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THE CONCLUSION OF PRACTICAL REASON

Aristotle's famous contention that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action (see Aristotle 1984) (henceforth "the Aristotelian Thesis") often baffles action theorists. I will first examine a few reasons to object to the Aristotelian Thesis; these objections seem to support the view that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an *intention*. However, I will argue that this is not a tenable position, and I will propose a way to understand the Aristotelian Thesis that can overcome these objections. The first part of the paper examines the case against the Aristotelian Thesis, and in favour of the main alternative view, the view that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an intention. It seems that the Aristotelian is vulnerable to a few rather obvious objections, while the alternative view seems to face none of these difficulties. The following sections try to show that appearances here are wholly deceptive. In the second section, I argue that when we properly understand the subject matter of the Aristotelian Thesis, that is, when we understand what can be properly considered a *conclusion* of practical reason, it turns out that the alternative view is indefensible. The third section argues that, on the other hand, with this proper understanding of its subject matter in hand, we can show that the Aristotelian Thesis is immune to the objections canvassed in the first section.

Before we move on, a piece of terminology is helpful. The conclusion of practical reasoning is not a prediction about how one will act or intend (see, on this issue, Korsgaard 1997). This can be registered by adding a 'should' to the conclusion ("I *should* turn the light on"). It is my view, however, that if the Aristotelian Thesis is correct, this way of writing the conclusion is a categorical mistake. So in order not to prejudge the issue, I will write the conclusion of practical reasoning as an intention or action, depending on the view being discussed, but maintain throughout that good practical reasoning (or a sound argument in the practical

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sphere) *justifies*, rather than guarantees the truth (or the reality) of the intention or the action.

1. The Case Against the Aristotelian Thesis

The Aristotelian Thesis seems to be vulnerable to the following objections:

(1) An agent intends an action only under a particular description.
(2) Whether we succeed in carrying out a particular action does not depend solely on our reasoning capacities.
(3) Sometimes one does not act on the conclusion of practical reasoning (Robert Audi raises a similar objection in 1989, p. 93).

Let us start with (1). Actions have an "accordion effect" (this term was coined by Joel Feinberg; see his 1965). To use Davidson's well-known example, by flipping the switch, Mary may turn on the light, and also inadvertently alert a prowler (Davidson 1980). In this case, all these actions might be identical:

(a) Mary's flipping the switch.
(b) Mary's turning the light on.
(c) Mary's alerting the prowler.

It is somewhat controversial how actions should be individuated, and indeed whether the actions described by (a), (b) and (c) are actually one and the same action, or whether a narrower criterion for action individuation is more adequate (for a survey of the available positions, see Mele 1992). Since the objection is far more powerful if we assume that actions are individuated in this broad manner, I will assume that, if "*A* -ed" and "*A* -ed" are action descriptions, and that if "*A* -ed by -ing," then "*A* -ed" and "*A* -ed" refer to the same action. With this assumption in place, there seems to be an obvious problem with the Aristotelian Thesis. For certainly a sound piece of practical reasoning is made unsound by substituting descriptions of the same action.

Let us take, for instance, the following reasoning:

I. I want to (intend to, shall) read in the bedroom.
II. I believe that in order to read in the bedroom, I must turn the light on.

Therefore,

III. I turn the light on.

This seems like a valid piece of practical reasoning. One might dispute whether, for instance, premise (I) should not be substituted by an evaluation (such as 'is desirable' or 'is good'; see Scanlon 1998), or, of course if premise (II) should not state a fact as opposed to a belief, (see Thomson 2001, Ch. 2), etc. But it seems that some revised version of the reasoning above should turn out to be valid, at least if we leave aside for the moment the idea that any such piece of reasoning can count as valid only on the assumption of some kind of *ceteris paribus* clause, or that considerations that counted against turning the light on did not provide reasons not to perform the action that were strong enough to override the above reasoning.[1]

But if by turning the light on, I alert a prowler, it seems that (III) could be substituted by the following:

IV. I alert a prowler.

However, it seems that an argument that concluded (IV) from (I) and (II) would be invalid. One might object that the substitution in question is not allowed by the Aristotelian Thesis. After all, substituting co-referring expressions doesn't necessarily preserve the validity of an argument or a piece of reasoning. I doubt, however, that this move can work. For the Aristotelian Thesis does not claim that the conclusion of practical reasoning is the statement of an action, or a proposition that describes a certain action. It claims that it is the *action itself*. In theoretical reasoning substituting different statements of the same proposition[2] in an argument should not make a difference to its validity; similarly, we should also expect that substituting descriptions of identical actions should not make a difference to the validity of a piece of a practical reasoning if we accept the Aristotelian Thesis. One could quibble further, but I will assume that the Aristotelian Thesis is committed to allowing such substitutions.[3]

It might be worth examining a defence of the Aristotelian Thesis that concedes some of these points. One might think that although there is nothing wrong about having a sentence of the form "I intend to . . ." as the conclusion of practical reason, it would be wrong to deny the Aristotelian Thesis on this basis. Although I can move from a belief to

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[1] Although we are leaving this aside for the moment, that the argument needs such assumptions will be a central concern of this paper.

