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## Reasons: A Puzzling Duality?

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It would seem that our choices can affect the reasons we have. If I adopt a certain end, then it would seem that I have reason to do what is required to pursue it, a reason that I otherwise would not have had. On the other hand, many of us believe that we have other reasons that are not dependent on our choices. If accelerating my car and driving straight ahead would seriously injure a pedestrian, this is a reason for me not to do that. And it seems, to me at least, that this is a reason I would have whatever ends I may have chosen. Its being a reason is something I discover rather than create.

This gives rise to a puzzle about what it is to be a reason—that is to say, a consideration that counts in favour of some action or attitude. If the normative status of counting in favour of acting a certain way is something that certain considerations can just *have*, how can it also be something that we can *confer* on certain considerations by our choice of ends?

This puzzle arises for anyone who, like me, is inclined to be a realist about some reasons but also recognizes an agent's ends and intentions as having special normative significance. But it arises in a particularly clear form for what Joseph Raz calls the classical conception of human agency.<sup>1</sup> This conception distinguishes sharply between reason and the will. The function of reason, according to this conception, is to assess various reasons for action and arrive at conclusions about which actions there is sufficient reason to perform. The function of the will is then to determine which of

<sup>1</sup> Raz discusses this view in *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. chs. 2 and 3.

these eligible actions we will in fact do. Raz believes that in many cases there will be more than one eligible action: that is to say, that available reasons will not fully determine what we should do. It follows that the activity of the will goes beyond reason and is not determined by it.

Raz's conception of rational action fits the pattern I described above. First, his view of reasons is, at least in many cases, a realist view in the respect I mentioned. He writes: 'The core idea is that rationality is the ability to realize the normative significance of the normative features of the world, and the ability to act accordingly.'<sup>2</sup> He also holds, as I have just said, that by the exercise of the will we choose actions from among those that reason determines to be eligible. It may not follow immediately that this activity of the will gives us new reasons beyond those that reason discovers. If a rational agent has willed a certain action, then (absent a change of mind) he or she will perform that action. Indeed, a failure to do so (again, absent a change of mind) would be irrational. But this may just be a fact about the way that rationality requires an agent's attitudes and actions to be related. It may not depend on the idea that an additional reason is generated by the agent's act of will.

Whatever one may say about this particular case, however, the puzzle I have described seems to remain when we shift from choices of actions to choices of goals. Raz mentions as typical goals such things as 'success in one's career, success in one's relationships, possessing the entire set of nineteenth-century French stamps, or qualifying as an International Master in chess'.<sup>3</sup> I assume he would say that reason recognizes such things as worthwhile, and that we then choose among these eligible alternative goals and adopt certain ones as *our* goals. He takes this to result in a difference in the reasons we have, since, as he goes on to say, 'We have reason to do whatever will facilitate the pursuit of our worthwhile goals.'<sup>4</sup> If we do not have similar reason to do what will facilitate the pursuit of other worthwhile goals (I will return to this question later), then this leaves us with the apparently puzzling duality I described above: the status of being a reason for an agent is something that a consideration can just have, and also something it can acquire through the exercise of the agent's will.

There are a number of different ways of responding to this apparent puzzle. One would be to deny that a person who chooses a goal or action

<sup>2</sup> Raz discusses this view in *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

thereby comes to have a reason to do what promotes it, over and above those reasons he or she would have had without having made that choice. A second response would be to admit that an agent acquires such a reason but to deny that this amounts to a duality in the sources of reasons. This might be maintained in several different ways. The first would be to hold that *all* reasons depend, ultimately, on the nature or activity of rational willing. Christine Korsgaard, for example, argues not only that the grounds of the principle of instrumental reason lie in the fact that it is constitutive of rational willing, but also that a consideration counts in favour of our adopting an end only if we have given it that status.<sup>5</sup> Like me, Raz does not take this view. We could, however, deny the duality in another way, by going to the opposite extreme and holding that the *source* of all reasons is independent of the will, although the exercise of our wills may sometimes change our situation in ways that change the reasons that apply to us. In the remainder of this paper I will explore this alternative, and consider Raz's account of how decisions affect the reasons we have. I will tentatively conclude that the apparent duality in reasons is only apparent, and should not trouble us.

