

# **The Nature of Practical Reason: A Philosophical Understanding**

## Synopsis

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## **Synopsis**

In my Ph.D. thesis, my intention is to understand the nature of practical reason which, I think, needs a thorough analysis. We, human beings, are rational as well as social beings. To maintain the social equilibrium, we must consider morality as equipment that helps to solve practical life problems. Thus to live a moral life, practical reason has enormous importance as it deals with practical life problems. The discussion of the nature of practical reason belongs to the domain of metaethics. Because here my concern is not to talk about what we are doing, but about why we are doing that. Here I must clarify the distinction between practical reason and practical reasoning also. Practical reason is a capacity which is governed by certain normative principles and its task is to project some responsiveness towards situations; whereas practical reasoning is a mental process that consists of reasons as premises and from those premises a practical conclusion is derived. To provide moral justification in favour of an action, practical reason is generally involved in the process called practical reasoning, since at the time of performing an action agent is motivated to reasoning by using the reasons attached with it. Therefore in my thesis, the notion of practical reasoning is sometimes included in the discussion of the nature of practical reason as we cannot maintain any water-tight distinction between these two. However, the historical epoch suggests that the nature of practical reason has taken different shapes as philosophers from the Greek period to the contemporary era are not unanimously explaining the nature of it. From the Greek period to the modern era of Western ethics we notice a biasness towards rationality alone and imperatives are considered as objectively valid; but in the contemporary span, along with rationality philosophers are willing to incorporate the psychology of the agent in moral sphere. They emphasize more on the agent who being a rational person possesses freedom, rights, moral responsibility, mutual commitments and rational understanding too. Agents also have some desires (not egoistic wants) that should be fulfilled and must be incorporated

under the umbrella of morality through rational route. Thus human being is identified as a social self. Any attempt to decouple his desires from his duty tends to delink morality from his life. In my thesis, I have discussed on these different philosophical views to understand the nature of practical reason. My discussion will focus on the possibility and the nature of moral knowledge of the agent that provides the justification in favour of his moral claims. My attempt here is to clarify the question – what kind of psychological qualities empower an agent to formulate moral claims? My discussion will cover the nature of the motivational state that is helpful for making moral judgments. The discussion of reasons for action also has occupied the centre stage. Normative reasons, motivational reasons and explanatory reasons are three kinds of reasons for action that are significant in the discussion of the contemporary era. So my thesis is not about what one ought to do, rather it is about what we are doing when we are deciding what we should do.

I have divided the whole thesis under following chapters –

1. *Phronēsis*: A Harmony Between Reason and Emotion
2. Pure Practical Reason: Approach of Immanuel Kant
3. Practical Reason: A Reflection of the Principle of Generic Consistency
4. Internal Reason: An Inclusion of Subjectivity
5. Reasons Holism: A Holistic Approach towards Practical Reason

### **Chapter 1. *Phronēsis*: A Harmony between Reason and Emotion**

Aristotle, being the pioneer of formal ethics, has coined the term *phronēsis* as practical wisdom or excellence. He distinguishes between two kinds of excellences and defines *phronēsis* (practical excellence) in contrast to *sophia* (theoretical excellence). The reason which we apply to obtain knowledge about the factual world is known as theoretical wisdom. The application of this excellence is in the field of natural sciences, i.e., mathematics,

physics, biology, psychology etc. This is the ability to deduce the conclusions from premises and to grasp those ultimate premises from which the deduction starts. Apart from this world, there is another intelligible world, which is the world of morality, where we initiate to act on the basis of our understanding through the analysis of the situation. In the moral sphere, practical excellence of a person has the autonomy to formulate the law for himself. This is the necessity of practical wisdom in the field of morality that is the source of the decision-making procedure. It ultimately leads the agent to do some act guided by the moral standards. In Aristotle's view practical wisdom deals with contingent facts that hugely differ according to the situation in which an agent acts. It is more or less associated with agent's intention, desire, decision that motivates the agent to action. Though he is using the term 'wisdom' or 'excellence' instead of 'reason', but it has the same connotation as practical reason. It is also necessary to mention here that Aristotle incorporates emotion in the rational discourse. He advocates a pre-dominance of reason in his moral theory, though considers harmonious coexistence of reason and emotion as the prerogative of a happy life. If we are only capable to possess theoretical excellence for experiencing the world of limited phenomena, we would not be able to cope up with the moral standards and as a result, moral activities would be impossible. The presence of desire (*orexis*) makes the difference between theoretical and practical excellences and this happens since action follows from choice which is a combination of reason and desire. The reason involved in choice is what he calls *deliberation*. The deliberation is an enquiry into what action is possible in a particular circumstance to bring out the goal of human life. Though Aristotle distinguishes between these two excellences; one cannot conclude that theoretical and practical excellences are totally dissociated from each other, because to decide what is right, we need some factual inputs that are provided by theoretical wisdom. Practical wisdom is a reasoned opinion about the variable issues; capacity to decide what is good for one's own sake. But before having the