[2] Talk of "propositions" in this way often sets off a number of warning bells. But since one's views on the nature or existence of propositions should not affect the point here, I will ignore them.

[3] Since my aim is to defend the Aristotelian Thesis, if this assumption turns out to be false, it would only bolster my case.

another by (theoretical) reasoning, it would be wrong to say that the conclusion of my reasoning is a *belief*, rather than its *content*. Similarly, although I form the intention on the basis of reasoning, it would be wrong to say that the conclusion of the reasoning is my intention rather than its content. And the content of the intention is an action (see Clark 1997, especially pp. 19-20). However, this line of reasoning is problematic in a few ways. First, what we get is a rather different version of the Aristotelian Thesis. On this reading, the Aristotelian Thesis turns out to be a claim about what is represented in the conclusion of a practical reasoning. The more contentious Aristotelian Thesis does not merely present a contrast between *what is represented* in the conclusion of theoretical and practical reasoning (the latter must be the representation of an action, former a representation of anything), but states that the latter is not a matter of representing, but of doing something. In Aristotle's words "whenever one thinks that every man ought to walk, and that one is a man oneself, *straightaway one walks*" (Aristotle 1984, 701a8-12, emphasis added). Moreover, if we reject the more radical Aristotelian Thesis and think of the conclusion in terms of the content of the intention of someone who reasons properly from (I) and (II), it is not clear that we should then accept that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action, rather than something *that is brought about through the action*, and in fact, a particular *description* of something that is brought about through the action (for a similar point, see Hornsby 1998, pp. 88-89). The content of the intention is not the action of my turning the light on, but rather "that the light is turned on," an effect brought about by my action. If one accepts Davidson's individuation of actions, there will be many effects for each action, and thus one cannot identify the action with what it brings about. Of course, one might take issue with Davidson's individuation of actions. But it is worth noting that one would need a rather fine-grained individuation of actions. For one would need a different action not only for each different effect, but a different action for each different possible object of intention. Assuming that Mrs. Jones is the prowler, "alerting the prowler" and "alerting Mrs. Jones" describe the same effect, but they are two different possible objects of intention (that is, one could intend to alert Mrs. Jones, but not intend to alert the prowler).

Let us now turn to objection (2). Suppose I go through what seems to be the same piece of deliberation, but instead of turning the light on, I inadvertently flip the alarm switch on. But now since I did not perform the action described in (III), it seems that, if the conclusion of a piece of

practical reasoning is an action, the only conclusion available to me is the following:

V. I turn the alarm on.

Concluding (V) from (I) and (II) does not speak very highly of one's intellectual powers. Yet, whatever my general limitations are, what I am displaying in this particular case is clumsiness rather than stupidity. One could reply that, in the absence of action, I should be regarded as concluding nothing at all. But this seems implausible; after all, it seems that I set myself to act because of the conclusion of a piece of reasoning. Alternatively, one could say that the action that concluded my practical reasoning should not be described as turning the alarm on, but rather as:

VI. I flip the switch.

However, even if we ignore the difficulties raised by objection (1), this cannot take us very far. If I am clumsy enough, I can also fail to flip the switch after deliberating in this manner. It seems that the only retreat that might accomplish anything, at least under certain views of the nature of mental states,[4] is to stop at a mental action that might be completely under the control of the agent, such as forming an intention or making a decision.[5] But this grants the opposition their point, since those who deny that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action will likely argue that the conclusion of practical reasoning is the formation of a certain mental state (such as an intention, decision, etc.).

A final reply is open to the "Aristotelian." She can say at this point that the conclusion of the practical reasoning at this point is the following:

VII. I try to turn the light on.

For any such case, we could characterize the action as one of trying. It will turn out that this suggestion is essentially correct, but as it stands it seems problematic. One might now want to say that if (VII) is the only thing that (I) and (II) and my logical skills can guarantee, then the conclusion of any piece of practical reasoning must be a case of "trying."

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[4] This qualification is necessary, since in some views there might be no "non-disjunctive" relevant mental states that are fully in control of the agent. For a view that suggests this possibility, see Hornsby (1998).

[5] Taking those mental states to be actions is itself problematic since it seems to generate an infinite regress. That is, if forming intentions are actions, then one should form intentions intentionally, and, under a plausible view of action, that means, that under certain description of this action, one intended to form an intention. But this means that one must have formed the intention to form the first intention.

But this suggestion faces a serious problem. If trying is anything that is not fully under my control, such as a bodily movement, even the most rational agent could fail to move from (I) and (II) to (VII) by sheer bad luck. If it is just a mental action or a mental event of some kind, then it seems that we are getting perilously close to the view that the conclusion is just an intention.[6] And this leads us directly to (c). For we would need to stretch the notion of "trying" pretty thin in order to cover all cases of practical reasoning. For suppose Larry wants to go for dinner this evening. Now it is 11:45, and he knows that he needs to call the restaurant at 12:00 to make reservations. He forms the intention to call at 12:00. Here it seems that Larry is done with the practical reasoning, and even if he were to die at 11:55, this would not change the fact that he had successfully carried out a piece of practical reasoning. His death would have prevented the action, but not the reasoning. Thus the conclusion of practical reasoning is not an action.

