PRACTICAL CONFLICTS

New Philosophical Essays

Edited by

PETER BAUMANN and
MONIKA BETZLER

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Practical conflicts pervade human life. Agents have many different desires, goals, values, commitments, and obligations, all of which can come in conflict with each other. The agent facing a conflict, therefore, finds herself in a difficult predicament. How can practical reasoning help to resolve practical conflicts?

In this collection of new essays, various distinguished philosophers analyze the diverse forms of practical conflicts. Their aim is to provide a comprehensive basis for understanding the sources of practical conflicts, to investigate the challenge they therefore pose to an adequate conception of practical reason, and to assess how that challenge can be met. Practical conflicts thereby provide a lens through which questions about the scope of practical reason come into focus.

These essays will serve as a major resource for students of philosophy but will also interest students and professionals in related fields of the social sciences, such as psychology, political science, sociology, and economics.

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Contents

Foreword

The idea for this anthology grew out of many discussions and jointly taught seminars on matters of values, autonomy, practical reasons, and rational choice at the Philosophy Department at Göttingen University (Germany).

All of the papers collected in this anthology are original contributions except Christine Korsgaard's "The Myth of Egoism," which was delivered as the 1999 Lindley Lecture at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Kansas. We thank Christine Korsgaard and the Department of Philosophy for allowing us to reprint the lecture here, which, so far, has been accessible only to a relatively small audience.

Many people have encouraged us to pursue this book project. We are particularly grateful to the contributors and special thanks go to Rüdiger Bittner and R. Jay Wallace for their ongoing support and many helpful suggestions. Many thanks go to Jon Cameron for producing the index. We also thank Terence Moore of Cambridge University Press for his valuable guidance during the preparation of this volume.

Introduction:

Varieties of Practical Conflict and the Scope of Practical Reason

Peter Baumann and Monika Betzler

Practical conflicts pervade human life. They arise in various domains, take many different forms, and pose a challenge, in varying degrees and intensities, to the rationally deliberating agent.

In this collection, analyses of practical conflicts in the various forms and domains in which they arise are gathered together for the first time. The aim is to provide a comprehensive basis for understanding their exact sources, the challenge they therefore pose to an adequate conception of practical reason, and how (ultimately) this challenge can be met – if, in fact, it can be met. Practical conflicts thereby provide a lens through which questions about the scope of practical reason come into focus.

There are many different reasons for action that can conflict with one another. The list of items that give rise to potentially conflicting reasons is long and might even appear open-ended. Consider, for example: desires, preferences, emotions, interests, goals, plans, commitments, values, virtues, obligations, and moral norms. After all, agents have many different desires, goals, and values; they subscribe to a variety of ideals and principles and accept different normative or moral commitments. Because all these different reasons are action-guiding claims, we call conflicts between them "practical conflicts." In contrast, the conflicts that arise, for example, between scientific theories and contradictory empirical evidence are often described as "theoretical" – having more to do with reasons to believe something and leaving the connection with action rather remote.

We focus on practical conflicts and, in particular, those faced by single agents, while neglecting interpersonal conflicts that involve problems of social coordination: These are being faced by more than one agent, and

they cannot be dealt with from the perspective of only one agent.[1] Single-agent conflicts pose a special challenge to rational deliberation from the agent's perspective and therefore qualify as a distinct field of study.

In their most general form, practical conflicts consist in the fact that the agent cannot act on all of her reasons for action: The agent has a reason to do A, and has a reason to do B, but cannot act on both of them.[2] In such situations, it would seem, therefore, that practical conflicts offer incompatible guidelines as to how the agent should act. Given the circumstances, the constraints on time, and her limitations in effort or ability, she cannot concurrently satisfy, pursue, or act on all of her reasons for action, even though each of the conflicting reasons qualifies as good in some way, applies to the situation, and thus seems to have normative force. The agent facing a conflict, therefore, finds herself in a difficult predicament, and is often unguided as to how (or whether) to act.

Closer investigation is required in order to explain why exactly an agent is confronted with such a conflict, and what she can do with regard to its resolution. As it will emerge, practical conflicts come in different kinds, but most of them give rise to questions about the scope of practical reason. This gives particular importance to the topic of this volume. Whether certain kinds of conflicts limit the scope of practical reason, or whether substantial assumptions about practical reasons and practical reasoning prove wrong in light of such conflicts, are questions that the study of practical conflicts across domains should help us confront anew.

Very often, there is an easy or even trivial answer to the question "What shall I do?" I want to have the cake and eat it, too. Since my desire to eat the cake is much stronger than my desire to keep it, I can easily solve the "problem." This does not require much deliberation. It is fairly obvious which reason proves better for the agent, and the cost of not pursuing the other reason is negligible. The agent is not "conflicted" in any interesting sense of the word and it would be very misleading to say that she needs to engage in practical deliberation. Therefore such trivial cases do not deserve to be called "practical conflicts."[3]

Practical conflicts pose a more or less severe challenge to the deliberating agent, and they are much more difficult to solve than trivial cases such as the one about the cake. Consider the following examples:

1. Mary is trying to finish some work. She is getting tired and feels like having a break, but she also wants to finish. She can't do both. She has conflicting desires.

2. Jack is already late for his appointment when he runs into a good friend who happens to need his advice immediately. Jack cannot both talk to his friend and be on time for his appointment. He is faced with two conflicting normative commitments.

And there are even more severe cases:

3. Ann may be torn between two incompatible goals that are both highly valuable: to dedicate herself entirely to her career or to lead a happy family life. She might pick one over the other but never systematically resolve the essential tension between the two conflicting ideals about how to lead her life. In that case, the importance of the conflicting issues may not allow for a fully satisfying or "complete" solution.

4. Or to take a moral problem: Should I be honest with my friend and tell him unpleasant news or spare his feelings? Here, again, it is difficult to assess which reason is stronger. Even if I come up with an answer, I may harm my friend no matter what I do.

There are hard, at times tragic, cases of which some think that there is no fully satisfying solution, or at least no fully satisfying solution available to us given our cognitive and other limitations. There simply is no resolution without remainder to be found, and acting on one of the options results in grave losses or harm caused by forgoing the other option. Possibly, the conflict may turn out to be a real quandary, and in the example above Ann may not be able to resolve the conflict at all. A practical conflict is considered genuine if the agent cannot in principle find a solution.

