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Josep L. Prades
University of Girona

*Disputatio* Vol. 2, No. 23

November 2007

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2007-0011

ISSN: 0873-626X

# Acting without reasons

**Josep L. Prades**
University of Girona

**Abstract**
In this paper, I want to challenge some common assumptions in contemporary theories of practical rationality and intentional action. If I am right, the fact that our intentions can be rationalised is widely misunderstood. Normally, it is taken for granted that the role of rationalisations is to show the reasons that the agent had to make up her mind. I will argue against this. I do not object to the idea that acting intentionally is, at least normally, acting for reasons, but I will propose a teleological reading of the expression 'for reasons.' On this reading, it is quite possible to act for reasons without having reasons to act. In a similar way, paradigmatic cases of cogent practical reasoning do not require the transference of justification from the premises to the practical conclusion.

Let us consider a putative paradigmatic case of cogent practical reasoning. I am in Barcelona with some friends and I start thinking about the best way of going back to my home in Girona before dinner. I have been drinking too much to drive. So, I decide to leave the car in Barcelona and, after checking the time table, I realise that taking the train is an adequate way of getting home. Consequently, I form the intention of taking the train. Here, we have a process of thought in which I have reasoned in order to reach the practical conclusion. This conclusion does not crucially depend, let us assume, on false or unjustified beliefs or on invalid inferential transitions. And, by knowing the relevant thoughts that rationalise my intention to take a train, it seems that you can know the reason for which I act: getting home by dinner time.

When trying to describe what is going on in those kinds of cases, there is a well-known difficulty. On the one hand, it is commonly assumed that the previous process of reasoning determines a reason *for which* I take a train — being in time to have dinner in Girona with my wife, let us say. On the other, it would seem that, for everything that has been said, it does not follow that *I have* a reason to take the train. For I could engage in the previous, cogent pattern of practical

reasoning even if I knew that I have no reason to go to Girona for dinner time, and therefore even if I knew that I could not have any reason to take the train that goes to Girona. For instance, my having dinner with my wife is not a reason to go to Girona tonight when my wife does not expect me and the life of some friend depends on my staying in Barcelona. It seems then that two apparently incompatible descriptions of the phenomenon are required: someone can take the train for a reason without having any reason to take the train.

My solution to the seeming paradox crucially differs from most contemporary accounts. If I am right, the relevant sense of 'acting for a reason' in which, in the previous example, I act for a reason, fixes a very peculiar relation between the agent's intentional action and the existence of this kind of reason. It is not, as it is commonly assumed, that I could have reasons of a special kind M ('motivating' or 'explanatory', let us say), while lacking reasons of some other kind N ('normative' or 'justifying', let us say). It is, on the contrary, that my *acting for* reasons when I take the train to go to Girona to have dinner there with my wife does not require the *independent* relation of having (or believing I have) reasons *of any kind*. Those reasons for which I act are just the intention with which I act. To act for them does not require the conjunction of two independent facts: having a reason and being motivated by it. The fact that I *act for* reasons does not require the independent fact that I *have* reasons to act. In the end, my account points towards a teleological interpretation of the process of practical reasoning. If 'practical reasoning' denotes a kind of process, it is just a process of adopting specific goals.

In the first section of this paper, I will try to describe the inconsistency of standard Humean accounts when trying to solve the apparent paradox I have just mentioned. In the second one, I will generalise the previous conclusions to show that the same inconsistency also affects most habitual non-Humean accounts. They share a common illusion that is described in the third section, where I will justify my own proposal. Finally, in the last section, I will make some very general remarks about the structure of practical reasoning that are entailed by my account.