None of these problems seem to arise if instead of (III) we have, as the conclusion of (I)-(II):

VIII. I intend to turn the light on.

We cannot substitute "alert the prowler" for "turn the light on" in the context of an intention, and intentions can certainly fail to be carried out by clumsiness, death, etc.[7] The case against the Aristotelian Thesis seems compelling.[8]

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[6] There is also another problem. It seems that what I should aim as the result of practical reasoning is the action itself, not an attempt. Although it is true that any time we *X*, we thereby also try to *X*, it is unclear that having *X*-ing and the attempt to *X* as one's aim amount to the same thing. If aim to hit a good serve, I will be concerned with the existence of obstacles, and I will try to remove them (I will, for instance, wait for the wind to stop blowing). But if I am concerned only to try to hit a good serve, I will not care about any external obstacles to my serve going in (no matter how hard the wind blows, my attempt will be flawless).

[7] I will assume that intentions are not actions. Although this makes for simpler presentation, rejecting this assumption will still leave room for a distinction between the Aristotelian view and its main alternative. The views would be distinguished as a different between *which* action should be regarded as the conclusion of practical reasoning: the intention to *X*, or *carrying out* the intention to *X*.

[8] The same advantages can be claimed for the view that the conclusion of practical reasoning is a practical judgment. See, for instance, Audi (1989).

2. Practical Reasoning and Soundness

Before we move on, we need to say a few words on what counts as valid and sound instances of practical reasoning. Of course, I do not mean here to give a complete account of the issue, but just place some constraints on these notions that will be relevant for the argument in this paper.

First let us start with the premises. We can distinguish between two kinds of premises that appear in practical reasoning. There will be premises that are possible contents of a belief clause, and whose soundness depends on whether the premise is true. On the other hand, there will be premises that specify a certain end or aim of the agent. The soundness of these premises will depend on whether the end is appropriate, correct, or one that the agent should have. I hope these remarks are neutral with respect to various views about the nature of practical reasoning. So, for instance, I do not assume that an instance of practical reasoning needs to have premises of the second kind. So, someone who thinks that desires, preferences, etc. are irrelevant to practical reasoning, will think that there are no premises of the second kind, and, perhaps that each premise describes the content of a belief of the agent (though some of the beliefs will be evaluative beliefs) or that all the premises are fact-stating propositions (though some of them state evaluative facts). A "subjectivist" about practical reason might think that all premises of the second kind are sound as long as they specify the content of the agent strongest desire, or the content of his relevant preferences, etc.

I will define an "acceptable conclusion" as follows: A conclusion is acceptable if and only if it is a conclusion that a fully rational agent would, or at least could, accept if she were in a relevantly similar situation. What counts as relevantly similar will vary from theory to theory, but it will probably involve having similar beliefs and preferences, that the agent be under similar time constraints, etc. The central idea is that an agent who is committed to an unacceptable conclusion is, on that account, irrational. I will assume that the following are unacceptable conclusions: a conclusion in which (or a conclusion that recommends that) one knowingly chooses a less preferred over a more preferred option, or a conclusion in which one takes (or a conclusion that recommends taking) what one knows to be insufficient means to one's ends. Depending on the details of one's theory of practical reason, different conclusions would count as unacceptable; I hope to use for my purposes only relatively uncontroversial examples of unacceptable conclusions. Similarly, a "fully rational agent" is one who is never guilty

of any kind of irrationality, but what counts as such an agent depends to some extent on one's theory of practical reason: here too, I hope to steer away from controversial examples.[9] Drawing an acceptable conclusion does not guarantee that the agent will do well, or even as well as possible for an agent in such a situation, for the agent might, for instance, lack important information.

We can now state constraints that will play an important role in the argument:

(C_1) A valid piece of reasoning never leads from sound premises to an unacceptable conclusion.

(C_2) If an agent acts irrationally then one of the following must be the case:
- (a) The agent forms noninferential beliefs irrationally.
- (b) The agent forms noninferential aims or ends irrationally.
- (c) The agent performs an invalid piece of reasoning.
- (d) Another irrational process that can be attributed to the agent takes place.

(C_1) is a relatively weak requirement on good (or valid) practical reasoning. Good practical reasoning should not move us from true beliefs and appropriate aims into a position in which we are guilty of some form of irrationality. This a rather basic constraint on good reasoning in general: that it should not take us from "unimpeachable" starting points into an irrational stance.[10] Indeed one could argue that a stronger constraint is also quite plausible: good reasoning shouldn't take us from *acceptable* premises into unacceptable conclusions. However, since I only need the weaker claim, I will commit myself only to (C_1). (C_1) is also formulated in such a way as to be neutral between whether the

[9] Of course a general sceptic about practical reason will not accept anything as an example of practical irrationality. But it is not clear to me that for such a sceptic practical *reasoning* is possible; general scepticism about practical reason would probably render this issue moot.