It remains controversial as to whether there are unsolvable practical conflicts of this kind, particularly insofar as such conflicts pose a serious challenge to the deliberating agent who faces them, and thus challenge the claims of practical reason to unrestricted scope. If our reasons for action conflict, and if we find ourselves unable to come up with an all-things-considered resolution and act accordingly, then practical reason lacks, to some extent at least, the action-guiding force it is supposed to have. It is thus of major importance for an adequate theory of practical reason to tackle these problems if we are to be guided by the best possible reasons or, for that matter, if we are to be guided by reasons at all. The debate over whether there is a right way to reason in light of practical conflicts and, consequently, to resolve them or not largely depends on what practical reasons are, how we as agents can reason about them, and how practical reason is thought to operate with regard to a conflict

among reasons. Such questions have not yet received sufficient attention. The analysis of practical conflicts across domains presented in this volume demonstrates that the challenge they pose depends on respective conceptions of practical reasons, and practical rationality more generally. At the same time, the diversity of different types of conflicting reasons that is examined in this volume helps us see more clearly what the exact conditions (if any) are under which our deliberative capacities can be put to work.

Practical conflicts pose particular problems for the morality, well-being, and autonomy of an agent, and these are the major domains in which they arise. Conflicting moral principles make demands on the agent that cannot all be fulfilled. In this predicament the agent is forced to make a decision under pain of potential immorality.[4] Or so, at least, it would seem. In a similar manner, when we are confronted with a number of conflicting values, it would seem that our well-being (as a function of the successful pursuit of our goals) is undermined. And if our motives remain conflicted, we not only remain divided selves (perhaps even to the extent that our personhood is threatened), but we also do not sufficiently – that is, autonomously – guide ourselves. Moral conflicts[5] (such as Jack's conflicting commitments to talk to his friend or to make it to his appointment[6]), conflicts of value[7] (such as Ann's problem of choosing between career and family), and conflicts of the will[8] (such as that of Mary, who wants to finish her work, but also feels like having a break) have therefore given rise to a variety of controversies: controversies about the potential for moral principles to be action-guiding, controversies about the commensurability of values, and controversies about the conditions of self-control and autonomy.

We can distinguish between different substantive features that can generate a practical conflict: Either different evaluative properties engender different and therefore potentially conflicting reasons or a single evaluative property gives rise to conflicting reasons. More precisely, there are (1) conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons,[9] (2) conflicts between desires and values,[10] and (3) conflicts between reasons derived from a single source. In short, there are conflicts of moral reasons, conflicts of desires, and conflicts of values.

The often-quoted story about Gauguin arguably offers an example of a conflict between moral and nonmoral reasons. He may be torn between his project to go to the Fiji Islands and paint and his esteemed sense of loyalty to his family.

Weakness of will and other problems of self-control typically account for conflicts between desire and value: An agent may give in to a desire that she would prefer to suppress or to not even possess, or she may subscribe to a value she does not really care to be guided by. Consider the smoker who has an urge to smoke and yet subscribes to the value of leading a healthy life or the person who thinks that leading a religious life is valuable and yet cares about many things that are incompatible with such a life.

Mary's conflict of desires (to work or not work), Jack's conflict of obligations (to talk to his friend or to make his appointment), or Ann's conflict of values (a career or a happy family life) represent single-source conflicts.

Given the incompatibility of conflicting reasons, and considering their different substantive features and inherent diversity, it seems particularly difficult for practical reason to assess their relative weight or stringency and issue an action-guiding verdict. What do the agent's deliberative capacities enable her to do in light of her conflicting desires, virtues, goals, values, principles, or moral norms? How can she reason about conflicts between her moral and nonmoral reasons or between her desires and values, and rationally resolve the conflict between them?

Different theories of autonomy, well-being, and ethics in general have taken quite different positions on the challenge posed by practical conflicts. In fact, practical conflicts arouse philosophical perplexity to the extent that the resolutions recommended by these theories does not seem to eliminate the conflict. The puzzle that causes this perplexity concerns the apparent rift between the common belief in the action-guiding or agent-forming force of practical reason and the various ways in which practical conflicts seem to undermine the scope of that force. It is not only that several substantive features of practical conflicts can be distinguished; a distinction can also be drawn between two main views about practical conflicts, that is, between those who believe in the unrestricted scope of practical reason and those who question that claim to unrestricted scope.

The most familiar classical theories of practical reasoning, such as Kantianism, Humeanism, and consequentialism,[11] typically hold that practical conflicts can be resolved, all things considered. They focus on various kinds of conflicts, but it is the assigned task of practical reason either to preclude conflicts or to guide clearly their resolution. Such theories are ideal in the sense that they have never really dealt much with the practical conflicts and the challenge they present. Given the widespread

difficulties of actually solving many practical conflicts, such theories may appear overly optimistic. Let us call the view that practical conflicts can be completely resolved "rationalism." Even though classical rationalist theories differ as to what qualifies as practical reasons and what practical reason exactly amounts to, they all provide standards of rationality that are supposed to help us tackle various practical conflicts.

According to a standard interpretation of Kant's ethical theory, for example, being rational entails that we are autonomous and morally guided. As reflective beings, we give ourselves the universal law of practical reason (i.e., the Categorical Imperative), which in turn endorses or rejects our given motives.[12] The Categorical Imperative, thereby, clearly adjudicates any conflicts between our moral and nonmoral motives by applying certain standards of consistency on action, eventually turning our moral motives into conclusive reasons for action. Kant's theory of practical reason (on a standard interpretation) clearly guides the resolution of any conflict between nonmoral motives and morality because the relation between morality and reason is conceived of as analytical. Practical reason thus qualifies immoral motives as irrational.

Hume's conception of practical reasoning, by contrast, precludes conflicts between rational and irrational motives by strengthening the divide between reason and the passions.[13] He relegates reason to the domain of the theoretical, while the passions qualify as arational "original existences" pertaining to the practical domain. Reason thus cannot criticize the agent's motives, but can only determine means to the desired ends. Conflicts arise only between incompatible desires, and they are settled according to their relative strength. As long as an action satisfies the agent's strongest desires, given her beliefs about the facts, it qualifies as rational. Conflicts between desires that an agent values and desires that she would rather lack – that is, conflicts of the will – cannot be captured by the standard Humean model.

