

The Quality of Practical Reasons*

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In discussions of practical rationality, although in other contexts as well, the concept of the quality of action occurs frequently, one action being or being judged to be better than another.¹ Especially if practical rationality is explicitly regarded as acting in accordance with one's judgement which course of action is best, as for example in (Davidson, 1969) and (Watson, 1977), this concept acquires a central role in understanding what it is for someone to act rationally.

If one action is better than another (or being judged to be so), it is better in virtue of something. Since this is what determines the difference in quality, it has to be something that can be said for the first action but not for the second. The totality of what can be said for the first action is thus superior to the totality of what can be said for the second one. Since what can be said for an action provides a reason for doing it², this superiority can be captured by saying that the set of reasons³ for the first action is better than the set of reasons for the second one. The qualitative difference between actions has to be assessed in terms of the qualitative difference between the reasons for these actions.⁴

Compared to the frequent explicit or implicit use of the concept of the quality of reasons, relatively little has been said to clarify it. It is the aim of this essay to provide a basic understanding of this concept. I will propose principles how the quality of reasons is determined and outline their consequences for the assessment of an agent's rationality.

1 Agents and the Quality of Reasons

Initially, we might wonder whether an account of the quality of reasons is needed at all. We might just acknowledge the fact that we sometimes judge one set of reasons to be better than another as minor part of our reason-giving practice and leave it with that. After all, agents deviate widely in such judgments, and can

*I am indebted to Simon Blackburn for extensive criticism on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Some examples are (Santas, 1966), p.26, (Sen, 1985), p.178, (Pettit & Smith, 1990), p.571, (Broome, 1991). p.6 ff., (Wallace, 1999), p.231 fn.21.

² See (Davidson, 1963), p.9 and (Smith, 1994), p.95.

³ This includes the case of a one-elemented set, if an agent acts upon one reason, as well as the case of a number of elements in this set, if an agent acts upon more than one reason.

⁴ See (Davidson, 1963), p.40. Examples of other contexts in which the concept of the quality of reasons is used are (Millgram, 1996), p.217 fn.9, (Blackburn, 1995), p.124 and (Raz, 1997), p.111.

they not form them almost arbitrarily? So what philosophical importance can attach to an account of the quality of reasons?

The ability to assess qualitative differences between reasons and corresponding actions is an important ingredient in a comprehensive conception of agents in several ways: Firstly, an agent should be credited with the capability to assess different alternative actions by the reasons he has for each. This requires in turn that he is capable of weighing these reasons against each other where the alternatives are mutually exclusive. If such an assessment is successful, it results in a judgment about the quality of the reasons for the alternatives. Hence, these judgments are a necessary part of a conception of agents as reasoning about actions and coming to conclusions. Secondly, an agent's verdicts about the quality of his reasons reflects his preferences. These judgments endow the agent's short- and long-term interests, plans and aims with a structure. They thus enable the agent to be an effective pursuer of his ends and initiate the dynamic of compromises and trade-offs within his intentions to act. Due to this structure, the agent exhibits recognizable patterns of practical commitments and actions which render him identifiable as a specific agent in the first place. The concept of the quality of reasons becomes even more important on the supposition that practical rationality is the agreement of what an agent does with what an agent thinks he has best reason to do (see, for example, (Davidson, 1969)).

Even though recognizing the importance of the concept of the quality of reasons, we might still have doubts whether anything substantial can be said about this concept. Two points are important here: Firstly, that this concept of quality does not only appear within an agent's judgments. It is also used in third-personal assessments of his reasons and actions.⁵ It might also be part of an attempt to ground the bindingness of moral considerations by claiming that such considerations provide, at least in situations in which they are binding, (rationally) best or overriding reasons. In both cases, a substantial concept of the quality of reasons is used.

Secondly, regarding an agent as capable of arriving at any judgment about the quality of his reasons he likes would undermine the intelligibility of his utterances as judgments. Crediting an agent with this capability means granting him the ability to arrive at judgments regardless of his mental states. But which sense can we make of an agent's utterance being a judgment incorporating a practical commitment if this judgment can be completely discontinuous with this agent's desires and beliefs, or – perhaps even worse – starkly inconsistent or incoherent with them? We would not be able to recognize these judgments as belonging to an agent, because we would *ex hypothesi* not be able to regard these judgments as arising from an agent's mental states.

But without this, we lose our grip on the significance of the judgment: If an agent judges that the reasons for going for a walk are better than for staying at home, but at the same time believes that he cannot go for a walk, or does not desire in any way to go for a walk, or is exclusively or overwhelmingly conscious of considerations speaking for staying at home, we do no longer know how understand his utterance as a judgment and practical commitment at all. Therefore, judgments concerning the quality of reasons must be grounded in an agent's economy of mental states to be intelligible as judgments at all. This means that

⁵ See section 2.

there have to be ways in which agents arrive at their judgments. These ways have to be such that we can understand them as rationalizing one verdict rather than another. Taking these ways to determine the quality of reasons for agents, they make up the body of the concept of this quality. Thus, we have to assume that this concept is substantial and can be given an account if we want to regard the corresponding judgments as intelligible at all.

