2

Answerability Without Reasons

Lilian O'Brien

As Anscombe emphasized, a distinguishing feature of intentional actions is that we are answerable for them in a special way. For her, intentional actions are '…actions to which a certain sense of the question "why?" is given application…' (Anscombe 2000/1957, 9). There is an important insight here, but it raises questions about how and why we are, at least ordinarily, answerable for our intentional actions.

It is widely thought that we are thus answerable because we perform our intentional actions for reasons. On this view, Anscombe's 'why' questions elicit our reasons.[1] As Pamela Hieronymi says:

> …As noted by G.E.M. Anscombe, if a person intends to φ or φ's intentionally, he or she can rightly be asked, "why are you φ-ing (or, "Why did you φ?", or "Why do you intend to φ?"), where this question looks for a very particular kind of answer: it looks for that person's reasons for φ-ing. (Hieronymi 2009, 203)

I argue against the reasons view of this basic kind of answerability. First, I distinguish reasons from what I call practical standards. Reasons for action will here be understood as considerations that favour actions. Practical standards will be understood as standards of performance that agents who try to token an act-type must meet. Then, I argue that the best interpretation of the 'why' questions that 'have application' to our intentional actions is that they fundamentally concern practical standards rather than reasons. The upshot is that the basic answerability that we have for our intentional actions should not be understood as answerability in virtue of the fact that we have, in performing our intentional actions, weighed and acted for reasons.

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[1] The view that intentional action is action for reasons is so widespread that it is not often explicitly defended; see Audi (1986) for a detailed discussion. But see also Hursthouse (1991).

What is troubling about the view that answerability can be explained in terms of the agent's being able to consider, weigh, and act on reasons, is that it characterizes this answerability exclusively in terms of how well or badly the agent has deliberated. But we are not just deliberators, we are also *executive* agents, and our capacities for execution are complex rational capacities that also open us to criticism. We are good or bad at knowing how to do things and we are more or less skilled in execution. I will present reasons to think that the kind of justification that we seek when we treat each other as answerable has to do *fundamentally* with the agent's executive capacities.

2.1 Basic answerability

It is a striking feature of intentional actions that we ordinarily, if not necessarily, treat agents as *answerable* for them. We do this by asking them questions, such as, 'what are you doing?', and 'why are you A-ing?'. In these questions we seek the agent's justification for her intentional action or some features of it. This practice by which we treat agents as answerable for their intentional actions is often called 'reasons explanation' or 'rationalizing action explanation' (e.g. Davdison 1963). I will call it Rationalizing Action Explanation (RAE) here. Sometimes RAE enquiries are quite explicit challenges to the agent to show why she is not mistaken in some way for acting as she does: 'Why are you drinking coffee? I thought that you had given it up', 'Is that really the best way to get the glue off?', and so on. In RAE enquiries the agent is regarded as potentially criticizable in light of her intentional action, how she performs it, when or where she performs it, whether there are alternative means, or given relationships between what she is doing intentionally and her other plans, policies, or principles:

Answerability: A rational practical agent, S, is ordinarily answerable for her intentional action, A—it is ordinarily appropriate to ask S RAE questions eliciting justification for A and its features.

Why is there ordinarily answerability for, and potential criticizability in light of, intentional actions? It is accepted by many philosophers that the agent is answerable in this way in virtue of the fact that in acting as she does the agent was sensitive to reasons that favoured or spoke against the course of action that she took. Philosophers often talk about RAE as *reasons* explanations of actions (Davidson 1963; Mele 2013). And among the key

debates about this practice are debates about what reasons are and what kind of relation they stand in to the action, such that they allow the agent to explain her action—answer for it—in a distinctive rationalizing way (Alvarez 2010; Dancy 2000; Davidson 1963; essays in Sandis 2009). Many philosophers now accept that in explaining her action—in answering for it—the agent cites the reasons that seemed to her to favour acting as she does. I will take it that this is the prevailing explanation of answerability:

Reasons: S is answerable for her intentional action, A, in virtue of the fact that she is capable of (i) recognizing, (ii) weighing, and (iii) acting on reasons that favour or speak against her A-ing.

Answerability as it is understood here is not a species of moral responsibility: an agent may be answerable on non-moral grounds for, say, taking a means that is non-morally inferior to another that was available to her. Given that some philosophers understand moral responsibility in terms of answerability, it helps to get clear on the basic answerability that is at stake here, if we are to have a more complete picture of the different kinds of answerability that there may be.[2] But even if we think that moral responsibility cannot be understood as answerability, it would not follow that the answerability that here concerns us has nothing to do with moral responsibility. RAE seems to be a kind of ground zero for our practices of holding agents morally responsible: we often need to understand what an agent has done intentionally if we are to justifiably resent or praise her. And to do this, we often first engage in RAE, thereby making an agent answer for her intentional action and its features.