Rationalism appears particularly attractive if one holds some kind of value monism. Consequentialist theories (such as utilitarianism or rational choice theory, not to mention the Humean model) subscribe to it, albeit in different forms.[14] Practical reasons are generated here by valuable states of affairs – desire satisfaction, expected utility, or the fulfillment of informed desires – and their value is weighed and estimated according to a common evaluative standard. Nevertheless, the different versions of value monism share the assumption that conflicting desires, values, or moral reasons can be ranked ultimately as to their strength or weight, and the relevant values can thus be maximized or satisfied.[15]

Classical decision theory in particular provides us with specific standards of rationality. These standards prescribe the strict ordering of preferences and thus exclude the possibility of conflicts among preferences. A set of axioms ensures that a rational agent's preferences will constitute such an ordering among the options she faces.[16] The axioms of completeness and transitivity in particular imply that there is always at least one best option. According to the axiom of completeness, the comparative values of alternative options are captured in a threefold relation. It entails that for any pair of options, one option is always either better or worse than the other in the pair or is equally good. The transitivity assumption states that if the first option is better than the second, and the second option is better than the third, then the first option is better than the third. This entails that the common evaluative standard by which the options are compared is exhaustive. The application of these standards is supposed to yield the rational resolution of any conflict between desires broadly understood. If it were to fail, we would seem to face a conflict on pain of irrationality.

Decision theory also elaborates the Humean approach in that intentional action always reflects the agent's strongest desires, together with her beliefs about the probabilities of the outcomes. Hence, an agent always does what she believes will be best – a view that leaves no room for conflicts of the will. This raises the basic question of whether this approach is really adequate to account for the full range of phenomena to which a theory of rational choice must apply.

In the meantime, various explanations have been offered as to why it proves difficult, if not impossible, to balance conflicting reasons so as to arrive at an "all things considered" solution and eventually act on it. Alternative approaches suggest that classical rationalist theories are unsuited to meet the problem presented by many practical conflicts.

Many critics of the classical rationalist picture maintain instead that practical conflicts reveal the limitations of practical reason in the various areas we have just sketched. How restrictive these limitations are is a matter of controversy. If conflicts are not just a rare exception and if they often cannot be solved (or at least not fully solved), then fundamental questions about the scope of practical reason are raised. Some think that many practical conflicts cannot be entirely resolved by any standard conception of practical reason.

According to these authors, not the Categorical Imperative, nor the Humean model of rational action, nor value monism, nor the completeness and transitivity axioms represents a standard of rationality that lets

us adequately tackle the problems posed by many different practical conflicts. All of these either seem to offer unduly stringent requirements or lack the resources to rationally resolve many practical conflicts.

Let us call this alternative view the "skeptical view,"[17] since critical opponents of rationalism share a certain skepticism about the claim of practical reason to unrestricted scope.

The basic assumptions about practical reason in the various rationalist approaches just sketched has thus been subject to influential objections that sometimes have led to alternative conceptions of practical reason. Some protagonists of the skeptical view may agree with rationalists in holding that there is some legitimate way of rationally choosing between conflicting reasons and consequently acting on one of them. However, they are skeptical of the standards of rationality provided by rationalism and typically give up the basic assumptions shared by many rationalist theories according to which a conflict must be resolved either by comparing the relative weight of the conflicting reasons or by assigning categorical weight to a certain type of reason. They take rationalist theories to either underdetermine or overdetermine the rational resolution of many practical conflicts. In the first case, they leave us at a loss as to how to resolve certain conflicts; assigning a relative weight to conflicting reasons just cannot be all that we have to do in order to reason practically about many conflicts. And even in cases in which we are able to assess the relative weight of conflicting reasons, the conflict cannot always be entirely resolved. After all, we often cause harm, foresake values, or remain conflicted about what to value, all things considered.

In the case of overdetermination, conflicts that do not meet the proposed requirements of rationality are relegated to the irrational domain. It is open for debate, however, whether such conflicts are clearly irrational or whether the proposed requirements of rationality that result in that verdict call for revision. The dispute between rationalists and their critics thus grows out of a puzzle about the adequate scope of practical reason. Facing practical conflicts in their variety can help us shed more light on this puzzle.

Along these lines, skeptics typically examine different forms that practical conflicts can take – forms of conflict that seem particularly resistant to a complete resolution. So far, they have focused on cases in which determining the categorical force of a reason, or assessing the relative weight of the conflicting reasons as to whether they are stronger than one another or of equal strength, is considered as either (1) not enough or

(2) impossible to achieve. We are unable to resolve the conflict of reasons with respect to a common evaluative standard. Our rational capacities, therefore, are taken to be clearly restricted in light of many practical conflicts.

For example, in the case of conflicting moral reasons, we may conclude that the conflicting reasons are equally strong, and no further moral criterion enables us to decide between them. A person might see two young children about to drown in a river. She might not be able to save them both, and her reason to save one is not better or worse than her reason to save the other.[18] Many believe that such a person faces a moral dilemma: She ought to save the one child, and she ought to save the other child, but she cannot save both of them. No matter what she does, she seems to breach an obligation,[19] and wrongdoing appears inescapable.[20]

But even if she finds one conflicting reason more compelling than the other and so has no problem deciding what to do, such serious cases of moral "sacrifice"[21] still leave her deeply conflicted. She has reason to regret that she could not act on the other reason, even if it was clearly weaker. Take, as one such example, Winston Churchill's alleged decision to let the Germans bomb Coventry to prevent much greater harm.

Reactive emotions, such as regret and feelings of guilt, are often taken to indicate that the rational resolution of moral conflicts cannot entirely eliminate them. Our capacities to rationally resolve a moral conflict are therefore considered to be limited. Some maintain that they simply cannot undo the binding force of moral reasons that we respond to in reactive emotions.[22]

Others hold that the relative weight of conflicting reasons cannot be assessed because they are, at times, incommensurable. If there is incommensurability of reasons, then an assessment of the relative weights of conflicting reasons is, in principle, impossible. One has to distinguish between two different types of incommensurability. In the first case, neither is one reason better than the other, nor are they equally good with respect to some common standard or value.[23] Consequently, we are unable to completely resolve conflicts between reasons with incommensurable evaluative properties.

