# PROCEDURAL AND SUBSTANTIVE PRACTICAL RATIONALITY

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*Abstract:*

This chapter surveys the debate between philosophers who claim that all practical rationality is procedural and philosophers who claim that some practical rationality is substantive.

# PROCEDURAL AND SUBSTANTIVE PRACTICAL RATIONALITY*

According to many philosophers, all practical rationality is *procedural*. According to other philosophers, besides procedural practical rationality, there is also a different kind of practical rationality, which is *substantive*. This chapter is about the debate between these two groups of philosophers, whom we shall call *proceduralists* and *substantivists*.

In section 1, we explain the distinction between procedural and substantive practical rationality. In section 2, we outline the view of David Hume, who is often seen as the first proceduralist. In section 3, we outline Richard Brandt's modern defence of proceduralism. In section 4, we set out Bernard Williams' very influential arguments for proceduralism. In section 5, we discuss the main argument for substantivism. In section 6, we outline how substantivists could criticize Brandt's defence of proceduralism. In section 7, we set out how substantivists could criticize Williams' arguments for proceduralism. In section 8, we discuss the possibility of being a proceduralist about practical rationality, but a substantivist about practical reasons.

## 1. The Distinction between Proceduralism and Substantivism

Suppose that Jack has a disease from which he will die in thirty years' time, unless he takes a certain medicine now. If he takes this medicine, it will cure him completely, without any side-effects. Jack knows all this, but he lacks the desire to take this medicine.

According to one group of philosophers, Jack can be open to rational criticism for lacking this desire *only* if

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(1) He has beliefs and other desires from which he can rationally reach the desire to take this medicine, but he fails to reach this desire.[1]

For example, suppose that Jack has the desire to get married next year, and has the belief that he cannot get married next year unless he takes this medicine. In that case, he can rationally reach the desire to take this medicine from the beliefs and desires that he has.[2] And in that case, according to these philosophers, Jack can be criticized for failing to be *procedurally* practically rational.

According to another group of philosophers, Jack can be open to rational criticism for lacking this desire if

(2) Whether or not he has beliefs and other desires from which he could rationally reach a desire to take this medicine, he fails to have this desire.

For example, suppose that Jack does not have a desire to get married next year, and does not have any other beliefs and desires from which he could rationally reach the desire to take this medicine. In that case, Jack cannot be criticized for failing to be procedurally practically rational. But, according to these philosophers, Jack *can* be criticized for failing to be *substantively* practically rational.

The first group of philosophers defend:

*Proceduralism*: An agent can be open to rational criticism for lacking a desire only if the agent can rationally reach this desire from the beliefs and desires that he or she has.[3]

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[1] We deliberately leave open here what it means to 'rationally reach' a desire from one's present desires, since different proceduralists have different views on this, as will become clear below.

[2] The 'beliefs' we talk about in this section should be taken to be non-normative beliefs.

[3] Philosophers who defend proceduralism will generally also hold that an agent can be open to rational criticism for *having* (rather than lacking) a desire only if the agent can rationally reach a state in which he or she *lacks* (rather than has) this desire from the beliefs and other desires that he or she has. To save words, in what follows, we will ignore this complication.

We shall call such philosophers *proceduralists*.

The second group of philosophers defend:

> *Substantivism*: An agent can be open to rational criticism for lacking a desire whether or not the agent can rationally reach this desire from the beliefs and desires that he or she has..[4]

We shall call such philosophers *substantivists*.

Proceduralists usually make a distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental desires. Non-instrumental desires are our foundational desires, and all our other rational desires are instrumental to the fulfilment of these foundational desires. For example, if Jack does acquire the desire to take this medicine, this desire will probably be an instrumental desire. The desire could, for example, be instrumental to the fulfilment of a foundational desire to be healthy, or a desire to lead a happy life.

Proceduralists and substantivists often formulate their views in terms of reasons rather than in terms of rational criticizability. That is, they formulate their views as:

> *Proceduralism*: An agent can have a reason to have a desire only if the agent can rationally reach this desire from the beliefs and desires that he or she has.

> *Substantivism*: An agent can have a reason to have a desire whether or not the agent can rationally reach this desire from the beliefs and desires that he or she has.

Many proceduralists and substantivists treat the formulations of proceduralism and substantivism in terms of reasons as equivalent to the formulations in terms of rational criticizability. Until the final section of this paper, we will also treat them as equivalent.