2 Dimensions of Quality

Before trying to understand the concept of the quality of reasons, we have to distinguish three senses in which a set of reasons can be said to be better than another. The first of these is provided by an example to be found in (Blackburn, 1995), p.124:

If some third person is to understand why I am doing the dishes when I want to watch the game, then they must find the aspect of doing the dishes that concerns me: my concern to fill my role as a dutiful husband, or to get them out of the way before they smell, or whatever. They have to see what it was that I thought about the situation that makes doing the dishes the option that I choose. Furthermore, since doing the dishes beats watching the game, the concern has to be regarded as stronger, at least at this time and on this occasion, than the desire to watch the game.

To understand why am I doing the dishes, one has to see what, from my point of view, can be said for doing the dishes.⁶ Apparently, since I am doing the dishes rather than anything else, I am motivated more strongly by my reasons for doing the dishes than by my reasons for watching the game: For me, the former set of reasons is obviously better than the latter, because I am actually acting upon it.

Since the judgement about the quality of reasons in the above example is justified by appeal to the agent's action, the qualitative order is assessed in accordance with his revealed preferences: The better one of two sets of reasons is the one on which the agent actually acts. I will call this the "backwards determination" of the quality of practical reasons, since it argues from the actual action to the quality of reasons that are supposed to be its antecedents.⁷ The quality thus determined will be called "motivational" because of its concern with the motivational strength a set of reasons has, assuming that an agent acts in accordance with his strongest motivation.⁸

However, there is an important way in which an agent can disagree with the motivational quality of his reasons: My set of reasons for doing the dishes might be motivationally better, but I might nevertheless have the attitude that my set of reasons for watching the game is the better one. Drawing on the distinction between motivational and evaluative language made by Santas (1966), p.24 f., I will call the quality of reasons assessed by such attitudes "evaluative". A set of reasons is evaluatively better than another if it occupies a higher place in an agent's evaluative ranking.⁹ (Note that evaluative quality pertains to the same

⁶ See (Davidson, 1963), p.3 and (Anscombe, 1974), p.4 f.

⁷ This feature of motivational quality will figure in section 3.1, p.4.

⁸ See Davidson's principle *P1* in (Davidson, 1969), p.23.

⁹ See (Watson, 1977), p.320 f.

reasons as motivational quality. Therefore, evaluative and motivational quality are two dimensions of the quality of *the same* reasons.)

The third dimension of the quality of reasons arises out of the possibility that an agent's evaluative attitudes might be judged to be incorrect. I might think that the set of reasons for watching the game is better than the one for doing the dishes. But you might judge my attitude to be incorrect, holding that the set of reasons for doing the dishes is the better one. Seeing the quality of practical reasons in this way constitutes a third dimension to this conception, which I will call the "critical" dimension since it is supposed to stand in judgement over the correctness of an agent's evaluative attitudes. (Note again that the reasons considered to have critical quality are the same reasons that have motivational and evaluative quality above.)

Thus, to understand the concept of the quality of reasons more clearly, we have to understand each of its three dimension of use. Our inquiry has to be concerned with the clarification of

1. the concept of motivational quality, that is, one reason being more effective in leading to action than another;
2. the concept of evaluative quality, that is, one reason being better than another in an agent's evaluative attitude;
3. the concept of critical quality, that is, one reason being better than another in critical judgement.

I will consider each of these dimensions in turn.

3 Motivational Quality

3.1 Backwards Determination

In order to understand the concept of motivational quality more clearly, we have to look again to the backwards determination of motivational quality: The motivationally better one of two sets of reasons is the one upon which the agent actually acts.

This formulation is defective. It seems that an agent might be motivated most strongly to act in a certain way, his reasons for doing it being motivationally best, but he is unable to act in this way, for example because of temporary paralysis. We therefore have to use the agent's *attempt* to act in the backwards determination of motivational quality, not his actual action.¹⁰ An agent attempts to act if nothing internal to him stands in the way of acting. The motivationally better one of two sets of reasons then is the one on which the agent actually attempts to act.

This formulation functions as a method for determining the motivationally best set of reasons, but is not supposed to provide by itself an exhaustive account of the concept of motivational quality. Rather, it draws attention to the fact that we can determine motivational quality in this way because the motivationally best set of reasons figures in the explanation of an agent's attempt to act.¹¹ The concept of motivational quality therefore involves the explanatory function of practical reasons. A more detailed understanding of this function has to be added to backwards determination in order to clarify the concept of motivational quality.