It will be helpful at the outset to distinguish two different ways in which an agent's judgement or decision can have normative consequences. One is by changing what the agent can do, or what attitudes he or she can hold, without being irrational.<sup>6</sup> The other is by changing the reasons that the agent has. These are not the same. Suppose, for example, that an agent concludes that tomatoes are dangerous to his health, and that he therefore has reason to avoid food containing tomatoes. This does not change the reasons that he has. If he is mistaken about the health risks of eating tomatoes, then he still has no reason not to eat them, even though he thinks he does. But, whether he is mistaken or not, as long as he judges that he has reason not to eat food containing tomatoes, he would be irrational if, when he is deciding what to eat, he did not treat the fact that a food contains tomatoes as a reason not to eat it. The claim that an agent must, in so far as he is not irrational, treat a certain consideration as a reason can fall short of the claim that this consideration *is* a reason for that agent. This is so because that claim need not involve an endorsement

<sup>5</sup> See Christine Korsgaard, 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason,' in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 253.

<sup>6</sup> Claims about what a person must, unless he or she is irrational, count as a reason invoke what John Broome calls "normative requirements". See his "Reasons" in this volume, pp. 28–55.

of the attitudes that make it irrational for the agent to fail to treat that consideration as a reason. But a claim of the former sort can be turned into a claim about the reasons that the agent in fact has by adding an endorsement of these attitudes.

This distinction suggests a strategy for explaining the puzzle I have been discussing. Since irrationality is, at least in some cases, a matter of conflict between an agent's judgement and his or her other attitudes,<sup>7</sup> it is not at all surprising that an agent's choices and decisions can make a difference to what he or she can do without being irrational. What would be more surprising, and raise the question of a duality of the kind I have described, is the possibility that an agent's choices and decisions could affect the reasons he or she has. What we should do, then, is to consider whether what seemed at first to be instances of the latter are really only instances of the former. If this turns out to be true in every case, it will solve the problem. If it does not, then we can consider how best to explain the residual cases in which choices and decisions make a difference to an agent's reasons.

I will begin by considering what seems to me to be an analogous question about belief. Coming to believe something, or judging that there is compelling reason to believe it, makes a difference to what one must, in so far as one is not irrational, count as a reason. Someone who judges that there is compelling reason to conclude that  $p$  is the case, but continues to reason as if  $p$  were not the case, or as if it were an open question whether  $p$  is so, is being irrational. More specifically, a person who believes  $p$  must, in so far as he continues to hold this belief and is not irrational, take the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as a reason for believing  $q$ . By contrast, a person who does not believe  $p$  need not see the fact that  $q$  follows from it as having any particular significance.

But a person who comes to believe  $p$  should not see this change in the considerations she must, in so far as she is rational, take to be reasons as flowing from her adoption of that belief. Rather, the reasons she must take herself to have to rely on  $p$  in further reasoning are just those considerations that she has judged to support her conclusion that  $p$ .

This dependence is shown in the fact that a person who believes  $p$  should not *necessarily* take the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as a reason for

<sup>7</sup> I have advocated using the term 'irrational' in what I called a 'narrow' sense, in which it applies only to cases in which there is such a conflict. See my *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25–30. But one need not accept that recommendation in order to agree with the claim made here.

believing  $q$ . It may be that  $q$  is so implausible that she should take the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as a reason for rejecting  $p$ . ( $q$  might be  $0 = 1$ , for example, or a contradiction.) Alternatively, she might have independent grounds for reconsidering her belief in  $p$ , if, for example, she learns that what she had taken as evidence for  $p$  was in fact mistaken. The most we can say is that someone who believes  $p$  should take the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as a reason for believing  $q$  *unless she knows or believes something that gives her reason to reconsider her belief in  $p$* . Supposing that she does not have such reasons, however, the fact that she believes  $p$  adds nothing to *her reasons* for believing  $q$ , or for taking the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as counting in favour of  $q$ . Her reasons for these attitudes are, as I have said, just the considerations that she takes to support belief in  $q$  (considerations which, we are supposing, she judges to be sufficient).