# I

Imagine someone — let us call him Roger Bad — who decides to kill his neighbour in order to steal an old copy of Hume's *Treatise*. Being a clever philosopher, Roger Bad makes a careful plan, and considers some different alternatives. In the end, he makes up his mind: poison is the best way of fulfilling his goal. So, the next day he goes to the shop in which, as he knows, they sell poison because he believes that he can buy there the stuff with which he can kill his neighbour. Many philosophers think that our Roger Bad has a reason to enter the shop. Just compare Roger Bad with Roger Irrational. Roger Irrational decides also to buy poison *in order to* kill his neighbour, *in order to* get a copy of Hume's *Treatise*. But there is a problem with him: he is unable to overcome his unjustified fear of being discovered. So he decides, against all evidence, that poison is not an effective way of killing his neighbour and chooses to start a sequence of secret magical rituals with the intention of producing his neighbour's death. There is a difference between Roger Bad and Roger Irrational. Roger Bad satisfies certain normative requirements that Roger Irrational does not satisfy. For Roger Irrational chooses, against all evidence, instrumentally inadequate means for his goal. One of the main conclusions of this paper is that we cannot express the difference by saying that Roger Bad, as opposed to Roger Irrational, has reasons for his intention. It is true that Roger Bad cannot be fairly accused of the specific sort of irrationality that Roger Irrational's intentions exemplify. We should resist the conclusion that, just because Roger Bad can escape a certain charge of irrationality, he must have reasons of a certain kind to buy the poison.

Humean accounts on motivation accept that the mere fact that there is a desire/intention of Roger Bad that is subserved by his buying the right kind of poison, gives him a special kind of reason to enter the right kind of shop. We can describe this Humean strategy by saying that, according to it, the mere fact that Roger Bad's practical inference tracks an efficient means-ends relation guarantees that his original desires provide reasons for his practical conclusion.[1] Standard anti-Humean accounts do not accept this connection. But they fall in a trap

[1] In fact, certain Humean accounts would consider this condition as too restrictive. They would hold that Roger Bad still would have certain kinds of reasons to enter the wrong shop if he had the adequate set of justified, but false beliefs.

when they try to look for reasons somewhere else. A typical anti-Humean approach is to accept that the mere generic desire presupposes some reason to desire. According to this point of view, the source of the reason Roger Bad has is not the fact that he desires to get a copy of Hume's *Treatise*. It is some valuable aspect that he thinks there is in having the book, for it is impossible to have this desire without finding desirable some aspect of the desired object. Another, slightly different, position is to oppose Humeanism by distinguishing two kinds of desire: motivated, or reason sensitive, desires, desires for which the agent has reasons that are not desires, and unmotivated desires. Motivated desires are those that can be rationalised. In these motivated desires at least, the reasons the agent has for the conclusion of practical inference is transmitted from the reasons the agent has for the original desire. I will argue that there are some common mistakes in both approaches.[2] Both share the crucial assumption that Roger Bad must have some kind of reason for his intention.

There is a strong intuition in favour of the anti-Humean camp: it is difficult to understand the idea that to desire/will/intend to φ is, by itself, a reason to φ. It seems that we cannot get reasons in such an easy way. This cheap, easy way of getting reasons for our actions has been described by M. Bratman as 'bootstrapping'.[3] It does not seem difficult to agree with Bratman: bootstrapping is illegitimate. For, without reasons for the end, we do not have reasons for the means. And, if bootstrapping has to be avoided, we should not say that willing an end is always a reason to take certain steps that subserve this end. On the contrary, the standard Humean intuition is that, after all, there must be some special sense of 'reason' according to which some reasons can escape this diagnosis. In other words, a sense of 'reason' in which we can get reasons from the goals that we accept, in which the mere fact that an end is wanted constitutes a reason for taking the subserving steps:

[2] For the argument that motivated desires presuppose reasons, see Nagel 1970. For recent versions of the idea that desiring requires believing that there is some aspect in the desired object that is worth desiring, see, for instance, Quinn 1993, Scanlon 1998, Moran 2001.

[3] Bratman 1987.

> 'R at t constitutes a motivating reason for an agent A to φ iff there is some ψ such that R at t consists of a desire of A to ψ and a belief that were he to φ he would ψ.' (Smith, 1987: 36)