Ann's difficult decision between career and happy family life might qualify as a typical case here: Her options may be so radically different that it would be false to say that one is either better than the other or is equally good.[24] If there is no dimension whatsoever that allows Ann to rank her options, she cannot come up with an all-things-considered judgment as to how she should act.

Others maintain that there are cases in which incommensurability arises because it is indeterminate whether one reason is better than another or is equally good. According to some semantic indeterminists, there are cases that show that the application of such comparatives is vague:[25] It is neither true nor false that a comparative value relation holds between two items, because it is neither true nor false that a comparative term applies. For example, the application of an ordinary English comparative such as "more pleasant" allows for borderline cases in which it is indeterminate whether, say, spending an evening at the movies is more pleasant than spending an evening with friends in a pub.[26] Thus, the comparative "more pleasant" gives rise to incommensurability.

Those who believe that there are different substantive features that generate reasons typically argue for the trumping force or "overridingness" of certain types of reason over other conflicting ones. Moral reasons typically enjoy such a normative status over nonmoral reasons. They are thought to have overriding significance.[27] Similarly, cognitive states, such as beliefs about the good, are thought to guide rationally noncognitive motives. The classical account of weakness of will thus takes beliefs or judgments about the good to provide the authority necessary to qualify desires that deviate from them as irrational.

Critics of the rationalist picture have increasingly attacked these orthodox claims. Along these lines, the universal normativity of moral reasons is put under doubt.[28] If moral reasons lose their authoritative force, the question seems to remain open as to how conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons can be resolved. More important, the amoralist does not even stand convicted of some error of reason. And, indeed, it seems much more plausible to suppose that immoral reasons are not irrational.

In the same vein, it has been questioned whether there is such a close rational connection between an agent's beliefs about the good and her desires, such that acting against her own best judgment (as weakness of will is defined) appears to be a form of irrationality. Instead – as some maintain – her beliefs about the good may prove to be erroneous, and her noncognitive states may reveal what she really values.[29]

Ultimately, the various debates and problems just sketched reflect the larger struggle as to how to come to terms with practical conflicts. The philosophical interest of moral dilemmas, value commensurability, moral normativity, and weakness of will lies in their bearing on how various kinds of reasons can be rationally assessed such that they issue in rational choice.

A number of different views on how rationalist or skeptical we should be about the resolution of practical conflicts are offered in this volume. Its contributors present novel analyses on what the adequate standards of practical reason could be in the light of practical conflicts, and what exactly their various sources are that render them ineliminable. They investigate in more detail conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons (Velleman, Korsgaard, Chang), moral conflicts (White, Schaber, Elster), conflicts of desires (Richardson, Levi, Baumann), conflicts between values and desires and the connection of conflicts to free will and self-control (Mele, Guckes), and conflicts of reasons more generally (Raz, Betzler). In the remainder of this introduction, we survey the different contributions to this collection and highlight their respective approach to practical conflicts with regard to the task practical reason is thought to fulfill or to fail to fulfill given the conditions of conflict.

To avoid the skeptical view and its repercussions on the scope of practical reason, those who believe in the rational resolution of practical conflicts argue that objections to it can be accommodated within a broadly rationalist framework. Accordingly, practical reason is taken to provide means that allow one to assess conflicts and issue conclusive reasons for action.

Opinions diverge as to how best to do this, and suggestions made by Christine Korsgaard, David Velleman, Henry Richardson, Ruth Chang, and Isaac Levi cover a broad range of possible new approaches to various kinds of practical conflicts. Each of these responses represents a development within rationalist thought that goes far beyond classical formulations of rationalism and early rationalist responses[30] to the challenge that the skeptical view poses. What remains rationalist about all of them is that they do not share the belief that practical conflicts block rational choice. Instead, they propose more sophisticated standards of rationality. In light of the difficulty of resolving many practical conflicts, these standards are supposed to help assess conflicting reasons and consequently to guide action. A fresh look is taken at conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons, conflicts of desires, and conflicts of values. To resolve conflicts between moral and nonmoral reasons, rationalists have to show how moral reasons can be normative and therefore overrule or trump conflicting nonmoral reasons.

Recall that Kant conceived the relationship between rationality and morality as analytical, and thereby precluded any irresolvable conflict between moral reasons and reasons favoring our well-being. Being guided by morality entails being free from irresolvable conflicts of practical

reasons. What seems particularly hard to defend for the Kantian is the claim that any conflict between moral and nonmoral reasons can be clearly resolved. Kant's account is particularly vulnerable to two objections: (1) being immoral does not seem necessarily irrational, and (2) the reasons we have for the pursuit of our own well-being undoubtedly have motivating force, while moral reasons can often lack that force.

David Velleman and Christine Korsgaard present two broadly Kantian arguments relating how it is possible for moral reasons to provide a normative standard, despite their frequent conflict with reasons of self-interest.

In his chapter, "Willing the Law," Velleman devotes himself to the first objection and offers what he calls a "concessive" Kantian interpretation as to how wrongdoing conflicts with our practical reason. While Velleman takes an immoral act to be rational in-itself, he views it as the act of an irrational agent. The conflict arises between immoral projects (though rational in themselves) and the Categorical Imperative (as a commitment to humanity expressing the fundamental moral identity of a person). The contradiction in the will of an immoral person lies in the fact that she could not rationally choose to be or continue to be such a person. Even if (in a particular moment) an agent's reasons are not up to her and she (thereby) may lack sufficient reason for acting morally, she is still responsible for getting into conflicting projects. Conflicts of this kind cannot be solved easily, since they presuppose a psychological change in the agent, which cannot be effected at will. Velleman suggests that such conflicts can be overcome only by an "irrational leap to a greater rationality" pertaining to the reasons arising from one's underlying identity as a rational human being.

Christine Korsgaard devotes herself to the second objection against the Kantian interpretation, according to which it is hard to see why moral reasons should be normative. In her chapter, "The Myth of Egoism," she attacks what some think is a major source of conflict, that is, the tension between egoism and morality as two conflicting principles definitive of practical reason. The "egoistic principle" of practical reason is supposedly compatible with the view that all practical reasons are instrumental and all motivation is grounded in desire. Many philosophers believe that the egoistic principle has an advantage over the moral one since it more obviously meets the naturalistic requirement of internalism, that is, that practical reason has the capacity to motivate.

