DO YOU HAVE REASONS FOR YOUR REASONS? AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE

NIHILISM AN ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO THEORIES

OF PRACTICAL REASON

by

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ABSTRACT

During the latter half of the 20th century the number of theories being defended in the field of practical reason has proliferated dramatically. This proliferation, however, threatens to undermine the justificatory aim of practical reason, for if these different theories yield different practical inferences, then we seem to be in a dilemma: we have to either give reasons for our reasons, or accept that there aren't any such reasons, which would render our actions (even if they were made after some sort of rational deliberation) completely arbitrary. This thesis argues that currently in the field of practical reason there isn't any method or set form of argumentation aimed at providing reasons for our reasons, and that therefore nihilism, or the view that we don't have good reasons for doing what we do, seems to be the best attitude to take regarding theories of practical reason and human agency. This conclusion is then defended against three objections that stem from the views of J. David Velleman, Christine M. Korsgaard, and John McDowell.

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the latter half of the 20th century (and especially during the last decade or so) the number of theories being defended in the field of practical reason proliferated dramatically. In fact, this rapid proliferation recently prompted Elijah Millgram to observe that "there are by now too many competing theories of practical reasoning out there for unreflectively adopting one to remain a respectable option."[1] Unfortunately, however, reflectively adopting a particular theory of practical reasoning is not as easy as it seems, for, as Millgram also points out, there are a number of different ways to argue for (or against) any particular form of practical reason:

> In the course of reviewing the most important positions on the spectrum of substantive views about practical reasoning, we have also seen a number of different ways of arguing for views of this kind: reflective-equilibrium approaches, which appeal to intuitions about rationality; attempts to tie patterns of inference to structures of action or agency, or to views in the philosophy of mind; reflexive arguments (where the pattern of inference being argued for is used in that very argument); and so on. Evidently, entering into a debate about the right way to reason practically means entering into another, second-order debate as well, a debate regarding the right ways to *argue* about practical reasoning.[2]

To my knowledge, this second-order debate has yet to begin, which leaves us with a problem: there are a variety of views about practical reasoning, but no set method or form of argumentation for choosing between them (hereafter referred to as an "adjudicatory method" or "AM"), which renders making such a choice a daunting task rather than a simple matter of reflection.

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[1] Elijah Millgram, "Practical Reasoning: The Current State of Play," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 19.
[2] Millgram, "Current State of Play," 19.

But that is not all. In this thesis I would like to argue that unless philosophers start taking the need for this second-order debate seriously, an additional problem faces us, namely that, in the absence of an AM, *nihilism*[3] threatens to be the proper attitude to take with regards to both practical reason and human action. My argument for this position will consist of four parts. First, I will elucidate Millgram's claim, stated at the outset, by briefly setting forth three commonly accepted theories[4] of practical reason. Second, I will motivate the need for an AM by showing that these competing theories can yield different practical inferences. Third, I will argue that since we do not have an AM, our choices become arbitrary; that is, they are *not* based on reasons. I will then conclude that this position is identical to nihilism, and that therefore it seems as though we should simply dispense with discussions about practical reason and embrace nihilism when it comes to theories of practical reasoning. Finally, I will address three objections to this conclusion.

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[3] To be perfectly clear, by "nihilism" I am referring to the idea that there are no *good* reasons for doing what we do (i.e., what we do is chosen arbitrarily, *even if* we have engaged in some sort of practical reasoning before authoring the action). This is to be distinguished from the idea that there are no reasons whatsoever, or that there is no such thing as a reason.

[4] In what follows I will be using the terms "theory" and "method" interchangeably when describing practical reason, but I am not trying to make a significant distinction between a theory vs. a method of practical reason.

2. THE COMPETING THEORIES OF PRACTICAL REASON

In his article,[3] Millgram sets forth some fourteen different types of practical reason. For the purpose of this thesis, however, I would like to focus on three of the most widespread theories, namely Instrumentalism,[4] Planning, and Universalizability. I will first briefly explain the main components of each theory, and then proceed to show how they can yield different practical inferences.[5]

2.1 - Instrumentalism

Instrumental theories of practical reason assert that all of our practical reasoning processes are aimed at discovering the means to a particular end or goal. Proponents of this theory believe that the only form of practical reasoning we employ is "means-end" reasoning, which implies that, in the words of Christoph Fehige, "the choice of means to our ends can be more or less rational, *but our ends themselves can't.*"[6] In other words, if I have a desire to eat some cake, then under an instrumental theory what I ought to be reasoning about is the best way to satisfy this desire (e.g., I could make a cake myself, buy one from a local market, or steal one from an unsuspecting neighbor). However, it is important to note that on the instrumentalist view, in this situation I am

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[3] Millgram, "Current State of Play."

[4] "Instrumentalism" is now a very broad term and can be used to describe a number of different theories. In this thesis, however, I will be dealing with instrumentalism as defined and defended by Christoph Fehige in Christoph Fehige, "Instrumentalism," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning,* ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 49-76.

[5] I should say at this point that while I will only be considering three of the fourteen theories mentioned by Millgram, I believe that a similar sort of analysis could be conducted upon the remaining eleven with similar results.

[6] Fehige, "Instrumentalism," 49 (emphasis mine).

not able to deliberate about whether or not I actually have the desire to eat some cake⁹—I just want to eat some! Hence, an instrumentalist would hold that our ends (e.g., eating some cake) are not subject to rational evaluation or deliberation; they are set, ¹⁰ once and for all, and the only task that remains is discovering how to achieve them, the completion of which is the province of practical reason.¹¹ Millgram claims that "instrumentalism is the default view in the field, and probably among philosophers in general,"¹² and Christine M. Korsgaard has made a similar remark.¹³ Recently, instrumentalism has been championed by Candace Vogler,¹⁴ and Fehige also ties instrumental reasoning to (among others) Anscombe, Aristotle, Gauthier, Hempel, Hume, Mill, Rawls, and Russell.¹⁵

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⁹ As Millgram has observed: "If instrumentalism is right, then, because only thinking about how to get what you want counts as practical reasoning, there is no such thing as thinking about what to want in the first place. When instrumentalists follow a chain of means-end links back to its origin, they find desires that cannot, on the instrumentalist view, be the products of reasoning." Elijah Millgram, *Ethics Done Right: Practical Reasoning as a Foundation for Moral Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 313.

Earlier in the same volume Millgram makes a similar point regarding the instrumentalist's attitude towards ends: "The spirit of instrumentalism is that while you can be criticized for an inappropriate choice of means, your ultimate ends are neither rational nor irrational, but just the ones you happen to have." Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 139.

¹⁰ Just how our ends are set, however, is a matter of some debate among instrumentalists, but usually the reply is that our ends are determined by our desires, which are themselves fixed. For example, Korsgaard has observed that "it is routinely assumed, by empiricists who see themselves as followers of Hume, that absent any other contenders, our ends will be determined by what we desire." Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 223.

Millgram has echoed this assessment, although he cites "brute psychological facts" as being responsible for our ends: "Instrumentalism is the view that all practical reasoning is means-end reasoning: that the thinking that goes into deciding what to do consists solely in figuring out how to get what you already want…The instrumentalist's final ends—once again, the ends at the termini of chains of means-end reasons—are set by brute psychological facts, and are not themselves the products of practical reasoning." Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 11, 12.

¹¹ In fact, Fehige is quite explicit on this point, insisting that instrumental theories are aimed *primarily* at desire satisfaction: "In other words, it is rational for [an agent] to do what he believes is best for him. As we have just argued, "best for him" means "best fulfills his desires". Thus, it is rational for him to do what he believes would best fulfill his desires. Ditto for each of us." Fehige, "Instrumentalism," 60.

¹² Millgram, "Current State of Play," 4.

¹³ "Most philosophers think it is both uncontroversial and unproblematic that practical reason requires us to take the means to our ends." Korsgaard, "Normativity," 215.

¹⁴ Candace A. Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). While I am listing Vogler as a proponent of instrumentalism, I should note that Vogler herself dislikes the term, and holds a slightly more nuanced view.

¹⁵ Fehige, "Instrumentalism," 70. Note #1.

2.2 - Planning

As advanced by Michael Bratman,[16] the planning theory of practical reasoning is similar to instrumentalism in that we are reasoning about the means to a particular end, but different in one very important respect: instead of working within a framework of ends that are themselves unassailable via reason, the planning theory holds that our plans (or more accurately, the ends that these plans are designed to achieve) *are* subject to rational deliberation. According to Bratman, we can deliberate about which plans (and therefore which ends) to adopt, and furthermore we can alter these plans if the circumstances allow.[17] This feature of planning distinguishes it significantly from typical instrumental theories in that it allows for one to remain rational while sticking to a plan that might not satisfy one's immediate desire(s).[18]

Bratman also argues that the planning theory is superior to instrumentalism for three additional reasons. First, because plans are typically stable (i.e., once a plan is adopted, we don't usually alter or abandon it except in extreme circumstances), they allow us to use our cognitive resources more efficiently by limiting the number of options that need to be considered in any

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[16] Michael E. Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Bratman has published extensively on this subject, but this collection of essays provides a very good overview of his views as well as references to his earlier publications.

[17] "As the day proceeds I execute my plan though, of course, I also must make further decisions (which route should I take to the computer center?) *and could always reconsider my plan.*" Michael E. Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 203 (emphasis added).

"Of course, I might reconsider my more general plan for the day, and actually consider whether to run instead. Given a plan at any level of generality or extensiveness that one is nondeliberatively executing, *it is always possible to reconsider and bring that plan into question.*" Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 211 (emphasis added).

"In settling on a prior plan of action, one commits oneself to the plan—*though of course one's commitment is normally not irrevocable*, and new information can make it imperative to reconsider and abandon a prior plan." Bratman, *Structures of Agency*, 26 (emphasis added). Bratman recognizes in footnote #15 that "it is a difficult problem to say exactly what is involved in such stability for a rational agent," to which problem we will return later in our discussion of Joe the college freshman.

[18] "...my nondeliberative execution of my plan may be reasonable even though, as it happens, in this particular case it would have been better if I had reconsidered. (By "better" I mean better in terms of the expected impact on the goal by reference to which deliberative decisions are to be assessed--desire-satisfaction, perhaps.)" Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 215. I will discuss this distinctive feature of planning in more detail in the next section.

particular situation.[19] That is, once a plan is in place we no longer have to stop and reconsider our planned course of action every time some new piece of information crops up. For instance, suppose that you have a desire to spend your weekends in a leisurely fashion, and that to this end we have been planning to go fishing this weekend. Now, since you have a plan in place, when the question is posed "What are you doing this weekend?" you no longer have to consider all of the possible leisurely pursuits that you could engage in. Instead, you can effortlessly answer "I'm going fishing" and focus your deliberations on how to achieve the best fishing trip possible. In this way having a plan allows you to use your cognitive resources much more efficiently.

Second, Bratman argues that since plans are stable, they also allow for better interpersonal coordination than just instrumentalism alone.[20] Consider again our fishing trip example; you and I have been planning to go fishing this weekend, but what assurance do you have that I will actually arrive at your house at six o'clock Saturday morning? Surely your assurance is based on more than just our decision and desire to do so, for, as Bratman points out, "just by *deciding* or *settling* at the beginning of the day on a plan for the rest of the day I do not ensure coordination."[21] Instead, Bratman suggests that your assurance is based on your knowledge of my plan combined with the conjecture that having plans produces what he calls "conduct-controlling" (as opposed to merely a conduct-influencing) pro-attitudes. In other words, once a plan is adopted one does not allow (except under extreme circumstances) conflicting desires (e.g., my desire to golf rather than fish) to either (a) prompt a re-evaluation of the plan or (b) interfere with the execution of that plan. Your assurance that I will arrive at your home at six o'clock is based on your belief that my plan to do so will *control* my behavior in the sense that my golfing habit won't influence me to drop our plans

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[19] Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 204.

[20] "The ability to settle on such plans thereby enables us to achieve complex personal and social goals we would not otherwise be able to achieve." Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 204. The entire discussion of this topic ranges from pp. 204-206.

[21] Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 204 (emphasis in original).

and head to the golf course on Saturday morning. Thus the planning theory provides for better interpersonal (and, as it turns out, intrapersonal[22]) coordination.

Finally, Bratman has recently argued that planning is superior to instrumentalism because it allows us to make sense of agents in a Neo-Lockean fashion.[23] Because plans are stable, they are temporally extended (i.e., they persist through time), and since we as agents are following these plans, it seems to follow that we are also temporally extended through time.[24] Thus in addition to the advantages already enumerated above, the planning theory also provides us with a picture of agents and personal identity.

2.3 - Universalizability

This theory of practical reasoning is built upon the Kantian concept of the categorical imperative and contains the following procedure (which is sometimes referred to as the "CI-procedure"):[25] First, we must identify the maxim of our action (e.g., "When I need money, I will lie about my ability to pay it back, in order to get a loan"). Second, we try to universalize this maxim in order to see if *everyone* could follow it as though it were a law of nature. If we can do this, then our maxim passes the "contradiction in conception" test. If not, then the maxim is rejected as an unacceptable maxim for action (our loan example falls into the latter category, for it turns out that if everyone lied, no one would believe anyone's promise of repaying the money, and hence loans would never be issued in the first place, which shows that the maxim is conceptually

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[22] Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 207.

[23] See particularly Bratman's essays "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency" and "Planning Agency, Autonomous Agency" (Chs. 2 and 10) in *Structures*.

[24] This seems to be the essence of Bratman's view, albeit in "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency" he introduces the concept of a "policy," which appears to be a special sort of plan that embodies "attitudes whose role it is to support the temporal organization of her agency by way of constituting and supporting Lockean ties." Bratman, *Structures of Agency*, 27.

[25] Following Onora O'Neill, "Consistency in Action," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 301-29. See also Korsgaard: Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Korsgaard, "Normativity"; Christine M. Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1999): 1-29.

incoherent). Third, if the maxim passed the contradiction in conception test, then we can continue to test it in order to see if it can also pass the "contradiction in the will test."[26] That is, we want to discover if there are intentions (or things that we "will") to which the maxim commits us that *cannot* be successfully executed if the maxim is universalized. For example, if my maxim is "When someone asks me for help, I will refuse, because I've got other things to do with my time,"[27] then my maxim commits me to both (a) not helping others and (b) doing "other things" with my time. However, some of the "other things" I want to do with my time will undoubtedly require help from others, which will not be available to me given the fact that (a) has been universalized. Hence while there doesn't seem to be any conceptual inconsistency with this maxim, it turns out that it is impossible for me to will it, since by so willing I am committed to a course of action that is impossible. Therefore, according to the universalizability theory I ought not to do it.[28] In short, on this view if a maxim can pass both contradiction tests then it follows that the maxim provides an acceptable principle for action. If not, then it should be abandoned.