Yet, it is not easy to understand which kind of reason can be identified by this stipulation. Friends of motivational reasons tend to tell them apart from the standard, justificatory sense of 'reason'. I doubt that following the spirit of this stipulation could give us a coherent sense of the term. To see this, consider now Roger Good. Roger Good is a decent human being and a competent philosopher longing for an old copy of Hume's *Treatise*. He also knows that his neighbour has one of those rare editions. And he also knows, as Roger Bad does, that poisoning his owner is a very easy way of getting his copy. There is nothing wrong with Roger Good's motivational set. There is nothing wrong in longing for this kind of book. Also, he has perfect knowledge about certain instrumental connections. Look again at the previous stipulation about the conditions under which someone has motivating reasons. Roger Good satisfies all of them. Even if he has not the slightest desire of poisoning his friend, he has a perfect motivating reason to poison him. What could this exactly mean? Well, it can certainly mean that there are certain possible worlds in which a nasty counterpart of Roger Good, for instance some Roger Bad, forms the desire, or the intention, or even acts with the intention, of getting the book by poisoning his friend and that, if this were the case, then this process could be rationalised by mentioning the relevant desires and beliefs, namely those desires and beliefs that Roger Good — a perfectly decent human being — already has in the actual world. There is, then, a possible world in which the motivational set that Roger Good actually has can rationalise the intention-of-poisoning-a-neighbour. The desires and beliefs of a decent man longing for a book have the power of rationalising a possible intention of killing someone. This could be a sense — a strange sense- of 'motivating reason.' In this sense, *we all actually have* millions of motivating reasons to do the nastiest things we can imagine. I actually have thousands of motivating reasons to kill my wife, to end the human race, to torture an innocent child, etc., even if I have not the slightest desire to do those nasty things.

It is not an accident that, even those philosophers that use the notion of a motivating reason, do not seem to think that the previous stipulation conveys what they really have in mind. If we were to accept the

consequence that Roger Good has a reason of some special kind to poison his friend, even if he has no desire, and no intention, of poisoning him, then it would be difficult to explain — even for the most fervent Humean — what this special kind of reason could be. In fact, when mentioning paradigmatic cases of actually having a motivating reason to φ *without* having normative reasons to φ, those Humean philosophers who are fond of the notion tend to describe a situation in which the agent decides or wants to φ, moved by his desire to ψ, when there is something wrong in trying to get ψ by φing: just (i) because ψ itself is a wrong goal, (ii) because, even if ψ is not wrong, it is wrong to φ, or (iii) because the relevant beliefs are false or unjustified. In the paper where Smith introduces the quoted stipulation about necessary and sufficient conditions for having a motivating reason, every given example is of one of those types. There is no single example similar to the case of Roger Good: a case in which an agent has a motivating reason even if he is not minimally moved by it. Given that this would be a case that, according to Smith's own stipulation, should be considered an instance of having this kind of reason, it is quite legitimate to wonder why the selection of examples that are suppose to illuminate the notion of motivating reason is so biased. And anyone who is familiar with contemporary philosophy of action must accept that this is not an eccentricity of Smith, it is, on the contrary, the common strategy: the clear cases of *having* motivating reasons are supposed to be just cases of being motivated without having justificatory reasons, not clear cases of having some kind of non justifying reason that does not move the agent that has the putative reason. The clear cases of having a motivating reason are just cases of being moved by the putative reason. Obviously, something wrong is going on here. Whatever they say, it seems that the phenomenon that philosophers have in mind, when they introduce the notion of motivating reasons, is the phenomenon of being in fact motivated: the kind of reason that Smith identifies is constitutively linked to the fact that it moves the agent in a minimal way.

Be that as it may, if, contrary to the literal meaning of Smith's stipulation and according to the spirit of his own examples, we said that Roger Good has no motivating reason to kill someone, then we would have still not identified a proper relation of having a reason, independent from the fact of being motivated by it. Roger Good is certainly in a motivational state that is *potentially* explanatory. It is potentially explanatory and it *would* rationalise the decision of poisoning someone made by his counterpart in a counterfactual world. How can anyone

have ever thought that those truisms justify the conclusion that his actual state (a state in which he actually is) includes a reason he has to poison someone? This conclusion crucially depends on considering the counterfactual situation in which he, or his counterpart, decides to poison someone to get the book. In this counterfactual situation, we can clearly talk about the reasons for which he acts. So, the clear cases of motivating reasons are cases in which the putative reasons are in fact motivating. Their being motivating states is fixed by the fact that they are in fact motivating. We can, if we want, say that those states have explanatory, motivating *powers,* even in the case in which they are not motivating at all. But, still, it looks very strange to say that being in one of states, when they are not motivating at all, is having a reason of a special kind. To say, for instance, that I do have a reason of a special kind to kill my best friend in order to steal a book, when I do not have the slightest desire of acting in this way.