Against these claims, Korsgaard shows that the egoistic principle (as a form of instrumentalism) is based on false assumptions about the nature

of practical reason. In the case of a conflict between egoistic and moral reasons, practical reasoning must resort to some normative standard to weight and balance them – a standard that egoism as such cannot provide. The importance of one's egoistic project is determined by the goodness of the reason promoting it, and such a project requires the possibility that we be motivated by pure practical reason in exactly the same way that moral action is motivated. It is only *what* practical reason tells us to do that is different in both the moral and the egoistic cases.

Whereas Korsgaard's and Velleman's Kantian reinterpretations pertain to questions of either why moral reasons enjoy priority in a conflict with nonmoral reasons (deriving from our desires and goals) or why nonmoral reasons do not provide a better normative standard (as some maintain), Henry Richardson offers an Aristotelian answer to the question of how we can rationally deliberate and eventually resolve conflicts between the reasons derived from our desires. While Humean versions of practical reason force us to think about our desires only in terms of their objects and their strength, in his chapter, "Thinking about Conflicts of Desire," Richardson shows that these attributes of desires are not sufficient for making sense of conflicts among desires, let alone for determining an adequate account of how to proceed rationally when they conflict. According to the Aristotelian interpretation proposed by Richardson, desires have a further dimension of "place" within an agent's conception of the good that is tolerant of the fact that conceptions of the good have not been fully worked out. In unreflective cases, perception (*phantasia*) indicates the respect in which a desire is taken as good, but this feature may become the subject of deliberative reflection. This reflection, in turn, helps to guide the agent's revision of his desires.

While Richardson, by introducing a further respect under which desires can be evaluated, centers on the question of how the conflicts of reasons generated by various desires can be rationally resolved, in "Putting Together Morality and Well-Being," Ruth Chang proposes a novel account of how conflicting values can be rationally accommodated so as not to issue in conflicting reasons for action. Chang defends the thesis that for any given conflict between particular moral and prudential values, there is some other more comprehensive value (often nameless) that includes the conflicting values as "parts" and in terms of which the conflict between them can, in principle, be rationally resolved. She argues that the conflicting values at stake and the circumstances in which they figure underdetermine the relative weights of those values. Hence, what matters in a choice must have content beyond that which is given

by the values at stake. Moreover, if disagreement about what matters in a choice is to be possible, this further content must go beyond their mere weighting. Chang argues that it is in virtue of a nameless value that (in a particular case) a moral value has whatever normativity it has in the face of conflict with a prudential value, and that nameless value provides what matters in that choice. Chang's nameless value account offers a value-based resolution of practical conflicts between more particular values, and thus supports the claim that any choice between conflicting reasons is justified only if a common evaluative standard is found that enables the assessment of their relative betterness.

Conversely, Isaac Levi defends the view that conflicts of practical reasons can be rationally resolved without assessing their relative betterness, thus loosening the rationality conditions defended by a standard account of rational choice theory. In his chapter, "The Second Worst in Practical Conflict," he rebuts two widespread prejudices of classical decision theory that he qualifies as "absurdly stringent" constraints on rational choice. Against the first prejudice, which states that rational agents have strict preference orderings and therefore always choose for the best (all things considered), Levi defends the view that agents can rate two options as equally optimal and yet choose rationally. He considers the second prejudice, which maintains that the preferences of rational agents are revealed by their choices (a prejudice that is also prevalent in the belief-desire theory of action explanation), to be derived from the temptation to think of rationality as hyperbolic maximization. In the course of his article, he particularly devotes himself to the kind of practical conflict that arises when several dimensions of value are of concern to the decision maker and defends a new criterion of choice that he calls "V-admissibility." According to this criterion, an option that comes out optimal in keeping with at least one possible standard of evaluation in the partial ordering[31] is deemed admissible. Levi shows how, contrary to "V-maximality," V-admissibility can accommodate the kinds of conflicts that emerge when the distinction between cases where one of three options is second worse or second best is relevant. He thus introduces a standard of rational choice that can also tackle conflicts between cardinal value structures.

Since our rational capacities turn out to be more flexible and varied than perhaps expected, the appeal of rationalism and the underlying idea that we can resolve practical conflicts rationally persists in different variants. Yet recent contributors to these debates disagree about how we can rationally assess the competing reasons. According to these new developments pertaining to the rational resolution of practical conflicts, practical

reason turns out to be a capacity that not only lets us apply given standards, but also enables us to come up with appropriate standards for different conflict situations. More precisely, practical reason is differentiated into two kinds. The first kind allows us to balance our momentary reasons for action, while the second pertains to our rationality as persons, arising from our underlying identity as human beings (Velleman). Practical reasoning does not just serve to uncover our desires. Instead, it must resort to a normative standard provided by pure practical reason with regard to the balancing of our desires (Korsgaard). Practical deliberation in the face of rational conflicts must resort to our perception of how desires have a place in our conception of the good and consequently guide the revision of our goals (Richardson). Practical reason lets us conceive comprehensive, often nameless, values that contain (in part) conflicting values, but that also contain normative standards as to how the conflicting values are to be compared (Chang). In conflicts between cardinal value structures, practical reason provides us with V-admissibility as a sufficient criterion of rational choice. It entails that an option comes out optimal if it is in keeping with at least one way of evaluation in the partial ordering (Levi).

Even if we can find other more sophisticated and flexible ways in which we can approach conflicting reasons that will yield rational standards of comparison or resolution, it will still remain controversial whether practical conflicts can entirely be eliminated. One reason for this may be the indeterminacy of comparison. Another possible reason is that no standard of comparison can eliminate the losses of values, harms, and inner divisions that are typical of practical conflicts. Furthermore, practical reasons may be of such a nature that we are in principle unable to respond to their binding force once they conflict.