Thus conceived, universalizability theories of practical reason differ from both instrumentalism and planning theories in the following way: while the latter two theories take an agent's ends as either given or subject to deliberation, universalizability theories offer the agent a systematic method for discerning which ends ought to be pursued and which ought to be abandoned *before* one even begins reasoning about *how* those ends are going to be achieved. In

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[26] Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, 96.

[27] Taken from O'Neill, "Consistency in Action," 320.

[28] O'Neill does note that technically, on Kant's view, failure to pass the contradiction in the will test generates only an "imperfect duty" to refrain from performing that action. However, she argues that "since we probably lack both rigorous criteria and firm intuitions of the boundaries between perfect and imperfect duties, it is hard to evaluate this claim." O'Neill, "Consistency in Action," 316. Furthermore, in her treatment of universalized maxims that fail the contradiction in the will test she concludes that "it is morally unworthy" (Ibid., 321) to adopt them, despite their failing only the contradiction in the will test (rather than the contradiction in conception test, which generates a "perfect duty" to refrain from that action). In my use of the universalizability theory I will follow O'Neill and assume that a maxim's failure to pass *either* test constitutes reason to reject it outright. I should also note that I am not alone in this reading of the CI procedure. Millgram has also interpreted it to mean that maxims are accepted only when they pass **both** tests: "You may act on your maxim (only) if the associated perturbed social world can be **both** conceived and willed." Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 142 (emphasis mine).

other words, universalizability theories hold that practical reason *begins* with the selection of ends, *after which* it progresses to the selection of the means to those ends. Instrumentalism, on the other hand, simply states that the ends are given and the practical reason deals *only* with the means, and while planning theories do allow for deliberation about ends, they do not provide the agent with a method for just how that is to be accomplished.[29]

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[29] While Bratman's concept of a policy (i.e., a special, higher-order plan) does some work towards this end, Bratman still recognizes that the selection of ends and the stability of one's plans towards those ends depends greatly upon the psychology of the agents themselves: "...the stability of my plan is largely determined by general, underlying dispositions of mine." Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously," 212.

3. COMPETING THEORIES, COMPETING INFERENCES

We now have three distinct methods for approaching the question "What should I do?" before us, namely Instrumentalism, Planning, and Universalizability. Of course, the mere fact that there are multiple ways of approaching this question is not, by itself, problematic, for indeed, in the sciences as well as in many other theoretical pursuits a multiplicity of methods is often viewed as an advantage. However, such multiplicity *can* become problematic if the different methods yield different results, and in the case of theories of practical reason, if it can be shown that these different theories yield different practical inferences, then the question of which method yields the *best* inference arises.[7] This question will become crucial in the next section where I will attempt to show that unless it is answered nihilism threatens to be the best approach to take with regards to practical reason and human action. Here, however, I will illustrate how Instrumentalism, Planning and Universalizability yield different practical inferences in the following situation.

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[7] I recognize that this statement presupposes the possibility of a "best" or "correct" inference, and that one can avoid this difficulty by simply denying this possibility. However, such a position seems to me to be identical with nihilism (i.e., one who takes this position is essentially saying there is no such thing as a "correct" or "best" reason for action), in opposition to which these theories of practical reason have arisen. Hence, I believe that the presupposition of a "best" or "correct" practical inference is shared by all theories of practical reason.

Also, remember that I am talking about *individual agents* here as opposed to agents in general. Were I talking about the latter, it would be possible to resist the idea that there is a "best" or "correct" inference by arguing that reasons could be agent relative; that is, agent x holds instrumental reasons as reasons because that's how he's always reasoned, while agent y disagrees and argues that universal reasons are the only valid ones. In either case, both have reasons, and both view them as such simply because that's how they've always reasoned. Thus, if such relativism is allowed, then there is no such thing as an objective or "best" inference for everyone, and the fact that agents cite differing reasons for their actions is not problematic at all. However, relativism is not an option when it comes to *individual agents*, for as I will attempt to show, what they actually end up doing will be a direct result of what form of practical reason they engage in, which would imply that if what you do depends upon how you choose to reason, and if you have no reason for reasoning the way you do, then it seems as though your actions are being produced arbitrarily.

Let us consider Joe (who happens to be an ambitious college freshman) and his plans concerning his future career. Like most freshman, Joe is unsure of what he wants to do for a career, but he desires, above all, to finish his undergraduate work swiftly. Hence, in order to make an informed decision regarding his career without delaying his graduation plans he takes a smattering of courses from a number of different departments and eventually decides upon a degree in history, with the hope of becoming a high school teacher in that subject. Joe declares his major, is accepted into a number of different clubs and honor societies for history students, and even receives a grant to do pedagogical research in this field with one of his professors. However, during his senior year Joe begins to have doubts about his choice of major. He wonders, given the horrible state of the economy, about the possibility of finding a job after graduation and subsisting on a teacher's salary, not to mention the fact that he is also beginning to have doubts about whether he actually wants to teach bratty teenagers for the next forty years of his life. To complicate matters further, during his senior year Joe's parents tragically die in a car accident, and Joe feels somewhat obligated to take responsibility for the care of his younger siblings since some years ago he had promised his parents that, in the event of their untimely passing, he would do so without delay. Joe immediately seeks guidance from his university, and he is informed that he is so far along in his current program and has so many commitments to it that changing his major now would set his graduation plans back some three or four years. Furthermore, Joe notes that in order to care for his younger siblings he would have to drop out of school in order to work full-time, and that the demands of employment and child care would probably leave him little or no time to finish his degree as it is, much less if he chose to change it. In the end, since he is so close to graduating, Joe concludes that, his promise to his parents and his misgivings about his future as a teacher notwithstanding, he should stick to his original plan, graduate on schedule, and hope that everything works out for the best.

This example clearly illustrates the differences between all three of the theories we have been considering (i.e., instrumental, planning, and universalizability), as well as the fact that in situations like these they can lead to different practical inferences. I will first illustrate how this example can be used to show how instrumental and planning theories would yield different practical inferences in this particular situation, after which I will turn to the universalizability theory.

3.1 - The Instrumental Inference

As we have seen, instrumentalists claim that all reasoning is means-end reasoning, where our ends are set once and for all, usually by our desires. On this view, Joe's decision to graduate on schedule would be irrational: at the time of his graduation, what Joe *really* desired, more than anything else, was to find secure employment and satisfaction in his career, as well as to (eventually, at least) fulfill the promise he made to his parents. Nevertheless, despite these desires Joe chose to pursue a course of action that he had good reason to believe would *not* achieve these ends, for in the first place he was unsure about secure employment and whether he was going to find satisfaction as a high school teacher, and furthermore he recognized that it was very unlikely that he would be able to provide for his siblings on a high school teacher's salary. Thus, the instrumentalist would assert that in this situation Joe failed to use means-end reasoning in order to achieve the ends he desired. Instead, from the instrumentalist's point of view, Joe was pursuing an end that was no longer desirable for him, namely, a speedy graduation, at the expense of ends that were now more desirable, namely, employment/satisfaction in his career and, albeit to a lesser extent, the fulfillment of his promise to his parents.[31]

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[31] Obviously I am assuming that Joe is giving preference to his current desires rather than his previous, more prudential desire for a speedy graduation, and this might not be true of all instrumentalists. However, it does seem

So what should Joe have done, à la the instrumental theory? We've just concluded that the instrumental theory wouldn't have suggested graduating as originally planned, but what *should* he have done? Given the situation as presented above it seems reasonable to infer that the instrumental theory would conclude that Joe ought to stay in school and change his major to something that he had good reason to believe would satisfy both his immediate desire for job security and career satisfaction as well as his desire to fulfill his promise to his parents. Of course, this would mean that he would have to postpone fulfilling that promise for a few years, but *eventually* he will fulfill this promise, and that's good enough for Instrumental Joe. Thus, according to the instrumental theory, it appears as though Joe should have stayed in school, since such a course of action would satisfy the means-end structure of the instrumental theory and would thus qualify as a rational thing to do.

3.2 - The Planning Inference

While Joe's decision to graduate on schedule was deemed irrational by the instrumental theory of practical reason, under the planning theory it makes perfect sense, even though Joe was having doubts about his original desire to graduate quickly and about whether his chosen degree would allow him to fulfill his promise to his parents. Recall how earlier I indicated that planning

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compatible with Fehige's presentation of instrumentalism, and Derek Parfit has recently argued for what he calls a "present aim" theory, wherein he holds that we should try to satisfy our *present* desires/aims to the greatest extent possible (See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), especially Chapter 6, §55). Furthermore, Korsgaard has argued that one's rationality is not necessarily at stake if present desires overrule ones' prudential desires: "Absent a principle determining which ends we should prefer, such as the principle of prudence, *a person will follow his stronger desire and will not be irrational for doing so.* The point is not that it is *rational* for him to follow his stronger desire because it is stronger. The point is that he is rational in the only remaining sense—he is (apparently) following the instrumental principle." Korsgaard, "Normativity," 227 (emphasis added). That is, in Joe's case, whether or not his refusal to stick to his former, prudential desire qualifies as rational depends completely upon whether or not Joe believes that prudence is a requirement of rationality, and as Korsgaard argues (see Korsgaard's discussion of Howard in Korsgaard, "Normativity," 227-28), instrumentalism *alone* cannot ground any such requirement. Hence, even though Joe *does* end up acting prudentially in this situation, if Korsgaard is right then it doesn't seem as though instrumentalism alone can justify such an action as "rational" without some sort of justification of the principle of prudence. Thus I have adopted the stance that Joe's action in this case is irrational because he failed to satisfy his stronger, more present desires of finding employment and satisfaction in his career.

theories are distinguished from instrumental theories in that they allow for one to remain rational even while sticking to a plan that might not satisfy one's immediate desire(s).[32] This example clearly illustrates this feature of planning theories, for Joe's immediate desires of finding employment and satisfaction in his career were overridden by Joe's commitment to his plan to graduate swiftly. As we have seen, this qualified as irrationality on the instrumental view, which held that Joe should have pursued the more immediate ends of employment and satisfaction rather than the now remote end of a swift graduation. However, on the planning view such a charge no longer holds: unless Joe's promise to his parents or his doubts about employment/satisfaction constituted sufficient conditions for reconsideration of his original plan, under the planning theory of practical reason, Joe was completely justified in sticking to it even though the original end is now overshadowed by other, more immediate desires/concerns.[33] Hence, in Joe's case we can see how instrumental and planning theories of practical reasoning lead to two different inferences about what Joe ought to do in this situation: instrumentalism held that Joe ought to have done something that would satisfy his immediate desires, whereas the planning theory justifies Joe's decision to graduate on schedule.

However, at this point an instrumentalist might argue that what a person *actually* ends up doing shows what he desires most, and since people do what they desire most[34] (re-statement of the instrumentalist commitment to means-end reasoning), it follows that in this instance Joe was doing the right thing: he decided to stick to his original plan because in the end this desire proved stronger than either his desires to find employment and satisfaction in his career or his desire to fulfill his promise to his parents. In other words, an instrumentalist might argue that Joe's desire to

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[32] See p. 5.

[33] Now, we did note earlier that re-evaluating your plan in extraordinary circumstances is also acceptable on the planning view, and hence if Joe had decided to, given his parent's tragic death, reconsider his plan, this probably would have been acceptable. However, for the purposes of this example I will just stipulate that Joe did not see his parents' death or his doubts about job security/satisfaction as sufficient reasons to reconsider his original plan.

[34] This view is attributed to Hume by Korsgaard. See Korsgaard, "Normativity," 230.

graduate swiftly was stronger than either of these other desires and that therefore in this situation there doesn't seem to be any discrepancy between the inferences drawn by the instrumental and planning theories: both theories would agree that Joe did the right thing.

I believe that this objection is misguided for the following reason: it presupposes that agents are infallible when it comes to the adjudication and selection of their desires. According to the objection, people *always* act in accordance with their strongest desire; one is never mistaken about the relative strengths of one's desires, nor does one ever do anything contrary to the hierarchy of one's desires (e.g., if you desire cake more than cookies, when offered a choice between the two, on this view you will *never* choose the cookies). But is this really the case? Michael Smith has argued to the contrary: "It is an adequacy constraint on any conception of desire that the epistemology of desire it recommends allows that subjects may be fallible about the desires they have."[35] Smith offers two reasons in support of this conclusion. First, it seems entirely possible that we might act on desires that we are entirely unaware of,[36] and second, agents might sincerely believe that they have certain desires when, in fact, they do not.[37]

With regards to the former, if unknown desires are influencing my actions, then it doesn't seem possible that such a desire would ever factor into my practical reasoning processes. If this is correct, then the claim that "people always act in accordance with their strongest desires" turns out to be vacuous, as far as practical reasoning is concerned, for since we are fallible when it comes to our desires (i.e., since it is possible that we might be mistaken regarding these alleged "strongest desires"), then the desires that we are mistaken about won't be factored into our practical reasoning at all. But this is contrary to the fundamental principle of instrumentalism, which holds that *all* our reasoning processes are dedicated towards finding the means to our ends, and in cases where

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[35] Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96, no. 381 (Jan. 1987): 47.

[36] This seems to be the conclusion of recent studies in cognitive dissonance, which I will discuss in more detail later in my treatment of Korsgaard's model of personhood and agency (see pp. 60-66).

[37] Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," 46-47.

unknown desires are serving as our ends, this is *not* what is going on. Hence, it doesn't seem as though instrumental theories of practical reasoning can support the idea that we can determine an agent's ends simply by observing their behavior.[38] Furthermore, Smith also argues that agents might sincerely believe that they have certain desires when, in fact, they do not. But if we can be mistaken about having desires, then, as we saw earlier, it simply cannot be true that we *always* act in accordance with the strongest desire, since it might turn out that (a) we have a desire but don't recognize that we do or (b) we don't even have that desire at all. Thus in Joe's case it doesn't appear that the discrepancy between the inferences drawn by instrumentalism and planning can be reconciled along the lines that people always act in accordance with their strongest desires.