¹⁰ See (Anscombe, 1957), 67: "The primitive sign of wanting is trying to get."

¹¹ See (Williams, 1981), p.102. See also (Davidson, 1963), pp.3-5.

3.2 The Principle of Motivational Quality

The motivationally best set of reason has to explain the agent's attempt to act. More precisely, the motivationally better of two sets of reasons has play a role in the *correct* explanation, for we reject every explanation as an explanation *at all* if we know that it is false. The explanation is correct iff the sentences constituting the explanans are true, that is, iff it is true that the agent has a belief and desire jointly providing a potential explanation of his attempt and that he actually attempts to act upon this belief and desire.¹²

There are limits to the acceptability of explanations as correct: We cannot interpret what an agent does as an attempt to do *Q* if we do not credit the agent with the belief that what he does contributes to his doing *Q*. Without this belief, we cannot regard the agent as recognizing his attempt to be relevant for fulfilling his desire to *Q*. In this case, merely mentioning this desire cannot tell us what the agent sees in doing what he does. But since this is how practical reasons explain attempts to act¹³, a desire to do *Q* without the appropriate belief is ruled out as a possible explanation. Thus Anscombe (1957) observes (p.36):

In order to make sense of 'I do P with a view to Q', we must see how the future state of affairs Q is supposed to be a possible later stage in proceedings of which the action P is an earlier stage.

A parallel argumentation holds for the desire-component of practical reasons: What the agent does cannot be interpreted as an attempt to do what he is not at all motivated to do. In this case, too, the defect lies in the impossibility of seeing what the agent sees in behaving as he does. Which reasons the agent can be regarded as having is limited by which present beliefs and desires are ascribed to the agent, for his reasons consist in these present mental states. Consequently, the range of possible explanations, which are supposed to provide the agent's reasons, is limited by these beliefs and desires.

The ascription of mental states is restricted by the requirement of an account of how an agent comes to have this mental states in terms of their acquisition and their various relations among each other. This requirement ensures internal cohesion of the mental states ascribed to an agent and thus that these mental states can be integrated into the unity of the mental life of one person. Explanations of an agent's actions containing his supposed beliefs and desires are ascriptions of mental states. Therefore, acceptable reason-explanations have to conform to this requirement: There has to be an account of how the agent comes to have the reasons he has according to this explanation grounded in the past and present mental states we ascribe to him. We can only accept an explanation of an agent's actions if we can understand it together with what else we believe about the agent's mental states.

This indicates that the acceptability of explanations is relative to what we assume we know about an agent's mental states. It also initiates a dynamic of accepting and discarding explanations depending on their fit with these states and revising our beliefs about the agent's mental states so as to make them fit with accepted explanations.¹⁴ The ascription of past and present mental states,

¹²See (Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948), p.137 f.

¹³See (Anscombe, 1974), p.5 and (Davidson, 1963), p.3.

¹⁴See (Hurley, 1989), p.84 ff.

on the basis of which the acceptability of reason-explanations is assessed, itself relies partly on accepted explanations of an agent's actions. Hence, the possibility of accounting for an agent's reasons by reference to his past and present mental states limits the range of acceptable explanations.

Which one of the reasons thus ascribed to an agent explains his actions? Not *any* of the reasons ascribed to the agent, for to appreciate giving reasons as an explanation of the agent's action we must be able to regard what the agent does as describable in a way that agrees with the description of the action contained in the reason. Otherwise, we lose our understanding of the agent's beliefs and desires. But we might still ascribe to the agent more than one reason for the same action under an intelligible description. How is it determined which of these reasons is motivationally better and thus the explanation of his action?

We should leave some room for rational failure, that the agent fails to appreciate the reasons he has. But given that there is no such failure, the ascription of different reasons for the same action on its own does not provide any grounds for supposing that the agent does not act on all of these reasons. The set of these reasons is then regarded as motivationally better than any reasons ascribed to the agent for different actions. It would not then make sense to ask which of these jointly motivationally best reasons is better than the other. Backwards determination, as the criterion for motivational quality, only allows for joint assessment.

We might ascribe to an agent reasons for not acting on certain reasons and suppose they make for a difference in motivational quality: The agent might be supposed to classify a reason in a certain way – a reason of selfishness, for example – and judge this as something that counts against acting on it, while he might regard the same action done out of another reason as all right. This seems to be able to tip the motivational quality of his reasons in favour of one or the other. The meta-reason can, however, only do so if it is motivationally better than the reason it speaks against. Hence, the motivational quality of the meta-reason has to be determined before it can have any effect on the motivational quality of the agent's reasons for acting.