Notice that, under the previous assumption, I am supposed to have thousands of motivating reasons to kill my best friend, or my wife, or my neighbour *without* having any desire of killing them. I can have a motivating reason for φing without having any desire of φing. Is this acceptable for a Humean? It does not seem so. It seems that no Humean should be tempted by this picture. The standard argument for motivational Humeanism relies on the idea that desires are, by themselves, a special kind of reasons to act, just because, as opposed to beliefs, they have the right direction of fit. This is why Smith, for instance, has argued that desires are motivating reasons (Smith 1994:116). Putting aside terminological stipulations, the Humean story is that those special reasons cannot be dissociated from desires, since to desire is to be in a state in which the world must fit.

There are many ways of showing that the Humean story is incoherent. I am just pointing to one that is crucial for the purposes of my argument. The crucial premise of Humeanism requires accepting that nobody can have one of these reasons without desiring. If it is right, there is no way of understanding the explanation of the transference of reasons in practical reasoning that underlies conventional wisdom about motivating reasons. Such transference would entail that I have many reasons to kill my best friends, without having the slightest desire to do such a thing. So, the Humean account of the putative reasons that Roger Bad gets for his practical conclusion is incoherent. It presupposes that to have those reasons requires desiring, while, on

the other hand, it has to accept that Roger Good has reasons to do things that he has no desire to do.

## II

Let us try to generalise now the previous diagnosis. For the incoherence of the idea that Roger Bad has certain reasons for his practical conclusion can be detached from the particular account that Humeanism provides of this putative phenomenon. As I have already mentioned, non-Humean explanations tend to assume that the relevant reasons are not provided by desires: according to them, the relevant role has to be played by the content of certain beliefs and certain pro-attitudes (evaluative judgements, for instance). Desires only play a role in fixing the reasons that the agent has to act insofar as they presuppose a certain evaluation about certain desirable aspect of the desired object. Be that as it may, the problem is still to try to understand the sense in which standard rationalisations that mention pro-attitudes and beliefs make the idea that the agent has (or believes she has) certain reasons for her practical conclusion intelligible. If I am right, the inconsistency of standard non Humean accounts is very similar to the one I have diagnosed in Humean analysis.

Consider, for instance, the two following pieces of practical reasoning:

**A**

(a) I wish I had his old copy of Hume's *Treatise*.
(b) If I poison him I can easily get his old copy of Hume's *Treatise*.

---

(c) I shall poison him as a way of getting the copy

**B**

(a*) His old copy of Hume's *Treatise* is a valuable object.
(b) If I poison him I can easily get his old copy of Hume's *Treatise*.

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(c) I shall poison him as a way of getting the copy.

A and B are different. If you are a Humean, you would tend to think that the specific cogency they have as pieces of practical reasoning

depends on the fact that pattern B is grounded on something similar to pattern A. If you are not a Humean, you would tend to think just the opposite. You would tend to think, then, that this particular cogency can only be accounted for if there are some valuable aspects under which the desired object is desired: something like pattern B must underlie, then, pattern A. Either way, it is commonly accepted, under the assumptions that have just been commented, that the special cogency of those pieces of practical reasoning, as pieces of practical reasoning, crucially depends on the fact that the agent gets some reasons for (c), from (a–a*) and (b). I think this is wrong. The basic problem with this model of practical reasoning is quite independent of the option (Humean or not Humean) of considering that desires are reasons-providers or not. Even if we say that pro-attitudes require certain kind of evaluative judgement (as in B), we still have to face the basic problem: generic pro-attitudes are used to provide reasons for *more specific* intentional contents.

The common assumption that, by following one of those patterns (A or B), the agent gets proper reasons for the practical conclusion, involves a no less common understanding of the relation of having reasons: having those reasons is different from forming the intention of acting for them in a specific way. Roger Bad does in fact form the intention expressed in (c), and he acts for those reasons he has. On the contrary, Roger Good does not want to act for those reasons he has. He acts for some other reasons he has. Nevertheless, all the reasons that are supposed to be relevant for the rationalisation of Roger Bad's intention are reasons that Roger Good has. Just because both of them accept the premises that are introduced in the model A-B. We could say, of course, that Roger Good acts for other reasons he has. But then we cannot insist that the relevant reasons, that are enough to show that Roger Bad's piece of practical reasoning is minimally cogent, are just the premises (a-a*) and (b). This assumption is incoherent, because the choice of a specific way of acting requires some difference in the relevant pro-attitudes (desires, if you are Humean, or value judgements, if you are not Humean) that both (i) must rationalise, in the relevant sense, the final intention and (ii) cannot be rationalised, at all, by the generic pro-attitude. They cannot be so rationalised, because, in that case, it would also be cogent for Roger Good to form the intention (c) in spite of the fact that he has no specific desire of getting-the-book-by-poisoning-a-friend. If the generic pro-attitudes *can* be relevant for the cogency of the piece