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[4] To say that a person is open to rational criticism is not to say that this person is *irrational*, since a person can only properly be called irrational if he or she is open to severe rational criticism (see Parfit 1984, p. 119 and Scanlon 1998, pp. 25–30).

## 2. Hume's Proceduralism

Proceduralists often invoke David Hume as the first defender of their view. Hume famously wrote:

> 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. . . . 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter (Hume 1739: bk II, part III, sect. 3 (p. 416 in OUP's 1978 edition)).

According to many proceduralists, what Hume is suggesting here is that practical rationality cannot require that we have certain desires when we cannot reach these desires from our present desires. Instead, on Hume's view, practical rationality is merely a matter of our desiring efficient means to the fulfilment of our non-instrumental desires, which are not themselves subject to rational appraisal. In this sense, many proceduralists claim, Hume's view is that all practical rationality is procedural. According to other philosophers, however, Hume's view is that there is no such thing as practical rationality at all (see Darwall 1983, p. 53, Hampton 1995, and Millgram 1995). Nevertheless, because it is often thought that, on Hume's view, all practical rationality is procedural, proceduralism is often called 'Humeanism'.[5]

Those who claim that Hume was a proceduralist usually think that, on Hume's view, there are two ways in which we can rationally reach a new desire from our present desires. The first way is:

(1) Acquiring a new desire for something that is a means to something else that we currently desire.

[5] More exactly, it is often called 'Humeanism about normative reasons', to distinguish it from Humeanism about motivating reasons (see, for example, Smith 1994). Our focus in this chapter is on normative reasons.

For example, suppose that Sarah desires to pass a certain examination. In order to pass this examination, she must study for it. Even if she does not yet have the desire to study for the examination, she can reach this desire from her present desire to pass the examination, because studying for the examination is a means to passing it. According to many proceduralists, on Hume's view, practical rationality can then require that Sarah has the desire to study for the examination, given that she has the desire to pass it. Because, in such cases, acquiring the new desire is *instrumental* to fulfilling a present desire, proceduralism is also often called 'instrumentalism' (see, for example, Fehige 2001).

The second way is:

(2) Rationally acquiring a new empirical belief that leads to acquiring a new desire.[6]

For example, suppose that John believes that most lawyers are poor. In fact, however, given the evidence that is available to him, he should rationally believe that most lawyers are rich. Theoretical rationality therefore requires him to have the belief that most lawyers are rich. Suppose that, if John had the belief that most lawyers are rich, he would desire to study law. According to (2), he could then rationally reach the desire to study law from his present desires. And according to many proceduralists, on Hume's view, practical rationality can then require that he has the desire to study law.

Obviously, (1) and (2) are related. For we might ask: why is it that, if John knew that most lawyers are rich, he would desire to study law? Presumably, the answer is that John already has a desire to be rich. So the desire that John can rationally reach from his present desires according to (2) is also a desire that he can rationally reach from his present desires according to (1). Therefore, if the new beliefs that he acquires under (2) are all beliefs about means to things that he already desires, (1) and (2) are equivalent.

[6] We say 'a new *empirical* belief' to exclude evaluative or normative beliefs, such as beliefs about what an agent has reason to do.

## 3. Richard Brandt's Proceduralism

A prominent modern defender of proceduralism is Richard Brandt. On his theory of rationality, proceduralism is the view that an agent has a reason to perform a certain act if and only if this act will fulfil whatever desires the agent would have after he or she would have undergone what Brandt calls *cognitive psychotherapy* (Brandt 1979, pp. 11, 111–113). Cognitive psychotherapy on an agent consists of:

(a) Putting aside any of the agent's desires that are founded on non-empirical beliefs (such as normative beliefs).

(b) Subjecting the agent's remaining desires to full empirical information, which may expunge some of the agent's desires and elicit some new ones.

(c) Making sure the agent's reasoning is logically correct.

On Brandt's view, there cannot be anything rationally wrong with an agent's desires as long as they don't result either from logically invalid reasoning or from less than full empirical information (Brandt 1979, loc. cit.).

By way of illustration, suppose that Fred has a strong desire not to eat apples. First, suppose he does not want to eat apples because he believes that eating apples expresses rebellion against God. In this case, his desire not to eat apples is founded on a non-empirical belief (that one shouldn't rebel against God). Any desire founded on a non-empirical belief would be purged by cognitive psychotherapy. Brandt wants normative theory to start from desires that are not a product of normative beliefs (Brandt 1979, pp. 2, 3, 13; Brandt 1989, p. 127). He wants rationality to *generate* normative beliefs, not to *presuppose* them.