[10] This is not to say that all good reasoning is truth-preserving; no doubt, inductive reasoning is not like that. It also does not mean that we cannot end up with an unacceptable conclusion as the result of good reasoning; one would need then to conclude that some of one's premises were unacceptable, and, *ceteris paribus*, one would consider revising at least one of them. See Harman (1986). Harman does not endorse the use of notions such as "valid" for reasoning (since they seem to confuse reasoning and argument), but as long as one keep the distinction between reasoning and argument clear, I don't see any reason not to use the word 'valid' for reasoning that is conducted solely in accordance with correct or appropriate rules of inferences. However, substituting 'good' for 'valid' would not alter in any way the argument of the paper.

conclusion is an action or an intention. Certainly rational agents both intend and act, and they could both intend and act rationally or irrationally.

(C_2) simply tells us that if an agent acts irrationally, then the agent must be guilty of some specific failure of rationality. The general idea of (C_2) is that there could be no "blameless" irrationality.[11] The failure of rationality might be due to an irrational starting-point or to irrational inferences, but as long as the agent forms all cognitive states as a rational agent would, the agent could not be guilty of irrationality. Clause (d) just covers the possibility that we overlooked a cognitive failure that cannot be assimilated to (a)-(c); I leave it there since the arguments presented for the Aristotelian thesis do not depend on (a)-(c) covering all possible instances of irrationality.

I will also make a couple of assumptions: As I said above, I treat the following as cases of irrationality: (a) the agent knowingly acts counter-preferentially; (b) for which the agent knowingly pursues ineffective means to her ends. Although someone might find instances of (a) and (b) which it might be contentious whether the agent behaved irrationally, the examples I use are fairly straightforward. Also for the sake of convenience, I will assume that the agents we discuss have preferences similar to those that we expect that most agents have (they prefer more over less money; they prefer not to destroy their property, etc.), and that these preferences are in no way irrational.

Finally, it is also worth adding that although I assume that we can *attribute* instances of practical reasoning to agents, I am making no assumptions about the ontological commitments of this attribution. Perhaps each step in the agent's practical reasoning must reach consciousness, or perhaps each must have *some* kind of psychological or physical reality, even if they do not reach consciousness; perhaps, the attributions are fully determined by questions about how to best interpret the behaviour of the agent as rational, etc. My only commitment is to the *possibility* of attributing these instances of practical reasoning to the agent.

[11] I am not going to argue for this claim, so it is open to the "anti-Aristotelian" to argue against this claim. However it would be surprising to conclude that the anti-Aristotelian position is hostage to the possibility of blameless irrationality; those who reject AT typically do not reject it on these grounds.

3. The Case against the View that the Conclusion of Practical Reasoning Is an Intention

Let us now look more carefully at the Aristotelian Thesis. Take the following pieces of reasoning:

IX. No honest person becomes a millionaire just by chatting.
X. I am an honest person.
XI. If I intend to become a millionaire, I should do something other than chatting.

XII. If something is good in some respect, then I have some reason to pursue it.
XIII. Every beautiful thing is good in some respect.
XIV. Thus, I have some reason to pursue anything that is beautiful.

Now these are valid pieces of reasoning, and let us assume that all the premises are sound. Certainly these arguments do not have an action as a conclusion. They also seem to be species of practical reasoning. So do not we have here a fast refutation of the Aristotelian Thesis? If the Aristotelian Thesis is plausible at all, we need to restrict its scope. In particular, the Aristotelian Thesis is absurd if it does not exempt arguments that have undetachable or conditional conclusions. It does not follow from (XI) or (XIV) that I should do something other than chatting, or that I should pursue beautiful things, or that I should do anything whatsoever. Rather the conclusions of these arguments are conditional statements, explicitly in the former, and implicitly in the latter. That is, the latter argument at most concludes that whenever nothing cancels this reason, and there are no overriding reasons not to pursue a beautiful thing, I should pursue beautiful things. The Aristotelian Thesis can be, however, only a thesis about *detachable* or *unconditional* conclusions. This restriction should not surprise us. The "job" of practical reasoning cannot end at a conditional conclusion. Insofar as one has not yet settled on a course of action, practical reasoning has not yet come to a rest, and thus one cannot see any such conclusions as any more than inferential steps in a larger piece of reasoning. Thus, more generally, we can say that the Aristotelian Thesis is a thesis about proper *termini* of practical reasoning, not about the conclusion of any thinking that has possible human ends as a subject matter. To restrict the Aristotelian Thesis in this way is just to clarify that the relevant notion of a "conclusion" here is the notion of something that can be regarded as a real *terminus* of reasoning that is indeed *practical* (as opposed to something that could be the end point of idle speculation).