2.2 Introducing practical standards

The main aim of this chapter is to argue against Reasons. I argue that agents are answerable for their actions because they are capable of recognizing and complying with *practical standards* that must be met if they are to perform the intentional action that they have decided to perform.

I assume that when an agent decides to[3] perform an intentional action she must meet certain practical standards if she is to token the relevant

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[2] Shoemaker (2015) and Smith (2012) offer characterizations of moral responsibility in terms of answerability.

[3] I treat a decision to A interchangeably with forming an intention to A, adopting a plan to A, undertaking to A.

act-type(s) in the fulfilment of her decision. The idea that practical standards must be met in tokening act-types is a natural way to think about intentional action.[4] A full defence of this approach would require developing a theory of intentional action in these terms and that is not possible here. Let me instead suggest a few reasons why it is plausible to take a practical standards approach to intentional actions and act-types.

First, it is suggested by the fact that when an agent decides to token an act-type and goes on to act on this decision, it seems correct to say that she can *fail* to token the act-type, or that she can token it, but *do so poorly*. For example, if an agent is trying to make meringue (in normal circumstances at the actual world), then whipping egg whites is something that, we might say, she *must* or *has to* do. Or if an agent is trying to catch the bus, we might say of her that if she is to do this, she *needs to* or *must* run quickly to the bus stop, and so on. And it seems that we could make a similar claim for any relevant act-type that an agent is trying to token, from a simple act like raising her arm, or taking a book from the shelf, to a more complex one like painting a picture. These natural-sounding claims suggest that given an act-type that an agent is trying to token, and given her circumstances, there are certain standards of action-performance—here called practical standards—that an agent must or need to meet, at least by her lights, if she is to token the act-type that she intends. Relative to these standards of performance, we treat agents as evaluable as failing to act as they intended to, or as acting poorly or well, and so on. And these standards of evaluation of the agent seem to be in play *whenever* an agent, at least a mature, well-functioning, neurotypical human agent, is trying to token an act-type intentionally.

This fact about performative standards—here called practical standards—resonates with our first-person perspective on our own performances. When things start to go wrong with an intentional action, we might think 'I must' take corrective measures or that 'I failed' to take corrective measures quickly or skilfully enough. There seems to us to be a kind of normativity in play in the way that we think about our own intentional actions—at least those that have a means–end structure, that we intend to perform, and of which we can be aware that we are performing. (O'Brien 2019) This gives us reason to say that in acting, we hold ourselves to the practical standards of the act-types that we intend to token.

Finally, it seems natural to think of act-types as defined, in a given context, by sequences of practical standards that an agent who tokens the

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[4] Mayr (2011) also emphasizes normativity in action and the possibility of the agent's failure.

act-type intentionally must meet. What it is to row a boat in a given context, C, is to swing the oars towards the back of the boat, dip them, then pull; the movement forward of the boat should be causally dependent on this behaviour, and so on. And it is relative to such standards that we routinely make such judgments about others' agential successes or failures. We might judge that being carried downstream while flailing around at the oars *isn't really rowing the boat* downstream, or we might think that gently stirring egg yolks *isn't really making meringue*, good intentions and considerable effort notwithstanding.

With this motivation in place for the practical standards approach to intentional action and act-types, let's turn to the difference between the reasons approach and the practical standards approach to answerability. For a simple example, suppose that S has decided to—has formed the intention to—catch bus 78 at noon. Given her intention and the circumstances she finds herself in—it is a few minutes before noon—she walks to the bus stop and waits for the 78 to arrive. Given the course of action that she intends and is now executing, she *should* step on to the 78 when it arrives at her stop at noon. This is a claim that I will defend in the course of arguing against Reasons:

Practical Standards: If S is answerable for her intentional action, A, then she is capable of recognizing and acting on the practical standards that she is subject to because of the intention with which she acts.

If bus 550 and bus 78 pull up at the same time, and S proceeds to get on to the 550 and not the 78, a bystander who knows of S's intention to go to town on the 78 might ask the following question of her:

Q: 'Why aren't you getting on the 78?'

The dominant Reasons interpretation of Q is that we are challenging the agent to answer for action by reference to the reasons that she has, or thinks that she has, for getting on the 78. That is, our question should be understood along the following lines:

Given that you (i) have (or think you have) sufficient reason to go to town today by bus and (ii) given that taking the 78 is the best means of achieving the end in (i), shouldn't you get on the 78?

But I think that this is an incorrect interpretation of many ordinary cases such as Q. Questions like Q can be better understood as eliciting the

practical standards that the agent must comply with if she is to do what she has decided to do—has the intention to do—in her movements. The question should be understood along the following lines:

Given that you (i) are executing your intention to take the 78 at noon, and given that (ii) this is the noon 78 in front of you, shouldn't you get on to this bus (rather than the 550)?