of practical reasoning, those more specific attitudes *must* also be relevant, in the very same sense. And so it cannot be that Roger Bad's intention is rationalised in the relevant way just by patterns A-B.

The point is not that the attitudes that correspond to the premises in A and B generate only an incomplete explanation of the practical conclusion. Let us assume that different agents accept the premises and form different intentions, depending on many other factors in their motivational set. In the case of Roger Good, he has those reasons, the reasons that are mentioned in the premises of A-B, but they are not the reasons for which he acts. I am also prepared to concede, for the sake of argument, that those putative reasons could be interpreted as pro tanto reasons, reasons that could be overridden by more demanding reasons that the agent has. But still: the present assumption is that Roger Bad's intention can be rationalised by pattern A-B. Roger Good's very different intention of buying the book can be rationalised by different premises. The problem is that Roger Good *does accept* the premises that are mentioned in pattern A-B. The only option is to point out that the difference in rationalising force depends on the fact that he also accepts different premises. But this would be, under the present assumptions, self-refuting. For now we need to assume that those premises only manage to rationalise Roger Bad's intention because of many other desires/values that he puts in the particular way of getting the book: because he also accepts many other premises that are not mentioned in pattern A-B. The mere fact that the intention that Roger Bad in fact forms is rationalised by an instrumental belief (an instrumental belief that Roger Good shares even if it is not the belief that rationalises his intention) shows something important. Roger Bad needs some more specific pro-attitudes towards some specific ways of getting the book. By hypothesis, Roger Good does not have any desire to poison anyone. If you are Humean, you will say that Roger Bad must have this more specific desire about a particular means. If you are anti-Humean, mutatis mutandis: you will accept, at least, that Roger Bad has to make some different, specific value judgements. In any case, the more specific reason for his intention is not described by the model of practical reasoning we are now considering — the pattern A-B. And this fact crucially breaks the kind of asymmetry between the two premises required by the model. The function of the second premise cannot just be to fix certain instrumental connections; under the present assumptions, the 'epistemic' premise becomes relevant because it conveys information

about the presence of some other conative attitudes that the agent has to form the practical conclusion. Those conative attitudes would generate or presuppose, under the present assumptions, reasons that would have the same right to be introduced in the model as the generic pro-attitude (a-a*) has. There is no way in which, under the present assumptions, Roger Bad's piece of practical reasoning could be cogent if he had not some pro-attitude about the specific way of subserving the generic goal of getting the book. And, then, it is impossible to maintain that Roger Bad's intention is cogently rationalised by the *mere fact* that it is formed according to our pattern A-B.

In the next section, I will try to show the last source of these difficulties. I will defend that we must give up the very idea that (a-a*) provide reasons for (c). The fact that our intentions can be rationalised does not entail that we have reasons of any special kind to form our intentions. The reasons that we discover when we engage in a successful process of rationalisation are just more refined descriptions of the content of the intention that the agent has formed. They are not, in any relevant sense, reasons he had to form this intention.

## III

There is then a crucial link between what I have described as standard interpretations of the practical syllogism and certain issues about intentional action. Which is the sense of 'reason' in which Roger Bad's decision is supposed to have reasons? Why can many different, incompatible, intentions be rationalised in the same way by the same conative premises in practical inferences? My diagnosis is that certain basic confusions about the transference of justification are connected to a more basic confusion about the general phenomenon of rationalising explanations. The grain of truth behind the idea that intentional action is (normally) action for reasons is that intentional action accepts certain paradigmatic why-questions, questions that ask the agent to specify the content of the intention-with-which she acts. I will defend that the typical answer to those questions, the answer that the rationalising explanation is expected to provide, does not mention the reasons that the agent has to form the intention. Those putative reasons that are mentioned are just determinations of the content of the intention. Of course, they can make intelligible what the agent is doing, just by showing that certain particular actions of hers have a

purpose. That the agent sees them as steps in a wider plan she is in fact following.