A difference in the motivational quality of different reasons for the same action thus cannot be grounded in the consideration of these reasons and the agent's action alone, for backwards determination only delivers a joint verdict. But since backwards determination is the means to decide about motivational quality, we have to appeal to an agent's past actions in order to find a qualitative difference. More precisely, we have to look at what the agent did in situations in which he had the reasons in question, but in which these reasons spoke for different actions. What he did in these situations is the basis for the assessment of the motivational quality of his reasons via backwards determination. To the extent that we find the alternative actions the reasons speak for as distinct, we can introduce a motivational order of reasons and determine their motivational quality and correct explanations even in complex cases involving meta-reasons and a variety of possible reason combinations as explanations. To the extent that alternative actions are not clearly distinct – two reasons for the same action, for example, tend to occur together throughout the agent's past – motivational quality remains plausibly vague. This motivational order of reasons also enables us to view motivationally worse reasons in a given action situation not all on a par, as application of mere backwards determination would yield, but in a specific structure allowing us to account for trade-offs and compromises. Therefore, the

consideration of an agent's past actions has also to take place in the assessment of the motivational quality of reasons for different actions. The long-term perspective ingrained in the concept of motivational quality ensures the continuity of the ordering of reasons needed for the identity of the agent as an agent, discussed in section 1.

If we define a *decidable* action situation with regard to two sets of reasons as one in which these sets do not speak the same action under any intelligible description, the motivational quality of reasons is determined in accordance with the following principle:

A set of reasons r is motivationally better than another iff there are more decidable situations in which r is the explanation of the agent's action.

As argued above, the explanation of an agent's action has to be an acceptable explanation. Which explanations are acceptable is determined by the possibility of accounting for them in terms of what else we believe about the agent's mental states. In decidable action situations, the sets of reasons contain non-coinciding action descriptions, so that only one set of reasons can be the correct explanation of the agent's intentional action. Since backwards determination yields this set as motivationally better, the above principle can be modified thus:

M A set of reasons r is motivationally better than another iff there are more decidable situations in which the belief and the desire r consists of can be accounted for by other mental states ascribed to the agent.

3.3 Judgements Concerning Motivational Quality

When judging the motivational quality of an agent's reasons from a third-personal perspective, we might have to decide between different ascriptions of mental states as explanations. The plausibility of these ascriptions can be compared in terms of how well they can be accounted for by other mental states, and how well the latter mental states can be accounted for in turn, etc., to meet the requirement of cohesion. Our decision between rivaling explanations is then based on how well we are able to back it up by what else we believe about the agent. Therefore, our judgments concerning another agent's reasons are inferences to best explanations relative to what we believe, and so are our judgments concerning the motivational quality of his reasons.

It might appear to be different, however, in the case of the agent's judgement which of his reasons is motivationally best: We could assume, for example with Anscombe (1957), p.57 ff., that the agent has practical knowledge of the descriptions under which his attempt is intentional. Since this in turn depends on the set of reasons the agent attempts to act upon, we could suppose that the agent has practical knowledge of his reasons for his attempt. Since practical knowledge is non-observational¹⁵, the agent does *not* base his judgement on observation of what he himself does. It is therefore *not* an inference to the best explanation.

It seems that such an account of the agent's knowledge of his reasons is, if correct, incomplete: Consider again the agent in Blackburn's example doing the

¹⁵See (Anscombe, 1957), p.89.

dishes rather than watching the game. He may think of himself that, on this occasion, he acted like he did because he wanted to fulfill his role as a dutiful husband. However, reflecting several weeks later about his motives he comes to see that this is not the case: He remembers that, just two days before this occasion, he had realized that he did not love his wife any more. By what he believed and believes about a husband's duties, he was thereby released from them. Furthermore, he remembers that this relation between loving and being subject to such duties was altogether clear to him when he did the dishes. Carefully considering the matter, he comes to see that he simply *could* not have done the dishes in order to fulfill his duties, because he no longer believed them to be binding. He concludes that he did the dishes for an entirely different reason, perhaps to get them out of the way before they begin to smell. He looks upon his past and present mental states and sees that his former explanation of his action cannot be correct. His motives were, after all, different from what he supposed them to be.¹⁶

Since in this case, the agent did not have the reason he thought he acted upon, he could *ex hypothesi* not have had practical knowledge of it being his reason for acting. It may thus be true that the agent has practical knowledge of his reasons for action, but he may also make *speculative* judgements concerning those reasons. These speculative judgements play an important role in the picture the agent has of himself. They are as prone to error when they are made by the agent as when they are made by anyone else. At least some of the agent's own judgements about the motivational quality of his reasons are thus inferences to the best explanation.

4 Evaluative Quality

4.1 Minimal Rationality

The agent in Blackburn's example may be motivated more strongly to do the dishes than to watch the game. As pointed out in section 2, he may however think that the reasons for watching the game are the better ones. Doing nevertheless the dishes, we judge what he does as a failure to follow what he thinks the best course of action is.