Given the intention in action that she is executing and the practical standards that she is subject to in virtue of this, she is criticizable when she performs an intentional action that is inconsistent with her unrescinded intention. This suggests that she is answerable for her action in light of the practical standards that she is subject to in virtue of that decision.

2.3 Distinguishing reasons and practical standards

To argue against Reasons and support Practical Standards, we need to clearly distinguish reasons and practical standards. I will assume three things about reasons, none of which is uncontroversial, but none of which is especially controversial either. First, reasons are considerations that speak in favour of or against courses of action—reasons stand in a 'favouring' or 'disfavouring' relation to a course of action (Maguire 2018). Second, reasons often show up in the agent's psychology in the following way: she recognizes a reason as a consideration that weighs in favour of, or against, a course of action that she takes to be open to her, and she assesses how weighty a consideration it is. Finally, one or more reasons can outweigh another reason or reasons, such that the reasons to perform action A outweigh the reasons against performing A. And two or more reasons, R1 and R2, say, can combine together so that the agent has greater reason to A than she would have had, had R2, say, not existed (Maguire 2018).

I will assume three things about practical standards. First, they do not ordinarily stand in favour of, or speak against, a course of action. Rather, they are sets of performative requirements on an agent who is trying to token an act-type. And they must be complied with by an agent if she is to intentionally token that act-type. For example, standards that must be met if an agent, S, is to intentionally token the act-type of making tea in S's home are (i) putting water in the kettle, (ii) switching the kettle on, (iii) scalding the teapot, (iv) pouring boiling water on the tea leaves, and so on. Second, practical standards don't ordinarily show up in the agent's psychology as

reasons do. Agents don't ordinarily weigh practical standards against one another in a practical deliberation whose conclusion will be a decision about what to do. In making tea, say, the agent doesn't ordinarily recognize the action of switching the kettle on as a consideration that favours making tea, while getting the teapot also weighs in favour of making tea, but scalding the teapot weighs against making tea, and so on. Rather, in trying to make tea, the agent 'holds herself' to these practical standards and she sets out to comply with them. Holding oneself to a practical standard shows up in explicit thought in the form of 'must' and 'have to' thoughts that indicate that the agent takes herself to be amenable to success or failure as an agent (O'Brien 2019). For example, in a context where S has decided to make tea, and is executing this decision, she might think 'I must wait for the water to boil, it's not hot enough yet' or 'I have to get the teapot', and so on. Third, practical standards do not weigh against one another, such that one standard that is constitutive of an act-type could outweigh another, thereby shaping either the rational agent's decision about what to do or what she does. Rather, the practical standards are a set of requirements that she must meet in a sequence if she is to intentionally token an act-type. And it is plausible to suppose that they are what is known by an agent when she knows how to token an act-type.

It seems that reasons are essential to the deliberative process that precedes and leads up to an agent's decision to take some course of action, while practical standards are essential to executive processes which come after decision-making is complete. Once an agent has weighed reasons, and made up her mind to A, as long as she is rational, she turns from the business of considering reasons to the business of executing her decision to A. She employs her knowledge how in being sensitive to the practical standards that she must hold herself to and comply with if she is to A. Then she employs skill in striving to control her actions and the environment in her effort to meet these practical standards. If this rough picture can guide us, then reasons and practical standards play very different roles in the kind of rational practical agency that we see in well-functioning neurotypical adult humans.

But the agent is critizable in light of both kinds of thing: she may fail to be adequately sensitive to reasons and she may fail to be adequately sensitive to practical standards. If reasons and practical standards are different, as I have argued, it is plausible to suppose that they offer different ways of evaluating an agent. She may fail, say, to take the harm of a proposed action as a reason against performing it, or she may deliberate well, but act akratically, or she may not take the time needed to carefully consider the reasons to her course of action, and so on. Turning to practical standards, she may

be sloppy or inattentive in executing her decision, she may spill the water and make only a small amount of tea when she has set out to make several cups, or she may not attend to the fact that the water is not yet boiling and she may make bad-tasting tea. Or she may not know how to make good tea and mistakenly believe that lukewarm water is appropriate for good tea, when it is not. What does this mean for understanding RAE and the kind of answerability that it involves? If we suppose that RAE involves evaluating the agent and her intentional action, as Answerability says, we should ask which kind of evaluation drives RAE or whether both kinds of evaluation play roles in this, and if so, whether their roles are equally important. The correct answers to these questions will allow us to understand the nature of answerability.

2.4 Arguing against reasons

Consider the following case:

Syllabus

Sally is working on her computer late at night when her friend asks her: Q1. 'What are you doing?' Sally says in answer, A1: 'I must make a syllabus before the first class of my new course, which is early tomorrow morning.'