To see what I mean, let us consider some basic cases. It is not difficult to accept, I guess, that, at least in certain cases, a typical why-question is correctly answered by providing information about the intention-with-which-the agent acts. For instance, to adapt an example by Davidson, let us imagine that Ada presses the key with the number 7 in her computer because she wants to calculate the cube root of 728 in her computer, now. Asked the relevant why-question, she tells us that the reason why she acts in this way is that she wants to take the cube root of 728 in her computer, now. There is no way of understanding what she says, except that she acts with the intention of taking a certain cubic root. In such basic cases, there is no room for strange deviant causal chains. Also there is no gap between the reason she has and the reason for which she acts. She cannot press that key because she wants to take the cube root of 728 in her computer now, and act with some different intention. If that were the case, we could say that she has stopped wanting to take this cube root.[4] So, in certain basic cases, the want that we attribute to a subject has all the marks of intention-in-action. In those basic cases, it seems obvious that the fact that an action can be so rationalised does not mean that the agent had any reason to form the intention. The function of the rationalising explanation is to tell us what the intention is. In the ordinary sense of 'having a reason', it might be true that Ada presses that key in her computer because she wants to take the cube root of 728 in her computer now, while she has no reason to do so. Of course, we can say that the reason for which she acts is that she wants to take the cube root of 728 in her computer now. But, if the previous lines are right, this is a very specific sense of 'reason'. In this sense of 'reason,' her reason is just a part of the intention with which she acts. Obviously, it is not the reason why she made up her mind. I am not deny-

[4] Davidson 1982: 263. This entails that the kind of Davidsonian challenge that has dominated contemporary discussions on action is misguided. There are certain Davidsonian reasons (certain wants) that have the following feature: having them is not independent from acting for them. So it is not true that all Davidsonian reasons are such that an agent could have had them without they being the reasons for which the agent acted. And all the interest of the Davidsonian challenge depends on its generality. If there are some reasons to which it does not apply, it loses all its putative force.

ing that our agent might have had such a reason. I am just saying that the existence of this kind of reason is not guaranteed by the mere fact that her intention can be rationalised.

Rationalisations, then, at least in certain basic cases, do not inform us about the reasons that the agent had to make up her mind. The reasons that proper rationalisations convey can be reasons for which an agent acts, without being reasons the agent had to make her mind up, before forming the relevant intention. Let us call them 'content-determining' ('CD') reasons. CD reasons are not proper reasons, in the sense that an agent can act for them, or form the corresponding intention for them, without having reasons to act or to make up her mind. We can say that Ada's CD reasons, then, are not proper reasons, in the sense that they are not reasons, not even reasons for Ada, to act in a certain way, or to form an intention. Just because those reasons do not exist before Ada is motivated to form her intention. It is true that Ada might have had proper reasons for her action. It might be, for instance, that the happiness of her children might depend on her acting as she did, it might be that some valuable goal might be attained by her action. On most views about what reasons are, those facts would count as reasons. They would be reasons she would have had, quite independently of how she decided to act. This is possible, but it is not guaranteed by the mere fact that Ada's action can be rationalised in the way we have just done. The fact that her intention can be rationalised does not guarantee the presence of proper reasons.

Let us consider now the following answers to a typical why-question that an honest and knowledgeable agent might give, when asked by a friend to explain his presence in Barcelona's station:

(1) I have the intention of going to Paris tomorrow.
(2) I am buying a train ticket because I have the intention of going to Paris tomorrow.
(3) I am buying a train ticket because I want to go to Paris tomorrow.
(4) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Paris because I have just remembered that Maria will be in Paris tomorrow.
(5) I am buying a ticket for tomorrow's train to Paris because I have always had the desire to meet Maria and she will be in Paris tomorrow.