If such disagreement of motivational and evaluative quality occurs more and more frequently, we begin to have doubts whether the agent is serious in his evaluative attitudes and whether his reports of them are sincere. If disagreement becomes the usual case and the agent does not in the least attempt to act in accordance with his attitudes, our doubts become the judgement that he *cannot* be serious and sincere, that he is merely paying lip-service in claiming to have certain attitudes.¹⁷

Therefore, our most basic picture of an agent having evaluative attitudes – a picture the agent has of himself – requires a minimal number of cases in which the agent at least attempts to act in accordance with his attitudes. We can call this the “minimal rationality requirement” on the supposition that practical rationality is acting in accordance with one's judgement which alternative is best¹⁸ and that this

¹⁶For a similar case, see (Smith, 1994), p.106.

¹⁷See (Davidson, 1970), p.221 f.

¹⁸See (Davidson, 1969) and (Watson, 1977).

accordance is equivalent to the motivational quality of reasons being in line with their evaluative quality, as was argued above. The minimal rationality requirement thus provides the connecting element between motivational and evaluative quality.

4.2 Davidson's Suggestion

In his "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?", Davidson provides what we can regard as a suggestion how agents assess the quality of their reasons:

A plausible modification of our original definition (D) of incontinence might label an action, x , as incontinent provided simply that the agent has a better reason for doing something else: he does x for a reason r , but he has a reason r' that includes r and more, on the basis of which he judges some alternative y to be better than x . (See (Davidson, 1969), p.40.)

This suggests that an agent judges one set of reasons to be better than another if the first set incorporates the second among other mental states. It cannot, however, serve as a general account of the evaluative quality of reasons, for Davidson's notion of inclusion is either too narrow or insufficient to establish a verdict on quality, as I will argue. Davidson does not elaborate on the idea of one reason including another, but from the context of the passage quoted above I suspect it is something like the following: Suppose I have a reason r for flipping the switch, which is that I want the room to be lit and that I believe that flipping the switch will turn on the ceiling light. But at the same time, I also believe that flipping the switch will set off the alarm, which I do not want to be set off. Furthermore, I believe that if I turn on my flashlight, the room will be lit. So I have a reason r' which includes the desire and belief of r and one more desire and two more beliefs. r' is a reason not to flip the switch but to turn on my flashlight instead. Because it includes everything I think speaks for flipping the switch, but still only speaks for turning on the flashlight, I judge r' to be the better reason, at least if I am rational in my judgment. The suggestion thus becomes that one reason is better than another if it takes into account the other reason and more of the agent's relevant beliefs and desires.

r' is a compound reason, containing a reason for flipping the switch, r , and a reason against flipping the switch, my desire not to set off the alarm and my belief that flipping the switch will do so. r' can be said to *include* these reasons into one, more comprehensive reason only because r' , on the whole, rationalizes only one course of action. If this were not the case, I would just have different reasons for different actions. But these reasons would not be related in such a way that they are included in one reason. The reasons contained in r' rationalize one single action because of my belief that there are other means of lighting the room, which connects the end contained in r with my reason for not flipping the switch into a reason for turning on my flashlight as a choice from specific alternatives. The inclusion of r into r' is only possible because of the presence of this connecting belief. According to the suggestion, therefore, my judgment that r' is a better reason than r depends on my having this belief.

But if we understand the notion of inclusion in this way, it is too narrow to account for an agent's judgments about the evaluative quality of reasons in general. For there might be situations in which the agent has to choose from

mutually exclusive alternatives without having a connecting belief. In the above example, I have a reason for flipping the switch, and I have a reason for not flipping the switch. But I might not have any belief concerning other means to light the room. This does not mean that I am incapable of deciding on which reasons to act. But it shows that my judgment about the quality of my reasons cannot be guided by inclusion.

This criticism depends on understanding the notion of inclusion as outlined above. It might be objected that there is a much weaker sense of inclusion which is capable of taking the counterexample into account: One reason r' includes another, r , if the agent considers in r' , among other mental states, the desire and belief of r as relevant for his actions. r can be so considered in two ways: Either in the presence of a connecting belief. This belief renders the end contained in r attainable by an action different from the one r itself is speaking for. As argued above, this way of considering r in r' is not sufficiently general. Or in the absence of a connecting belief. In this case, r is not dissolved as a reason rationalizing action in a way different from the way r' does. For absence of a connecting belief prevents reassessment of the means to the end contained in r . Thus, the agent has to consider r as rationalizing action in a certain way, and other beliefs and desires in r' which rationalize action in a different way (and thereby usually, but not necessarily, a different action). Since r and r' are supposed to be different reasons, these other beliefs and desires in r' must determine the way in which r' rationalizes action. This means that they have provide a reason other than r and this reason must be superior, must outweigh r – r must be a worse reason than the other beliefs and desires. Otherwise, the consideration of r would (rationally) lead to r' rationalizing action in the same way as r does. Thus, r' includes r in this case if there are beliefs and desires in r' which are a better reason to act than r . The wider sense of inclusion here presupposes the notion of the quality of reasons. But this renders Davidson's suggestion, that r' is better than r iff r' includes r , unhelpfully circular.