Let us go back to our first argument with this clarification in mind, with the conclusion explicitly stated as an intention as in (VIII). Is (VIII) an unconditional conclusion? It seems that if this is a valid piece of reasoning, the answer is "no." Let us assume again that the premises are all sound. For suppose I were also aware that the children are asleep and I will wake them up if I turn the light on, and that I would like to read, but I much prefer not to wake the children up than to read. In this case, the conclusion of the argument would specify an intention to act against my preferences. In accordance with (C_1), we cannot consider the argument as it stands to be valid and unconditional. A fully rational agent would not choose to act in way that obviously goes against his own preferences. As we said above, the validity of the inference depends on adding a *ceteris paribus* clause. So far we must read the conclusion as "If everything is equal, I intend to turn the light on" as a conclusion.[12] So, if we want to assess the truth of the Aristotelian Thesis, we should investigate an argument that does not have a *ceteris paribus* clause. Can we get rid of the *ceteris paribus* clause, while still holding on to the view that the conclusion of the reasoning is an intention? One simple way to do this is to add to the reasoning the following premise:

IIa. Everything else *is* equal.

Adding this premise seems, at first, to do the job. One can complain that this does not present the agent's full reasoning, since it does not say why the agent thought that everything else *was* equal. But even this flaw can be perhaps fixed if we move away from presenting the agent's reasoning as a form of practical syllogism. Indeed the practical syllogism seems to capture only a fraction of the agent's reasoning. An agent typically weighs various pros and cons of a situation, and, one could argue, a proper representation of practical reasoning should bring to light this kind of procedure. Moreover we could get rid of the *ceteris paribus* clause altogether by registering all the relevant considerations. Now, this seems hardly feasible in practice,[13] but at least it can show us how a valid piece of practical reasoning that would have an unconditional conclusion.

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[12] Another way to secure the validity of the argument with an unconditional conclusion is to argue that practical reasoning is non-monotonic. See on this issue, Brandom (2001). I leave this possibility aside for the moment and come back to it at the end of the paper.

[13] Especially if we think that part of the reasoning involved registering indifference about various things. After all it is not a matter of logic, for instance, that moving my left foot first when I start walking towards the switch is no better than moving my right foot first, and thus, arguably the full representation of the reasoning would involve listing every single aspect of the action the agent is about to undertake (or at least every single aspect that the agent does or could foresee) in comparison to the alternatives.

If we now add (IIa) to the reasoning, or further premises specifying all the relevant considerations that weighed in the decision to turn the light on, can (VIII) be rightly considered the *terminus* of practical reasoning? Now even if one thinks that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an intention, one will not think that the agent's practical life ends at the formation of intentions; the point of forming intentions is to carry them out in actions.[14] Suppose now the straight path to my light switch goes through my computer, which I can easily, but damagingly to the computer, shove out of the way. Had I taken this route I would have carried out my intention, but my *action* would no longer be justified by the relevant piece of reasoning. For surely the reasoning left out the fact that it would not be worth trashing the computer. But if this is the case the reasoning does not warrant *this particular intention*. Assuming that I am fully aware that taking this route should knock the computer in this manner, I act against my preferences if I take this route, and thus irrationally. In accordance with (C_2), given that we need not assume that there is anything wrong in the way I form beliefs or desires, and since there is no unusual cognitive process that could take the blame for my irrationality, my irrationality must be due to bad reasoning. Indeed, it seems independently clear that the reasoning can make my intention rationally acceptable as it stands. For, unless our intentions have certain autonomous benefits,[15] our intentions can only be justified if we are justified in carrying them out. And in this case, I am not rationally warranted to carry out my intention, at least, not to carry it out in any possible way. Of course one could protest here that although not all ways of carrying out the intentions are justified by this piece of practical reasoning, at least some of them are. But this reply concedes that the intention is not the proper *terminus* of practical reasoning: insofar as we want to allow that some instances of practical reasoning are valid, the job of practical reasoning is not done when we form this intention, for, given that not just any way of carrying out the intention is warranted by the reasoning above, in order to know how to act I must also know which ways of carrying out the intention would be appropriate.

Still, the critic of the Aristotelian Thesis might argue that this simply shows that the intention needs to be further specified. First one might say that given that the agent was aware of the existence of the computer in

[14] For instance, Thomson claims that the Aristotelian Thesis is "at best suspect," but later argues that practical reasoning is reasoning "about what to *do*" (Thomson 2001, pp. 79 and 82, emphasis added).

[15] Such as the benefits of forming the intention to drink toxin in Gregory Kavka's toxin puzzle. See Kavka (1983).

the path to the light switch, this must have been a relevant consideration in forming the intention, and thus should be part of the content specified by the intention. But this will not do. First, note all that needs to go into the content of an intention if I need to represent all the foreseeable ways in which carrying out the intention might be acceptable or unacceptable. If I am going to turn on the light in my room, and now I am in the next room over (a rather simple intention to be executed), I must represent the layout of the room, and my path towards the room, make sure that I keep in mind all possible obstacles, represent how I will move my arms and legs so as to avoid the possible obstacles, think about what can happen in my room that can make turning the light on in a certain way problematic, represent more precisely *how* I am going to turn on the light, etc. It is quite implausible that this is all even implicitly represented in forming the intention to turn the light on; indeed implausible enough that we might want to reconsider the plausibility of the Aristotelian Thesis. But suppose one were ready to bite the bullet here, and argue that I do represent all these things when I form the intention to turn the light on. This still will not suffice. Insofar as the intention *precedes* the action,[16] and the action is extended through time, the agent could always become aware of new, relevant information *while* he executes the intention. It seems that any intention that can be the conclusion of practical reasoning must take into consideration the possibility that in executing an intention, the agent might face unexpected, but relevant, facts. One could try to handle these problems in one of two ways. One could first try to make the intention so specific that it will rule out the possibility of unexpected "twists" while one acts. In this case, the intention could be something like:

VIIIa. I intend to walk through such and such a path to reach the light switch and then turn the light on.