If Reasons were correct, we should interpret Sally's answer, A1, as citing the reason that favours, or is sufficient for, her acting as she is acting: creating a syllabus is her reason for typing. But it is not clear that this is correct. First, taking note of what was discussed in the previous section, there is a plausible interpretation of Q1–A1 according to which Sally explains her action by articulating which practical standards she is trying to comply with in typing. That is, A1 conveys information about practical standards rather than information about reasons. We can think of the question Q1 as defining a set of possible intentional actions that Sally could be trying to perform. The aim of the question is to uncover which of the set Sally is actually performing (or trying to perform). A1 serves as a correct answer to Q1 because it isolates the intentional action that Sally is actually performing in typing: Sally is creating a syllabus in typing. In effect, A1 allows Sally's friend to know what further practical standards Sally is holding herself to in her typing: the practical standards constitutive of creating a syllabus. On this interpretation Q1–A1 have fundamentally to do with practical standards

that the agent is holding herself to, rather than the reasons on which the agent is acting.

Second, it is noteworthy that Sally's natural-sounding response doesn't involve claims such as 'I'm making a syllabus because it helps to orient the students and I also don't want to jeopardize my job as an instructor…', etc. In fact, such a response may not strike us as a perfectly felicitous answer to the question. This is because Sally's friend isn't obviously seeking information about what considerations Sally takes to favour her course of action. Think about what prompts the posing of Q1: the friend sees Sally's feverish typing, and wonders what Sally is aiming at in those actions, particularly so late at night: is she trying to post to a social media account, or is she trying to re-write a paragraph in a chapter of her book, or something else? On this interpretation of Q1 the class of possibilities that is defined by Q1 is the class of possible intentional actions that Sally may be performing. And on this interpretation A1 articulates the standards that the agent is holding herself to: she is not holding herself to the standards involved in posting to a social media account, or in polishing a chapter; she is holding herself to the practical standards that must be met if she is to token the act-type of putting a syllabus together. On this reading of Q1 and A1, we have an explanation of why citing multiple reasons that favour the course of action is infelicitous—it is because practical standards, not reasons, are sought with Q1. And A1 gives information about those practical standards. The fact that we can make sense of the conversation without appeal to reasons and that we can also make sense of the infelicity of citing reasons in answer to Q1 speaks strongly in favour of Practical Standards and against Reasons.

To establish the Reasons interpretation of Q1–A1 it has to be shown that Sally presents a reason for typing when she utters A1. But there are two serious problems facing the Reasons view. The first is that there are plausible metaphysical considerations that speak against it. The second is that, once we take seriously that the agent herself must answer for her action, and so, that we must assess what things are like from Sally's perspective, there is no easy way to make sense of her conceiving of her creating a syllabus as a reason that favours her typing. Both of these considerations speak so strongly against Reasons that we should, I think, reject it.

First, let's consider the metaphysical case against Reasons. It seems uncontroversially true that, *in typing*, Sally is *creating* a syllabus. The metaphysics of the relationship between the typing and the creating is a bit murky. The typing on the keyboard may stand in the relation of a realizer to the act-type of producing a syllabus, or it might be that typing stands in a

'generation relation', such as a by-relation, to the creating (Goldman 1970, chapter 2). Alternatively, the typing might constitute the creating (Baker 1998). Yet again, the typing and the creating might be one and the same thing differently described (Davidson 1969). In spite of widespread disagreement about how we should characterize the relationship, it is not clear that any of these ways of describing the relationship could be compatible with the creating standing in the favouring relation to the typing as Reasons requires. One reason to think this is that the relationship between the typing and the creating of the syllabus seems to be a relationship between concrete happenings—an action of typing generating or constituting an action of producing. But a reason does not seem to be a concrete happening (Alvarez 2010, chapter 2). It is widely regarded as a fact, an abstract thing, that stands in a favouring relation to another abstract thing, a practical option, or to a concrete thing, a course of action. But neither the typing nor the creating is an abstract thing. If this is right, then we have reason to think that the (i) creating of the syllabus (cited as the *explanans* in Sally's answer, A1) does not stand in the favouring relation to her (ii) typing (isolated as the *explanandum* by Sally's friend's question, Q1).

Here is not the place to develop either a theory of the metaphysics of actions or of the metaphysics of reasons. It bears repeating, however, that if we take the Practical Standards view seriously, we already have a plausible account of what is going on in Q1 and A1: Q1 isolates the class of possible intentional actions that Sally is performing in typing. In A1 Sally reveals which intentional action (of perhaps a few others) is being performed. In effect, Sally explains her typing by giving new information about further practical standards that she is holding herself to in her typing. The typing is thereby explained. We do not have a big puzzle about what is going on in Q1 and A1 that only the presence of reasons and the favouring relation would allow us to solve. We already have plausible candidates for the explanatory relation that holds between the typing and the creating: a generation relation or constitution or identity.

Let's turn from metaphysical considerations against Reasons to ones concerning Sally's perspective. Let's think about her perspective on her typing and her creating of the syllabus in three phases: (i) when she deliberates about what to do, (ii) after she has made a decision about what to do, and (iii) when she begins to act.