Suppose that Fred's desire not to eat apples is not founded on any normative belief, but comes instead from an empirical belief. Suppose it comes from the empirical belief — which, as it happens, is false — that eating apples is likely to make him ill. Now, once Fred learns that eating apples is more likely to help keep him from getting ill, he might go from desiring not to eat apples to desiring to eat them. For Brandt, what it is rational for an agent to do depends on what the agent would desire if his or her empirical beliefs were correct. It does not depend on what the agent does actually desire when his or her desire is based on a false empirical belief.

Brandt does not maintain that all other-regarding desires are to be ignored. Contrast what might be called *natural* concern for others with what might be called *conscientious* concern for others. An agent has natural concern for others if his or her desire that others do well expresses an underived altruistic impulse in the agent's nature, as opposed to being derived from a desire to comply with moral duty, or derived from a desire for other ends. In contrast, an agent has conscientious concern for others to the extent that his or her desire that others do well comes from our normative belief that the agent is morally required to desire this, and is thus founded on a normative belief. Since Brandt's theory of rationality puts aside desires founded on normative beliefs, it puts aside conscientious concern for others, but does not put aside natural concern for others.

Different people have different degrees of natural concern for others. According to Brandt, this is part of why it may be rational for one agent to do something that it would not be rational for another agent to do. If Laura has greater natural benevolent concern than Emily does, then it can be rational for Laura to make greater sacrifices for the benefit of others than it would be rational for Emily to make.

According to Brandt, one of the elements of cognitive psychotherapy is making sure that one's reasoning is logically correct. For example, suppose that George desires not to be in the presence of transsexuals. And suppose this desire developed in him as a consequence of his once meeting a transsexual. On that occasion, the person made a pass at him. George then made the hasty generalization that most or all transsexuals, when in his presence, would make a pass at him. Since he generalized on the basis of just one instance, George made a mistake in inductive reasoning. That was a mistake in reasoning whether or not the belief he arrived at was true.

Suppose the truth is that transsexuals are no more likely than non-transsexuals to make a pass at George. So the belief George arrived at via hasty generalization was in fact false. Given that the belief he arrived at was false, then, contrary to what Brandt claims, whether or not George arrived at this belief via faulty reasoning is ultimately irrelevant. What matters is only whether his desire not to be in the presence of transsexuals would extinguish once he became fully aware that transsexuals are no more likely than non-transsexuals to make a pass at him.

Now suppose (what is only just conceivable) that the belief George arrived at via hasty generalization was in fact true—i.e., that most or all transsexuals would (when in his

presence) make a pass at him. Then, contrary to what Brandt suggests, that George arrived at this belief via a hasty generalization is, again, ultimately irrelevant. Rather, on Brandt's view, what matters is only what George would want after he had been vividly and repeatedly exposed to the relevant empirical facts.

Because of this point about the irrelevance for Brandt of the logical or illogical reasoning involved in the acquisition of desires, as well as the irrelevance of instrumental desires, Brandt's theory boils down to the following:

> Everyone has most reason to do whatever best fulfils the set of non-instrumental desires that he or she would have after maximum exposure to all relevant empirical facts, where this set of desires does not include any desires founded on normative beliefs.

This theory is to some extent *idealized* in that it grounds reasons for action not in the desires the agent happens to have now, but in the desires the agent would have after maximum exposure to empirical information. The theory is *empiricist* in that it eschews reference to normative facts or properties. The theory identifies good reasons for action as whatever would fulfil the agent's desires, not including desires resulting from normative beliefs.

**4. Bernard Williams' Proceduralism**

The most influential recent defender of proceduralism is Bernard Williams (Williams 1981, 1995a, 1995b). Williams' arguments for proceduralism can be set out as follows (Hooker 1987).

Williams defines what he calls an agent's *subjective motivational set* as a set that includes the agent's present desires, plus the agent's 'dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may abstractly be called, embodying commitments' (Williams 1981, p. 105). He then defines *rational practical deliberation* as:

(a) ascertaining what way of satisfying some element in one's subjective motivational set would be best in the light of the other elements in the set, or

(b) deciding which among conflicting elements in one's subjective motivational set one attaches most weight to, or

(c) 'finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment' (Williams 1981, p. 104).