As a result, the most obvious alternatives to any new version of rationalism are attempts that are realist about the persisting force of reasons not acted on, indeterminist about our standard of comparison, or otherwise skeptical about the perfect action-guiding force of practical reason. Yet there is a shift in emphasis away from general doubts about the scope of practical reason to a more detailed analysis of the specific conditions that render the rational resolution of conflicts difficult or inadequate. That renders the skeptical approaches more varied. The chapters by Joseph Raz, Nick White, Alfred Mele, Peter Schaber and Jon Elster, along with our own contributions, indicate this. They examine moral conflicts, conflicts of reasons more generally, and conflicts between different evaluative attitudes. These authors cast light on practical

conflicts from a different perspective and examine in more detail what remains in the way of any rational resolution. They agree to a large extent with rationalism that the rational resolution of conflicts is possible, but that rational resolvability does not entail that conflicts are entirely eliminated. In many cases, in addition to the difficulty of finding the means to resolve practical conflicts, the force of conflicting reasons not acted on may remain. Further analysis is offered as to what characterizes practical conflicts that practical reason cannot do away with.

In his chapter, "Personal Practical Conflicts," Joseph Raz distinguishes between two theoretical questions with regard to practical conflicts: Is there a right action in conflict situations, implying that reasons deriving from different, distinct values may be compared in strength, weight, or stringency? And, what is unfortunate about such conflicts? Conflicts are unfortunate only where doing one's best is not good enough, and where the agent is blameless. Raz describes such conflicts as "normative" if there are more reasons than it is possible to conform with, or, at least, to conform with in full. It is this impossibility of perfect conformity with reasons that characterizes what is unfortunate about conflicts (even though it does not exclusively pertain to conflicts and does not thereby define them).

This characterization assigns practical reason the role of recognizing and responding to reasons. Reasons for action are thus taken as evaluative facts favoring action. If something is to qualify as a reason, it must entail that we should conform to it. Given this conception of practical reasons, we are in a genuine conflict if reasons demand incompatible actions. The rational resolution of such a conflict cannot eliminate the binding force of reasons that require conformity.

Monika Betzler's chapter, "Sources of Practical Conflicts and Reasons for Regret," puts the argument from reactive emotion under closer scrutiny. The argument demonstrates that the resolution of practical conflicts, which gives rise to such reactive emotion, is rationally underdetermined. Whereas previous views dictating what precisely regret reveals about the reasons not acted on prove to be mistaken, Betzler's analysis attempts to specify what reasons there are for us to be susceptible to regret. A more thorough analysis of the objects of regret reveals that rational regret responds to forgone commitments. What makes regret compatible with having rationally resolved a conflict is the fact that commitments are connected with two kinds of reasons, notably (1) reasons favoring the commitment in the first place, and (2) reasons deriving from such commitments. Even though the reasons favoring our commitments can be balanced, and conflicts between them rationally resolved, the

commitments engendered valuable pursuits that often continue to give us reasons to value them. Regret is justified despite the rational resolution of conflict insofar as it responds to what we still consider valuable but can, given the limitations on time and ability, no longer act on.

While Raz and Betzler both identify and describe various kinds of reasons not acted on that continue to stay in force such that the agent is rationally required to respond to them, the papers by White, Baumann, Mele, Schaber, and Elster focus on various distinct conditions that make the rational resolution of conflict hard, if not inconceivable.

Drawing on Plato's and Socrates' thought on the unity of virtue, Nick White's chapter, "Conflicting Values and Conflicting Virtues," examines what forms conflicts between goods can take. He identifies two distinct questions that need to be answered in order to account for the difficulty of resolving many practical conflicts. On the one hand, we need to ask whether or not there is any reason to believe that a virtue (as a trait that is good) can come in conflict with other virtues. Yet, on the other hand, he shows that we also need to investigate whether or not the particular traits that we identify as virtues conflict with each other. What initially looks like a question about the intrinsic value of a good (taken by itself in a given practical conflict) really involves evaluating that good with respect to context, covering value, and the situation within which the evaluation fits. Thus, for White, the indefiniteness of the conditions under which an evaluative standard could be determined is the main difficulty not sufficiently attended to in the current discussion.

Peter Baumann's chapter, "Involvement and Detachment: A Paradox of Practical Reason," deals with what, according to him, constitutes an interesting but worrisome paradox of practical reason. This paradox is structurally analogous to the well-known preface paradox for beliefs and could be called a "preface paradox for goals." It concerns conflicting types of reasons for action and has to do with the conflicting attitudes a rational agent apparently has toward his own goals. On the one hand, agents do not have an indefeasible reason not to want that all their goals will be realized. Is it not almost trivially true that we are very much "involved" with and committed to the realization of our goals? On the other hand, Baumann argues, an agent does indeed have indefeasible reason not to want that all her goals be realized: If a person's life were completely successful (in every respect), it would lose its point. As reflexive beings, we are also somehow "detached" from and not fully committed to our goals. However, if all this is true, we do, of course, face a contradiction. After discussing various objections, Baumann concludes that it is not at all clear where we should look for a solution to the paradox.

Alfred Mele's chapter, "Outcomes of Internal Conflicts in the Sphere of *Akrasia* and Self-Control," examines more thoroughly the conditions under which agents confronted with internal practical conflicts either succumb to temptation or master it. Drawing from his previous work on action theory, he proposes a principled way of distinguishing various kinds of conflicts of the will. Agents either intend to act in accordance with a decisive belief that favors acting and then backslide due to competing intentions or they fail to make the transition from decisive belief to intention. Furthermore, given one's own standards, one can also change one's decisive belief resulting from motivational bias, or sometimes motivation can bias our beliefs. By introducing results from the psychological literature, Mele shows how these conflicts come about. As it turns out, in many cases agents are not helpless victims of strong temptations but fall prey to various forms of biases that have a disproportionate influence on the formation and retention of beliefs about what action is best. Mele thus provides a psychologically more adequate analysis of the sources of inner conflicts. This does not preclude their rational resolvability but, on the contrary, elucidates the constraints involved with rational self-control.

Not White, nor Baumann, nor Mele questions the rational resolvability of practical conflicts in general, but each focuses on specific kinds of problems pertaining to its difficulty. Similarly, Peter Schaber and Jon Elster are concerned with moral dilemmas, and both explore under what conditions such dilemmas arise.