(i) Suppose that Sally deliberates about whether to create a syllabus on the basis of considerations such as that a syllabus helps the students

to get oriented and it helps her to clarify her thought about the aims for the course. The creation of a syllabus in this first deliberative scenario seems to be a practical option that is assessed in terms of whether considerations favour her taking the practical option or not. Sally does not, it seems, regard the creating of the syllabus as a reason that stands in a favouring relation to the typing.

(ii) Drawing on a widely accepted view of decisions, let's suppose that at the conclusion of her deliberation Sally decides to create a syllabus, thereby forming an intention to do so (Mele 2003, chapter 9). Drawing on a widely accepted view of intentions, once Sally intends to create a syllabus, creating a syllabus becomes a course of action that she is committed to (Bratman 1999). Once again, it does not seem to function in her eyes as a reason, as this would require Sally to treat her commitment to creating a syllabus as one reason among others. This would seem to demote its status from a commitment (Bratman 1999). In fact, we can suppose that her committing to the creation of the syllabus is what leads her to think such things as 'I need to figure out how and when to make the syllabus.' It seems, then, to impose a requirement on her to deliberate about a means, and is not easily interpretable as a reason that merely stands in the favour-ing relation to such deliberation, for this would again conflict with its status as commitment that imposes some kind of requirement on her to deliberate. I return to related issues below in the discussion of commitments to a practical role (Section 2.6). Suppose that in delib-erating about how best to create the syllabus, Sally considers dictating it to a scribe or typing it. Having engaged in a bit of deliberation, she decides to type it up before going to bed. In this second course of deliberation, creating the syllabus remains a course of action to which she is committed, and which rationally requires her to find a means. It does not seem to be regarded by her in this context as a reason that favours the typing.

(iii) Finally, when she begins typing, it seems natural to describe her perspective as one in which she regards her typing as her creating a syllabus. They are both things that she is doing, and she is doing the latter by doing the former. It does not seem that she is thinking of the creation of the syllabus as being a reason that favours her course of action.

In this unremarkable reconstruction of the route by which Sally ends up typing on her keyboard, she does not seem at any point to take the creation of the syllabus to stand in the favouring relation to anything. Given this, the Reasons interpretation of Q1 and A1 seems incorrect. And taken together with the metaphysical considerations, we have very strong reasons to reject Reasons for this case, Syllabus. But as Syllabus is not an odd or anomalous case, we also have grounds for doubting that reasons play, in general, as prominent a role in Answerability as they are often taken to play.

2.5 Objections

2.5.1 Phases of rationalizing action explanation

The Reasons defender might concede that Q1 elicits information about practical standards that Sally holds herself to and that A1 is explanatory of the typing because it allows the questioner to isolate which intentional action Sally is performing in typing. But it might be claimed that this is just a preliminary phase of RAE in which the agent is not *answering for* her action. She is, rather, merely allowing her interlocutor to come to know what she is doing intentionally. And so, even if we concede that practical standards rather than reasons are the focus of enquiry in Q1 and A1, there is no deep challenge to Reasons. Reasons is a claim about a different phase of RAE in which the agent must answer for—justify—her action. This phase would begin with questions that follow up on A1 and which explore the agent's reasons for her action.

But this is too quick. For in saying what she is doing, and if the practical standards view of intentional action is correct, Sally allows the interlocutor to know what standards she is holding herself to in acting, and in doing this, she becomes open to criticism. For example, if she says she is putting together a syllabus before the first class, her interlocutor might say:

Q2: 'Isn't it too late to make a syllabus? Doesn't that take days? You only have a few hours.'

Sally's friend asserts certain things about the practical standards that must be met to produce a syllabus, or do a good job of this, and in effect, she points out that Sally is at fault for embarking on a course of action that she cannot complete, or cannot complete well. Sally is at fault *given the practical*

standards that she holds herself to in virtue of intending to produce a syllabus and acting on this intention. In this scenario it seems that a question such as Q1 elicits an answer that opens the agent to criticism. The follow-up question requires Sally to answer for her action in terms of the practical standards that she is holding herself to. And note that Sally may try to parry this criticism, not by appeal to reasons, but by appeal to the practical standards that she must meet:

A2:   'It doesn't take that long! And in any case, I have an old syllabus that I can re-work for this class, so I am not starting from scratch.'

Given this, this line of defence of Reasons seems incorrect: Q1 and A1 open Sally to the possibility of criticism and follow up questions and answers may exclusively concern the practical standards that the agent holds herself to, not her reasons for acting.

It is also noteworthy that we seem to have such discussions with one another with some regularity. We ask 'what are you doing?' and elicit a true direct answer, and we follow up with a challenge to the agent in which she is treated as potentially critcizable:

Question: 'What are you doing?'

