, as in cases in which I conclude deliberation without setting off to act because I need not do anything at the moment. Say I deliberate about where to spend my summer vacation and settle on spending it in a remote town without internet access so that I might for once avoid the distractions and disturbances which so characterize my life and clearly think about whether this career still make senses for me or whether I should give up the tenure-track dream and join the mauling world of finance. As it is February, I do not set off for the hills, or even start planning in detail. There is so long until the summer that acting now is unnecessary. Practical cognitivists should say that my exercise of practical reason is in progress and so my answer to the single practical question about what I am to do is incomplete but not for that incompetent. It is a partial, ongoing exercise which is in this moment not progressing because it need not at the moment progress to success. I must pick it up again at an appropriate time if I am to succeed. So much as I might pause this essay for a while without ending it and so without failing to complete it but must pick it up again another day if I am to successfully write it, so a partial exercise of practical reason might await resumption without thereby being a failure so long as I continue it at an appropriate time and bring it to completion.

15. See also, among others, (Raz, 1998) and (Parfit, 2011, II.386).

16. Jonathan Dancy is thus wrong to regard cases “where the reasoning leaves us still with a choice” as a type of “bad case” which must not “infect our account of what one might call the good case, where the reasoning does hit on one way of acting as the sort of response most favoured by the situation” (Dancy, 2018, 138). I agree that the proper exercise of a capacity is prior to its improper exercise. That is the basis of my response to the puzzle of akratic action. However, there need be nothing wrong with the exercise of practical reason, if it is the self-conscious will, when I exercise it in one among two equally good ways. The appearance of inadequacy depends on an assumption that to adequately exercise practical reason, I must be able to normatively privilege one exercise over any other incompatible exercise. That depends on modeling practical reason on theoretical reason. Yet practical cognitivists can reject that assumption. For more against Dancy on these points, see (Schwenkler, 2021, 187-9).

17. I offer a related but distinct argument in response to certain arguments by Sarah Paul in (Fix, 2020_B, 453-4). See (Paul, 2013, 295-6, *et passim*).

18. Gibbard tries for a similar response but puts it in a way which I think threatens to undermine his original insight. Although he says in *Thinking How To Live* that practical reason is our will, he does not there explain how I conclude what to do. He tries to fill this gap in *Reconciling Our Aims* when he says that I decide on the basis of ‘intuitions of the good’. From this idea, he concludes that practical thought has “two stages: In the first stage, I form my valences and preferences. In the second stage, if there’s more than one thing I equally and most prefer from among my alternatives, I pick one—not out of preference, but out of the necessity to choose if I’m not to be like Buridan’s ass. My strictly normative thinking is a matter of the first stage. ... Thinking what I ought to do, then, is not all of thinking what to do” (Gibbard, 2008, 19). To isolate normative thought to the first stage in which I form valences and preferences, though, is to ‘come to a belief’ about which action has a particular property. It never involves a decision, even if I most prefer one thing. On this view, then, permissible actions seems to show that practical reason and the will are distinct capacities. Better to instead say not that there are two stages and identify practical cognition with one of them but that there is one exercise of a capacity with multiple interdependent aspects which we might think about separately only for certain theoretical purposes. Practical cognition then does not end before volition begins because they are the same thing.