

Is partial compliance with reason always better than non-compliance?

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Abstract. Joseph Raz claims that there can be reason to do the impossible; but partial compliance with reason is better than non-compliance and the closer one gets to complying with reason, the better. I propose some exceptions.

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Joseph Raz claims that we sometimes have reason to do the impossible. But if we know that it is impossible, should we not just ignore what reason requires? How is the ingenious philosopher going to solve this problem? He offers a sensible reply:

Conforming to reason is potentially a matter of degree. Apart from the two extremes of full compliance and no compliance there are usually possibilities of partial compliance. If I owe you \$100 and I give you \$60 I do less than I ought to have done, but more than nothing. It would have been better had I given you \$100, but worse had I given you nothing... Having reasons means that one should comply with them, that is comply perfectly. It also means that it is better to comply partially than not at all, and the closer one is to complete compliance the better. (2003: 348-349)

But are there cases where partial compliance is possible but no better than non-compliance? Here are some examples, or attempted examples.

Conceptual art. An aesthetic philosopher sounds as if he would agree with the following: if you are a conceptual artist and you conceive of a urinal artwork and

obtain the urinal, but do not display it, then this partial compliance is worthless (Dodd 2016: 251). This example assumes you have reason to display the artwork, an overriding reason even, and that full compliance is possible, but we are not restricting ourselves to situations in which it is not. This seems a tricky case to me, but I thought I would mention it.

Tests of courage. One might be set a task which people regard as a test of courage. Can you go up those stairs to the top floor of that house and find out what is there? Going up five of the stairs then running back is not regarded as more courageous than just saying, “No, I am not doing that.” There is no reason to partially comply in this case.

Footballers and tax. If you are a wealthy footballer, perhaps it is sometimes better to either pay all your taxes or no taxes whatsoever. From the point of view of self-interest at least, partial compliance can be as bad for your reputation as total non-compliance. But Raz may be setting aside reasons of self-interest (2003: 350).

The bad in-between. Continuing with this sport, George Best tells a story of how he lived near a lovely beach which was a short walk away, but he never made it to the beach, because there was a pub in between his house and the beach. That prompts me to contemplate situations in which mere partial compliance is a bad idea, compared to non-compliance and full compliance. Presumably, the crew of the Titanic had reason to sail all the way across the Atlantic.

Testing Zeno. I also wonder where there are examples in which partial compliance is as good as full. Zeno tells a man that he cannot get from where he is to 2m away, because first he has to cross half that distance (1m), then half the remaining distance (0.5m), and then half the distance that still remains (0.25m), and so on –

infinite half distances, which each take some amount of time to cross. The man has reason to disprove Zeno, but only manages to cross half the distance. But in this case, you might say that he actually fully complies with reason, because the conclusion Zeno is aiming to draw is more general – motion is impossible – and it is disproved.

References

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Raz, J. 2003. Numbers, With and Without Contractualism. *Ratio* 16: 346-367.