1. Answer: 'I'm baking a cake.'
   Further question: 'But don't you need to add flour?'
2. Answer: 'I'm leaving for the meeting.'
   Further question: 'But it's at noon, and it's five to, shouldn't you already have left?'
3. Answer: 'I'm taking the 78 to town.'
   Further question: 'Don't you need to get on that bus (as opposed to the 550)?'

These exchanges are readily interpretable as ones in which the agent is answerable in virtue of practical standards that she holds herself to. Interlocutors and agents alike regard the agents as potentially criticizable, not in terms of whether their course of action really is favoured by the balance of reasons—interlocutors in the exchanges above seem to ignore this—but in terms of whether the agents (i) understand what standards must be met to complete the course of action that they have set out on, and (ii) whether they are actually managing in their movements to meet the standards that, it is agreed, they must meet.

2.5.2 Rational requirements

Let's consider the following conversation had at the bus stop between Sada and Sorin. Sorin is waiting for the 78 bus to town:

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(Sada) Q1*:   'What are you doing?'
(Sorin) A1*:   'I'm taking the 78 to town.'

The 78 and 550 pull up and Sorin begins to board the 550, which is not going to town.

(Sada) Q2*:   'Don't you need to get on the 78?'

I have been arguing that questions such as Q1* define a class of intentional actions that an agent could be performing. Answers such as A1* specify, I maintain, which intentional action is being performed, and so, what practical standards the agent is holding himself to. Q2* treats the agent as potentially criticizable in light of the practical standards that he is holding himself to.

But it seems possible that questions like Q1* define the class of possible ends that the agent has in action and that answers like A1* specify which end the agent has in action. If this were right, might it not be, then, that Q2* should be interpreted as treating the agent as potentially criticizable in virtue of the fact that she is subject to requirements of instrumental rationality?[5] Isn't it appropriate to ask her for justification because she is subject to the rational requirement to take appropriate available means to her end? Although this objection does not seek to undercut the main aim of the chapter, which is to argue against Reasons, it does threaten to undermine the alternative to Reasons that I am advocating, Practical Standards.

Although an agent may be criticizable for her intentional action in many ways—by reference to such things as the reasons that she has for acting, the moral law, the law of the land, rational requirements, rules of etiquette, and so on—such criticizability is not sufficient for an agent's answerability for her intentional action. As we have seen in the argument against Reasons, although the agent may be criticizable in light of reasons when she acts, her answerability for her action may not be answerability in terms of reasons but in terms of practical standards.

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[5] I am indebted in the discussion of this subsection to the very helpful objections of an anonymous referee.

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The objection points out that there are also rational requirements in light of which the agent is criticizable. I will argue that these requirements are not fundamental to answerability. To do this, I must first return to the idea with which the chapter started, the idea that there is an intimate connection of some sort between intentional action and RAE questions. I will argue that the practical standards approach explains this connection, while the appeal to rational requirements does not.

It is a guiding assumption of this discussion, as it has been of Anscombe's work and the work of many others, that there is an intimate connection between intentional action and an agent's capacity to field RAE questions.[6] As noted earlier, Anscombe believes that intentional action just is, by its nature, something to which a certain kind of question has application. It is not just that agents happen to have the capacity to field RAE questions, or that they are highly likely to have appropriate intellectual capacities for answering such questions if they have the capacity to perform an intentional action, it is that it is especially *appropriate* to ask agents such questions about their intentional actions. Why is this?

The practical standards approach has something helpful to say in response to this question. It is both highly plausible and widely accepted that it is necessary for intentionally tokening an act-type, A, that one knows how to A. Simply put, it does not seem possible for an agent to do something intentionally if she does not know how to do that thing (e.g. Setiya 2017). Second, it is plausible to suppose that knowledge of how to token some act-type, A, centrally involves knowledge of the practical standards that one must meet if one is to token A intentionally. If practical standards define act-types, then knowing how to token a given act-type, A, will involve knowing the standards that are constitutive of this type. Moreover, practical standards are also ordinarily or necessarily *available to the agent's conscious awareness*. If an agent is well-functioning and rational, she will have given some thought to whether she knows how to do what she decides to do in her decision-making process. And if her action is to be guided in conditions of any complexity, then this knowledge how must be available for further deliberation should she need to modify her plans for execution. If knowledge-how is a necessary feature of intentional action, and if it is ordinarily available to the agent as she acts, the well-functioning agent has ready access to practical standards that she holds herself to as she

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[6] This is echoed, not just in the 'Anscombean' tradition in the philosophy of action but in the 'Davidsonian' tradition, which takes intentional action and action explanation to be two key and interrelated problems that a philosophy of action must solve.

acts. And, more importantly, we would be able to make sense of the tight connection between intentional actions and the capacity to field RAE questions if RAE had these practical standards as its fundamental subject matter. If the foregoing line of argument is on the right track, the practical standards approach has the advantage that it allows us to understand the tight connection between RAE and intentional action.