Peter Schaber's chapter, "Are There Insolvable Moral Conflicts?," presents an analysis of the conditions that must hold for moral conflicts to be reasonably called "insolvable" so as not to issue in categorical prescription on action. He demonstrates that conflicts of this kind are best conceived as conflicts between moral reasons. If there are further reasons contrary to weighing the moral reasons at stake, then moral reasons can be considered practically incommensurable. Yet conflicts between incommensurable moral reasons turn out to be nonresolvable only if these reasons are "symmetrical." In most cases, however, they are asymmetrical, and the agent can arrive at an all-things-considered judgment regarding what he ought to do.

In "Moral Dilemmas of Transitional Justice," Jon Elster focuses on a field of study that has, so far, received no attention within the debate on practical conflicts. He is particularly concerned with conflicts arising in the political realm and investigates the kinds of moral dilemmas and conflicts of justice that arise in the transition process from predemocratic

regimes to democracy. Drawing extensively from empirical material (e.g., concerning the restoration or introduction of democracy in many European countries and Japan after 1945, in Eastern European countries after 1989, or recently in South Africa), he shows how our intuitions remain mute or torn with regard to our ability to come to terms with the predemocratic past. The historical evidence casts light on how irresolvable dilemmas arise between procedural and substantive, consequentialist and nonconsequentialist principles of justice regarding the compensation of suffering, the restitution of property, and the assessment of personal responsibility in trials for wrongs committed under predemocratic regimes. While there is no formula for balancing conflicting principles, Elster reckons that either principle is defensible up to a point, though either becomes absurd if taken to the extreme.

Such more critical approaches, then, differ from those that focus exclusively on the possibility of rational resolution to practical conflicts in two respects. They either

1. center on the various conditions that account for the difficulty of rationally resolving many conflicts – for example, a lack of a definite standard for rational comparison (White), contradictory attitudes toward goals (Baumann), how bias affects our ability to make choices about how best to act (Mele), and how changes in institutional conditions can result in the application of conflicting principles of justice (Elster), or
2. subscribe to the view that there are reasons that remain in force despite the potential difficulty of a rational resolution to a practical conflict.

This view stems from the idea that there is something unfortunate about conflicts even if they can rationally be resolved. What remains unfortunate is attributed to reasons that in general we cannot perfectly conform to (Raz), to particular kinds of reasons that remain in force due to valuable pursuits engendered by our commitments (Betzler), or to incommensurable moral reasons that are symmetrical (Schaber). However, none of these accounts is incompatible with the rationalist view that the rational resolution of practical conflicts is largely possible.

While critics of rationalism present various arguments specifying why and under what conditions the rational resolution of conflicts is inadequate or simply not enough, it has rarely been acknowledged (at least not in this context) that the limitations posed by practical conflicts might also yield advantages.

In Barbara Guckes's chapter, "Do Conflicts Make Us Free?," the question is raised as to what extent genuine practical conflicts provide us with the sole conditions under which it is intelligible to consider ourselves free and responsible agents. She draws on the recent incompatibilist debates on free will, which stipulate that an agent can act freely only in genuine conflicts. Genuine conflicts present the only conditions under which a person seems free (i.e., indetermined) to act either way between two conflicting alternatives, yet with the capacity to control his respective choices in accordance with his reasons. Hence, the lack of stronger action-guiding reasons may leave us with a pocket of freedom. After discussing various recent incompatibilist theories (attempting to show how an agent can be free, i.e., indetermined in the face of conflicting options, and yet in rational control of her action), Guckes agrees that, if we can act freely at all, we can do so only in practical conflicts. She concludes, however, that none of the theories succeed in showing how it is possible for an agent to rationally control an indetermined action. Hence, even practical conflicts do not seem to yield the pocket of freedom that we had hoped for.

To be sure, the contributions to this collection are not the only possible answers to the intricate problems that practical conflicts continue to pose. However, we believe that they cover a broad range of new analyses that provide a better understanding of the sources and conditions under which practical conflicts arise and that they also clarify how we should conceive the challenge to the scope of practical reason and how it can eventually be met.

In addition to conflicting desires, moral obligations, or values, we encountered conflicts between moral and immoral motives (Velleman, Korsgaard), conflicts of virtues (White), conflicts of commitments (Betzler), conflicts of attitudes toward goals (Baumann), and conflicts of justice (Elster). Our initial thesis stated that further analysis of the sources of practical conflicts provides the key to understanding what role practical reason can play with regard to them. This volume contains various suggestions regarding a more adequate conception of the sources of practical conflicts that enable us to spell out more clearly what practical reasoning can achieve. Tentatively, we may conclude from the contributions collected in this volume that investigations into the rational resolvability of conflicting motives or values either

1. concentrate on further specifications or broadenings of reason-providing features (features that lead us rationally to resolve

conflicts and to produce assessments of betterness (Richardson, Chang, Levi)) or

2. focus on the conditions that render reasons normative, despite possible hurdles and difficulties (e.g., the rationality of persons and the normativity of pure practical reason (Velleman, Korsgaard)).

Analyses of the conditions that make it systematically hard to resolve conflicts or that reveal potential resolutions to practical conflicts as inadequate concentrate either

3. on the question of how reasons continue to remain binding (Raz, Betzler, Schaber) or

4. on the sources preventing us from assessing what we (as deliberating agents) should do, all things considered (White, Baumann, Mele, Elster).

We hope that the focus on practical conflicts presented in this volume will help to show that there are more refined ways practical reason can be put to work. Potentially, our discussions reveal that there is (as Bernard Williams once pointed out) another "deliberative route,"[32] if not various deliberative routes, that our reasoning can take in light of the various conflicts we can imagine. Furthermore, the fact that some conflicts remain difficult to resolve may more clearly reveal the way in which practical reasoning remains constrained. The contributions to this volume indicate that the dispute between rationalists and their critics has become more intricate. But what divides them is the perspective they take on practical conflicts and the assumptions those conflicts are based on regarding the relationship between practical reasons, their reason-providing sources, and the task of practical reason. Future research may provide us with further insights into the conditions of that relationship.

Notes

1. See McConnell 1988: 25, who characterizes interpersonal moral conflicts thus: "one agent, P_1, ought to do a certain act, say A, a second agent, P_2, ought to do a different act, say B, and though each agent can do what he ought to do, it is not possible both for P_1 to do A and for P_2 to do B" (see also Marcus 1980: 121 f.). Many interpersonal conflicts are not moral conflicts (see, e.g., some of the coordination problems in game theory), and many moral

conflicts are, of course, not interpersonal conflicts (in the sense above), since a single agent can face a moral conflict.