Now consider the case of instrumental practical reasoning. Here we can say, in a fashion parallel to the case of belief, that adopting a goal gives rise to a difference in what an agent must, in so far as he has that goal and is not irrational, see as reasons. Someone who has adopted  $G$  as a goal, believes that  $x$ -ing is a necessary means to  $G$ , and (while continuing to have  $G$  as a goal) does not count this as a reason for  $x$ -ing, is being irrational. This difference follows simply from principles that are constitutive of practical reasoning. Since adopting a goal involves taking oneself to have reason to do what advances it, a failure to take oneself to have a reason to advance a goal one has adopted, and continues to hold, is irrational. Should we say, then, that an agent need not see his adoption of  $G$  as constituting or giving rise to a new reason, and that he should, on the contrary, see the reasons he has as flowing entirely from the considerations that he takes to support adopting  $G$  as a goal?

I defended a positive answer to the parallel question in the case of belief, and it may seem that we should give the same answer here. The principle of instrumental reasoning does contain a qualification parallel to the one I discussed in the case of conditional theoretical reasoning. A person who has  $G$  as an end should not necessarily take the fact that doing  $x$  would promote  $G$  as a reason to do  $x$ . If  $x$  is the only way of achieving  $G$ , and is morally repugnant, then it may be that the person should abandon  $G$  (or at least suspend pursuit of it until some other means becomes available). And she might have other reasons for reconsidering whether  $G$  is in fact worthy of pursuit. So the most we can say is that a person who has  $G$  as an end should take the fact that doing  $x$  would

promote *G* as a reason to do *x*, *unless he knows or believes something that gives him reason to reconsider his adoption of G.*

The need for this qualification indicates that an instrumental reason for doing what advances one's goal continues to depend on the reasons for having that goal. But in at least some cases the fact that the person has adopted *G* seems also to be doing some normative work. Suppose that Jones reasonably believes the following:

1. There are a number of ends, call them *G*, *H*, and *K*, which he has sufficient reason to adopt (they are all *eligible*, to use Raz's phrase).
2. He has good reason not to adopt more than one of these goals.

If Jones, believing (1) and (2), has adopted *G* as a goal, then he must, if he is not irrational, take the fact that *x*-ing would promote *G* as a reason for him to *x*. But he need not, similarly, take the fact that *y*-ing would promote *H* as a reason for him to *y*, which he should balance against his reasons for doing *x*. So he must, in so far as he is not irrational, take the fact that he has adopted *G* as a goal as itself making a difference in what he should treat as a reason—as itself a reason why the fact that *x*-ing would promote *G* is a reason for him to *x*.

So far, this is just a claim about what Jones must, in so far as he is not irrational, take to be a reason. But if we add that Jones not only reasonably believes (1) and (2) but that these claims about the reasons he has are correct, then we are committed to the stronger claim that the things he must, in so far as he is not irrational, take to be reasons are in fact reasons. In particular, we are committed to the claim that the fact that Jones has adopted *G* as a goal is a reason for him to take the fact that *x*-ing would advance *G* as a reason to *x*, and hence to the claim that the fact that an agent has adopted a goal can make a difference to the reasons he has, not merely to what he must see as a reason, in so far as he is not irrational.

In cases of this kind, the normative significance of an agent's having adopted *G* as an end seems to derive from the element of free play involved—that is to say, from the fact that, in Raz's terms, the adoption of *G* as a goal is an exercise of the will, not required by reason. One might maintain that there can be a similar element of free play in the case of belief. Raz seems to suggest something of the kind.<sup>8</sup> He argues that there can be evidence making a belief rational but leaving it none the less 'optional'. The apparent evidence may be such that a very trusting person

<sup>8</sup> Raz, *Engaging Reason*, 95–6.

would take it as grounds for believing  $p$ , while someone of a more sceptical turn of mind would not. But it may be that neither response would be irrational. Should we say in this case that the first person's decision to believe  $p$  leads to a difference in the epistemic reasons he subsequently has? This decision does seem to make a difference in what he must treat as a reason if he is not to be open to a charge of irrationality. If he refuses to see the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as sufficient reason for believing  $q$  (absent reasons for reconsidering his belief in  $p$ ), then he is being irrational. The more sceptical person is in a different situation. She should take the fact that  $q$  follows from  $p$  as counting in favour of  $q$  to the degree that, in her judgement, the available evidence supports  $p$ , but no more than this. However, the less sceptical person need not see the fact that he believes  $p$  as making a difference to what he must take to be a reason. The difference in what the two must see as reasons in so far as they are not irrational results simply from a difference in their assessments of the underlying reasons supporting  $p$ .