3.3 - The Universal Inference

We have just seen how instrumental and planning theories of practical reason yield different practical inferences in Joe's situation. It now remains to show how the universalizability theory would yield a third practical inference, one that would differ from both the instrumental and planning inferences seen already, which were:

1. Joe should stay in school and change his major to something that will fulfill his immediate desires of secure employment and career satisfaction as well as his desire to eventually fulfill his promise to his parents. (Instrumentalism)

2. Joe should stick with his original plan and graduate swiftly. (Planning)

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[38] This seems to be Korsgaard's conclusion as well. In her "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason" paper she argues that in order for a principle to be a principle of reason we must be able to be guided by it. But as we have already seen, in the instrumentalist view we are considering here we are unable to deliberate about our ends, and hence, according to Korsgaard, "Whatever you do is the means to the end which you are *going* to pursue...[but] how can you be guided by a principle when anything you do counts as following it?" Korsgaard, "Normativity," 229. Hence, Korsgaard argues that we *cannot* determine an agent's ends merely by viewing their behavior and assuming that she is pursuing the end that she desires most. Korsgaard, "Normativity," 230. Rather, we must either distinguish between actual and rational desires, or between what she wants locally and what she "really wants." But, as Korsgaard argues, in either case something *besides* instrumentalism is required in order to make the requisite distinction.

So what would the universalizability theory suggest that Joe do in this situation? The answer is that the universalizability theory would hold that Joe should fulfill his promise to his parents and take care of his siblings, even though this would mean foregoing his desires for employment security and satisfaction and a speedy graduation. Remember that earlier in our discussion of the universalizability theory we used an example of making a false promise to show that if this maxim were universalized, promises would become meaningless in the sense that one could not make a promise in the first place (since everyone would know that you weren't going to keep it).[39] This analysis shows that the maxim of making a false promise undercuts itself because it renders promise-making impossible, and hence the universalizability theorist would conclude that all agents *must* keep their promises, which, in Joe's case, would mean that he is obligated to do whatever it takes to fulfill his promise to his parents. Now, it could be argued that under either the instrumental or planning theory Joe was *eventually* going to fulfill this promise, but it doesn't seem as though the eventual or even partial fulfillment of one's promises is going to cut it here, especially since Joe promised his parents that he would care for his siblings *without delay*. In fact, the argument could be made, on the side of the universalizability theory, that partially or eventually fulfilling one's promises is a form of lying,[40] and lying is also something that cannot pass the CI-procedure: Joe promised that he would care for his siblings *without delay*, and that does *not* mean either (a) after I've changed my major to something that suits my goals of employment security/satisfaction OR (b) after I've completed my plan to graduate swiftly. In other words (and this seems completely consistent with the spirit of the universalizability theory), Joe's desires are *irrelevant* when it comes to his promise to his parents: under the CI-procedure, Joe is obligated to

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[39] See pp. 7-8.
[40] Perhaps this goes without saying, but lying and making a false promise appear to be the same thing, and hence obviously if one doesn't pass the CI-procedure, neither will the other.

keep his promise, *regardless* of the impact this decision will have on his current desires. Thus, in Joe's situation the universalizability theory offers a third and unique practical inference.

4.   COMPETING THEORIES → COMPETING INFERENCES →

NIHILISM

In the previous section we saw how, in the case of Joe the college student, three theories of practical reason yielded three different practical inferences:

1.   Instrumentalism held that Joe should have stayed in school and changed his major to something that will fulfill his immediate desires of secure employment and career satisfaction as well as his desire to eventually fulfill his promise to his parents.

2.   The planning theory sanctioned Joe's decision to graduate on schedule because it constituted fulfillment of his original plan to graduate swiftly.

3.   Universalizability disagreed with both of these inferences and held that Joe should honor the promise he made to his parents regardless of whether or not this decision would fulfill any of his current desires.

With this fact in mind, we are now in a position to make a very important observation about the field of practical reason in general. As I see it, most philosophers involved with practical reason seem to accept the idea that practical reason's primary function is to enable agents to discover an answer to the question "what should I do," and consequently they have been developing theories that attempt to explain (in either a descriptive or normative fashion) how agents do this. However, with so many theories currently being defended in the field, the question "what should I do" doesn't seem to be the most basic question any longer. Rather, the question "how should I reason?" seems to be even more important,[8] simply because it seems as though one's actions are

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[8] Indeed, this seems to be a question that interests laymen and philosophers alike, judging by the proliferation of practical guides to decision making. In other words, it seems as though this issue isn't just

determined *directly* by how one chooses to reason, which is what Joe's experience is meant to illustrate: Joe could have done (at least) three *different* things with respect to his graduation, and what he *actually* ended up doing seems, given the analysis above, to depend *directly* upon how he chose to reason about his predicament (i.e., which theory of practical reason he used to reason his way through the situation).

If this is correct, then the following question must now be raised: which theory (and therefore which inference) ought Joe to adopt as his own? If Joe is expected to provide reasons for his actions (i.e., if he is supposed to be able to answer the question "Why did you do that?"), then it seems as though he has to decide what to do via *some* process of practical reason in order to arrive at those reasons. But if different practical theories yield different results, then the first question Joe needs to ask himself is *not* "What should I do?" but "Which theory of practical reason is the best, and why," since what Joe will do will be determined by how he reasons. In other words, I wish to raise the following worry: if we accept the need to justify our actions by providing reasons for them, then absent an AM that can be used to tell us which form of practical reason we ought to use in order to get these reasons it follows that *we really don't have any reasons at all, even if we engage in some form of practical reason,* for someone could always ask "Why didn't you do x (as opposed to y) for *these* reasons (as opposed to the reasons you came up with)?" And if this is correct, and the reasons that we get by engaging in practical reason don't really count as reasons absent an AM, then the question becomes "Why engage in practical reasoning at all?" Thus, in the absence of an AM, it appears as though there is no such thing as nonarbitrary reasons for actions, and hence nihilism threatens to be the proper attitude to take when it comes to reasons and actions. Let us now return to Joe's situation in order to illustrate this problem more clearly.

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philosophical: many people seem to be agonizing over the question "Have I reasoned *properly* about x?" *not* "Have I reasoned about x?" I will address this again later in the conclusion.

Let us suppose that Joe is an instrumentalist. As such, he concludes that he ought to change his major from history to electrical engineering, since being an engineer seems to offer job security and Joe finds solving technical problems immensely fulfilling. However, Sally, Joe's grandmother, is a planner and believes that Joe made the wrong decision. On her view, Joe should have stuck with his original plan and graduated as a history major, his doubts about job security and long-term fulfillment notwithstanding. She thus asks Joe, "Why did you decide to change your major rather than graduate?" Joe responds that he didn't believe that graduating would fulfill his present desires (first-order instrumental reason), and counts that as sufficient reason for making his decision. But his grandmother isn't satisfied with this answer and argues further: "Why did you choose to reason about your situation in that way? If you had reasoned from your original plan, you would have graduated on schedule, not changed your major!" Joe is now in the following dilemma: he can either provide some second-order reason for why his instrumental reasoning process yielded a better inference than his grandmother's, or he could say that he has no reason for preferring his own method to that of his grandmother's.

Unfortunately for Joe, the former option seems to require an AM, which, we have argued, is currently unavailable in the field of practical reasoning. That isn't to say that practical reasoning theorists don't offer arguments in support of their theories or criticisms against competing theories; rather, as Millgram pointed out at the outset of the thesis, there are simply too many theories and too many argumentative styles in play for one to make a simple, informed decision regarding the relative merits of one practical theory as opposed to another. That is, Joe *could* argue for the virtues of his theory and point out the flaws in his grandmother's, but who is to say that his approach to this question is the right one, or that his argumentative style is the most effective at answering this meta-question regarding the relative merits of one practical theory as opposed to another? To repeat Millgram's observation: "Evidently, entering into a debate about the right way

to reason practically means entering into another, second-order debate as well, a debate regarding the right ways to *argue* about practical reasoning."[42]

The point here isn't that this question is unanswerable.[43] The point is that no one has bothered *to* answer it, which leaves Joe in quite a predicament: he doesn't have the tools to provide the second-order reasons being demanded of him, but he also doesn't want to say that his choice of method was *without* reason, for that would amount to saying that his choice of action, though rational on one theory, was *completely arbitrary* since he cannot justify his choice on the level of reasoning about methods of practical reason. In other words, if Joe holds that he has no reason for preferring instrumentalism to his grandmother's planning theory, then since what he does is a function of how he reasons, he is essentially saying that what he does is *arbitrary*, that he really *has no reason for what he does*, even though he engaged in a form of practical reasoning. Thus Joe's inability to justify his choice of method for practical reasoning seems to invalidate the reasons his chosen method offered him in the first place, which prompts us to ask: if the reasons we get via practical reasoning *aren't really reasons*, then why engage in practical reasoning at all? Why not just accept the fact that, absent an AM to provide us with second-order reasons to justify our choice of method, what we do is essentially arbitrary? In short, why aren't we all nihilists?

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[42] Millgram, "Current State of Play," 19.
[43] That is, the question *is* answerable, but not without some measure of difficulty. In my conclusion I will mention a few difficulties that will confront those who may wish to answer this meta-question.

5. OBJECTIONS: VELLEMAN, KORSGAARD AND McDOWELL

The simplest way to avoid the conclusion of the previous section is to argue that either (a) we already have an AM that tells us which method of practical reason we ought to use, or (b) there are good reasons to believe that the question of which method of practical reason ought to be engaged in never arises, and hence there really is no need for an AM in the first place. In either case, it would follow that our actions are anything but arbitrary, because we either (a) really *do* have reasons for reasoning in this way as opposed to that, or (b) the need to provide such reasons never arises, and hence the threat of nihilism disappears. In this section, I will address the arguments of three philosophers who have argued precisely along these lines: J. David Velleman and Christine M. Korsgaard will be interpreted as presenting objections of type (a), while John McDowell's argument will fit into category (b). Admittedly, none of these philosophers were attempting to deal with the threat of nihilism directly, but nevertheless their arguments do constitute serious objections to the argument presented in the previous section, and as such need to be addressed. In what follows, I will discuss each of these philosophers in turn, beginning with Velleman and concluding with McDowell.

5.1 - J. David Velleman

This section will consist of two parts. First, I will demonstrate how Velleman's argument in "The Possibility of Practical Reason"[44] constitutes an objection of type (a) to the previous section's argument. Second, I will argue that Velleman's objection fails on the following two counts: (1) it relies on an analogy that is self-defeating and (2) his appeal to truth or true belief is not sufficient to solve (1). I will then conclude that because of these two difficulties Velleman's objection fails to refute the argument of the previous section.

Velleman believes that the correct method of practical reasoning can be determined by first discovering what constitutes a reason for action; that is, if there truly is something normative about our reasons for acting (i.e., if we truly can criticize others for not recognizing x as a reason to do y[45]), then the proper method of practical reasoning is the one that produces actions that are in accord with these normative (or "external"[46]) reasons. In Velleman's words:

> [In order for there to be external reasons] the externalist must at some point provide practical reasoning with a substantive standard of success, which will either consist in or give rise to a substantive account of the features that constitute reasons for an action. The externalist will then have to justify his normative judgment that an agent ought to be swayed by consideration of the specified features.[47]

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[44] J. David Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," *Ethics* 106, no. 4 (July 1996): 694-726. Reprinted in J. David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). My citations will be drawn from the former.

[45] This view is very similar to that of Korsgaard. See Velleman's discussion of (and agreement with) Korsgaard's view here: Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 697-98.

[46] On my reading, Velleman is interpreting the normative feature being sought after here as what distinguishes an external reason from an internal one. That is, external reasons are applicable as reasons in one's rational processes regardless of one's internal temperament or desires, whereas an internal reason is only a reason if I am prone, in virtue of my internal temperament or desires, to accept it as such. In short, if x is a reason in the externalist sense, then it is a reason for *everyone*, regardless of whether or not the person is inclined to view it as such. While this distinction between internal and external reasons is one of the primary focal points of Velleman's article, for my purposes here this distinction (and Velleman's reaction to it) is of little importance and hence I will not address it. Instead, I want to focus on what he says about the constitutive elements of action and theoretical reason, since these are the observations from which one could construct an AM.

[47] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 703 (emphasis mine).

If correct, Velleman's position could qualify as an AM since it would allow one to determine, via reference to the substantive account of normative reasons identified by Velleman's method, the proper method of practical reasoning, thus avoiding the conclusions drawn in §4.

However, Velleman acknowledges that at this point his account faces a problem: assuming that a substantive account of the features that constitute reasons for an action can be given, how is this account going to be justified without begging the question? That is, how is this account of reasons going to be justified *independently* of the theory of practical reason used to get the reasons in the first place? As Velleman argues,

> The generic concept of rational action is just the concept of action that would issue from competent practical reasoning. Until there is something that counts as competence in practical reasoning, nothing counts as a rational action in the generic sense. And competence in practical reasoning can be defined only in relation to the object of the enterprise, since competence is a disposition toward success. To be indicative of competent practical reasoning is to be indicative of practical reasoning that's well suited to achieving its object. *[But] defining the object of practical reasoning as action that's rational in this sense would thus be to string definitions in a circle, leaving the object of practical reasoning still undefined.* It would be like trying to teach someone a game by telling him that the object was to make a competent showing; whereas what counts as a competent showing always depends on the substantive object of the game.[48]

What Velleman is pointing out here is that the justification of one's account of what constitutes a reason for action *cannot* consist of a practical argument, for that would be using practical reason in order to justify one's concept of a reason, which is viciously circular (since you used that theory of practical reason in order to get what you want to call a "reason" in the first place). In order to solve this problem, we must have recourse to some other method that can establish this substantive account *independently from* the concept of rationality in general or any other particular form of practical reason, which, Velleman argues, can be accomplished by drawing an analogy between practical and theoretical reason.

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[48] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 702-03 (emphasis mine).