4.3 Independence of Specific Agents

The set of reasons occurring in an evaluative attitude as better does not have to explain what an agent attempts to do, for his evaluative attitude might disagree with the actual explanation of his attempt to act.¹⁹ Since, however, the minimal rationality requirement establishes a link between the reasons occurring in evaluative attitudes and those explaining the agent's attempt in at least some cases, the former have to be *potentially* explanatory of the agent's actions.²⁰

We should allow the evaluative assessment of reasons to gain complexity by the possibility of binding evaluative quality to conditions the fulfillment of which is specific to agents²¹: For example, I may have the evaluative attitude that my reason for going to the pub (having some simple fun) is better than my reason for going to the concert hall (attending a worthwhile performance). I have this attitude because I have already been to concert hall the last three times I had the choice. This, however, does not sufficiently ground my attitude: I might be rather

¹⁹ See section 2 and (Smith, 1994), p.96.

²⁰ See (Williams, 1981), p.102.

²¹ These conditions may be dynamic and interdependent. See, for example, (Hurley, 1989), p.72 and (Wiggins, 1997), p.53.

strict about attending worthwhile performances, so that whenever there is one, I might think this provides a better reason for going to the concert hall, no matter how often I have already been there. Hence, for a fact about me – my having been to the concert hall the last three times – to determine my assessment of reasons in favour of going to the pub, I need the conditional evaluative attitude that if I have already been to the concert hall three times in a row, my reason for going to the pub is better than my reason for going to the concert hall.

This does not mean that anything specific to me – including my past actions and my past and present mental states – *must* enter my assessment of reasons. I might hold that the reasons to help someone in distress are always better than the reasons for pursuing my self-interest, irrespective of what my individual past and present looks like. Though it is perhaps praiseworthy to have this attitude, I might also have a different one: Being a rather self-centered person, I might think that the reasons for helping someone in distress are only better than the reasons for pursuing my self-interest if the person in distress has been particularly nice to me in the past. Our evaluative attitudes are conceptually open to such qualifications, although we might find them wrong in some cases.

Anything specific to an agent thus requires a conditional evaluative attitude in order to have effects on the assessment of reasons. Specific features about agents, their past and present has to occur in the antecedent of these conditionals. Thus, reference to such features serves to differentiate conditions for the evaluation of reasons. As these elements enter evaluation only via conditional attitudes, their role is restricted to this differentiation. They enable an agent to have more fine-grained evaluative attitudes, taking into account the variety of circumstances in the assessment of reasons. Evaluative attitudes that are already distinguished by all conditions an agent deems relevant cannot be grounded on anything specific to an agent: These elements would only be apt to introduce further distinctions, which the agent *ex hypothesi* regards as irrelevant. The quality of reasons as assessed by such attitudes cannot be established by what contains reference to anything specific to an agent. It is, therefore, independent of any individual agent.²² This is the reason why evaluatively better reasons need not explain any agent's attempt to act and need not be motivationally better.

It is clear that evaluative attitudes are *an agent's* evaluative attitudes. It is possible, even likely, that another agent may differ in his attitudes. We thus restrict the claim that one set of reasons is evaluatively better than another to an agent, maintaining that this is so only for him. This consideration is available to the agent as well. It can lead him to see that his evaluative attitude might be judged to be incorrect. This is reflected in the agent claiming that it only *appears* to him that one set of reasons is better. If the agent's reflective insight is to be true, however, he has not only to judge that one set of reasons appears to him to be better than another, but *for him*, from his perspective, they have actually to be so.

4.4 The Principle of Evaluative Quality

Evaluative attitudes are not concerned with explaining attempts to act, for these attitudes are independent of specific agents as argued above. Reasons can not

²²See (Broome, 1991), p.8.

only explain actions, but, for an agent, they are something that can be said for attempting to act in a certain way.²³ They thereby provide a *prima facie* justification from the agent's point of view. This also means that attachment of conditions to evaluative attitudes is not arbitrary, but guided by the justificatory relevance of these conditions. Evaluative attitudes therefore assess the quality of justifications: One set of reasons is evaluatively better than another if, for an agent, it constitutes a better justification for an attempt to act. Evaluative judgments are inferences to best justifications. But what makes a justification better than another?

Davidson's suggestion, as discussed in section 4.2, is that one justification by reasons is better than another if the former includes everything the latter does, but integrates more of the agent's beliefs and desires into a reason for action. The most inclusive set of reasons, on this account, provides the best justification. This often seems to guide agents in their reasoning about what they have the best reason to do: One action is better than another if it is a more effective satisfaction of desires or of more desires. The set of corresponding desires, together with the relevant beliefs, then is evaluatively better. But the more inclusive set of reasons need not be judged to be better, for one reason may outweigh many. The lesson to be learned from Davidson's suggestion is that considering a set of reasons in the light of more beliefs and desires may be decisive for an evaluative judgment.