There seems, then, to be a difference between the cases of theoretical and practical reasoning. In the case of practical reasoning, the fact that someone has adopted  $G$  as an end may make a difference in what she must treat as a reason in so far as she is not irrational. But it also may itself be something that she must (in so far as she is not irrational) treat as a reason, and it may even *be* a reason for her—namely, a (second-order) reason to treat the fact that  $x$ -ing would promote  $G$  as a reason for her to  $x$ . In the case of theoretical reasoning, by contrast, the analogues of the latter two claims do not hold.

The next question is whether this amounts to a troubling duality in the sources of practical reasons. As I have said, a constructivist who holds that the rational will is the source of all reasons would see no duality here. I will not explore this alternative. I want to examine the options available within a view that is at least partly realist in the way that both Raz's and mine seem to be. Given such a view, one possibility would be to offer a realist account of the additional reasons that a person comes to have as a result of adopting a goal.

Here I must begin with a few remarks about how realism about reasons is to be understood. Realism may seem an odd view if it is taken to hold that facts about reasons are just facts 'in the world' that we can discover but that, in their nature, have nothing to do with us. This way of understanding the matter fails to take account of the relational character of

claims about reasons. To claim that some consideration 'is a reason' is to claim that it counts in favour (or against) an agent in certain circumstances holding a certain attitude, such as, for example, a certain belief or intention.

Making this relational aspect of reasons explicit may make realism seem even stranger. How, it may be asked, can there be such facts 'in the world' about the relations between our attitudes and various possible states of affairs? I believe, however, that this worry results from giving normative realism an unnecessary and unwarranted ontological reading. We all believe that there is a difference between good reasons for a belief and bad ones. And whether we are internalists or externalists about reasons for action, if we believe in practical normativity at all, we believe that some considerations are good reasons for a person to act in a certain way, and other considerations are not. The most natural construal of these beliefs takes them to involve commitment to relational truths of the sort I have described. There would be reason to withhold this commitment, and to seek a revisionist understanding of our beliefs, only if it involved some further commitment that is properly deemed implausible. But the naïve reading of our beliefs about reasons commits us only to what needs to be the case if they are to have the kind of significance we attribute to them. This significance—normative significance—does not depend on these truths having any special ontological status; nor would it be enhanced or supported by such status.

Returning now to what I called the relational character of claims about reasons, suppose that a certain feature of some goal—for example, that achieving it would increase the educational level of children in some city—is a good reason to adopt it. More explicitly, this is a good reason for someone to adopt it if he or she is in the right situation, for example has the right skills and opportunities to promote the goal, and perhaps only if he or she stands in the right relation to the children, or the city, in question. For someone else, who was not in this position, the same consideration might only be a reason to encourage someone who was in this position to adopt the goal and a reason for him not to interfere with her pursuit of it. So the same consideration can be a reason for different people to do different things, depending on their relation to the goal in question.

To adopt a goal is to set oneself to pursue it, and to take the fact that certain actions would be means to that end as counting in favour of those actions. So if the fact that this goal would increase the educational level of the children in a certain city is a good reason for someone in my situation

to adopt it, it is also a good reason for me to pursue it *if* I adopt it, and if I adopt it, for me to take the fact that some action would promote that goal as a reason for that action. But what is the force of this conditional? How is it that adopting the goal makes a difference?<sup>9</sup>

Here it is important to remember the kind of situation we are considering (the kind in which, as I argued above, the fact that an agent has adopted a goal can make a difference to the reasons the agent has). This is a situation in which there is more than one goal which the person has sufficient reason to adopt, but in which the person also has compelling reason not to adopt more than one of them, perhaps because they cannot be effectively pursued at the same time. What a person has reason to do in such a situation is to pursue one of these eligible goals. To do this, she must employ some procedure for selecting one of the goals and then pursue that goal, rather than any of the others. Once she has selected a goal, she is no longer in this situation.