In a nutshell, Velleman's argument runs along these lines:[49] theoretical reason is aimed at a particular goal or object: true belief.[50] Furthermore, in the case of theoretical reason, it appears that when one fails to recognize the relevant theoretical reasons for accepting a particular belief as true, one is not only worthy of the title "irrational" but one also ceases to qualify as a *rational believer* when it comes to that particular belief:

> If someone isn't inclined to believe what seems true on a topic, he is no longer subject to reasons for believing things about it; but he is no longer subject to reasons for belief about it...*because he is no longer a believer about it at all, and a fortiori no longer a rational believer.* He isn't in the business of forming beliefs on the topic, to begin with, unless he is inclined to believe what seems true about it.[51]

Thus, in the case of theoretical reason, it seems as though the ability to recognize theoretical reasons as relevant to the question at hand is what qualifies or constitutes you as a rational believer because these reasons are what get you to the goal of theoretical reason, namely, true belief. In other words, reasons for belief acquire their normative status *not* because they stem from your inclinations or desires but from the fact that you *must* accept them in order to obtain true belief. Thus, the normative status of theoretical reasons is achieved by linking them to the aim of theoretical reason and making the achievement of this aim constitutive of one's status as a rational believer.

Might the same thing be said of practical reasons? Velleman seems to think so:

> Perhaps, then, action can be distinguished from other forms of behavior by a substantive goal, and an inclination toward this goal can create the susceptibility necessary to the application of reasons for acting. In that case, reasons for acting would be considerations relevant to the constitutive aim of action, just as reasons for believing are indicators of truth, which is the constitutive aim of belief. And anyone who wasn't susceptible to reasons for acting, because he had no inclination toward the relevant aim, *wouldn't be in a position to act*, anyway, and therefore wouldn't be subject to reasons for acting; just as anyone who has no inclination

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[49] See Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 704-19.

[50] "The object of theoretical reasoning is to arrive at true belief." Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 705.

[51] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 706-07 (emphasis mine).

toward the truth isn't in a position to believe and isn't subject to reasons for belief.[52]

With this in mind, Velleman seems to be arguing that theoretical and practical reason are similar on two counts. First, both theoretical and practical reason have an aim or goal that is constitutive of rational belief and rational action, namely, true belief in the case of the former, and "conscious control over one's behavior," or "self-awareness"[53] in the case of the latter. Second, Velleman seems to be arguing that one's status as a "rational agent," just like one's status as a rational believer, can be linked to one's acceptance of practical reasons that are "relevant to the constitutive aim of action": if one is susceptible to these reasons, one qualifies as a rational agent, and if not, one is simply not an agent at all (since he is not pursuing reasons that are relevant to what constitutes an action, namely, self-awareness). And finally, if correct, Velleman is definitely in a position to argue that he can avoid the nihilistic conclusion of §4 because he has an AM: the correct form of practical reason is the one that produces reasons that accord with the constitutive aim of action, and we know this not via practical argument (which would be circular), but because practical reason is analogous to theoretical reason in the way specified above.

But does Velleman's analogy between theoretical and practical reason really provide the justification for a substantive account of normative reasons that we were initially seeking? My contention is that it does not because Velleman's own arguments can be used to undercut the analogy itself.[54] Recall that Velleman was forced to draw this analogy between theoretical and practical reason because of his worry that justifying one's substantive account of normative

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[52] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 714 (emphasis mine).

[53] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 720. Interestingly enough, Velleman at one point believed that just plain old "autonomy" was good enough to serve as the constitutive goal of action. See J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). However, Velleman has recently concluded that autonomy is not a very fruitful way of speaking about the constitutive goal of action, and he has since adopted the position that "self-awareness" is the goal. For his most recent statement (or perhaps we should say "restatement") of this position, see Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 30. We will also discuss just what Velleman means by this term below. See pp. 32-34.

[54] I am greatly indebted to Marissa Lelanuja for this objection.

practical reasons was impossible via practical argument, since this would be viciously circular. However, Velleman seems to have failed to notice that this same argument could be used against his account of theoretical reasoning also, for as any student of theoretical reasoning knows, there are many ways for one to engage in theoretical reasoning processes, some of which can be proven sound and complete (e.g., classical logic, modal logic, etc.),[55] and others (which, as we will see, are the ones that are particularly problematic) that just *seem* to be self-validating and truth-preserving (e.g., affirming the consequent—see below). But in either case, it doesn't seem as though the analogy between practical and theoretical reason is going to provide us with the sort of justification we were initially looking for, because there are multiple methods of theoretical reasoning that can be used to arrive at justified belief, and we don't have any way of determining which method of theoretical reasoning is the right one.[56] Thus, before we can confidently say that the analogy between theoretical and practical reason can be used to justify an account of normative reasons, we must first determine the proper form of theoretical reason, which cannot be done via theoretical argument, since that would be circular as per Velleman's own argument. In other words, even if the analogy between practical and theoretical reason holds, it doesn't seem like we're any better for it, since the analogy places us in a position where we are confronted with multiple forms of theoretical reason (some valid, and some not) and no way of determining which one ought to be used (since using theoretical reason to make this determination would be viciously circular). Hence, it seems as though Velleman's analogy is self-defeating in the following way: the argument that prompted the analogy can be used to destroy it.

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[55] I am here referring to the fact that it is possible to prove that the set of one's rules of inference (i.e., one's decision procedure) in any system of logic is sound and complete. Gödel, however, proved that while this may be the case, it is possible that these rules may not always give us an answer in every case.

[56] I will point out below that this is also true of practical reason: there are many methods that provide us with practical reasons, but even if we can specify what is constitutive of a practical reason this isn't going to help us discover which method we *need* to use.

Velleman is ready to reply to this objection by appealing to the notion of truth, contending (as we have already seen) that the proper object of theoretical reason is *not* the production of any belief whatsoever, but the production of *true* belief, and the recognition of the proper object of theoretical reason will serve to aid us in the selection of the proper method of theoretical reason. As Velleman puts it:

> The nature of reasons for belief, and the inclination that mediates their influence, are fairly clear. The object of theoretical reasoning is to arrive at true belief; and since true belief needn't be defined in terms of success in theoretical reasoning, it constitutes a substantive rather than formal standard of success [i.e., it avoids circularity]. Reasons for a particular belief are recognized by their perceived relevance to this substantive standard of success, as considerations that appear to guarantee or probabilify the truth of the belief. And these considerations influence a person's beliefs by virtue of an inclination to believe what seems true. Here, then, are considerations of a single kind and a single inclination to mediate their influence.[57]

However, it is not clear that these considerations are going to be strong enough to ensure that we will be able to adopt one form of theoretical reason over another. In fact, it's not even clear whether considerations of truth would allow us to rule out fallacious forms of theoretical reason. That is, it seems possible to object to Velleman's line of reasoning here by pointing out that, in addition to the commonly accepted forms of theoretical reason, it is possible to interpret logical fallacies as being acceptable forms of theoretical reason because they also *seem* to provide us with justified true beliefs, which is an idea that has been aptly defended by Wesley Salmon:

> We can, of course, prove a metatheorem to the effect that *modus ponens* in the object language is truth-preserving. The metaproof, however, requires inference in the metalanguage, and this in turn requires that the metalanguage have *modus ponens* or some other rule of inference which is at least as suspect. To prove that a kind of rule is truth-preserving, it is necessary to have and use rules of deduction in that very proof. Hence, we cannot prove, without either circularity or vicious regress, that *modus ponens* is truth preserving—that is to say, we cannot justify deduction.[58]

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[57] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 705-06.
[58] Wesley C. Salmon, "The Concept of Inductive Evidence," in *The Justification of Induction*, ed. Richard Swinburne (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 53.

Salmon does go on to deny the conclusion that deduction cannot be justified at all,[59] but he does argue that the observation made in this passage seems to suggest that we *cannot*, as A.J. Ayer puts it, allow forms of theoretical inference to "act as judge in its own cause...[because] there logically could be no court of superior jurisdiction."[60] But why not? Salmon points out that the problem with allowing inferences to be their own judge is simply the fact that there would be "too many courts of equal jurisdiction. Vicious circularity manifests itself; if each type of reasoning is left 'to act as judge in its own cause', there are many conflicting judgments,"[61] which seems to be precisely what Velleman was concerned about when he argued that practical argument couldn't be used to justify one's account of practical reasons. But, as Salmon has just pointed out, the same thing can be said about theoretical reason as well, considerations of truth notwithstanding.

With these observations in mind, the objection to Velleman could be stated thus: if a logical inference as simple as *modus ponens* cannot be justified without circularity or vicious regress, then what prevents us from using forms of theoretical inference like affirming the consequent, especially when these structures seem to produce inferences that are on par with those produced by *modus ponens?* For instance, consider the following argument:[62]

1. If affirming the consequent is valid, then Barack Obama is the United States' first African-American president.

2. Obama is the United States' first African-American president.

3. Therefore, affirming the consequent is valid.

Regarding inferences like these, Salmon observes that they are similar to inferences provided by structures like *modus ponens* in the following way: "This argument has true premisses, it conforms

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[59] "Although we cannot now conceive the possibility of a genuine counter-example, future developments might make us change our minds. For the present, however, we can find no grounds whatever for withholding the judgement that *modus ponens* is truth-preserving." Salmon, "Inductive Evidence," 54-55.

[60] A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1956), 75.

[61] Salmon, "Inductive Evidence," 58.

[62] Adapted from Salmon's own example. See Salmon, "Inductive Evidence," 58.

to the form of affirming the consequent, and it asserts the validity of this form. *If we allow customary inductive methods to act as judge in their own behalf, we do so by ignoring all other judges and listening only to the judgement in the particular court we happen to be in.*"[63]

In other words, suppose you believe (and rightly so) that *modus ponens* is a valid inference that leads to true belief. Fair enough. But what Salmon seems to be arguing here is that there is nothing in the nature of "true belief" that would prevent someone else from believing that affirming the consequent is *also* a valid inference that leads to true belief (as the argument above is meant to show). Hence, it doesn't seem as though we will be able to salvage Velleman's analogy by appealing to truth, since, given Salmon's observations, we can't even use truth to rule out invalid forms of inference like affirming the consequent without being guilty of circularity. Thus, we are still in the position of having multiple forms of theoretical "reasoning"—all of which claim to be "truth-preserving," but some of which aren't even valid—and no way of determining which one ought to be used. Furthermore, to repeat the earlier point, we cannot resolve the question of which method of theoretical reasoning we ought to use via theoretical argument because of the threat of circularity. Hence, in the case of theoretical reason at least, it doesn't seem as though discovering the constitutive elements of rational belief is going to aid us in selecting the proper form of theoretical reasoning.

But what about the other half of Velleman's analogy? Just because we have doubts that his AM will yield the proper form of theoretical reasoning doesn't mean that we couldn't still use it to discover the proper method of practical reasoning. That is, unless it can be shown that specifying the constitutive aim of action doesn't rule out the possibility that multiple methods of practical reason can achieve this aim, then we haven't shown that Velleman's AM couldn't be used to discover the proper method of practical reason (indeed, all we've shown is that Velleman's analogy

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[63] Salmon, "Inductive Evidence," 58 (emphasis mine).

is a shoddy one). Unfortunately for Velleman, it seems plausible that multiple methods of practical reason, including those discussed in §2, would yield the sort of self-awareness he is looking for, which he outlines as follows:

> ...[there is] a third possibility for the relation between self-control and self-awareness. Maybe consciousness of what one is doing is that by which one exerts control. Consciously controlling one's behavior would then be—not just controlling it and also, or thereby, becoming aware of it—but rather having a *controlling consciousness* of one's behavior, a guiding awareness of what one is doing. This possibility would account not only for an agent's self-control but also for the quality of his self-awareness, since his knowledge of what he was doing would be, so to speak, directive rather than receptive knowledge.[64]

But just what is this concept of "self-awareness," and just how does it lead to the "controlling consciousness" mentioned here? Velleman fleshes out this picture by using an example of catching a falling glass.[65] According to Velleman, there are two ways to interpret one's attempt to catch this falling glass. On the one hand, the action could be interpreted as merely a reflex reaction, in which case the action would fail to qualify as a "full-blooded action" because you are *not* consciously directing the action: you are merely observing it. In Velleman's words:

> When you extend your hand reflexively, you react before you know it, but then you observe your reaction. Extending your hand in order to save the glass causes you to accept the proposition that you're doing so. *When you're acting intentionally, however, acceptance precedes behavior:* you accept that you'll extend your hand to save the glass, and this acceptance is what prompts you to do so.[66]

This is an extremely important passage for understanding Velleman's conception of self-awareness and why he believes self-awareness is constitutive of action. First, this quotation informs us that actions must be explained by some sort of causal sequence. Second, it distinguishes between causes that are outside our conscious control (i.e., those that we observe, merely, like a reflex reaction) and those that *are* within our conscious control. Finally, Velleman links these two elements to form his

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[64] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 720 (emphasis in original).
[65] The falling glass example forms a major part of Velleman's discussion of what he means by self-awareness and controlling consciousness, which constitute the final six pages of his article. See Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 720-26.
[66] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 722 (emphasis mine).

conception of self-awareness and what Velleman refers to as "full-blooded" actions: full-blooded actions are produced only when agents are self-aware, and this self-awareness consists in consciously accepting the causal proposition that will lead to or produce the action specified by that causal proposition. As Velleman writes:

> The goal-directed movement of your hand comes under your conscious control because it is prompted by *your accepting that you will perform such a movement.* And it is prompted by that acceptance because of your inclination toward conscious control of what you're doing—which is just an inclination toward autonomy. Your movement thus becomes autonomous precisely by manifesting your inclination toward autonomy; and in becoming autonomous, it becomes a full-blooded action. A full-blooded action is therefore behavior that manifests your inclination toward autonomy, just as a belief is a cognitive attitude that manifests your inclination toward truth.[67]

In order to be perfectly clear about this picture, let us return to the falling glass example. According to Velleman, an agent that is self-aware would have the following thought process when confronted with the following glass:

1. I want to save that glass.

2. I could save the glass by extending my hand.

3. So I'll extend my hand.[68]

Given this thought process, what happens, on Velleman's view, seems to be the following: first, the agent is simultaneously aware of both his desire to save the glass and the fact that his desires regularly give rise to actions. Second, before he actually extends his hand, he consciously predicts, in virtue of his conscious awareness of the aforementioned facts, that he will, in fact, do something in order to fulfill his desire as expressed in (1), which includes the action in (2) of extending his hand. This prediction or conscious acceptance of the inference "My desire to save the glass will cause me to extend my hand" then prompts him to actually extend his hand (3), and thus we have

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[67] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 723 (emphasis mine).
[68] Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," 723.

not only explained the action in terms of a causal sequence, but also distinguished it from other, lesser actions by showing how self-awareness yields the controlling consciousness mentioned earlier. In other words, our conscious acceptance of the fact that we will act in accordance with our strongest desires qualifies as practical reasoning on Velleman's view because this conscious acceptance *is* what prompts us to act, and while it is true that we can perform actions without this conscious acceptance, these actions aren't really full-blooded actions because they lack this element of self-awareness or conscious control, which Velleman has argued is the constitutive element of action.