intention to live a happy life, we need to know the meaning of happiness and here lies the importance of theoretical excellence. It is clear that neither one is capable to act independently of the other one. But it is evident from his magnum opus *The Nicomachean Ethics* that it is practical wisdom or excellence and not the theoretical excellence that is relevant to determine the decision in a practical situation. Aristotle emphasizes only on practical excellence and not on theoretical excellence since he considers life not as a mere disposition to believe certain things, but as an activity that manifests that disposition.

## **Chapter 2. Pure Practical Reason: Approach of Immanuel Kant**

In modern period we find a radical change in the ethical thought of Western world as it starts to focus on 'what is the right thing to do', ignoring Aristotle's approach of giving importance to the agent's dispositions. In spite of that difference, Immanuel Kant in modern era is also making a division between theoretical and practical reason following the Aristotelian approach. Due to the influence of Renaissance, philosophers not only develop a secular kind of moral theory by refusing the divine morality of the middle age, but ethics has also shifted its focus from the evaluation of agent's character to moral action. This change has a prominent impact in the interpretation of practical reason. Kant emphasizes on reason as the only primary means to take moral decisions. Theoretical reason helps us to gather information, to increase our knowledge, but in dealing with practical life situations practical reason is primal. Pure reason can be practical - this seems the chief thesis of Kantian moral philosophy. Kant asserts that reason is one and the same, whether applied theoretically to the realm of what it is, or practically to the realm of what ought to be. Theoretical reason and practical reason are just two different applications of one and the same reason. This view is coined as the doctrine of the unity of reason. Arguing regarding the inadequacy of empirical practical reason, Kant justifies the necessity of pure practical reason. The principles of the empirically affected will are based upon the contingent fact that certain desires are to be

fulfilled. These principles are not the products of the autonomous lawgiving power of reason and consequently, they are not absolutely obligatory. All moral systems (except the one that is based upon pure reason) provide motives as heteronomous and they are unable to account for the absolute, unconditional, universal, necessary factors that we experience in moral obligation. His assertion is that practical laws must be a priori and prescriptive, whereas empirical laws are a posteriori and are not prescriptive. Pure practical reason, on the contrary, holds before us a law valid for practice which is not derived from our experience of the things of the world. It prescribes without considering the presence of desires or the need of the situation and is considered to be as intrinsically practical which discovers unconditional practical law. A moral agent does a morally good action following the formal maxim which must be valid for all rational beings independent of their particular desire. In this way the universal law becomes a command to us which we should obey. Practical reason is simply a certain application of pure reason to the human will. A principle is emerged to be a moral principle if it is derived from pure practical reason. So Kant considers it as an autonomous source of normative principles.

Aristotle clearly asserts that practical reason is agent specific and related with his own good. But Kant claims that just like theoretical laws of the factual world, there are unconditional practical laws to deal with practical moral situations. The practical laws are universal and objective in nature and so should motivate all rational beings to take moral decisions irrespective of their subjective aspects. The fundamental laws of morality are the same for every rational being, since the ultimate criterion of rightness is deducible from the highest faculty of a rational being as such. In regard to this, Kant identifies freedom with the capacity to regulate one's will by pure rational principles and to act independent of sensible interests. Since acting morally is considered to be acting freely, bringing a moral will into existence actualizes our capacity for freedom. Pure reason is practical, when it determines a