It seems that, in the sense in which (1)–(3) specify a reason for action, the specified reason is just the content of the intention with which the agent acts. Somebody could say that this is not necessarily what those

statements say. For instance, (3) could be literally true, even if I was not buying a ticket for Paris. The fact that I was buying a ticket for *London* might have been, via a complicated causal story, a causal consequence of the fact that I wanted to go to Paris. In this case, (3) would not give us information about the intention with which the agent acts. My diagnosis of this possibility will be crucial for my argument in this section. In this case, the person who is asking for the rationalisation would feel cheated. That is, (3) would still be an explanation, but not the kind of rationalisation that my interlocutor has the conversational right to expect.

To see this more clearly, look now at cases (4)–(5). They might seem quite different. In them, a reference to desires and beliefs seems to work as a way of specifying the reasons why the agent acts. There are, of course, certain differences, but, in my opinion, they are systematically misunderstood in contemporary literature. It is true that (5) can be a conversationally appropriate answer to a paradigmatic why-question ('Why are you going to the station?'). The Humean is obviously impressed by (i) the fact that a similar answer — an answer that mentions desires, for instance — is always possible and (ii) the fact that desires seem obviously appropriate to explain behaviour — the 'direction of fit' intuition. Conventional forms of anti-Humeanism insist that the explanatory role of desires is not the relevant issue when we think of the reasons why we intentionally act. Even if my desire causes my intention, the fact that I desire is not, at least not normally, my reason to act. I agree, but this is irrelevant for the typical anti-Humean conclusion, the conclusion that in those cases the true reasons for action must be some reason-providing features in what is desired.

Of course, it might seem that (4) and (5) are appropriate answers to the typical why-question that asks for the reasons for which we act. The diagnosis is quite simple: they are a perfectly appropriate way of conveying the relevant information about those reasons (the CD reasons). If they manage to fulfil this role, it is not because desires or beliefs are reasons, or because they presuppose the existence of reasons that the agent had. It is because the agent is exploiting her conversational commitment to provide relevant information about the intention with which she acts. She is just talking about the special causal antecedents of the action that are internally linked to the purpose that guides her. There are hundreds of causal antecedents of the action that might be mentioned and that are, nevertheless, quite

irrelevant for the information that the agent is expected to provide. By *choosing* this particular causal antecedent the honest agent conveys information about the relevant kind of reasons she is being asked for: the CD reasons that fix the content of her intention.

On the one hand, as Davidson remarked, the fact that I have had certain desires or beliefs can hardly count as a reason that is necessarily effective. I could have had them without being moved in the corresponding way. On the other hand, we have the intuition that mentioning desires and beliefs is a standard way of conveying the intention, the goal or the purpose with which the agent acts. Both things are true. We can say that there is a mechanism of conversational implicature by which the agent conveys her intention just by selecting as relevant a certain causal antecedent of the action. Our intuition that (4) and (5) are ways of conveying CD Reasons goes hand in hand with our intuition that the agent tries to exploit this conversational mechanism. And there is a crucial test for my thesis: if the agent cancels the corresponding conversational implicature, then we are forced to stop assuming that (4) and (5) convey information about the relevant CD reasons. For instance, the agent might add to (4):

> Even so, I do not go to Paris with the intention of meeting Maria. It is just that my thoughts about Maria and Paris made me remember that I promised Joanna to visit her in Paris before the end of the month.

By doing this, she is not contradicting herself. Simply, she has cancelled any right to assume that the intention was to meet Maria. My main point is that we all share the intuition that, when the conversational implicature about the relevant CD reasons is cancelled, what is shown is that the original answer was not the right rationalisation. Certainly, it was not the kind of explanation that the person who asked the why-question in a normal case was looking for. She had the right to feel cheated if someone used this mechanism of conversational implicature to give causal information that was literally true without conveying the relevant information about the CD reasons. Rationalisations do look, then, for CD reasons. But those reasons, as I have been arguing, are not reasons that the agent had for making up her mind. They are just the content of the intention with which the agent acts.

## IV

There is, I have been suggesting, an interesting connection between the role of rationalisations of intentional action and the structure of paradigmatic cases of practical reasoning. In the sense in which intentional action can always be rationalised, this rationalisation only gives us the content of the intention with which the agent acts. In what has usually been accepted as a standard case of practical syllogism, the relevant connection between the premises cannot be properly described as instrumental. The agent does not choose a specific way of satisfying a goal because of its instrumental virtues. The agent, simply, makes his mind up, forming a specific intention. This process can be ideally rationalised by something similar to the mention of a generic goal and a particular way of subserving it. But this idealization is just a way of specifying, in a given dialectical context, the content of the intention. It does not follow that his having a goal is a (believed) reason to choose a particular means, nor that the instrumental virtues of the specific means are — given the goal- a reason to choose it. If I have no reason to choose a goal, I won't have reasons to choose particular ways of subserving it. And, even considering only the cases in which I have reasons to choose a goal, the mere instrumental virtues of the selected means cannot be a reason to choose this particular means.