While much more could be said about this picture, for the sake of argument let us just assume that Velleman is right and that self-awareness is what he says it is and furthermore that it is what constitutes an action. It would then follow that, in virtue of its status as the constitutive element of action, self-awareness places a normative requirement on any theory of practical reason: in order for it to be a proper method of practical reason, it must yield inferences that induce the agent to produce actions while being self-aware in the sense outlined above. But even if this account is correct, it still doesn't seem as though we can use it in order to rule out any of the methods of practical inference discussed earlier, since it seems as though instrumentalism, planning, and universalizability all produce actions that would cause the agent to be self-aware in the sense indicated above. That is, whether one is consciously working to achieve the ends of one's immediate desires or plans, or whether one is striving to act in accordance with maxims that are universalizable, in each case the use of these methods is going to produce the "controlling consciousness" mentioned by Velleman, which would mean that the inferences produced by any of these methods would be acceptable under Velleman's method. Hence it doesn't seem as though discovering the constitutive elements of action will produce an AM of the sort necessary to avoid the conclusions of §4: we cannot use Velleman's method to rule out the multiple methods of

practical reason that confront agents, and thus Velleman's argument cannot be used to diffuse §4's threat of nihilism.

To illustrate more concretely just why this is the case, let us consider the following examples of inferences produced by the three types of practical reasoning discussed in §2 in an effort to see if they would produce actions that qualify as actions under Velleman's criteria. We have already seen in the falling glass example that Velleman would accept instrumental inferences because of the fact that (1) our desires causally explain our actions, and (2) we can develop self-awareness by being aware of these desires and making conscious predictions about our behavior based upon them, which predictions then lead to the production of the actions themselves. Thus, if Velleman is correct, then actions that issued from instrumental inferences would qualify as full-blooded actions because they would allow for self-awareness and conscious control.

But what about planning inferences? Can't a similar story be told about them, and the actions they produce? Remember that in our discussion of plans we noted how Bratman argues that they are conduct controlling and stable,[69] which could easily lead to a reliable causal chain of the following sort: I am consciously aware that for the vast majority of situations I do what I have previously planned to do, or, in other words, my plans are the reason behind (or cause for) what I do. Now that we have the causal explanation for our actions, it is only a short step to get the self-awareness required by Velleman's AM: I can consciously make predictions about what I am going to do based on my conscious awareness of the fact that my plans (usually) cause me to do what I do, and then, as per Velleman's explanation, these predictions or inferences would result in the actions themselves because (1) they are a result of a causal process and (2) they involve the self-awareness that Velleman is seeking. In this way planning inferences *also* seem to produce full-

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[69] See pp. 5-7.

blooded actions, which means that the planning method of practical reason is also an acceptable method under Velleman's criteria.

The foregoing treatment is, I believe, sufficient to prove that Velleman has not provided us with the sort of AM that can avoid the conclusions of §4 (since we now have, despite Velleman's constitutive account of action, two theories of practical reason that yield inferences that result in the production of full-blooded actions), but I think that we can also show that universalizability theories can produce full-blooded actions as well, which would leave us with *three* valid forms of practical reason. In order to see why this is the case, we must first show that the universalizability theorist can provide a causal explanation for action, which is possible by appealing to duty, for the universalizability theory tells us that the only maxims that are acceptable to act upon are those that we are duty bound to follow (or refrain from). Thus under the universalizability theory duty is the causal force behind the action, and we decide what we are going to do by determining whether we are duty bound to act on or avoid any particular maxim via the CI-procedure. Velleman's self-awareness then comes into the picture in virtue of the fact that agents who follow the universalizability theory are consciously aware of the fact that duty guides their actions, and thus they can make predictions or inferences about what they are going to do based on their conscious awareness of their duty to perform or refrain from any particular action. Hence, the agent knows, before she produces the action, that she is going to, in fact, produce that action in virtue of the fact that she is aware of the causal relationship between her conception of duty and that action. Thus, as per Velleman's theory, these conscious predictions/inferences then produce the action, which yields the feeling of conscious control over the action. Hence, the universalizability theorist can also argue that his method of practical reason produces full-blooded actions under Velleman's criteria, and hence Velleman's attempt to produce an AM fails: we now

have three methods of practical reason, all of which produce full-blooded actions, which renders us unable to avoid the conclusion of §4.

5.2 - Christine M. Korsgaard

In this section I will first show how Korsgaard's arguments could be used to construct an AM, after which I will argue that Korsgaard's AM is unmotivated, in the sense that it doesn't tell us *why* we should care about authoring actions in the way Korsgaard describes.[70] If correct, this would mean that Korsgaard's AM lacks the normativity that is necessary in order to avoid the conclusion of §4, and therefore, both the need for an AM and the threat of nihilism remain.

Korsgaard's objection to the argument presented in §4 is similar to Velleman's, in that she also attempts to identify the constitutive elements of action, and then argues that if an action lacks these elements it is no longer an action but is "defective."[71] Thus, like Velleman, Korsgaard is in the position to hold that we already have an AM, since her argument would imply that the correct form of practical reason is the one that produces actions that conform to the constitutive standard of action itself. However, unlike Velleman, Korsgaard believes that we identify this constitutive standard not by appealing to the agent's self-awareness but rather to the fact that in order for an action to be an action, we must be able to attribute it to *someone,* that is, to a person:

> What distinguishes action from mere behavior and other physical movements is that it is *authored*—it is in a quite special way attributable to the *person* who does it, by which I mean, the *whole* person.[72]

To act then, on Korsgaard's view, *is* to be a person,[73] but this does not mean that one need only act in order to establish one's personhood. Instead, Korsgaard argues that:

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[70] In my analysis of Korsgaard I will be drawing heavily from David Enoch, "Agency Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't Come from What is Constitutive of Action," *Philosophical Review* 115, no. 2 (2006): 169-98. I should also note that my objections to Korsgaard's views could also be directed against Velleman, since Velleman is also using the constitutivist strategy to identify the normativity of reasons.

[71] I discuss this aspect of Korsgaard's view in greater detail below. See pp. 62-66.

[72] Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 3 (emphasis in original).

> ...what makes an action yours...is that it springs from and is in accordance with your constitution...The actions which are most truly a person's own are precisely those actions which most fully unify her and therefore most fully constitute her as their author. They are those actions which both issue from, and give her, the kind of volitional unity which she must have if we are to attribute the action to her as a whole person.[74]

Thus it seems that, on Korsgaard's view, a "person" (like an "action") is also a concept that admits of constitutive elements, and only when a person is present who authors actions that are compatible with what is constitutive of her personhood (i.e., her constitution) do we find actions that really qualify as actions because only in these circumstances are we justified in attributing the action to her, which attribution is constitutive action in general. If true, this would imply that the correct method of practical reason is the one that serves to "unify and constitute" one's existence as a person (which, as it turns out, is the universalizability thesis) because only when actions flow from our constitutions in this way can the actions produced really be *ours* (i.e., only in these circumstances can they be attributed to us), which puts Korsgaard in the position to argue that there is no need for an AM to determine the proper form of practical reason: an analysis of the constitutive elements of personhood and action attribution accomplishes this, and thereby vanquishes the threat of nihilism presented in §4.

But just how is self-constitution accomplished by means of action? The answer seems to already be contained in the previous discussion. Agents constitute themselves *as agents* by authoring actions in a way that enables them to distinguish *themselves* from the action itself.[75] That is, by discovering, via rational deliberation, a maxim that is universalizable and then, by

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[73] "Action *is* self-constitution. And accordingly,...what makes actions good or bad is how well they constitute you." Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.3.4.

[74] Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 3.

[75] "...to will an end is not just to cause it, or even to allow an impulse in me to operate as its cause, but, so to speak, to consciously pick up the reins, and make *myself* the cause of the end. And if I am to constitute *myself* as the cause of an end, then I must be able to distinguish between *my* causing the end and some desire or impulse that is 'in me' causing my body to act. I must be able to see *myself* as causing something that is distinct from any of my particular, first-order impulses." Korsgaard, "Normativity," 247 (emphasis in original).

means of the will, *accepting* that maxim as the principle of choice behind the action, agents

constitute themselves as the cause of the action. As Korsgaard explains:

> To conceive yourself as the cause of your actions is to identify with the principle
> of choice on which you act. A rational will is a self-conscious causality, and a self-
> conscious causality is aware of itself as a cause. To be aware of yourself as a cause
> is to identify yourself with something in the scenario that gives rise to the action,
> and this must be the principle of choice.[76]

In other words, agents distinguish themselves from the action by following the CI-procedure, and

only when this distinction has been made can the action qualify as a true volitional action, because

only when the action and the agent are distinguished can the action be attributed to the agent.

Hence, only by authoring actions in this way can agents constitute themselves *as agents*, and thus

the universalizability thesis is the correct form of practical reasoning because this is the only form

of practical reason that enables us to make this important distinction between action and agent,

which distinction then enables us to properly attribute the actions they produce to them.

While much could be said about Korsgaard's position and the specific arguments she

presents in support of it, I would like to bracket that discussion and, for the sake of argument, just

assume that Korsgaard's picture of self-constitution is correct in order to pose the following

question: even if Korsgaard is right and self-constitution is constitutive of personhood, and that

action attribution is constitutive of action, does this constitutive account really give us the sort of

normativity required to avoid the conclusion in §4? My response is no, it does not, because while

Korsgaard believes she has identified the constitutive elements of volitional action via her theory of

self-constitution, what she *hasn't* given us in this theory is a reason to care about it. In David

Enoch's words:

> Why isn't [the skeptic] entitled to respond along the following lines: "…Perhaps I
> cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. *But why
> should I be an agent?* Perhaps I can't act without aiming at self-constitution, but

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[76] Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 26.

why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don't care about agency and action. [But] I am perfectly happy being a shmagent—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not of shmagency) of self-constitution. [Furthermore,] I am perfectly happy performing shmactions—nonaction events that are very similar to actions but that lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not of shmactions) of self-constitution."[77]

Korsgaard, of course, has made a few replies to objections such as this (as has Luca Ferrero,[78] whom I will address shortly), but none of them seem to really solve the problem. First, Korsgaard argues by way of analogy in both the Locke Lectures[79] and her "Self-Constitution" article[80] that when the normative standards of some activity—house building, for instance—aren't met, then someone simply isn't building houses. That is, certainly one normative requirement for making a good house is that it provides shelter from the weather, and hence, it follows that a good house should have a roof, tightly sealed corners and windows, etc. But while this may be true, it does *not* tell us that we *should* want to build houses in this way, for what prevents someone—a very inept contractor, for instance—from saying "I can see why you would think that, but I guess that what *I* have been doing just isn't house building, and why should I care how you classify my activities?" Likewise, in the case of games like chess, for instance, one of the constitutive elements of the game is that you attempt to checkmate your opponent's king. But, as Enoch points out, while this *is* something that is constitutive of playing chess (just like having a roof and tightly sealed corners is constitutive of building a good house), it does *not* provide us with a reason to play chess in the first place: "In order to have a reason to checkmate your opponent [or to build a house with a roof, etc.], it seems to me it is not sufficient that you do in fact play chess [or build a house]. Rather, it is also necessary that you *have a reason* to play chess (or to play the relevant specific game of

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[77] Enoch, "Shmagency," 179 (emphasis mine).
[78] Luca Ferrero, "Constitutivism and the Inescapability of Agency," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Vol. IV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Forthcoming.
[79] Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 1.4.2.
[80] Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 14-15.

chess)."[81] Thus it seems as though there is something deeply troubling about Korsgaard's constitutive account (and Velleman's, for that matter), for it doesn't seem as though the normativity she is seeking is going to come from a constitutive account since such an account fails to give us a normative reason to care about the constitutive elements identified therein.

However, perhaps the fact that agency is, as Korsgaard has also pointed out, unavoidable can salvage her (and Velleman's) account. On this line of reasoning, you have to care about what qualifies as an action because *you have to act.* In other words, to continue with the chess analogy, you have a reason to play chess because it's the only game in town. Fair enough. But again, even this claim, if true, doesn't seem to prevent someone from playing the game half-heartedly.[82] That is, even if you can't quit the game, it still doesn't seem as though you have to care about whether you're playing the game correctly (i.e., with the intent to win). You could, for instance, simply move your pieces around at random, and even if you are aware that this is not what is constitutive of playing the game of chess, like we saw before, there doesn't seem to be anything involved in such a constitutive account that requires you to *care* about just what is constitutive of playing chess. Likewise, to map this objection back onto practical reasoning, even if it is true that self-constitution is required in order to act, and even if it is true that you cannot refrain from acting, there still doesn't seem to be anything in this constitutive account that *requires* me to care about authoring actions that accord with these constitutive requirements. In short, to borrow Enoch's term, there is nothing in Korsgaard's (or, for that matter, Velleman's) account that requires me to be an agent rather than a shmagent. And if this is the case, then Korsgaard's AM simply cannot meet the nihilistic challenge raised in section §4 because it lacks the necessary normativity: it cannot be used in order to identify the proper form of practical rationality (since it cannot rule out

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[81] Enoch, "Shmagency," 185 (emphasis in original).
[82] Enoch raises this objection here: Enoch, "Shmagency," 187-92.

forms like shmagency) and therefore, both the need for an AM and the threat of practical

rationality remain.

But what if we object, not that agency is the only game in town, but rather that it is the

biggest game in town and that it offers "closure" in a way that other agential enterprises do not.