Williams defines what he calls an agent's *internal* practical reasons as reasons that can come to motivate this agent if the agent engages in rational deliberation that starts from his or her subjective motivational set. And he defines *external* practical reasons as reasons of which it does not need to be true that they can come to motivate this agent if the agent engages in rational deliberation that starts from his or her subjective motivational set.

Williams then claims that there are no external practical reasons. In other words, he claims that practical rationality is procedural, in the sense given by his definition of S and (a), (b) and (c) above.[7] Williams has two main arguments for this view.

His first argument appeals to the role that claims about reasons play in the *explanation* of what people do. He writes:

> If there are reasons for action, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action (Williams 1981, p. 102).

Starting from this observation, Williams gives an argument that can be set out as follows:

(P1) It must be possible for a reason for doing something to explain why an agent does this thing.

(P2) A reason can explain why an agent does something only if this agent is motivated by this reason to do this thing.

[7] Williams himself does not call his conception of practical rationality 'procedural'. This term is applied to Williams' view by Parfit 1997.

(P3) An agent can be motivated by this reason to do this thing only if the agent either already believes that he or she has this reason or can come to believe that he or she has this reason by rational deliberation.[8]

(P4) All reasons that an agent either already believes he or she has or can come to believe he or she has by rational deliberation are internal reasons.

So,

(C) All reasons are internal reasons.

Williams' second argument concerns the *content* of claims about reasons. He writes:

> *What* is it that one comes to believe when he comes to believe that there is a reason for him to ϕ, if it is not the proposition, or something that entails the proposition, that if he deliberated rationally, he would be motivated to act appropriately? (Williams 1981, p. 109)[9]

Williams' argument here can be set out as follows:

(P1*) The only intelligible content of the claim that there is reason for an agent to ϕ is, or entails, that the agent would be motivated to ϕ if he or she deliberated rationally.

(P2*) The content of the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ cannot be, and cannot entail that, the agent would be motivated to ϕ if he or she deliberated rationally.

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[8] It may be thought that (P3) should be formulated without 'by rational deliberation'. But, given that Williams' conclusion is that all practical reasons are internal, and given how Williams defines internal reasons, he either is committed to (P3) as we have formulated it, or his conclusion does not follow.

[9] Here and in what follows, 'ϕ' represents the performance of an action.

So,

(C*) The claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ has no intelligible content.

Williams considers two possible replies that substantivists — or, as he calls them, 'external reasons theorists' — might give to this argument.

The first reply that substantivists might give is that the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ means that this agent would be nicer, more considerate, more courageous and the like if he or she were to ϕ. Williams writes:

> There are many things I can say to or about [a man who does not ϕ]: that he is ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things. . . . There is one specific thing that the external reasons theorist wants me to say, that the man has a reason to be nicer. . . . But if that is thought to be appropriate, what is supposed to make it appropriate, as opposed to (or in addition to) all the other things that may be said? (Williams 1995a, p. 39)

Consider statements like 'ϕ-ing is insensitive to the feelings of others', 'ϕ-ing is dishonest', and 'ϕ-ing is pernicious to society'. Such statements cannot be rejected merely on the grounds that an agent lacks any desire that will be served by this agent's avoiding insensitivity, dishonesty, or perniciousness. In this sense, the concepts 'insensitive to the feelings of others', 'dishonest', and 'pernicious to society' are externalist ones. What Williams seems to be suggesting is that, since we already have these externalist concepts to deploy against culprits, it is hard to see how deploying externalist claims about *reasons* against culprits could add anything distinctive to statements like 'ϕ-ing is insensitive to the feelings of others', 'ϕ-ing is dishonest' and 'ϕ-ing is pernicious to society'.

At this point, it may be helpful to contrast Williams' position with Gilbert

Harman's.[10] Consider this spectrum of concepts:

| CLAIMS ABOUT REASONS FOR ACTION | MORAL VERDICTS | MORE SPECIFIC EVALUATIVE CONCEPTS |
|---|---|---|
| such as<br>'The agent has good reason not to ϕ' | such as<br>'ϕ-ing is morally wrong' | such as<br>'ϕ-ing is insensitive'<br>'ϕ-ing is dishonest'<br>'ϕ-ing harms others' |

Start with the box on the right end of the spectrum above. Harman and Williams agree that whether specific evaluative concepts can be ascribed to an agent's action typically does not depend on the agent's desires. Suppose we are inclined to evaluate some agent's act as dishonest and harmful to others. We would not withdraw those evaluations when we learned that this agent doesn't disapprove of dishonesty or harming others and doesn't have a desire to avoid dishonesty or harming others.