This might be put by saying that adopting the goal puts one in a different relation to that goal, and this makes a difference to what a given consideration gives one reason to do, just as having the opportunity or skills to advance it, or standing in the relevant relation to the city in question, can make this kind of difference. It is therefore unnecessary, and a mistake, to suppose that adopting an end can make a difference in the reasons one has only if, when we adopt an end, we *generate* new reasons by an act of will. By adopting an end, we do come to have reasons that we otherwise would not have had. But these reasons are not different in their source from our reasons for adopting the goal in the first place.

We may be misled into thinking that they have a different source by confusing claims about reasons with claims about irrationality. As I have noted, the fact that someone has adopted a certain goal makes it the case that he is irrational if, absent a change of mind, he denies that the fact that some action would advance this goal is a *prima-facie* reason for performing it. This particular species of irrationality is independent of the reasons the person may have for adopting the goal in the first place, and is therefore created by the person's adoption of the goal in a way that the reasons I have just been discussing are not.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Samuel Scheffler for raising this question in discussion at the Raz conference.

<sup>10</sup> Nomy Arpaly advances some reasons for doubting this claim about rationality in 'On Acting Rationally Against One's Best Judgment', *Ethics* 110 (2000), 488–513.

What I am calling the relational character of reasons amounts to this: considerations that are reasons are not reasons in the abstract, but reasons for agents in particular circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Defensible claims about the reasons we have must take into account various facts about our situation, such as the fact that we can't do everything worth doing, or adopt every goal. This seems to be built into the notion of an eligible action (or goal), which Raz invokes. To claim that a goal is an eligible one, for an agent in certain circumstances, is to make a claim about the reasons supporting that goal considered in relation to the reasons supporting other goals that that agent could choose. It is to claim that there is good enough reason for the agent to adopt that goal rather than others and, once having chosen it, to pursue it. If a goal is an eligible one for a given agent, and she adopts it, then she has no reason to reconsider that decision unless she has reason to believe that her circumstances have changed or that new information about the merits of these goals has become available to her. All of this, it seems to me, is part of the normative content of the idea of an eligible goal. If this is correct, then an agent's decision to adopt one eligible goal among others makes it the case that she has reason to pursue that goal rather than others even though that decision does not *create* this reason by a kind of self-legislation.

I have so far been supposing that if the adoption of a goal makes a difference to the reasons we subsequently have, it does this by making it the case, in one way or another, that we have a new positive reason to do what will promote that goal. An alternative view would hold that a decision to perform an eligible action or adopt an eligible goal changes our normative situation in a different way, by changing the normative status of reasons for doing other actions or for doing what would promote other goals. Rather than providing a new reason to do the act one has chosen, a decision among alternative eligible actions gives one a reason to regard the considerations that might have counted in favour of performing alternative actions as no longer relevant.

One might put this in terms of a purely pragmatic second-order reason. As I have said in the preceding paragraph, if an agent has decided to do *A* after carefully considering the matter and weighing what seem to her to be the relevant reasons, then she has no reason to reconsider this decision unless she comes to have some reason to think that circumstances

<sup>11</sup> This is not to deny that some considerations might give *anyone* a reason, regardless of that person's circumstances.

have changed, or that she has overlooked some relevant factor. One might add that an agent in this situation has a positive second-order reason *not* to reconsider her earlier decision. Doing so would be costly. It would be, at the least, a waste of time. Worse, a general policy of reconsidering one's decisions in such circumstances would be a serious impediment to doing anything at all.