But the intriguing connections among the performance of intentional action, the appropriateness of asking RAE questions, and the capacity of the well-functioning agent to answer such questions would be harder to explain if RAE enquiries had rational requirements, such as the instrumental requirement (e.g. Broome 2013, 159–70), as their subject matter. Sorin may be well-functioning and mature, but like most neurotypical human agents, he would be hard-pressed to articulate that it is indeed true, as Sada putatively suggests, that qua rational agent with an adopted end he is subject to a requirement to take an appropriate means to his end, and so, that he ought to board the 78, rather than the 550. Such rational requirements are not consciously adopted by agents and agents do not have to be aware of them to guide their actions to completion. It is difficult, then, to see how they could explain the intimate connection between RAE and intentional action.

There is much more to be said here, but we have, I think, good reasons to doubt the viability of this objection. One unanswered question is whether practical standards have normative authority, and if so, whether this authority stems from reasons, rational requirements, or something else. But grappling with this lies beyond our scope. We can answer the question of *what* the subject matter of RAE questions is, and what standards of evaluation an agent employs when she answers for her action, without answering the difficult question of whether these standards have genuine authority, and if so, whence that authority stems.

Although I have argued against the claim that we can explain answerability by appeal to rational requirements, it does not follow that means–end thinking and rational requirements are wholly irrelevant to answerability. As I discuss briefly in Section 2.6, just as reasons may sometimes be key to understanding a given case of an agent's answering for her action, means–end relations that the agent sees among her actions may also play such a role (although precise articulations of the instrumental requirement, and why the agent is subject to such requirements will still, I think, fall outside the scope of answerability). But, as with reasons, I think that we have good reason to insist that means–end relations are less fundamental to answerability than practical standards.

2.6 Hard cases for practical standards

It may be objected that even if not all RAE enquiries concern reasons, some do. In Syllabus, Sally's friend first sets out with the aim of finding out what Sally is up to (with Q1), then she queries whether Sally really understands the practical standards that she must meet in order to fulfil her intention (Q2). But we can imagine that she then turns to querying whether Sally has sufficient reason for embarking on her course of action:

Q3:   'But why are you finishing the syllabus—isn't it more important to get a good night's sleep?'

Insofar as this very common type of rejoinder treats Sally as criticizable in light of reasons, it offers a clear challenge to Practical Standards.

Before turning to a more concessive point, let me first push back a bit. We can fairly easily imagine Sally responding as follows:

A3:   'The importance of sleep is beside the point—I don't have a choice about this, I'm the instructor.'

This response is of interest for a number of reasons. First, it is natural sounding. It is not uncommon to appeal to a practical role in RAE contexts. An agent might explain why they are assuming so much responsibility for their daughter's education by saying 'Well, I'm her parent', or explain why she, as opposed to someone else, is ordering troops to stand down by saying 'I'm the ranking officer'. Neither these responses nor Sally's response seems to involve refusing to be answerable for the action, but they do not seem to answer for their actions by appeal to reasons. In saying 'I am the instructor', Sally does not try to show that a good night's sleep is, say, less important than having a syllabus ready for her students, thereby attempting to show that the latter reason outweighs the reasons that are treated as weighty in Q3.

It may be contended that roles are reasons, and so, saying that 'I'm the instructor' or 'I'm the ranking officer' is to give a reason. Some of the problems with this claim have already cropped up in the discussion of whether Sally's commitment to creating a syllabus could be regarded by her as a reason in favour of means–end deliberation. First, casting roles as reasons suffers from a boot-strapping problem. As committing to a role is something that we do voluntarily, if roles were reasons, we could create reasons. But if this were possible, then even absurd and morally heinous acts of

commitment could generate reasons that, just qua reasons, have some normative force (Bratman 1999). Reasons-defenders should feel some reluctance to accept this consequence.

Second, there is something counterintuitive about thinking of roles to which we are committed as things that show up in our practical thought as reasons. Suppose that S weighs the fact that she is committed to being the mother of a very young child, C, as a reason that favours feeding and clothing C, but regards this as a reason that could be outweighed by others. It is not clear that thinking in this way is compatible with S's *being committed* to the role of mother of C. A commitment should, we may think, impose pressure on S not to take her role as just another reason to be weighed. A commitment should instead preclude or exclude such lines of practical deliberation altogether (Williams 1981; Raz 1975).[7] If the Reasons defender is to make this line of objection work, they will have to wrestle with counterintuitive claims about the first-person practical thought of rational committed agents.