If this is right, there is nothing like a logical form of pure instrumental practical reasoning, just because there is nothing like pure instrumental practical reasoning. No rational agent chooses a means just in virtue of the instrumental relation with a given goal.[5] As I have just said, the problem is not only the well known difficulty that this instrumental relation could not provide reasons when the agent had no reason to pursue the goal: nothing is gained if we try to bypass this difficulty by reducing the scope of pure instrumental rationality to a certain kind of relativised rationality, the specific rationality that is conditional or relative to a given goal. If the instrumentally adequate means were not sensitive to some other kind of value, then we would have to say that chopping my head off is a rational means of stopping my mild headache. If, on the other hand, we insist that the instrumental connection has to be sensitive to some other value of the possible

[5] For an interpretation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that would be congenial with my account, see Wiggins 1987.

means, then the relativisation to a given goal is a completely empty move. For, then, there is no interesting distinction between (i) the case in which the most rational thing to do is to choose a not-very-efficient way of satisfying the goal, and (ii) the case in which the most rational thing to do is just to give up the goal, because no efficient way of satisfying it would be acceptable. Whatever is meant by 'the most rational thing to do' in (i) is not different from what it is meant by 'the most rational thing to do' in (ii). And this entails that we have still not described the kind of instrumental practical rationality we are looking for.[6]

This conclusion could seem trivial. It is difficult to understand the idea that there is a kind of practical reasoning whose point is to look for the way of satisfying our previous goals at any cost. In fact, we pursue certain generic goals just because we are confident that among the possible ways of satisfying them there are some that can be accepted by us. So, we cannot explain our acceptance of them in terms of a putative instrumental relation. If I have been right, the reluctance to recognise this fact that most part of contemporary literature on action shows can only be explained by a misreading of the surface grammar of paradigmatic cases of rationalisation of intentional action. Once we assume that intentional action requires having reasons to act, we are tempted to look to the instrumental relation between the chosen means and the

[6] Broome 2002 has argued that a cogent piece of practical reasoning does not transfer reasons from the premises to the practical conclusion. Under certain terminological stipulations, I agree: for, once we assume that the successful process of rationalisation of a particular intention entails a corresponding ideal piece of practical reasoning, I endorse the idea that the agent can form the rationalised intention without having reasons for it. Nevertheless, it is important to notice the differences between our arguments. His way of describing the special cogency of instrumental practical reasoning depends on the idea that the practical conclusion must satisfy certain normative requirements: if I have the intention of doing X and I know that doing Z is a necessary means for doing X, then I should not give up Z while keeping the original intention. Even if this is true, it cannot cast light on the general phenomenon of practical reasoning, just because, as Broome himself recognises, in most common cases the agent does not choose a necessary means for the satisfaction of his goal. In fact, I would not say that there is anything practical in the satisfaction of the normative requirements that Broome mentions: the kind of cogency that he analyses in terms of the satisfaction of normative requirements is, in the end, a consequence of (i) the mere relation of instrumental necessity, and (ii) a crucial aspect of the concept of intention: I cannot have the intention of doing X, while at the same time knowing that my present way of acting is incompatible with my doing X.

pursued end as a special source of reasons. This move looses all its appeal when we realise that standard rationalisations of intentional action do not try to specify the reasons that the agent has to act. Intentional action does not require having reasons to act.[7]

Josep L. Prades
Departament de Filosofia i Filologia
Facultat de Lletres, Sant Domènec
Campus de Barri Vell
Universitat de Girona
17071 Girona, Spain
josepll.prades@udg.edu

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[7] In no way do I try to question the possibility of a philosophical theory about what is usually described as 'substantial rationality.' Many times we have reasons to act. And sometimes we act for the reasons we have. I have just argued that the fact that an intentional action can be rationalised does not mean that the agent had, or believed she had, reasons to act.