2. This tentative explanation should not be taken as a definition. The conflict of reasons must also be so serious that the agent is conflicted, and therefore starts to deliberate (we return to this point below).

3. Applying the term "practical conflict" to trivial cases such as the one above would "inflate" the meaning of the term: Almost every decision situation would constitute a practical conflict. This use of the term would, of course, not be illuminating at all.

4. See, e.g., Walzer 1972/73: 166.

5. See the contributions in Gowans 1987 and Mason 1996. See also Sinnott-Armstrong 1988.

6. Or conflicts of virtues: A person might, for instance, be both courageous and kind; on one particular occasion, however, it might not be possible to act on both virtuous dispositions.

7. See, e.g., Nagel 1979; Williams 1981; Stocker 1990.

8. See, e.g., Mele 1987; Fischer and Ravizza 1998. For an overview of the problem of weakness of will, see Walker 1989.

9. We certainly do not want to say that all practical conflicts are clearly either moral or nonmoral conflicts; perhaps there are even no, or only very few, clear and pure cases of moral or nonmoral conflicts. Perhaps the moral or nonmoral character of a practical conflict is nothing but a matter of degree. Be that as it may, the distinction itself seems very helpful.

10. See, e.g., Watson 1975; Frankfurt 1988a; Velleman 1992; Bratman 2000.

11. Obviously, there are many more theories of practical reason. However, the ones mentioned are not only the most widespread ones in contemporary practical philosophy. They are also the main target of those who claim that practical conflicts reveal the limited scope of practical reason.

12. See Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Books 1 and 2.

13. See Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, iii.

14. See, for example, Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Even though Mill distinguishes between two different kinds of pleasure, pleasure still represents the only value. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, believes that there is always a more general and more authoritative value to be found that allows one to assess seemingly conflicting values. See Griffin 1986: chs. 1–2, for an account of informed desire satisfaction. See also Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II.iii. Slote 1985 argues, however, that utilitarianism can allow for the possibility of genuine practical conflicts.

15. See, e.g., Slote 1989.

16. See von Neumann and Morgenstern 1953: 26–7; Sen 1970: 8f.; Savage 1972: 18.

17. See, e.g., Berlin 1969; Williams 1973; Nagel 1979; Raz 1986; Wiggins 1997.

18. See, e.g., Conee 1989: 139f.

19. Some assume that there are moral dilemmas:

   (1) An agent S ought to do A and S ought to do B but S cannot do (both A and B).

If one adds two further, rather plausible assumptions, a contradiction can be derived. First, the "agglomeration principle" tells us that

 (2) If S ought to do A and if S ought to do B, then S ought to do (both A and B).

(1) and (2) imply

 (3) S ought to do (both A and B).

Another very plausible principle tells us that

 (4) *Ought* implies *Can*.

(3) and (4) imply

 (5) S can do (both A and B),

which contradicts (1). Hence, we have to give up at least one of the three assumptions: that there are moral dilemmas, that the agglomeration principle is true, or that *ought* implies *can*. See, among many: Williams 1973 and the contributions in Gowans 1987 and Mason 1996.

20. See, e.g., Walzer 1972/73; Gowans 1994; Greenspan 1995.

21. See Lukes 1997.

22. See Williams 1973: 177ff.; Marcus 1980; Sinnott-Armstrong 1988: 44ff.; Hurka 1996; Bagnoli 2000.

23. See Raz 1986: ch. 13; Griffin 1986; Stocker 1990: chs. 4 and 5; Anderson 1993: ch. 3; Richardson 1994: ch. 5; Richardson 2001; Broome 1999; also see the overview in Chang 1997a and the anthology Chang 1997b. One could also say: If neither option A nor option B is better than the other, and if there is or could be a third option C such that C is better than A but not better than B, then A and B are incommensurable (see Raz 1986: 325f.). Incommensurability is not compatible with one of the crucial assumptions of rational choice theory: the connectedness or completeness axiom (see, e.g., Luce & Raiffa 1957: 23, 25): An agent either prefers one of two options to the other or is indifferent between the two options. However, incommensurability is compatible with the absence of a common unit of measurement. For example, there is no common scale of measurement shared by the option to throw oneself into the mud and the option to have a nice cup of coffee; however, there is no doubt that under normal circumstances one would clearly prefer the latter to the former.

24. Some philosophers think that there is a fourth possibility. See, e.g., Griffin 1986: 81ff. for his account of "rough equality." See Chang 1997a: 25–7 and Chang 2002: ch. 5 for her account of "parity." We focus here on the usually held position that there are only three possibilities.

25. See Seung and Bonevac 1992; Broome 1997; Endicott 2000.

26. Broome 1997 argued that comparative terms in a natural language such as English can never determinately fail to apply.

27. Kantian as well as utilitarian approaches have derived the normative standing of moral reasons from different connections to value, such as our rational nature (Kant) or the promotion of well-being (utilitarianism). These connections lend moral considerations their normative force.

28. See, e.g., Foot 1978: 151ff.; cf. Lawrence 1995 and Frankfurt 2000. According to Raz 1999: chs. 11–13, moral reasons stem from a radically heterogeneous

group of values. Hence, there is no substantive unity to morality as a norma-
tive domain.

29. See, e.g., Frankfurt 1988b; McIntyre 1993; Arpaly 2003: ch. 2. Some propose
to describe weakness of will in terms of value incommensurability: The agent
acts on one value commitment that remains incommensurable with the value
commitment she has to disregard in her decision. See, e.g., Nussbaum 1986:
chs. 2–4; Wiggins 1991.

30. See, e.g., Watson 1975 with regard to a rational resolution of conflicts of
the will; Hare 1981 and Donagan 1987 with regard to the rational reso-
lution of moral dilemmas; and Griffin 1986: 81ff. with regard to forms of
comparability.

31. A relation is a partial ordering of a domain A if and only if the relation is
reflexive, antisymmetric, and transitive in A.

32. Williams 1995: 38 suggested that reasoning in the case of practical con-
flicts amounts to a new deliberative route opposed to mere means-end
reasoning.

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