Now consider the box on the left end of the spectrum above. Again, Williams and Harman agree. They both believe that whether an agent has good reason to do some act *does* depend upon the agent's desires.[11]

What Williams and Harman disagree about is the status of the middle category — i.e., the status of moral verdicts.[12] Williams takes moral wrongness not to be grounded in, and so not to be hostage to, the agent's desires. In contrast, Harman takes moral wrongness to be at least partly grounded in, and so to be hostage to, the agent's desires.[13] Harman thinks that an

[10] We draw here on Harman 1977. In essentials, Harman's views have not changed, as is apparent in Harman 1996.

[11] For Harman's endorsement of this, see Harman 1977 pp. 87, 125–28.

[12] In Williams 1985, Williams attacks 'the morality system' (ch. 10). But Williams has since admitted an important place for judgements like 'ϕ-ing is wrong' (Williams 1995c, 19–34, p. 32).

[13] This is a leitmotiv of Harman's work in ethics. See, for example, Harman 1975, Harman 1977, pp. 84, 106, and Harman 1996.

agent cannot have a reason not to ϕ unless the agent has a desire that not ϕ-ing would fulfil. He also thinks that ϕ-ing cannot be morally wrong unless the agent has a reason not to ϕ. Therefore, he thinks that ϕ-ing cannot be morally wrong unless the agent has a desire that not ϕ-ing would fulfil.

In short, neither Harman nor Williams relativize application of the *more specific evaluative concepts* to the agent's desires. Both Harman and Williams do relativize claims about *good reasons for action* to the agent's desires. Williams and Harman part company over whether *moral verdicts* should be relativized to the agent's desires.

Williams also considers a second reply that substantivists might give to his argument. According to this reply, the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ means that if this agent were a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator, he or she would be motivated in these circumstances to ϕ (Williams 1995b, p. 109).

Against this answer, Williams stresses that an agent may lack the dispositions and capacities that a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator would have. In such cases, Williams claims, it is implausible to say that what this agent has reason to do depends on the dispositions and capacities of a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator, rather than on the dispositions and capacities of this agent himself or herself. For example, suppose that Jane can't stop herself from drinking alcohol once she starts. In that case, it seems that Jane has a reason not to accept even one glass of alcohol, even though a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator (who would of course lack a disposition to drink too much once started) might have no such reason. Or suppose that, after a day of hard work, Tom is tired and irritable, to the point that Tom would probably end up picking a fight if he went to the pub. In that case, Tom has a reason not to go to the pub that a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator might not have, since a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator would not have a disposition to get irritable and pick fights when tired.

Substantivists could reply to this that the test for whether an agent has a reason to do something is whether a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator would be motivated *in these circumstances* to do this thing. If Jane can't stop herself once she tastes alcohol, and if Tom is irritable after a day of hard work, these facts are arguably part of the circumstances that Jane and Tom find themselves in. Therefore, *in the circumstances that Jane and Tom find themselves in*, a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator *would* be motivated not to accept even one glass of alcohol and not to go to the pub.

Williams' rejoinder to this is that if we let such things count as differences in circumstances, we are acknowledging that differences in our affective states can make a difference to the reasons we have. Given his definition of an agent's subjective motivational set as including 'dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may abstractly be called, embodying commitments', Williams suggests, this puts us back on the road to the view that all reasons are internal.

These arguments lead Williams to suppose that claims about external reasons are mere empty rhetoric, or, as he puts it, 'bluff' (Williams 1981, p. 111). On Williams' view, internal reasons are the only reasons there are, and all practical rationality is procedural in the sense he has defined.

**5. Arguments for substantivism**

The main form of argument for substantivism comes in the form of examples. Elizabeth Anscombe proposed this example. Suppose that someone who knows all relevant empirical facts and is reasoning logically nevertheless says that he wants a saucer of mud (Anscombe 1957, p. 70). And suppose that this person does not want the mud as an artistic material for the creation of something else. Nor does he want it for throwing in someone's face. Nor does he want it as a symbol for something else. He claims simply to want the saucer of mud for itself. According to substantivists, such a non-instrumental desire would be rationally criticizable (or indeed unintelligible) — whether or not the person would abandon his desire for a saucer of mud if he deliberated in a procedurally rational way with full empirical information.