It might be objected that utterances such as 'I'm the instructor' or 'I'm the ranking officer' do not explicitly cite reasons, but they can have the purpose of conveying that there are reasons on the other side that would, were they cited, show that the agent's course of action can be vindicated. This might be a plausible interpretation of an utterance on a given occasion, but there is another interpretation available that is applicable to many ordinary cases, and it does not favour Reasons. As already suggested, it is not implausible to suppose that in being committed to some role, it is required of an agent that she avoid certain kinds of deliberation and that she engage in others. Being a committed spouse rationally rules out practical deliberation about whom to marry next, and being a committed employee of enterprise E rationally rules out practical deliberation about the best ways to sabotage E. When Sally says 'I'm the instructor', she may wish to convey that she is precluded from deliberating in the manner suggested by Q3. Rather than being churlish or pointing to the existence of reasons, Sally is instead correcting the questioner's faulty understanding of her normative situation: as Sally is committed to being an instructor, the deliberation that the interlocutor urges on her is ruled out for her. Similarly, suppose that someone says to S when she buys food and clothes for her child, C, 'Why do you spend what little money you have in feeding and clothing C, you should spend that

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[7] Williams's (1981) 'one thought too many' suggests such a view. Raz's (1975) discussion of exclusionary reasons may also be appealed to here.

money on a vacation!' S may say 'I'm C's mother!', where S's point is not to indicate that there are reasons on the other side, but to point out that such weighing of considerations is ruled out for S. If this is on the right track, we have a reason to think this defence of Reasons is too quick.

It should be noted that neurotypical adult human agents, who are central players in RAE are typically agents with lots of practical roles and other commitments. They are parents, friends, employees, and members of political parties, clubs, and so on. When they commit to these roles, it seems that they come to regard themselves as subject to the practical standards that define their roles. Given the central place of role commitments in such agency, we should expect that answerability in RAE contexts will be shaped by them. And if it is correct that commitment sometimes excludes deliberation, the role of commitment in answerability will be one that at least sometimes works against Reasons.

But to turn, finally, to a more concessive response to Q3, Sally might offer this alternative answer:

A3-ALT: 'No, I'm not going to go to bed. It's just too embarrassing for me to turn up without a syllabus, and besides, it will help me prepare for the class tomorrow if I make a syllabus now.'

In this response, Sally defends her course of action—answers for it—in terms of the reasons that, she takes it, favour creating the syllabus. This is a common case and offers challenges to the primacy of practical standards for answerability.

But this does not allow us to reinstate Reasons. The discussion of earlier sections indicates that an agent may be *answerable for* her action in terms of the practical standards that she takes herself to be subject to in virtue of her intention. If this is correct, Reasons is false as long as it is read as a claim to the effect that the agent's sensitivity to reasons is fundamental for—necessary and sufficient for—answerability:

Reasons: S is answerable for her intentional action, A, in virtue of the fact that she is capable of recognizing, or weighing, and acting on reasons that favour or speak against her A-ing.

Although I have focused only on a handful of cases to defend Practical Standards, the cases are not outliers; they are commonplace. Given this, we should not just reject Reasons as making a false claim about what

answerability fundamentally depends on; we should take seriously the possibility that answering for actions *often* involves practical standards. If this is correct, then we also have reason to be sceptical of a more modest view that answerability is usually or normally bound up with an agent's sensitivity to reasons.

And it may be true, as Practical Standards states, and as I have tentatively argued in earlier sections, that sensitivity to practical standards is necessary for intentional action, and so, for answerability:

Practical Standards: If S is answerable for her intentional action, A, she is capable of recognizing and acting on the practical standards that she is subject to because of the intention with which she acts.

If I am right, the performance of intentional actions involves agents holding themselves to, and trying to comply with, practical standards. If this is essential to at least the paradigmatic intentional actions of mature neurotypical adult humans—the agents and actions that are central to RAE practices—then we have reason to think that answerability in light of practical standards will play a fundamental role in our fully developed theory of answerability. For whether or not an intentional action is performed for reasons, and it may not be, and whether or not the agent bases it on means–end reasoning, she must, if the practical standards view of intentional action is true, still hold herself to practical standards. And if she holds herself to practical standards, she is answerable in light of them. It may be, then, that practical standards are necessary for answerability; it may be that reasons are not necessary for this, and so, that practical standards will be the cornerstone of our complete theory of answerability.

2.7 Concluding remarks

A complete theory of answerability will have much more to say about reasons and practical standards; it will explain how answerability to practical standards and to reasons is intertwined, it will fully explore the relationships among intentional action, answerability, and RAE enquiries, it will absorb relevant empirical data concerning our rationalizing action explanation practices, and so on. But these tasks lie outside the scope here. The central aim has been to argue against Reasons. An additional aim has been to motivate the view that practical standards are central to answerability.

Although I have spent a lot of time arguing against the widely accepted Reasons, the driving motivation is not just to disagree with such a claim, but to foreground our *executive* agency. Execution for creatures like neurotypical adult humans involves sophisticated rational capacities. Given this, it is plausible to suppose that we are answerable in ways that are distinctive of our executive agency. I have tried to vindicate the view that agents are answerable because they are *executive agents*, agents who are good or bad at meeting the practical standards that they are subject to in virtue of their intentions to act.

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