This is a short-lived improvement. For specifying the path is not all I need to do. I could take this path but flip the switch with my mouth, both experiencing the (I imagine) unappetizing flavour of light switches, and exposing myself to germs in such a way that may outweigh the value of switching the light on. The problem is that by just getting more and more detailed about my plan cannot rule out in advance that, while I act, I will

[16] Could one say that the intention that is the conclusion of practical reasoning does not *precede* the action, but is an intention *in* action? I discuss this point below, but in a nutshell this would surrender most of the advantages that the view is suppose to have over the Aristotelian Thesis, and would make it virtually indistinguishable from the Aristotelian Thesis.

face previously unforeseen information that is relevant for how I act. The general problem should be clear: the intention that is supposed to be the conclusion of practical reasoning, the intention that guides me in action, is the representation of something general. But the action is a particular. Thus there always are aspects of the action that were not represented in the intention, of which I become aware while I execute the intention. Since each aspect is potentially relevant for the evaluation of my action, the way I carry out my intention can never be fully justified by the practical reasoning that issues in this intention. It might be thus better to deal with the unexpected by representing it in a general form in the agent's intention. Perhaps the relevant intention is something like the following:

VIIIb. I intend to turn the light on while always making sure that, as far as I can tell, no foreseeable effect of my carrying out the intention in a particular way outweighs the value of the action.

(VIIIb) succeeds in covering the whole ground by quantifying over all foreseeable effects of my action. However (VIIIb) is also a conditional conclusion, or at least a conclusion that leaves the job of practical reasoning unfinished. It has a form equivalent to "I intend *X* unless *C*," or "I intend to *X* in some way" (but the correct way of doing it still needs to be figured out), and for this reason it cannot determine in any particular way how I should act. In sum, no matter how one further specifies the intention, given that the intention is general and the action is particular one will be facing the following dilemma. On the first horn, one would say that *any* way of carrying out the intention specified in the conclusion would be justified by a piece of sound practical reasoning. But this route is hopeless; given that there are indefinitely many ways of carrying out an intention one would expect that some of them could turn out not to be rationally justified. On the second horn, one would say that *only some particular ways* of carrying out the intention are justified by a piece of sound practical reasoning. But if this is the case, the intention can't be the terminus of practical reasoning, for one cannot yet act in a justified manner until practical reason can specify *which* particular ways of carrying out an intention are justified.

One could say that the problem here is not with further specifying the intention, but with individuating the appropriate stages of one's behaviour such that a specifiable intention corresponds to each. I have assumed that while carrying out an intention one might become aware of certain things one hadn't been aware of (or couldn't have foreseen) at the time that the intention was formed, but that, once one is made of aware of

them, this would render certain ways of carrying out the intention irrational. If I could not foresee an obstacle when I formed my intention to turn on the light (for instance, there are shards of glass in my way to the light that cannot be spotted from where I was), but have become aware of it while executing the intention in time to avoid to obstacle, it would be irrational of me to continue to carry out the original intention in such a way as not to avoid the glass shards. However, one may object that this assumption is plausible only if we do not ascribe a separate intention to each "choice node." We do not turn the light on by merely directing our will towards this end, but we take steps in the direction of the light switch, we move our hand in the direction of the switch, we press it down, etc. Each of these steps presents a choice situation, in which we need to make a decision; each of these steps, the objection goes, requires a separate intention. Since there are no choice nodes between each of these intentions, there is nothing that I can become aware of between the time I form each of these intentions and the time I finish executing them that could make a difference to the rationality of my actions, since there is nothing I can do between choice nodes.

Now, I do think that this is the most promising way to reply to the objection. No doubt the number of intentions that need to be postulated will be quite high, but given that part of the problem here is that there seems to be so much reasoning that goes into an action, this crowding of intentions might not be so objectionable. It would also be unfair to protest that it is it hard to believe that we think to ourselves each of these intentions after explicit deliberating about it in our mind. After all, it is hardly a minority view that some intentions and some deliberations do not show up in the agent's life as explicit, occurrent thoughts.