Luca Ferrero takes this line of objection against Enoch's schmagent when he writes:

> To sum up, agency is special because of two distinctive features. First, agency is
> not the only game in town, but it is the biggest possible one. In addition to
> instances of bare intentional agency, any engagement in an ordinary enterprise is
> *ipso facto* an engagement in the enterprise of agency. Second, agency is closed
> under rational reflection. It is closed under the self-directed application of its
> distinctive discursive operation, the asking for and the giving of reasons for action.
> The combination of these features is what makes agency *inescapable.* This is the
> kind of nonoptionality that supports the viability of constitutivism.[83]

In other words, according to Ferrero the schmagent objection won't work for two reasons. First,

given the fact that agency is the *largest* game in town, it follows that even the act of objecting to

agency via schmagency *is an act of intentional agency*, and as such it is "conducted in deference to

the constitutive standards of agency."[84] Thus, according to Ferrero, the schmagent, in order to

object to the normativity of agency, must do so by conforming to it, which undermines his

objection.[85] Second, Ferrero is arguing that reflecting about agency itself is also "a manifestation of

agency"[86] because of the closure principle mentioned above. That is, Ferrero believes that "one

cannot put agency on hold while trying to determine whether agency is justified because this kind

of practical reasoning is the exclusive job of intentional agency."[87] Thus the schmagent, in order to

both reflect about and formally object to agency, *must*, on Ferrero's view, presuppose the very

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[83] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 8. Page numbers are taken from the document posted on Ferrero's website: http://www.uwm.edu/~ferrero/research.htm, accessed 4/22/2009.

[84] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 8.

[85] Ferrero discusses what he thinks a real schmagent would be like on pp. 10-11 of his article, which discussion I will critique below.

[86] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 8.

[87] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 7.

standards that he is trying to avoid (namely the constitutive standards of agency), which, as we indicated earlier, undermines his position.

To this point, it doesn't appear as though Ferrero's argument is anything new; we have already seen the appeal to the inescapability of agency, as well as Enoch's response to it, which was the half-hearted agent.[88] However, Ferrero believes that his account has a response to Enoch's half-hearted agent as well, and that is that *any* engagement in *any* enterprise, including "half-hearted" enterprises (like the ones the half-hearted schmagent or half-hearted chess player are engaging in), *also* qualify as instances of genuine intentional agency, and as such must conform to whatever the constitutive standards of agency may be. In Ferrero's words:

> Ordinary examples of alienated participation, such as pretending, playacting, and simulating, are still instances of intentional agency, no less than the genuine participation in the simulated enterprise. This is another manifestation of the inescapability of agency. This means that any kind of alienated participation in agency, if modeled on this kind of pretending [i.e., that of the schmagent who only cares about producing actions that only "look similar to actions" but are really schmactions], would have to count as an instance of genuine participation in agency.[89]

If Ferrero is right, then even the half-hearted agent is still conforming to the constitutive standards of agency that he is trying so hard to avoid, because even "playacting and simulating are still instances of genuine intentional acting."[90] Ferrero then concludes that Enoch's schmagent does not constitute a serious objection to the constitutivist program.[91]

However, while Ferrero may have demonstrated that an agent *must*, due to the jurisdiction and closure provided by the agential enterprise, be an agent, it still doesn't seem as though he has given agents a reason to care about it, which is what Enoch was demanding. That is, the question we posed earlier, namely, "Why should I care about producing actions that conform to the

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[88] See p. 41 above.

[89] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 14.

[90] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 14.

[91] Ferrero, of course, discusses a number of other issues regarding constitutivism, but it will suffice for our purposes to focus on his objection to Enoch, the crux of which I have just presented.

constitutive elements of agency (whatever those may be)?" remains unanswered, and Ferrero seems to admit this fact when he observes that while it is possible to prove that reasons *for* being an agent can be given under the constitutivist picture without being circular,[92] this doesn't mean that there *are* such reasons. In fact, Ferrero admits that it might be possible for agents to confirm that what the schmagent is saying is true, namely that we *don't* have any reason to be an agent, which would yield what Ferrero calls a "pragmatic paradox."[93]

But let us bracket these admissions and, for the sake of argument, just assume that we *can* discover that we have practical reasons to be agents, and furthermore that we have arrived at these reasons in a noncircular manner. Has the constitutivist really gained any ground against the schmagent's position? It doesn't seem so, since even under these circumstances, the original question still stands: "Why should I care about these reasons, and why should I act in a way that conforms with the constitutive standard of agency that these reasons are supposed to support?" In other words, even if it is true that we have to be agents *and* that we have a reason to be an agent, does it follow that we therefore have a reason to *try* and flourish as an agent? That we should *try* to produce good actions? The simple answer seems to be "no": even if we grant the constitutivist the claim that you *have* to be an agent, and that you *can't* be one without accepting these reasons and conforming to the constitutive standard they support, the constitutivist *still* hasn't given the schmagent a reason to care about producing good actions. It still seems completely possible that you could produce actions, but without regard to the constitutive elements of agency *or* the reasons provided in support of these elements. In short, even under these circumstances the constitutivist strategy can't rule out indifference, which is what I consider the function of Enoch's schmagent to be.

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[92] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 25-31.
[93] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 31-36.

In fact, Ferrero himself seems to agree with these conclusions: "...the ontological optionality of agency, allows for the existence of genuine schmagents in the sense of being who are truly and completely indifferent to the standards of agency."[94] Ferrero, however, doesn't seem concerned by this possibility because he believes that even if these "genuine schmagents" exist, "...these are not the kinds of beings that can raise philosophical challenges to constitutivism." Why? Because they would have to be *completely* indifferent to the constitutive standards of agency, and if they were, then Ferrero seems to be implying that they would recognize the necessity of presupposing these standards in order to raise a philosophical objection, but would then demur because of their complete and utter indifference to those standards.

But is this really the case? If Ferrero is correct and constitutivism allows for the ontological possibility of genuine schmagents, then why *can't* these schmagents pose philosophical challenges to the constitutivist enterprise in much the same way as skeptics pose challenges to the epistemological enterprise: via *reductio* arguments? That is, if my interpretation of Ferrero is correct, he seems to believe that a philosophical objection coming from a schmagent is self-refuting because it presupposes the principles he is attacking (namely the constitutive standards of intentional agency), which is exactly the same response that the skeptic is typically met with when he challenges our claims to knowledge: in order to challenge our knowledge claims he has to presuppose that knowledge is possible, even if it is only knowledge of the proposition "we know nothing." But it doesn't seem as though we have to interpret the arguments of schmagents or skeptics in this manner. Why isn't the schmagent allowed to assume the constitutive standards of agency *because* the constitutivists do? That is, just because an interlocutor is conforming to certain standards of argumentation doesn't have to mean that he necessarily accepts those standards. It seems perfectly plausible to allow the schmagent (like the skeptic) to engage in what Ferrero seems

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[94] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 10.

to consider genuine acts of intentional agency in order to launch his objection of them, *if* the

schmagent's objection is interpreted as a *reductio* argument, which, interestingly enough, Ferrero

believes is the very style of argumentation that constitutivism is vulnerable to:

> The indispensability of agency does not rule out the possibility of genuine
> skeptical challenges launched inside of agency. This is why constitutivism might
> be able to engage in actual rational argumentations with these 'internal' skeptics
> and attempt to refute them. At the same time, this shows that constitutivism
> might still be vulnerable to a *reductio ad absurdum*. This is what any skeptic who
> does not take the ill-fated schmagency route is going to attempt against
> constitutivism.[95]

With these observations in mind, I will pose the question again: why can't the schmagency

argument be interpreted as such a *reductio ad absurdum?* If interpreted in this manner, it seems as

though the schmagency argument is certainly *not* "ill-fated." For instance, consider the following

argument:[96]

1. Assume that Ferrero and the constitutivists are correct: agency is normatively
   inescapable, which means that the agent must try to do *good* intentional
   actions (i.e., they must try to flourish as agents). (Premise)

2. If it is possible to perform actions imperfectly or half-heartedly, then agency is
   trivially rather than normatively inescapable. (Premise)

3. It is possible to perform actions imperfectly or half-heartedly. (Schmagency
   objection)

4. Agency is only trivially inescapable, not normatively inescapable. (2, 3)

5. Premise (1) is false. (Contradiction, 1, 4)

When couched in these terms, it just won't do to claim, as Ferrero does, that this argument is self-

refuting because in order to raise it the schmagent must accept the normative standards of agency

provided by the constitutivist picture. It seems perfectly acceptable, given the fact that the

constitutivists accept these standards, to allow the schmagent to assume them in order to show

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[95] Ferrero, "Constitutivism," 18.
[96] This argument was inspired by another argument formalized by Joel Van Zanten.

how they lead to a contradiction. Such a form of argumentation is hardly self-refuting, since the schmagent himself does not *have* to accept these standards himself to raise the argument. Furthermore, it doesn't seem as though the constitutivist can object to (3) on the grounds that such actions really aren't intentional actions, because such an objection would beg the question since in order to assert that you must already accept the constitutivist picture outlined in (I). Thus, when presented like this, it appears as though the schmagency objection still stands, Ferrero's arguments notwithstanding, which means that the constitutivist pictures of both Korsgaard and Velleman fail to provide an AM that will enable us to avoid the conclusion of §4 because an AM based on either account would lack the necessary normativity.

5.3 - John McDowell

The final objection to §4 that I would like to consider is drawn from John McDowell's interpretation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter just *NE*),[97] which interpretation has become, in recent years, the standard interpretation of what Aristotle meant by the "man of practical reason" in the *NE*.[98] According to McDowell, the argument in §4 would fail because there simply isn't a need for an AM at all: a virtuous agent can, in any situation, just *perceive* what ought to be done and will act in accordance with this perceptual capacity. On this view, our actions are anything but arbitrary, since they are determined by the virtuous person's capacity to perceive what sort of behavior is demanded by any particular situation. Thus, if correct, McDowell is in the position to claim that both the need for an AM and the threat of nihilism can be avoided because the question of "which method of practical reason ought I to engage in" just doesn't (for the virtuous agent, at least) arise at all. In what follows I will first lay out McDowell's position, after

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[97] My main source of this interpretation is John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 50-73.

[98] I am here echoing Elijah Millgram's observation (see Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 163, fn. 35.), and while we both say "standard," McDowell's reading is by no means the only interpretation available.

which I will point out what I consider to be serious flaws in McDowell's view. I will then conclude

that Aristo-McDowellian agents cannot be appealed to in order to avoid the need for an AM in

the field of practical reason.

In his article "Virtue and Reason" McDowell gives a fairly clear articulation of his view by

discussing the activities of a reliably kind person:

> A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation
> requires. Moreover, his reliably kind behaviour is not the outcome of a blind, non-
> rational habit or instinct, like the courageous behaviour—so called only by
> courtesy—of a lioness defending her cubs. Rather, that the situation requires a
> certain sort of behaviour is (one way of formulating) his reason for behaving in
> that way, on each of the relevant occasions. So it must be something which, on
> each of the relevant occasions, he is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity
> to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour. The
> deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms
> according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as
> knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a
> requirement of kindness. *The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual
> capacity.*[99]

McDowell continues:

> Hence, since the sensitivity fully accounts for its deliverances, the sensitivity fully
> accounts for the actions. But the concept of virtue is the concept of a state whose
> possession accounts for the actions which manifest it. Since that explanatory role
> is filled by the sensitivity, *the sensitivity turns out to be what the virtue is.*[100]

I believe that these two passages capture the distinctive elements of McDowell's interpretation of

the ideal Aristotelian agent: first, the agent acts not from "blind, nonrational habit or instinct" but

from *knowledge.* Second, this knowledge by which the agent acts is delivered by the agent's

sensitivity to the requirements *particular situations* impose upon behavior, a sensitivity that is

likened unto a "perceptual capacity." And finally, virtue is equated with this sensitivity or capacity

to simply perceive what behavior this particular situation requires.

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[99] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 51 (emphasis mine).
[100] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 52 (emphasis mine).

Another of the main elements in McDowell's portrait is the idea that virtuous action is *contextual*, or that its demands vary from situation to situation. As such, it is impossible to formulate so-called "rules for action," for, as McDowell observes:

> If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however, subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong—and not necessarily because one had changed one's mind; rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula.[101]

Thus McDowell argues that, rather than rules, what the virtuous agent brings with him to each and every situation is his own conception of how a human being ought to live, or, in Aristotle's terms, his own conception of *eudaimonia*. However, even this conception of *eudaimonia* is itself uncodifiable also, which fact seems to be the rationale behind McDowell's view that the ideal agent is able to perceive, by means of his conception of *eudiamonia* combined with the particular elements of the situation, how he ought to act. In other words, if you were to ask the ideal agent why she did something, it seems as though she would say something like this: "Because, given the way human beings ought to live, it was the right thing to do—can't you see that?"[102]

So, to briefly recapitulate McDowell's view:

1. Ideal agents act not from instinct or whim but from knowledge.

2. This knowledge is uncodifiable, but includes, among other things, the agent's conception the sort of life a human being ought to live, as well as information concerning the proper (i.e., virtuous) response to particular situations.

3. Because of its uncodifiability, McDowell holds that this knowledge is provided by a "perceptual capacity" developed by the agent over time.[103]

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[101] McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 58.

[102] This seems to be what McDowell had in mind when he wrote: "...it is highly implausible that all the concerns which motivate virtuous actions are intelligible, one by one, independently of appreciating a virtuous persons' distinctive way of seeing situations...We do not fully understand a virtuous person's actions—we do not see the consistency in them—unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live." McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 71.

[103] "...no one virtue can be fully possessed except by a possessor of all of them, that is, a possessor of virtue in general. Thus the particular virtues are not a batch of independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the

4. Virtue is equated with this perceptual capacity.

If correct, this view would constitute an objection to the argument of §4 because it would imply that practical reason is unnecessary: agents don't need a method in order to discover what they ought to do since they can be trained to develop a virtuous perceptual capacity that will enable them to just see what kind of behavior the situation requires. And if this is the case, then we definitely don't need to develop an AM since we don't need raise the question about *the* proper way to engage in practical reason in the first place. I will now proceed to offer a critique of this view.