Taking into account an agent's background mental states is not only required in the case of inclusion of reasons Davidson describes, but also in order to find any evaluative difference between sets of reasons at all. To be sure, if the agent is trying to decide which of two alternative actions he should do, and sees reasons for only one of them, he will regard himself as justified in acting in only one way, if he is rational. But this cannot serve to determine any evaluative difference of reasons involved, for there are no rivaling sets of reasons for the different alternatives that need evaluative assessment. We thus have to consider the case that the agent sees reasons for the alternatives he considers. Here we see that two rivaling sets of reasons, merely by themselves, do not indicate which one provides the better justification: I might have a reason to flip the switch (I want to light the room) and a reason not to flip the switch (I want to save energy), and both provide a minimal justification for the corresponding action. But without anything more being said, these reasons have the same evaluative quality, for I have no ground for supposing it to be otherwise.

That there is nothing more to be said about these reason is not as unusual a case as one might think: The agent might just not have thought about these alternatives and his reasons for them before, or he might not be able to make out any further difference. But the network of reasons and further beliefs and desires he has might also be imperfect in several ways: It might be incomplete, incoherent or even outright inconsistent. If, in trying to assess the quality of justifications by reasons, the agent is faced with these imperfections, he might try to mend this defects. This will enable him to make up his mind on the question of the evaluative quality of his reasons.

This suggests that the agent, if he is to find any justificatory difference between his sets of reasons, has to consider them in the light of the rest of his mental states.²⁴ In the above example, I might find further reasons for flipping the switch,

²³ See (Davidson, 1963), p.9.

²⁴ See (Smith, 1994), p.95.

which, together with my desire to turn on the lights, are sufficient to outweigh my reason for not flipping the switch. Or I might consider my belief that not flipping the switch will contribute to protecting the environment and I that I hold it to be imperative to protect the environment, no matter which considerations speak against it. So my set of reasons for not flipping the switch will outweigh the set of reasons for flipping the switch. These mental states can themselves include an appeal to evaluative quality of reasons and thus in turn involve further mental states. Considering reasons in a broader context of beliefs and desires may also initiate trade-offs and compromises between evaluative verdicts.

Thus, if there is a justificatory difference between an agent's set of reasons, it has to be grounded in the relation of these reasons to what else the agent believes and desires. Given that his reasons and related mental states are evaluatively on a par, the only criterion for a difference in evaluative quality is how many of the agent's relevant mental states are involved in a piece of practical reasoning for the corresponding action. Given that they are not on a par, the mental states related to the evaluatively better set of reasons have to be such that the agent rationally comes to this verdict even if he considers his rivaling set of reasons and the mental states related to this. Practical reasoning for the action the evaluatively better set of reasons speaks for can thus take into account the evaluatively worse set of reasons and the mental states related to this. Practical reasoning for the action the evaluatively worse set of reasons speaks for, however, has to ignore the evaluatively better set of reasons and related considerations. For the evaluatively better set of reasons would not be evaluatively better, and would not be so thanks to relevant background mental states, if it did not decide the outcome of practical reasoning in favour of the action it speaks for. If an agent considers the evaluatively better set of reasons and related mental states in practical reasoning, he rationally has to come to the conclusion that he has best reason to do what the evaluatively best reasons speaks for. His practical reasoning then cannot be reasoning for the action he has worse reason to do. Since practical reasoning for the action the evaluatively better set of reasons speaks for can take into account more relevant mental states than practical reasoning for the action the evaluatively worse set of reasons speaks for, we can regard the evaluative quality of reasons as determined by the following principle:

- E A set of reasons r is evaluatively better than another iff practical reasoning for the action r speaks for can take into account more relevant mental states.

This also integrates Davidson's suggestion, for a more inclusive reason in the understanding suggested above consists of more relevant mental states, figuring in practical reasoning for the action the more inclusive reason speaks for.

5 Critical Quality

The critical dimension of the quality of reasons arises out of the possibility of error in an agent's evaluative assessments: It may appear to an agent that one set of reasons is evaluatively better than another, but may he not be wrong about this? The critical quality of reasons is concerned with answering this question. It is supposed to stand in judgement over the correctness of an agent's evaluative

attitudes. If we regard moral claims as binding even for agents who do not agree with these claims, and as determining the evaluative quality of reasons²⁵, it is the critical dimension of quality that is most relevant for moral theory.