However, this option will end up facing a few serious problems. The first one is that it is not so clear how different this proposal is from the Aristotelian thesis itself. It is hardly likely that this approach would succeed in postulating a *separable* intention for each stage of the action. Rather it would probably rely on the existence of what is sometimes called "intention in action"; that is, an intention that is an aspect of my intentional action, not an event that can be separated from it. Given the omnipresence of such "stages" at almost any moment in which one is carrying out a continuous action, it seems that in this approach we need to look at the decision embodied *in* carrying out the action at each step, rather than the decision *to* carry out the action. But in this case, the gains of moving to this conception of practical reasoning are rather limited; the conclusion of practical reasoning here is still inseparable from the action itself. And if the conclusion of practical reasoning is something that is

inseparable from the action itself – indeed something that can be described as an aspect of the action – one seems to have gotten quite close to conceding, if not fully conceded, that the conclusion of practical reason *is* an action. Indeed, the main advantages of taking intentions to be the conclusions of practical reasoning, at least in dealing with objections (2) and (3), seemed to rest precisely on the fact that it took the conclusion of practical reasoning to be separable from the action, something that could occur even when reasoning did not issue in an action. Moreover this view would have to find a way to parse the relevant intentions in continuous actions. For instance, when I am running, it seems that I can decide to stop at any moment, and at any moment my failure to do so could be a failure of deliberation.

Indeed this problem becomes particularly difficult when we try to understand how this suggestion would deal with the skilful execution of an intention. Let us look at two tennis players, a rather skilled one, and one who is learning to make the shots. For our present purposes, the second player is going to be an idealization, since we will assume that he proceeds by explicitly reasoning how to turn his hand, how to place his racket given the trajectory of the ball, etc., and still has time to make the shot. They both enter the court with the intention to win the game, and they will form, on this view, various more specific intentions throughout the game. Suppose now they face the exact same situation: the opponent returns a serve in such a way that she leaves one side of the court completely open. Both come to the same conclusion about what to do in this situation: each must send a hard shot to that side of the court. Now the unskilled tennis player cannot just hit the shot; the job of practical reasoning is not yet over for him. He must try to figure out the approximate speed and trajectory of the ball, calculate the angle he wants his racket to be at, how hard he has to hit it, etc. For the unskilled player, this view is no doubt committed to saying that these were stages of the action that required further deliberation and further intentions. But what about the skilled player? Here this view will face a dilemma. On the one hand it seems that we are committed to saying that there are no further stages of this action. For a certain period of time, the skilled player will not have acted under any intention other than "hitting a hard shot on the deuce side." If asked why he had his racket facing down at a sharp angle, he might not even recognize that he did anything that fell under this description. Indeed, if the skilled player misses the shot, it would be a bad shot. It would not be an instance of irrationality; it would not be an instance of failing to deliberate correctly about how to carry out the intention to hit a hard shot on the deuce side. If we look back at (C_2),

none of conditions (a)-(d) seem to apply to this case. The same is not true, or at least not necessarily true, of the unskilled player. The unskilled player settles on the position of the racket by deliberating on the issue, and thus, at least in the case in which he is aware of all the relevant information, if the unskilled player chooses the wrong angle, she will have deliberated badly. Thus since there were no more specific intentions about how to carry out the intention to hit a hard shot on the deuce side, we seem to come to a conclusion that there are no further stages of the action. However, this view seems also equally committed to the existence of further stages of this action. For the agent could change the course of the action at any moment, and this fact could be relevant for evaluating whether the conclusion of her practical reasoning was warranted or acceptable. One could, for instance, ask: "Didn't you notice that there are children running across the court all the time? And that a child whom you couldn't see at the time you decided to hit the shot could run to the deuce side of the court and be there just in time to be hit by the ball? Do you care more about winning a game than about the welfare of a child?" It is certainly possible that the appropriate answer here is something like: "Any such child would have to appear in my field of vision before my racket hit the ball, in which case I would just send the shot in a different direction." No doubt the availability of such an answer is relevant to the acceptability of the agent's reasoning, and thus it seems that we need some reasoning that has the conclusion "I can go ahead and hit my shot" just before the skilled tennis player hits the shot. But since the conclusion of practical reasoning under this view is always in an intention, so it seems that we are at same time, under this view, required to say that there *are* further stages in the action of the skilled player. The problem is that skilful execution of an intention is a way in which we carry out an intention such that we are still in control of our actions (and we still could thus revise the intention) but not by means of further, more specific intentions, as would be required by the view in question; in these cases, one carries out an intention without representing the way in which one is carrying out the intention.[17]

[17] No doubt one could continue the argument here, by trying to say, for instance, that the further stages can be characterized as various intentions to continue carrying out the original intention. I do not think that this strategy would work since we would need more determinate ways of specifying the intention to continue, and given the nature of skilful execution of intentions, this might not be possible. But at any rate, my aim is to establish that such a view would have enough problems that it is worth reconsidering the Aristotelian Thesis.

One might be tempted to do away with these problems by advocating a hybrid view: that the conclusion of practical reasoning is sometimes an intention and sometimes an action. But it seems hard to prevent this concession from turning into full surrender. For after all most of our actions are stretched through time, and most of them require some kind of skilful execution of one's intentions. Before we set ourselves to protect such an enclave for the view that intentions are the conclusion of practical reason, we should re-examine the plausibility of the Aristotelian thesis in light of our revised understanding of its subject matter. If the Aristotelian Thesis can answer these questions, the issue of whether or not such an enclave can be protected might be moot.