I believe McDowell's picture of the ideal agent is deficient on two fronts. First, McDowell's picture seems to be an overidealization of the virtuous agent in the sense that it doesn't allow any room for rational deliberation. Certainly there are many situations wherein we can experience ourselves "just seeing" what we ought to do (e.g., an elderly woman drops her purse while waiting in front of you in the checkout line), and the fact that these experiences are rather commonplace does give some credence to McDowell's view. However, I would argue that there are just as many situations wherein the correct course of action is not at all clear, even if you have been, in Aristotle's words, "brought up in good habits."[104] In other words, if McDowell's picture of the ideal agent is correct, it doesn't seem as though he would *ever* deliberate. That is, it seems as though it would be impossible to place him in a situation where he would have to stop and deliberate about what to do—in any situation, he would just "see" the correct course of action, and this seems very implausible.

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particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: the ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behavior. *It is a single complex sensitivity of this sort which we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook.*" McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 53 (emphasis mine).

[104] This appears to have been a requirement to attend Aristotle's class: "Presumably, then, *we* must begin with things known to *us*. Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits." *NE*, 1195^{b}2-6.

At this point it could be argued that I am taking McDowell's perception metaphor too literally. Perhaps what McDowell has in mind when he refers to this perceptual capacity is something along the lines of "I perceived that x was the right thing to do," where "perceived" is meant to *include* rational deliberation. In fact, colloquial speech seems to bear out this objection, for we often hear people using visual metaphors to describe processes of rational thought: (e.g.) "I didn't do x because I saw where that was going to lead," or "I didn't do x because I just can't see myself behaving like that in that situation." In neither example does rational deliberation appear to be excluded from the agent's thought process, the visual metaphors notwithstanding, and thus perhaps McDowell's visual metaphors ought to be treated similarly.

Additionally, experience also furnishes us with many examples where the perceptual capacities of certain individuals exceed those of their fellows. Artists, for instance, are trained to be aware of different things when confronted with art than a layperson who just happens to be looking at the same painting. Hence, it doesn't seem implausible to assert that different people are going to be aware of different things in similar situations because their perceptual training may have been vastly different, and this training doesn't seem to exclude rational deliberation.[105] In these two ways it appears as though deliberation can still constitute a significant portion of McDowell's view.

I believe these objections are deficient because if adopted they will allow for situations wherein a virtuous agent will be unable to produce an action, which I believe is what McDowell might be trying to avoid via the visual metaphors in the first place. Thus while they do alleviate some of the strangeness implied by McDowell's visual metaphors, I would like to argue that these

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[105] A similar objection would hold that deliberation could be built into McDowell's view by allowing deliberation to occur either before or after the situation has actually occurred. That is, during our training as virtuous agents we could deliberate about how we actually behaved in a particular situation in order to determine how we will act should we be presented with a similar situation in the future. Thus we are still deliberating about action, just not in the heat of the moment.

objections ultimately prove to be incompatible with McDowell's view. Recall that at the outset we observed that theories of practical reason are meant to help agents answer the question "What should I do?" The first objection assumes that, when confronted with this question, there is time to deliberate, and that is true: many situations do not require immediate action; there is time to stop and deliberate, and thus there doesn't seem to be any inconsistency if one wants to invoke visual metaphors that describe the outcomes of this deliberative process. But what about those situations where immediate action *is* required, and there *isn't* time for deliberation at all? In these cases, one is aware of the situation, and one must also act *immediately* (any sort of disaster or emergency seems to necessitate this sort of action). When faced with these sorts of situations, it seems as though one *cannot* interpret a visual metaphor in the sense asserted by the first objection: in these situations, it *does* seem as though McDowell's metaphors ought to be taken literally, and this makes sense because it seems reasonable to assume that the ideal agent, in virtue of the fact that he is ideal, *would* know *exactly* what to do even in situations such as these. That is, if he had to stop and deliberate, or if he was unable to author the immediate action that situations like these demand, he just wouldn't be ideal.

Furthermore, given McDowell's commitment to what I will call the Uncodifiability Thesis[106] it seems as though it is possible that situations such as these could *always* pop up, and even if we assert that, like the artist, the perceptual capacity of the ideal agent is just further developed than his peers, it still seems possible that he could be presented with a new situation (like when he is presented with a new piece of art that uses techniques the artist has never before experienced) that requires immediate action, and again it seems as though we face the same dilemma: the virtuous agent *has* to act (or else he isn't really ideal) and hence it seems as though the perception metaphor ought to be taken literally. In these situations the virtuous agent just does,

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[106] See quotation on p. 49 above.

as McDowell seems to assert, have the capacity to "see" what the situation requires, without recourse to deliberation. Hence while these two objections present plausible alternative interpretations of McDowell's perception metaphor, in the case of emergencies it seems as though we are justified in interpreting McDowell's metaphor literally rather than figuratively since the alternative (i.e., hesitant or nonaction) is not consistent with McDowell's picture of the ideal agent.

If these arguments hold, it follows that McDowell's portrait of the ideal agent still seems to rest upon an overidealization of what an agent ought to be, and therefore it would seem that one couldn't appeal to the ideal agent in order to escape the necessity of engaging in practical reason and, given the multiplicity of methods for such an engagement, the need to develop an AM since it is impossible for regular agents to become like the ideal agents represented in McDowell's view. And if this is the case, then even if the ideal agent is upheld as the unattainable ideal, it seems as though agents will still have to deliberate about practical matters, which means that we're are still in need of an AM. Hence the conclusion of §4 still stands.

The fact that McDowell's account of the ideal agent rests on an overidealization is not the only criticism that can be leveled against his view, however. So, for the sake of argument, let us set aside these worries about overidealization and the perceptual capacity and just accept that virtue resides in this capacity, whatever it may be, and that this capacity can be developed by normal agents to the point where they will be able to avoid the use of practical reason (and thereby the need to develop an AM as well). The objection that can now be raised stems from the fact that this view seems to lead us to counterintuitive results regarding the virtuous life.[107] For instance, if the virtuous life consists in performing virtuous actions, and if we receive the impetus to perform virtuous actions from (1) being in situations that require virtuous action and (2) this perceptual capacity, then it seems possible that a virtuous person (i.e., an agent with the virtuous perceptual

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[107] I would especially like to thank Candace Vogler for suggesting this counterexample.

capacity) would never want to watch the news, turn on the TV or even go outside because by

doing so she would *constantly* be being propelled to produce virtuous actions.[108] Of course, having

these urges to produce virtuous actions constantly is inevitably going to interfere with our virtuous

person's ability to live her life,[109] and so we can imagine her moving to some remote location and

spending her days gardening or performing activities where situations that require virtuous actions

don't arise very often. In this way our virtuous agent could alleviate the tension between the near

constant stimulation of her virtuous perceptual capacity and her desire to live her own life. But

now observe what has happened: by intentionally placing herself in a situation where her perceptual

capacity isn't triggered very often, on McDowell's account *this virtuous agent is still living a*

virtuous life, provided that on the rare occasions when her sensitivities *are* triggered, she produces

the virtuous action.[110] But intuitively it seems as though someone who is trying to *avoid* performing

such actions, even if she does perform them on the requisite occasions and in harmony with her

perceptual capacity, *isn't virtuous.* Thus intuitively this picture of virtue being the result of (1) and

(2) doesn't seem to be quite right.

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[108] This is, of course, a dilemma faced by many comic book superheroes, most notably Spiderman, who is always forced to choose between his own life and the "requirements" his superpowers impose upon him. Odysseus also offers a more classic example of this tension between the demands of one's virtuous perceptual capacity and one's desire to live one's own life.

[109] I am aware that McDowell has a response to this apparent conflict between one's virtuous perceptual capacity and one's other desires (in this case, the desire to live one's own life), namely his concept of "silencing" (see McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 55-56.). On this view, the virtuous perceptual capacity "silences" the voices of other desires that would pull you in the direction of doing something other than what the virtuous perceptual capacity is telling you to do, which, in this case, would mean that this conflict between living one's own life and performing virtuous actions wouldn't arise, especially since in the Aristotelian conception of virtue there *is* no conflict between these two desires. However, as we will see shortly, this *is* the question that this example is supposed to motivate: how do we know that the Aristotelian conception of virtue is the correct one? Perhaps we *are* supposed to perform virtuous actions all the time, at the expense of our personal lives. And if this *is* the case, then it seems as though "silencing" would work in the opposite direction (i.e., it would silence our desire to live our own life, whereas on the Aristotelian conception there would be some sort-of harmony achieved between both desires). Thus it doesn't seem as though silencing can be used here to resolve the conflict without presupposing the correctness of a particular conception of virtue, which is, as I will argue shortly, *the* major question that faces McDowell's view.

[110] Thus she is living the virtuous life because she is producing virtuous actions on the requisite occasions, which we specified was the definition of the virtuous life. In other words, it doesn't seem as though the *quantity* of virtuous actions performed is a consideration when it comes to the virtuous life. Rather, the only requirement seems to be that one act in accordance with one's virtuous perceptual capacity on those occasions when said capacity requires virtuous action.

But perhaps living one's own life is going to be part of the ideal agent's conception of the virtuous life, which, if true, would allow us to avoid the counterintuitive results implied by the previous situation. The only problem with this position, however, is that we, being imperfect (or nonideal) agents, *would never know whether living one's own life is, in fact, virtuous.* Only an ideal agent would know whether he is supposed to live his own life, and thus it would seem as though we imperfect agents would have to rely on the ideal agent to inform us whether this perception of how we ought to live our lives is truly virtuous or not. But if this is true, then it raises another issue: what are imperfect agents supposed to do when virtuous agents disagree about what constitutes either (a) virtuous action or (b) the virtuous life?[111] Since imperfect agents are utterly dependent upon the virtuous agents' perceptual capacities, should two virtuous agents disagree about what really is virtuous it seems as though imperfect agents are stuck without a proper method of knowing what to do!

The idea that imperfect agents must rely on the virtuous perceptual capacities of virtuous or ideal agents has been labeled the "epistemological privilege" of the virtuous agent, and a number of objections have been raised against it, both as it is found in McDowell's views[112] and in those of virtue ethicists in general.[113] But in general terms the objection could be stated thus:

> Aristotle does not tell us what a virtuous agent (*phronimos*) is to do to convince someone who is not virtuous to agree with him, other than to educate him all over again. He does not suggest criteria which anyone and everyone can use to determine who is a virtuous agent and who is not. He does not discuss the situation in which two virtuous agents disagree seriously with one another. And consequently he does not notice what seems to be an implication of his view: that

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[111] That is, Spiderman does choose to marry Mary Jane and have some semblance of his own life apart from his virtuous activities as Spiderman, while Superman, despite his attraction to Lois Lane, refuses to allow himself a similar path. Thus it seems as though, should Spiderman and Superman ever meet, that they would disagree about whose conception of virtuous action is correct, which, on McDowell's view, would mean that one of them isn't really virtuous. But then the question for normal agents is how are we going to tell who is right?

[112] See R. Jay Wallace, "Virtue, Reason, and Principle," *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (December 1991): 469-96.

[113] See especially Ch. 13 of Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also J.B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (October 1990): 42-63.

> if two allegedly virtuous agents strongly disagree, one of them (at least) must be morally defective.[114]

In other words, even if we grant it is possible for normal agents to achieve the status of ideal agents as described by McDowell, we are still in the situation of not being able to distinguish between the many different paths to virtue, these paths being represented by the different perceptions of so-called "virtuous" agents. This is an extremely important observation to make because this inability to distinguish between these different paths to virtue is similar to our inability in the realm of practical reason to distinguish between the different methods of practical reason. In short, this observation shows us that shifting the focus from different modes of practical reason to different forms of virtuous perception does *not* solve the problem of parity: even if it is possible for agents to develop a virtuous perceptual capacity, we *still* need some method to distinguish the capacities that are truly virtuous from those that are not, since we, as regular agents, do not (at least initially) share the virtuous person's perceptual capacity to discern virtue, and furthermore even if we did, as the foregoing discussion shows, we wouldn't be able to settle disagreements that might arise between ourselves and other virtuous agents without impugning their professions of virtue. In short, we still need an AM in order to avoid the nihilistic conclusion of §4, and since McDowell's view cannot be used to show that this need is unnecessary we cannot appeal to Aristo-McDowellian agents in order to avoid it.

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[114] Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," 62.

6. CONCLUSION

Allow me to briefly recapitulate our journey up to this point. In the first two sections of this thesis I demonstrated how, in the exact same situation, three different theories of practical reason can lead us to three different practical inferences. Then, in §4 I showed that absent an AM that can be used to answer second-order questions about different theories of practical reason, it seems as though further discussion about practical reason is pointless, for even if we engage in practical reason in order to justify our actions, if we aren't able to justify our *method* of reasoning, then, given the plethora of methods, it appears as though we're selecting the method arbitrarily, and hence the actions suggested by that method are arbitrary as well. In §5 I discussed the apparatus of three philosophers who could resist this conclusion, but in the end found each of their responses deficient in one way or another.

So where do we go from here? One option is to acknowledge the facts presented in the earlier sections of this thesis (namely that (a) there are many competing theories of practical reason and (b) there isn't an AM that can be used to judge between them), but then deny the premise that these facts should lead us to the nihilistic perspective regarding practical reason, for it could be argued that we engage in many practices that admit of different forms, but that we don't stop engaging in these practices just because we don't have second-order methods of argumentation to justify our activities. For instance, consider our linguistic practices. We employ language every day, and are able to communicate effectively *without* the assistance of some second-order method that is working behind the scenes and informing us of which word to use when and where. That is, just

because I don't have a method that tells me how to correctly employ the word "banana" doesn't mean that I can't use the word, or that my usage of the word is completely arbitrary. Likewise, to extend this line of argumentation to the field of practical reason, it just doesn't seem to be the case that the lack of an AM reduces our choices to the realm of the arbitrary, and hence it doesn't seem as though nihilism is really a threat, the multiple, competing forms of practical reason and their varied inferences notwithstanding.

I must admit that I am very sympathetic to this line of argumentation. Nevertheless, I have two brief replies that I would like to register against it. First, I find the analogy drawn between our linguistic and practical reasoning processes to be a bit misleading in that it implies that our use of practical reason is analogous to our use of language, namely that using language (and therefore, by analogy, practical reason) is fairly effortless in the case of most adult persons. However, it doesn't appear as though this is the case at all, for while we do tend to use language rather effortlessly and while I would tend to agree with the observation that people generally don't agonize over the lack of an AM (or something analogous to it) when they use language, people *do* tend to agonize over the proper method of reason when it comes to their decision making, and hence it doesn't seem as though the need for an AM is as unmotivated as the analogy suggests. Consider all of the self-help books, motivational speakers and seminars, TV shows, etc. that are all aimed at showing people how they *ought* to make decisions in their everyday lives. The fact that there is a demand for such products seems to show that this quest for an AM isn't just a theoretical matter that philosophers should be worrying about. Rather, even if it is true that the lack of an AM doesn't lead to nihilism, it doesn't seem to be the case that this question can be ignored.