There are lots of other examples. Warren Quinn offered the example of someone with a disposition to turn on radios whenever possible (Quinn 1993, p. 236). This person does not turn on radios because she wants to hear music or news or other radio programs. Nor does the person want to turn them on in order to test them, or in order to disturb other people. The desire in question here is supposed to be a non-instrumental one. But, substantivists would say, such a desire seems rationally criticizable.

Such examples can be multiplied infinitely. For there is an infinite number of things that are not worthy of being desired as ends *in their own right* (however instrumentally desirable they may be in some situations as means to or as symbols of other things). When

these things are not means to or symbols of other things, there is no 'desirability characterisation' of them (Anscombe 1957, pp. 72-3). According to substantivists, when something has *no* feature that would make the thing worth desiring as an end in itself, then desiring this thing for its own sake is rationally criticizable whether or not a desire for this thing would result from logically valid deliberation from the agent's desires.

Other examples of desires that substantivists would claim are rationally criticizable involve irrational patterns. Consider Derek Parfit's example of 'Future Tuesday Indifference' (Parfit 1984, p. 124). Suppose that someone cares equally about what happens to her on every other day of the week except Tuesdays, and that she cares not at all what happens to her on any future Tuesday. She does care on Tuesday about what is happening to her on that day, but she never cares about what happens to her on future Tuesdays. In addition, suppose that this person does not take Tuesdays to be symbolic of something important, and does not have any other special beliefs about Tuesdays. She is indifferent to her future Tuesdays for no further reason than that they are Tuesdays.

This person is clearly irrational, substantivists would say. The fact that a harm or benefit occurs on a Tuesday is no reason to discount it. The fact that some days are Tuesdays is not really a reason to accord them lesser (or greater) significance. Indifference to future Tuesdays involves drawing a line arbitrarily and unnecessarily.

Again, there are an infinite number of examples of the same general kind. These are examples in which a pattern of concern discounts what happens during some unit of time, or space, for no further reason.

Being indifferent to what happens on future Fridays, for no further reason than that they are Fridays, would be just as irrational as indifference to what happens on future Tuesdays, according to substantivists. Likewise, to be indifferent to what happens on any future day between 4:02 and 4:05, for no further reason than that those times are those times, would also be irrational according to substantivists. Or imagine someone who cares deeply about what happens to those less than one mile away from her but not at all about anyone who is more than one mile away (Parfit 1984, p. 125). Again, suppose that the distinction between those within a mile and those outside a mile is made for no further reason. (It is not that all members of this person's family are within a mile.) According to substantivists, such 'within-a-mile altruism' makes an unnecessary and arbitrary distinction, and is therefore rationally criticizable, whether or not this person could abandon this pattern of concern on

further reflection.

Another example is the far more familiar one that anyone with absolutely no concern for his or her own future well-being would be irrational, according to substantivists.[14] Consider the fifteen-year-old who says, 'I don't care one bit about anything that happens to me after I'm thirty.' According to substantivists, this person fails to care about something she should care about, and is to that extent rationally criticizable, whether or not she would come to care about her further future if she thought clearly about it with full empirical information (Sidgwick 1907, Nagel 1970, Foot 1972, Parfit 1984).

Once we have accepted the substantivists' claim that someone can be rationally criticizable for failing to care about her own future good, we might accept that someone can be rationally criticizable if she fails to care at all about the good of others. Indeed, substantivists typically hold that rationality not only rules out certain desires and patterns of desire but also requires certain desires, such as concerns for one's own future good and for the good of others.

## 6. Replies to Brandt's Proceduralism

How could substantivists respond to Brandt's proceduralism? The first thing they might say is that Brandt is wrong to assume that our desires necessarily become more rational as we obtain more empirical information. To take the most familiar example, suppose Bettina has a slightly below average natural concern for others. As we give her more information about the daily lives of the starving people in the world, her natural concern for them grows. Helping her to appreciate vividly their daily struggles, we have increased her natural sympathy.

But now suppose Bettina goes to work for aid agencies in the very worst hit areas. This puts her face to face with the pain, panic, and deprivation that so many millions suffer every day. At first, her natural concern for the worst off grows as she sees more directly and vividly how needy they are. But eventually the prolonged exposure to suffering all around

[14] To hold this is compatible with holding that one's own future well-being is less important than some other things, such as the well-being of others.

Bettina thickens the skin over her heart. Eventually, even the desperate needs of others begin not to trouble her.

This story illustrates that, at least up to a point, some desires will intensify as we obtain further relevant information. But beyond that point, receiving yet more relevant information may serve to dampen or even extinguish these desires. Therefore, substantivists could claim, the best set of desires may not be the one we would have after exposure to maximum relevant empirical information. Too much information, even if relevant and true, can be overwhelming, even deadening (Gibbard 1990, pp. 165–6, 171–2, 175–7).

The other way that substantivists could reply to Brandt's proceduralism would be to appeal to counterexamples like the ones cited earlier. Consider a noninstrumental desire for a saucer of mud, or a noninstrumental desire to turn on radios whenever possible, or future Tuesday-indifference, or within-a-mile altruism, or someone's complete lack of concern for his own future well-being, or someone's complete lack of concern for anyone's well-being other than his own. Suppose that one or more of these survives Brandt's 'cognitive psychotherapy'. Intuitively, it would still seem irrational to have these desires or patterns of concern.

## 7. Replies to Williams' Arguments for Proceduralism

How could substantivists respond to Williams' arguments for proceduralism? Recall that Williams' first argument, which appealed to explanation, made use of the premises:

(P3) An agent can be motivated by this reason to do this thing only if this agent either already believes that he or she has this reason or can come to believe that he or she has this reason by rational deliberation.

(P4) All reasons that an agent either already believes he or she has or can come to believe he or she has by rational deliberation are internal reasons.

In response to this argument, Parfit points out that for (P3) and (P4) to be true, 'rational deliberation' must mean *procedurally* rational deliberation. However, Parfit claims, if someone has an external reason to do something, then if this agent 'were substantively rational, his awareness of this external reason would motivate him' (Parfit 1997, p. 116). So

if we take 'rational deliberation' to mean *substantively* rational deliberation, (C) does not follow.

Williams' second argument, which concerned the content of claims about reasons, made use of the premise:

(P2*) The content of the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ cannot be, and cannot entail that, the agent would be motivated to ϕ if he or she deliberated rationally.

Hooker and Parfit point out that, again, for this premise to be true, 'rational deliberation' must mean *procedurally* rational deliberation (Hooker 1987, Parfit 1997). If we take 'rational deliberation' to mean *substantively* rational deliberation, as substantivists do, this premise is false. And, in that case, (C*) does not follow.

How could substantivists respond to Williams' criticism of the view that the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ means that this agent would be nicer, more considerate, more courageous and the like if he or she were to ϕ?

As we have seen, Williams' criticism of this view is that, on this view, claims about external reasons are not saying anything distinctive. In response to this claim, substantivists could start by admitting that what it *means* for an agent to have an external reason to ϕ is not that this agent would be nicer, more considerate, more courageous and the like if he or she were to ϕ. Nevertheless, they could say, claims about niceness, considerateness and courage are in part ways of saying that an agent has an external reason to do something. For such claims normally *imply* that an agent has a reason to do the thing that these claims pick out as the nice, considerate or courageous thing to do.

Alternatively, substantivists could reply that, for Williams' criticism to work, he must be assuming both of two things. First, he must be assuming that the meaning of claims about external reasons is exhausted by their truth-conditions. Second, he must be assuming that, on the substantivists' view, claims about niceness, considerateness, courage and the like have the same truth-conditions as claims about external reasons. If Williams is assuming the conjunction of these two claims, substantivists can reply in two ways. They can either:

(a) Deny that the meaning of a claim about external reasons is exhausted by its truth-conditions,[15]

or:

(b) Admit that the meaning of a claim about external reasons is exhausted by its truth-conditions, and say that the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ is true if and only if there actually is an external reason for this agent to ϕ.

If substantivists give reply (a), it is hard to see how Williams could still insist that claims about external reasons collapse into claims about niceness, considerateness, courage and the like. Against (b), however, Williams might object that the truth-conditions that substantivists propose here are vacuous. But substantivists could reply that this merely seems to be so, because the concept of a 'reason' is a basic concept that cannot be analysed in other terms. Moreover, they could say, if Williams assumes that the meaning of a claim about reasons is exhausted by its truth-conditions, he is himself guilty of collapsing the meaning of the claim that there is a reason for an agent to ϕ into the claim that, were the agent empirically well-informed and reasoned logically from her existing set of motivations, the agent would be motivated to ϕ.