will; and as Kant defines, that a free will is determined by pure practical reason. The human will is capable of being conceived as practical reason as the self-guiding, self-motivating rational will strives to actualize the universal structure through its own actions. As practical reason, the will does not recognize a good that is pre-decided as good. It constitutes the good as the rational will's own object. Thus will is identified with practical reason when it turns to good will. Pure reason is always concerned with unconditioned condition. Pure practical reason, according to him, is the faculty of providing an unconditioned condition for voluntary moral action, which is a law that demands direct obedience or obligation. If pure reason is practical, there is some intrinsically valid practical law and some motive of duty. Kantian morality places agents in a very stringent position so that they can act independent of their self-interest. His attempt to vindicate morality insists him to explain how we ought to act on the basis of moral grounds without the influence of self-interest. Agents, according to him, are moved by a special kind of intellectual pleasure or a feeling that originates from his free will. For Kant obligation is not equivalent to compulsion. His view includes him in the camp of internalist thinkers as he has successfully made a balance between law-abidingness and the freedom of will. When the agent follows the universal law as his duty, he is not doing that out of compulsion or due to hegemony of the law. Rather he follows the law as it is confirmed by his own will. His will is giving the universal law as his own will is capable to be guided by practical reason by ignoring his self-centred desires. Such will gives moral command to the person. Thus in Kant's ethics practical reason is very significant as it justifies the postulate of freedom of will.

### **Chapter 3. Practical reason: A Reflection of the Principle of Generic Consistency**

The nature of practical reason has transformed exceptionally during the contemporary era. Ethics acts as an instrument to maintain a right social environment. We follow the yardstick of ethics as we consider us as the responsible agents of a moral community. Due to our

responsibility we try to justify our actions and our justification also encompasses the point of view of other fellow beings. In ethical activities we cannot ignore the expectations of other persons and so justification necessarily involves at least the views of our dear ones and must be ratified by other people. Alan Gewirth advocates a supreme principle of morality as the 'Principle of Generic Consistency' (PGC). The principle states that every agent must act in accordance with his or her own as well as for all other agent's generic rights. This PGC is ultimately responsible for the resolution of the 'is-ought' problem. The chief thesis is the logical derivation of a substantial normative moral principle from the nature of human action. Every agent, by the fact of engaging in action, is logically committed to the acceptance of certain evaluative and deontic judgments. This principle is derivable as a requirement of agential self-understanding. A generic right is a right to have the generic features of one's behaviour. These are freedom (voluntariness) and well-being (capabilities to achieve purposes). These rights are possessed by both actual and potential agents. He thinks that the PGC is derivable only via a 'dialectically necessary' mode of argumentation. The dialectically necessary method begins from statements or judgments that are necessarily attributable to every agent since they are derived from the generic features that constitute the necessary structure of action. It is a kind of indirect or oblique approach to the justification of moral principles. By oblique approach, Gewirth means that instead of trying to justify ethical propositions directly, this method does it indirectly by tracing out the thoughts or ascertaining the beliefs of an agent who is thought to be in a special or privileged position. The ideal observer, described by Rawls in the original position, is an example of the agent in oblique approach. The mode is dialectical means that it presents the steps of the argument as inferences made by the agent himself, rather than a statement true of the world itself. Each step is a description of what the agent thinks and not what things are like in the world independent of the agent. This mode of argumentation is also "necessary" both in the sense

that its initial premise is inevitable from any agent's standpoint and that the subsequent steps of the proof are logically deduced from this premise. According to Gewirth, acceptance of PGC is categorically obligatory since agents who violate it implicitly contradict themselves.

But there are some other contemporary moral philosophers also who have some different kinds of approaches towards practical reason. They have the tendency to emphasize on the inclusion of subjective aspects in the rational justification of a moral action. Moral agent is considered as an embodied particular entity and possesses some desires (not egoistic ones) to fulfil. So, moral commitments, understanding, responsibility are the most significant features that a moral agent should hold. Moral evaluation consists of moral action as well as particularities of moral agents and also the particular situations. To explore this view I have discussed about the philosophical thought of Bernard Williams in the fourth chapter.

#### **Chapter 4. Internal Reason: An Inclusion of Subjectivity**

Following the critique towards Kantian morality, Bernard Williams establishes his exegesis of internal interpretation of reason. Dividing reason under two heads – external and internal, he shows that external reason is insufficient to bring true reason statement in morality. So, all normative reasons are internal for Williams. He includes agent's subjective aspects along with reason that can objectively justify an agent's moral action. It is not pointing towards relativism (however, it is not a serious issue for Williams as he supports pluralistic approach in morality), since he admits objective deliberative route through which the agent deliberates. Any reason for action must be a true explanation of it. Now to be a true explanation, it has to be a true belief possessed by the agent. Internal reason, according to Williams, is considered to be a reason for action since internal reasons are relative to the agent's subjective motivational set. This motivational set contains elements such as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be

abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent. This set is not a fixed set of elements that are statically given. The elements can be added to the set or subtracted from the set to rectify the agent's reason statement with the help of his imagination and experience. Internal reason becomes one and the same for a third-personnel perspective and what an agent ascribes to himself as a result of rational deliberation.