To yield the possibility of such judgements, the critical quality of an agent's sets of reasons cannot be assessed under restriction to an agent's first-personal perspective. In such assessment critical and evaluative quality would coincide, since the agent would not have the evaluative attitudes he has if he were convinced that they were incorrect. This does not mean that the agent must be certain about the correctness of every evaluative attitude he has. He might be more modest and restrict his claims to his appearances, that his evaluative attitudes only purport to be correct *from his perspective*. It is this restriction that prevents him employing his attitudes as standards in judging other agents' evaluative claims.

Therefore, extending the scope of this restriction is the basis for such judgements: If any attitude is supposed to be correct not only from one agent's perspective, but in the shared perspective of a number of agents, it can serve as a standard by which to judge the correctness of the attitudes of these agents. This does not yet mean that any agent can be justified in claiming that his attitudes assess the quality of reasons correctly for any group of agents, but only that he has to assume that his attitudes have this extended scope in order to judge others' attitudes at all. Evaluative attitudes with such an extended scope purport to be correct from the shared perspective of a group of agents. Note that they only *claim* to be correct. They need not be actually shared by all members of such a group. As already noted, an agent's network of reasons and relevant mental states might be defective in several ways. He might therefore have evaluative attitudes that are incorrect regarding the shared basis.

If the scope of evaluative attitudes is extended to all agents, the restriction of such attitudes ceases to be of use, because such an attitude is supposed to stand in judgement over all (relevant) evaluative attitudes. It is only in an assessment of reasons that has universal scope that the restriction to any perspective can be dropped. It is only here that the critical quality of reasons can be assessed, that the correctness of evaluative attitudes *per se* is at issue. The critical quality of sets of reasons has to be assessed from any agent's perspective. Thus the background mental states in relation to which the evaluative quality of reasons is assessed has to be capable of being shared by all agents to provide a basis for critical evaluation:

- C A set of reasons r is critically better than another iff
 practical reasoning for the action r speaks for can take into account
 more relevant mental states that can be shared by all agents.

This means that it is a criterion for the eligibility of evaluative attitudes to provide a critical assessment of sets of reasons that it is at least possible that it can be supposed to be correct from every agent's perspective. Therefore, evaluative attitudes that not every agent can adopt are not apt for assessing critical quality. This means that such attitudes cannot be supposed to be the standard of correctness by which to judge other agents' evaluative attitudes. Note, however, that this does not mean that the critical quality of reasons cannot take into account relevant differences between individual agents, for the evaluative attitudes can be differentiated as outlined in section 4.3.

²⁵ As, for example, Parfit (1984), p.3, suggests.

Thus, the concept of critical quality contains a basic level of assessment of sets of reasons, purporting to be correct *for every agent*, which is essentially negative: It excludes certain evaluative attitudes to serve as critical claims. This is because these fundamental critical evaluations have to be based on something which all agents share. Thus it cannot rely on any substantial configuration of mental states relevant for acting, but has to consider the general concept of practical reasoning, enabling agents to form evaluative attitudes. However, restricting the scope a critical attitude claims to be correct for, it can draw on more specific background structures of mental states that are the basis of evaluative assessment shared by the agents falling within this scope.

It can be seen from this that the concept of agents as forming evaluative attitudes based on background mental states is crucial to understanding the concept of critical quality. Hence, the latter cannot completely abstract from the former. More specifically, this implies that critical quality is *not* assessed by appeal to an independently existing qualitative ordering of sets of reasons, binding for all agents. Such an appeal is not only not needed for critical assessment, it also would require a further argument relating this qualitative ordering to agents and their reasons.

6 Concluding Remarks

The above inquiry suggests that the concept of the quality of practical reasons is to be analysed in terms of the extent to which reasons fit into a frame of reference: For *M*, this frame is provided by decidable action situations in the agent's past. For *E*, the background mental states connected with a set of reasons are the basis of evaluative assessment. *C* employs the same way of arriving at a qualitative verdict, but restricts the basis on which to come to this verdict to background mental states that can be shared by all agents. In each case, the assessment of the quality of practical reasons cannot be adequate by considering reasons in isolation. Furthermore, speculative judgements concerning motivational quality have the form of inferences to best explanations, whereas judgements about evaluative quality have the form of inferences to best justifications. The latter also holds for critical quality on further restrictions on the acceptability of justification. The qualitative momentum of the concept of quality of reasons is thus first transferred to a frame of reference and then assessed in its terms.

We thus get a new view to the minimal rationality requirement: We can no longer claim that an agent's practical rationality is the agreement of motivational and evaluative quality of certain sets of reasons only in specific situations. Rather, we have to see rationality as the convergence of the best explanations of an agent's past and present actions with their most inclusive justifications in practical reasoning. We should therefore doubt the plausibility of Davidson's supposition that "[...] it is at least possible to perform isolated incontinent actions" ((1969), p.25) and take a more comprehensive view on practical rationality and weakness of will.²⁶

²⁶See also (Watson, 1977), p.333.

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