My second reply has to do with the fact that while I believe the earlier objection has some merit, it doesn't seem to be an option for some philosophers currently working in the field of practical reason, for whom therefore the argument presented in this thesis poses, I believe, a serious

challenge. For instance, Elijah Millgram has recently argued that the proper approach to ethics is through an analysis of practical reason, declaring that "…the right way to do moral philosophy is to start by working out your theory of practical reasoning."[115] But just how are you to work out such a theory of practical reasoning, especially given the observations made in this thesis? Millgram responds with what he calls the "Method of Practical Reasoning," which he describes as follows:

> If you were to try to give a step-by-step rendering of the Method of Practical Reasoning, it would look something like this. First, get an overview of as many different theories of practical reasoning as possible. Second, puzzle out what moral theories those accounts of practical reasoning give rise to (or anyway, leaving aside for a moment issues of what's responsible for what, which of the former are yoked tow which of the latter). Third, without appealing to any substantive moral theory, determine which theory of practical reasoning is correct. Fourth and last, adopt the moral theory with which you have paired it with.[116]

Millgram's approach to ethics, if correct, *demands* that you be able to identify *the* correct form of practical reasoning, which, we have argued, would require some sort of AM. Thus, for Millgram at least, the idea that we can just accept the multiple forms of practical reason and argue that they don't threaten us with nihilism along the lines indicated earlier *just isn't an option*, given the commitments he has made here. Thus the challenge of identifying an AM remains for Millgram, as does the charge that absent such an AM, nihilism regarding practical reason *and* morality seems to be the proper attitude to adopt.

The second option available to us at this point seems to be the challenge of developing an AM in order to avoid the conclusion presented in §4. But just how is an account of an AM going to be established? I have purposely put off this question until the end of this thesis because I believe it to be an extraordinarily difficult task, for at least three reasons. First, any account of or argument for an AM seems subject to charges of infinite regression. Because the AM purports to be a second-order method aimed at adjudicating between different theories of practical reason, the

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[115] Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 1.
[116] Millgram, *Ethics Done Right*, 2.

question could always be raised "What justifies the method for selecting the method?" and so on, for each additional AM you choose to develop. So first off anyone committed to identifying the proper form of practical reason by means of an AM is faced immediately with the challenge of avoiding such an infinite regress. Second, there is the problem indicated by Millgram at the outset of this paper, namely the fact that the styles of argumentation employed by the defenders of the various theories are as varied as the theories themselves, and hence any argument for a general AM is faced with the possibility that objections might be leveled against the style of argumentation used to develop that AM. In other words, before a general AM can be developed, it first seems as though we must first address the question of which argumentative styles are acceptable to employ when dealing with theories of practical reason, otherwise we won't end up settling anything. In my mind, both of these questions pose significant obstacles to the development of an AM, and thus must be addressed by anyone committed to producing one.

The third difficulty confronting those trying to develop an AM stems from recent studies in cognitive dissonance (hereafter "CD"), which seem to show that what we call "practical reason" is merely an illusion. That is, CD purports to demonstrate that the reasons for which we act are *very different* from the ones that we have consciously identified as the reasons for our actions. To illustrate just why CD constitutes a serious obstacle to the development of an AM, consider the impact such findings would have on a theory of practical reasoning like Korsgaard's.[117] As we have seen, Korsgaard's view of volitional action is quite simple: agents evaluate various maxims via rational deliberation, choose one, and then, by identifying *themselves* with the chosen maxim, author the action. At first glance, Korsgaard's model seems to provide a plausible account of volitional action, but according to CD empirically it does not hold up, since studies in CD purport

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[117] While I will be discussing Korsgaard's theory here specifically, I take this point to be generally applicable to all theories of practical reason. In fact, I think it very plausible that a positive argument for nihilism could be constructed based on the theory of cognitive dissonance.

to show that people are more than capable of authoring actions where they identify themselves with the action, but have *not* identified a maxim of their action by means of rational deliberation. In fact, the fundamental claim of CD is that our minds function in such a way as to avoid dissonance at all costs, which sometimes leads us to produce actions with which we identify, but for which we have *not* rationally identified a maxim/reason, which means that the reasons identified by the CI procedure are *not* the reasons for which we are identifying (i.e., they are illusory reasons).

For example, consider the following case: in a classic study performed by Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith[118] a group of students were asked to perform tedious tasks for extended periods of time. Then, after completing the tasks, certain students were asked for a favor: they were told that a research assistant was unable to make it to the experiment and that they would be compensated for filling in for said research assistant. All these students had to do was persuade someone who was performing the tedious tasks that the tasks were actually interesting and engaging. Half of the students who were asked to perform the favor were paid $20, while the other half were paid only $1. After performing the favor, these students were then asked to rate the tedious tasks in terms of the tasks' enjoyability and engagement, and it turned out that those who were paid only $1 rated the tasks *higher* than those who were paid $20. Why? Festinger and Carlsmith concluded that those who were paid $20 had an obvious, external reason for lying about the quality of the tasks being performed (i.e., because they were being paid $20 they had no problem telling someone that the tasks were interesting and engaging when they really felt the opposite), whereas those who were only paid $1 had no such motivation and therefore, *because of the cognitive dissonance* between the propositions "I told someone the task was interesting" and "I

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[118] Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (1959): 203-11.

actually found it boring" *internalized* the former and ignored the latter (i.e., because they did not have strong, external reasons to lie about how they felt about the tasks, they subconsciously *made themselves believe* that the tasks were interesting and engaging).

Now, notice how the ratings of the group that was paid $1 do *not* follow Korsgaard's model for volitional action: the ratings of this group were *not* the result of following a maxim that was identified by rational deliberation, but instead their ratings were a direct result of a subconscious desire to avoid CD. The actions of this group of students stem directly from a complex interaction of internal considerations, namely the subconscious desire to avoid dissonance between our beliefs. Furthermore, in addition to the fact that (and probably in consequence thereof) none of these students had rationally identified this maxim, none of them identified *themselves* with said maxim. Thus this study shows how Korsgaard's model for volitional action is illusory: the people in the $1 group fully identified themselves with their actions (i.e., their ratings), but were able to do so by means of a process *other than* rational deliberation.[119]

Korsgaard was probably not unaware of studies like these, as her account has a defense against such considerations. As we have seen, Korsgaard makes it abundantly clear that her model for volitional action is a *normative,* not descriptive model. In other words, she is arguing that producing actions in the way that we have already described is a *requirement of action,* not a description thereof: if an action is not produced in the way outlined above, then it is simply not an action, but a *defective* action. In her words:

> An agent cannot simply set aside the question whether his action is universalizable
> or just, for if he falls too far short of the internal standards for actions, what he

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[119] There have been other studies conducted by psychologists studying cognitive dissonance that point to the same conclusions drawn here. However, for the purposes of space I will confine myself to this one, classic example. See also J. Brehm, "Post-Decision Changes in Desirability of Alternatives," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 52 (1956): 384-89; Festinger and Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance"; D. Frey et al., "Cognitive Dissonance: Experiments and Theory," in *Studies in Decision Making,* ed. Martin Irle (New York: W. de Gruyter, 1982), 281-310; L. C. Egan, L. R. Santos, and P. Bloom, "The Origins of Cognitive Dissonance: Evidence from Children and Monkeys," *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 978-83.

produces will simply not be an action. In effect this means that even the most venal and shoddy agent must try to perform a good action [i.e., one that follows the normative standards outlined earlier], for the simple reason that there is no other way to try to perform an action. Performing a good action and performing an action are not different activities: for both are activities in which we must be guided by the functional or teleological norms implicit in the idea of an action. Obviously, it doesn't follow that every action is a good action. It does, however, follow that performing bad actions is not a different activity from performing good ones. *It is the same activity, badly done.*[120]

Thus, in response to claims that agents simply don't deliberate or author actions in the way Korsgaard has described, Korsgaard can simply say that she was not trying to provide a *descriptive* account of how actions are authored but a *normative* one. In short, she would argue that the way in which agents actually produce actions is irrelevant: just because they don't do it in the proper way doesn't mean that they *shouldn't.*

This objection takes for granted that the normative standard Korsgaard has provided is *cognitively possible.* However, as I will make quite clear shortly, just because a given standard is presented as normative does not necessarily entail that it is possible. Consider the example Korsgaard uses to flesh out the idea in the quotation above: house building.[121] Korsgaard claims that in order to build a house certain normative or requirements that are "internal" to the activity of house building must be met: the corners must be properly sealed, the roof must be waterproof and tight, the rooms must be tall enough to stand up in, etc. These, of course, are all plausible standards and therefore could conceivably be adopted as normative standards for house building. However, suppose that you wanted to adopt an M.C. Escher lithograph like "Ascending and Descending" (Figure 1) or "Waterfall" (Figure 2) as the normative standard (or blueprint) for your dream house.

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[120] Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 15.
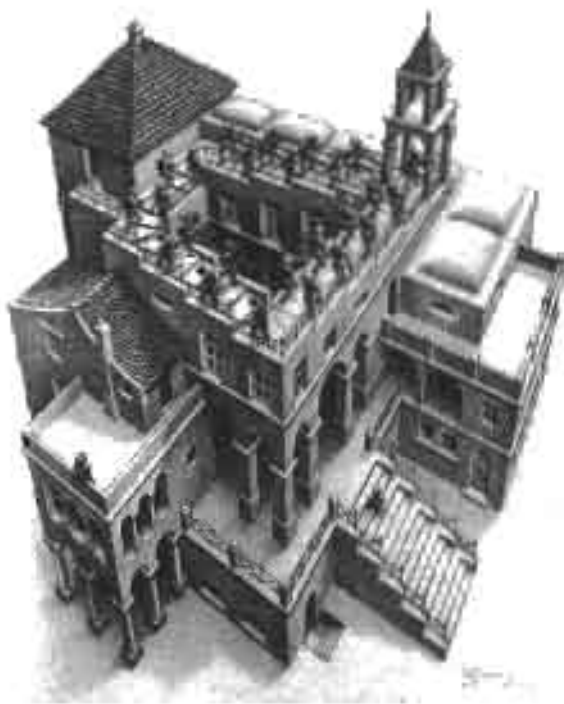[121] See Korsgaard, "Self-Constitution," 14-15.
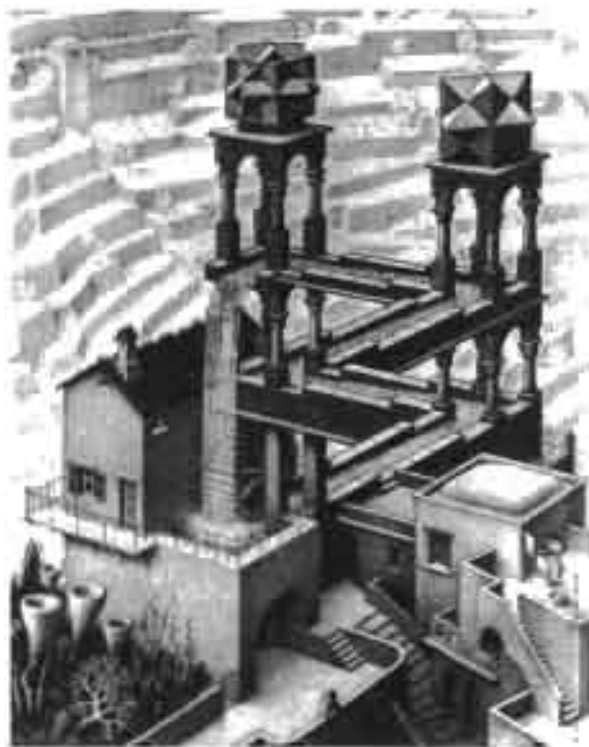
Figure 1
M.C. Escher, "Ascending and Descending"

Figure 2
M.C. Escher "Waterfall"

Now, obviously these lithographs contain a standard that is architecturally impossible in three-dimensional space, and it just won't do to scream at every architect who tells you so that "just because you don't build houses this way doesn't mean that you shouldn't!" The fact is that such a blueprint is impossible and therefore the standard, while taken to be normative, ought to be rejected.

Likewise, I would like to suggest that it may very well be the case that producing actions in the way Korsgaard describes is cognitively impossible in the same way that the Escher lithographs are physically impossible, which is precisely what the studies in CD seem to prove. That is, these studies seem to show that there are other subliminal psychological forces at work behind our deliberations that are determining them (and thereby determining our actions as well), and since these forces are subconsciously determining our reasons and actions, it just won't to do *insist,* as Korsgaard does, that they *must* be integrated into our conscious deliberative processes. Such integration is cognitively impossible, since (at least in instances of CD) these forces seem to be hard wired into our cognitive capacities (which brings us back to the Humean claim that perhaps we are wired to use reason merely as a way to satisfy our passions, whether those passions are explicitly identified or subconscious). In any case, given these considerations it doesn't seem implausible to assume that there is always something in the background that is *determining* our actions and our deliberations, which would make deliberation and willing of the Korsgaardian sort merely an unattainable illusion. Furthermore, it doesn't seem as though the arguments presented here are limited to just Korsgaard's account of practical reason. Rather, it seems possible that a positive argument for nihilism could be constructed based on these findings, one that would be applicable to any theory of practical reasoning.

In any case, it doesn't seem as though the need for an AM is going to be relinquished anytime soon. On the one hand, you have the fact that people everywhere (i.e., not just

philosophers) are demanding a clearer picture of the method behind proper, justified practical inferences, while on the other you already have philosophers in the field who are committed to views that seems to demand some sort of AM before the "correct" form of practical inference can be identified. In addition to these considerations, I have also hinted that recent studies in cognitive dissonance might be strong enough to provide a positive argument for the nihilistic perspective, but at any rate it seems as though the argument in §4 still stands: absent an AM any theory of practical reason bottoms out in the arbitrary, which seems to make nihilism the proper response to take when it comes to questions regarding practical reason and human action.

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