### **Chapter 5. Reasons Holism: A Holistic Approach towards Practical Reason**

Following Williams' footsteps, another contemporary moral philosopher, Jonathan Dancy advocates a thesis of practical reason. For Dancy reasons for action plays a pivotal role in determining the agent's moral character. Jonathan Dancy follows the Aristotelian insight describes that like the virtuous person the continent person perceives the whole situation but cannot properly assemble it and consequently they lack unity in their emotions and acts in a way that does not make any sense. This notion of the virtuous person's narrative, according to Dancy, is coined as reasons holism. Reasons holism is the view that some considerations function as a reason only in a particular context. Considerations do not have any reason-giving force apart from the context. So, the considerations along with the particular context can provide the justification for a moral action. It opposes another doctrine known as reasons atomism. Atomistic view recognizes objective reasons only as valid. In this view, considerations in favour of the action are not contextual, but permanent. These considerations intrinsically have some reason-giving force that continues from one context to another. The holist maintains that consideration itself cannot have a reason-giving force on its own; a reason emerges from a virtuous person's narrative. The virtuous person follows it not because it is treated as a normative reason; but he does not feel any pull against the normative reason since there is no other reason by which he can be moved. He does not realize the need to deliberate on the basis of the reason statement. He, being the virtuous person, naturally chooses the right reason for action in that particular context. For him, the motivating and the

normative reason are unified and his emotions are univocal and therefore he acts successfully following a harmonious path.

### **Conclusion**

To understand the nature of practical reason, I have discussed here different philosophical views following a historical epoch. Starting from the ancient Greek period through the modern age I have finished my journey at the contemporary exegesis. Practical reason has transformed its nature exceedingly. Now to draw the conclusion of my thesis, I am focusing on my understanding of this trend analysis and have tried to point out some new insights that will be my sole contribution to this issue of analysing the nature of practical reason. The contemporary philosophers have inherited their insights of practical reason from Aristotle, the pioneer of formal ethics. In spite of prescribing a fixed list of moral virtues, he is presenting a context based moral theory where a moral decision is made based on the demands of the particular situation and the good life of a particular being. In his theory, rational justification is decided on the basis of the evaluation of the agent's moral character. This notion of practical reason has a unique and novel approach in the Aristotelian exposition. The contemporary philosophers, in contrast to the Kantian approach of practical reason, follow this Aristotelian insight of practical reason and redefine the nature of practical reason by the inclusion of the subjective aspects of the moral agent. They emphasize more on the particular human agent, his social self and his individuality along with preserving rationality. Agent's moral responsibility, mutual understanding and moral commitments towards his peers play a significant role in the decision-making procedure. This is certainly a new kind of approach to redefine the nature of practical reason. The discussion of practical reason turns toward the domain of moral psychology where subject's personal choice is considered as an objective benchmark for the justification of a moral action. Along with maintaining the normativity, approaches of the contemporary thinkers are pragmatic too. Aim of the contemporary

philosophers is to construct ethics as a self-directive discipline. Moral knowledge is thus not imposed on us as an order; rather it is a capacity that makes us aware about the demand of rationality when we require responding in a practical situation. Finally, I can comment that there is a water-tight distinction between reason and the agent's psychology, his subjective aspects in Aristotelian as well as in the Kantian framework; whereas in the Contemporary era, this dichotomy is not preserved. Alan Gewirth, Bernard Williams and Jonathan Dancy have shown that the subjective aspects of the agent are not to be considered as contradictory to reason. Inclusion of the subjective aspects of the agent along with his rational aspect play significant role in moral-decision making process. It shows that the contemporary philosophers flourish their notion of practical reason based upon the individual aspects. Individual aspect must pervade the criterion of social responsibility to avoid contradiction or problem of relativity. It is proved that the contemporary philosophers flourish their notion of practical reason based upon the Aristotelian framework, though they both have their own uniqueness toward the nature of practical reason.

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