This is a second-order reason because it is a reason to ignore the first-order reasons favouring courses of action other than the one chosen. I call it a purely pragmatic reason because it concerns the costs and effectiveness of the process of deliberation, rather than the substantive relevance of the reasons it instructs an agent to ignore. Its pragmatic character can be seen from the fact that if the agent's circumstances were to change in a way that would eliminate the costs of reconsideration, then these particular reasons against reconsidering the merits of alternative actions would disappear. Suppose that I am about to attend a meeting at the start of which I will have to vote for one of two job candidates. After deliberating about their merits for some time, I decide, just before the meeting, to vote for Smith rather than Jones. But as I am on my way to the meeting, there is a power failure, and I am stuck in the elevator. Given that I don't have anything else to do while I am waiting for the power to come back on, I would seem to have no reason not to revisit the merits of the candidates and consider whether Smith is indeed the one to choose.<sup>12</sup>

Not all second-order reasons are purely pragmatic. If I am on a committee considering revisions in the undergraduate curriculum, then I have reason to disregard the effects that new requirements would have on the number of teaching fellow positions available to graduate students in my department. This is a second-order reason, since it bears on the status of other considerations as reasons for or against the policies I am considering. But it is not purely pragmatic. Rather, it is based on the substantive view that considerations of graduate funding are not relevant to the question of what undergraduates should be required to study in order to get a good education.

It is uncontroversial, I believe, that a decision, taken after deliberation, to do one of several eligible actions, or to adopt one among several eligible goals, can give rise to a purely pragmatic reason to subsequently ignore,

<sup>12</sup> This example is a modification of one suggested to me by Derek Parfit, who credits it to John Broome.



deliberation even while knowing that this is premature. Doing this might be irrational, but it is still a possible thing to do. This formulation still fits with the rationale Raz offers for the condition, since it seems natural to say that what is lacking in the case of the person who has formed a view about what he should do but wants to consider some further evidence is an intention to terminate deliberation rather than a belief that he should do so.

Raz believes that it is the decision itself, rather than the considerations that provide reasons for that decision, that provides the exclusionary reason he is describing. More exactly, he holds (indeed, holds that it is 'logically true') that a person who has made a decision to do *A* must regard this decision as an exclusionary reason to disregard further reasons for alternative actions. He believes that a person may be mistaken in deciding to do *A*, and that when this is so, the person may not have a *valid* reason for excluding reasons for other courses of action. But he maintains that the person must regard his decision as such a reason. Raz argues that even if a person comes to believe that a decision that he has made was premature, this decision itself still provides an exclusionary reason not to reconsider the matter, and continues to do so as long as the person does not unmake the decision by deciding to reopen the matter. He takes this to support the conclusion that it is the decision itself, and not the reasons supporting it, or even the agent's own assessment of those reasons, that the agent must take as providing an exclusionary reason.

It does not seem quite right to say that an agent must take his own decision as providing a reason not to reconsider it, in the way that Raz maintains. I want to suggest, however, that much the same point can plausibly be made by making use of the distinction discussed above, between a claim about the reasons that an agent has and a claim about what that agent must do in so far as he or she is not irrational. Suppose, for simplicity, that we modify Raz's conditions in the way I described above, replacing his requirement that a person who makes a decision must form the belief that it is time to terminate his deliberations with the requirement that a person who makes a decision must form the intention not to deliberate further. I believe, as I suggested earlier in this paper, that a person who forms an intention to do something but then does not do it (without abandoning or modifying that intention) is being irrational. Moreover, as I argued there, this irrationality seems to be a matter simply of the incompatibility between such a person's attitudes. It persists whether

or not the person had good reason, or now judges that he had good reason, to form the intention in the first place. Nor does it need to be explained by claiming that a person who forms an intention to do something thereby acquires a new *reason* to do it. So, in the present case, if deciding involves forming an intention not to deliberate further, then a person who has reached a decision would be behaving irrationally if (without abandoning that decision) he were to consider further the reasons for taking a different course of action. That this would be irrational follows (logically, one might say) from the decision itself, regardless of the soundness of the grounds for making it and regardless of the agent's assessment of these grounds (as long as this assessment does not lead him to abandon the decision and reopen the matter). But there is no need, in order to explain this phenomenon, to say that the decision itself provides the agent with a *reason* not to reconsider.

If we accept this analysis, then we can say two things about a person who has decided to do a certain eligible action or to adopt a certain eligible goal. First, this decision (as long as it is not abandoned) makes it irrational for her to consider further the reasons favouring alternative actions or goals. Second, she has purely pragmatic reasons of the kind described above not to abandon the decision unless she comes to believe that her situation has changed or that there are further considerations that must be taken into account.