How could substantivists reply to Williams' criticism of the view that the claim that there is an external reason for an agent to ϕ means that if this agent were a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator, he or she would be motivated in these circumstances to do this thing?

As we have seen, Williams' criticism of this view was that, when the agent lacks the dispositions and capacities of a well-informed and well-disposed deliberator, what the agent

[15] This will be most clearly true on an expressivist view about the meaning of judgements about reasons for action, such as R. M. Hare's view that the meaning of normative judgements (e.g. 'A has reason not to ϕ') does not determine the truth conditions of such judgements (Hare 1981, especially p. 207).

has good reason to do cannot be determined by what the well-informed and well-disposed deliberator would do in the circumstances. In response to this criticism, substantivists can agree that any sensible view about practical reasons will hold that there is some connection between an agent's dispositions and capacities and what the agent has reason to do. Substantivists will typically accept that, *in many cases*, which reasons an agent has is related to which desires the agent has (Parfit 1997, p. 128). For example, if Harry has a strong desire for food, he will normally have a reason to get some food. On a substantivist view, this reason is not *given by* Harry's desire, but is instead given by the fact that he will get pleasure from eating or by the fact that if he does not satisfy his hunger he will be too distracted to concentrate on anything else. Desire can influence what reasons agents have, according to substantivists, because of desire's pervasive connections with pleasure, concentration, and the like.

**8. Rationality and Reasons**

Brandt, Williams, Harman, and Parfit take *practical rationality* and *responding to reasons for action* to be very closely related. For Brandt, Williams, and Harman, practical rationality is primary, and what there is reason to do depends on what it is practically rational to do. Because Brandt, Williams, and Harman are proceduralists about practical rationality, they are also proceduralists about reasons for action. Hooker, Parfit, and others, by contrast, take responding to reasons for action to be primary. They take what it is practically rational to do to depend on what there are reasons to do. Since they are substantivists about reasons for action, they are substantivists about practical rationality.

A possible way out of this controversy is offered by T. M. Scanlon. According to Scanlon, it is not necessarily the case that if someone does not do what he has most reason to do, he or she fails to be fully practically rational. Instead, Scanlon claims, a failure of practical rationality occurs only 'when a person recognizes something as a reason but fails to be affected by it in one of the relevant ways' (Scanlon 1998, p. 25). If we follow Scanlon in this, we can be proceduralists about practical rationality and substantivists about good practical reasons. Taking this position would enable us to avoid awkwardnesses in the two opposing positions.

Suppose that Steve is a cool, calculating, self-disciplined, efficient achiever of things

that he wants and thinks important. His attitudes and actions conform very well to his own judgements about what to care about and pursue. Steve knows that he could reduce the suffering of innocent people massively merely by pushing a button that is right in front of him, which would cost him nothing beyond a millisecond of time. But he has no desire at all to push this button, and he would not reach such a desire by engaging in procedurally rational deliberation — because, even if he were presented with vivid empirical information about the suffering of these people, he would not care at all about their plight.

In that case, proceduralists about reasons will have to say that *there is no reason* for Steve to push the button. But that seems an awkward thing to say, because the thing that Steve could achieve is so important, and because he could achieve it with so little effort. Substantivists about practical rationality, on the other hand, will have to say that Steve *fails to be rational* in not pushing the button. But that seems an awkward thing to say as well, because Steve is such a cool, calculating, self-disciplined, efficient achiever of things that he wants and thinks important. Herein lies the appeal of Scanlon's compromise. If we are proceduralists about practical rationality, we can say that what is wrong with Steve is not that he fails to be rational. But if we are simultaneously substantivists about reasons for action, we can still say that there is something wrong with Steve, namely that there is a very strong reason for him to push the button, which he fails to see is a reason.

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Two very useful collections of papers, both of which contain excellent introductions, are:

Millgram, Elijah (ed.). 2001. *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press. This collection contains, among other papers, Williams 1981 and Hooker 1987, and also has some further reflections on the debate by Bernard Williams.

Cullity, Garrett, and Berys Gaut (eds.). 1997. *Ethics and Practical Reason*. Oxford:

Clarendon Press. This collection consists entirely of original papers, many of which are relevant to the debate between proceduralists and substantivists.