4. The Objections against the Aristotelian Thesis Reconsidered

If the above arguments are sound, a piece of practical reasoning will not be able to justify an unconditional intention, since particular ways of carrying out the intention (and in some cases all particular ways of carrying out the intention) will turn out not to be warranted by the apparently valid piece of practical reasoning. In general, we see that what needs justification is not only the general end represented in the intention, but the particular way in which one carries out the intention; indeed, practical reasoning ideally should justify that no particular way of carrying out the action would be more advisable. Thus the only thing that could be properly warranted as the unconditional conclusion of practical reasoning is the particular way of carrying out an intention, and thus the action itself. What the practical syllogism justifies is the particular action carried out by the agent, not the intention itself. (I) and (II) justify my *particular action* of turning on the light, but they could not justify the intention, since many ways of carrying out the intention would not be warranted in light of such beliefs and desires.[18] The more perspicuous way of writing (III) would be:

IIIa. This particular action of turning the light on.

There is no issue here of a *ceteris paribus* clause; since the conclusion is the action itself, either it is justified, and thus there was nothing that made it unwarranted, or it is not justified, and thus the inference is invalid. This approach also provides us with a quite straightforward response to the objections raised against the Aristotelian Thesis. First,

[18] Although, again, a conditional intention could be justified.

although it is true that we intend the action only under a particular description, whether the action is *justified* must take into account more than the description under which I intended it. For at least unintended but foreseen consequences will play *some* role in assessing the soundness of my reasoning.[19] Moreover, assuming that (I)-(IIIa) is valid, and that by turning the light on I alerted the prowler, rewriting the conclusion as follows would still give us a valid inference:

IIIb. This particular action of alerting the prowler.

Since the action itself was justified by (I)-(II), picking out by means of a different phrase could make no difference to this fact; the fact that (IIIb) can also pick out the conclusion of my action, for instance, certainly doesn't violate (C_1); a fully rational agent could perform the action describe in (IIIb), even she would not intend it under this particular description. No doubt writing (IIIa) as the conclusion makes the validity of the inference more perspicuous. This is all no different from theoretical reason: substituting equivalent propositions might turn an obviously valid argument into one whose validity only a skilled logician could establish.

Certainly we may fail to carry out an intention for reasons that have nothing to do with our reasoning capacities – for instance if I were to die before I could carry out my intention. This case is unproblematic for our account: were I to die I would never have derived the unconditional conclusion.

Moreover we can understand the case in which I clumsily do something other than what I intended as a case in which the conclusion of practical reasoning is indeed an attempt such as:

VIIa. This particular action of trying to turn the light on.

Since there is no doubt here that 'trying' here refers to the "outward" action, there is no danger of having the conclusion slide back into a mental state.

One might also complain that the reasoning from (I)-(IIIa) cannot represent the full reasoning of the agent. For, after all, (I)-(II) could not justify the actions by themselves. Had it been the case that I knew I would have electrocuted myself by flipping the light switch, I would not be justified in turning the light on, even if I wanted to read. But although this is true, I do not think it follows that *in this case* (I)-(II) were not

[19] This is not to say that it makes no difference whether an effect is intended or foreseen. However, even the most adamant defender of the doctrine of double effect will not argue that we should simply disregard foreseen but unintended consequences.

sufficient to justify the conclusion. Since the conclusion is a particular action, and not a general claim about what one ought to do in these circumstances, the truth of that counterfactual does not affect the validity of the inference. Since the inference is not supposed to justify a certain general *description* of an action, the fact that another action falling under the same description would not be justified by the same premises is irrelevant to assessing the acceptability of the inference in question.[20] Could not the same be said about the account that takes an intention to be the conclusion of practical reasoning; that is, that the inference warrants the intention to turn on the light on this particular occasion? But here again the intention that I can form even on this particular occasion is still a conditional one: the intention spelled out at (VIIIb). There is no escape from the fact that practical reasoning comes to a rest only when the action is completed. Thus anything that stops short of the action itself must be the intervening chapters, rather than the conclusion, of practical reason.

One might be surprised here at the disanalogy between theoretical and practical reasoning. After all, it is also true that if it rains, it rains in a determinate way. But this neither seems to affect our views about the acceptability of conclusions such as "It will rain tomorrow" nor does it make us think that these are not proper resting points for theoretical reasoning. However, we can see why this disanalogy holds. The aim of theoretical reasoning is knowledge or true belief. But if it is true, say, that it will rain heavily tomorrow, it is still true that it will rain tomorrow. The fact that it will rain tomorrow in a particular way does not make the statement "it will rain tomorrow" any less true. But the aim of practical reasoning is "right" or "justified" action. But it does not follow, for instance, from the fact that one is justified in eating that one is also justified in eating heavily.[21]

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[20] This does show that inference is at best a materially, rather than formally, valid inference, and that the inference is non-monotonic. On a similar point, see Brandom (2001).

[21] Perhaps there is a closer analogy here with being justified in asserting the conclusion of a piece of probabilistic reasoning. Pursuing the analogy, however, would require an investigation of the nature of probabilistic reasoning going beyond the scope of this paper.

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