On this account, a decision to do *A* does not give rise to a new positive reason to do *A*, apart from purely pragmatic reasons we have not to reconsider that decision. Raz's claim that the opposite is true—that a decision to do *A* is a positive reason to do it—is supported by an appeal to an alleged similarity between decisions and promises. So in closing I want to consider that similarity, to see whether it suggests that the reason a decision provides is not purely pragmatic.

A person who promises to do *A* normally comes thereby to have a new reason to do *A* (as well as certain exclusionary reasons). This reason is not generated by a decision or the formation of an intention on the part of the agent, since it exists even if the promise is entirely insincere. In normal cases, promising creates a reason because it changes the agent's situation in a way that gives her a reason. A person who promises to do *A* leads the promisee to expect that she will do *A* unless the promisee consents to her not doing so, and she creates this expectation in a situation in which she has reason to believe that the promisee wants reliable assurance of this

kind and understands her to be intending to provide it.<sup>18</sup> If a person has done this, then it would be wrong of her not to do *A* (absent special justification). Thus, by changing her circumstances in this way, she comes to have a moral reason to do *A*. (She could also do the same thing—create similar expectations in similar circumstances—without using the words ‘I promise’, in which case, I would argue, she would have created the same moral reason.<sup>19</sup>)

Raz says that while a decision is ‘materially’ different from a promise, the two have the same formal features.<sup>20</sup> Central to this formal similarity is the fact that a person who promises, like a person who makes a decision, ‘must regard this as a reason for him to behave in a certain way’, and this reason is independent of the content of the promise or decision. For the reason just mentioned, I have doubts as to whether a person who promises must see the promise as providing a reason. But what interests me here is whether the parallel with promises casts light on the kind of reason that Raz takes a decision to provide. Promises generate reasons because we need to be able to give and receive reliable assurance about what we will do. The suggestion, then, is that decisions provide reasons because we need to be able to rely on ourselves—to be able to bind ourselves to particular courses of action, as it were.

But in the case of decisions, this ‘binding’ is weaker than in the case of a promise. If a decision to do *A* constitutes a positive reason to do *A*, it does so only so long as the person has not unmade this decision by deciding to reopen the matter. And the only reasons not to do this are purely pragmatic ones. The only thing like a ‘need to rely’ that is playing a role in this picture is the fact, which I mentioned among the pragmatic considerations counting against reconsideration, that if one keeps reopening a decision without grounds for believing that one’s circumstances have changed or that new relevant information has become available, this will make it impossible to act. But the force of this consideration in any particular case will depend on the costliness of reconsideration, and the costs of postponing action in that particular case.

<sup>18</sup> In abnormal cases the promise may fail to create his expectation, or the promisor may be mistaken in believing that the promisee wants it. But as long as it is reasonable for the promisor to believe that the normal conditions obtain, she should *believe* that she has come to have a reason to do the thing promised.

<sup>19</sup> I describe this account of promises in more detail in *What We Owe to Each Other*, ch. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Raz, ‘Reasons for Action, Decisions and Norms’, 137.

I am therefore inclined to accept the account sketched above, according to which the exclusionary *reasons* generated by a decision are purely pragmatic ones. Beyond that, what a decision does is not to generate a new reason but to change what one can do without being irrational.

To sum up, I have argued for the following claims:

1. An agent's decision can change what she must, in so far as she is not irrational, treat as a reason. But it need not do this by being or giving rise to a new reason.
2. In some cases, the fact that an agent has adopted a certain goal is itself a reason for her to regard the fact that an action would advance that goal as a reason for that action. But this is not because the decision to adopt that goal creates a new reason.
3. The fact that a person has decided to follow a certain course of action can make it irrational for him (as long as he does not reconsider that decision) to consider further the reasons for alternative courses of action.
4. A person who has decided, after due reflection, to adopt a certain course of action, has a purely pragmatic second-order reason not to reconsider that decision.

Taken together, these points seem to me to account for the observed facts about the normative significance of decisions without suggesting any troubling duality in the sources of reasons.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For helpful comments at the conference, or on drafts of this paper, I am indebted to Frances Kamm, Derek Parfit, Philip Pettit, Joseph Raz, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith.