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On the duality of reasons and time-relativity of obligations

Abstract

This paper challenges the puzzle of how decisions and promises create additional reasons for action. I argue their binding force isn't reducible to reasons' normativity by examining their time-relativity. J. Raz's view that decisions generate new reasons breaks the connection between reasons and value. Alternatives focusing on intrinsic value miss time-relativity. I argue promises are grounded in relationships, not normative forces. When making promises, we introduce biases toward certain values that shape our lives as we fulfill them.

Keywords

Obligations, Normative reasons, Time-relativity

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to discuss the problem known as the puzzle of the duality of reasons: the problem that the mere fact that we have made a certain sort of choice creates, by itself, reasons for actions and attitudes, resulting in a duplication of the source of reasons¹.

J. Raz once claimed that making a decision or a promise in itself gives the agent additional reasons for action. A person who has decided to do φ will avoid dwelling on considerations that might weaken their resolve by suggesting that it would be better not to do φ , since this person has made the decision. Indeed, if this person willingly reconsiders whether they should do φ despite no change in their circumstances, it seems that their decision has already been at least partially abandoned. Moreover, someone who has decided to do φ and actually does φ might answer, when asked why they did φ , “because I decided to do so”. If the agent performs the action, they decided to perform precisely for the reason that they decided to do it, we are inclined to think that making a decision is a practice that creates a reason to perform action φ . Even if there are already some reasons to do φ , making a decision seems to provide an additional new reason. For example, if we think that reasons for action are given by the properties of the action's object or that of the action itself, we might think that action φ now has the property of being an action that agent A decided at time t to perform, and this property could provide a reason (although whether such a relational property can provide reasons may be controversial).

Of course, as we might sometimes decide on red wine but then change our minds and order white wine on a whim, it could be said that decisions about trivial matters have little binding power on us. Whether or not this is strictly true, changing one's mind about what to do when there are options with roughly equal weight does not indicate that the agent has a significant practical defect. However, an indecisive person who always takes time to order a drink might, upon noticing their vacillation, cut short their deliberation by thinking that they had already decided on red wine. Furthermore, at least for someone who has decided to take on a major challenge relevant to their future career, or who has decided to endure something for the sake of self-improvement, or who has decided to start a family and support it, they appear to be bound by the fact of their decision from the moment they make it.

¹ This term is from Scanlon 2004.

When someone who has made a resolution or self-promise breaks it, they will likely regret or blame themselves for what they've done, but this is not only because they're responding to reasons related to the importance of the goal they set to achieve, the negative consequences of the behavior they resolved not to repeat, or the magnitude of the costs they have already incurred. Rather, they seem concerned with the fact that they failed to respond to the reason provided by their own decision; since one has reasons to accomplish or continue what one has decided to do, they appear to be concerned about not being able to respond to these reasons.

Similar things can be said about promises. A person who has promised to do φ seems to be bound by the very fact that they made such a promise at some point. If this person carries out φ and is asked why they are doing φ , it would be natural for them to answer, "because I promised to do so", and it would be equally natural to understand this answer as stating the reason for doing φ . This suggests that it is precisely because of making the promise that an obligation to keep it arises. The promise to do φ appears to create additional normative force supporting action φ that did not exist before the promise was made.

However, taking decisions or promises as practices that generate new reasons for action is problematic. When I deliberate trying to decide what to do, I should be thinking about what I ought to do. We try to understand our situation, find relevant things worth considering, and act properly, taking those things into consideration. Various facts about our situation have normative importance, and what we can do to respond to that importance also varies. If I try to respond to the fact that a certain sensation is pleasant, I will perform actions that enable me to obtain that sensation; if I try to respond to the importance of truth, I will engage in truth-seeking or support those who do. Normatively important matters are those that have normative force supporting or opposing specific responses. It's because they are responses to normatively important things that our actions are intelligible actions, even if they're not actions we should do all things considered. If a fact counts in favour of doing an action, that action is an action for which there is a reason to do. We act in response to reasons, that is, in response to what matters about the world we're in. The normative force of reasons for action is often identified with the normative force possessed by the valuable or the good². Basically, when we try to explain

² See Anscombe 1957, Scanlon 1998. However, objections have been raised against this view. In particular, the Buck-passing Account of Value proposed by Scanlon was a view

why we do something, we try to show that it's desirable in some sense. Even if the agent's beliefs contain errors and there is actually no desirability as the agent assumed, it should be the case that the agent intends actions as responses to desirability. And if there is nothing desirable about the thing that has been done, the agent would probably answer, "I don't really know why I did such a thing. I just did it because I wanted to, there was no reason".

If we understand our intentional actions in this way, we can see the problem with the view that decisions or promises in themselves generate reasons for action. According to the view that understands the normativity of reasons for action in connection with our conception of value or desirability, the fact that there is a reason to perform an action or adopt an attitude (or a reason not to perform an action or adopt an attitude) is a fact about the world that we discover, not something we create³. I desire something because it's desirable (the response of desiring it is appropriate because the object is desirable in some way), not that the object becomes desirable because I desire it.

However, in the practical deliberation of someone who has made a decision or a promise, the fact that they made the decision or promise seems to be treated as if it were a source of reasons. If there is a reason to do φ because of the fact that I decided to do φ (that is, if the fact that I decided counts in favour of doing φ), this reason is one I would not have had if I had not made the decision. The fact that a decision was made or a promise was given itself becomes a reason counting in favour of the action decided upon or promised, meaning that my choice creates new reasons. But reasons were supposed to exist independently of our attitudes. To acknowledge a duality in the sources of reasons – that there were already reasons to do φ , and additional reasons are added by my deciding or promising to do it – is highly problematic.

implying that there is a biconditional relationship between something having value and that thing having another property that gives a reason, but arguments have been directed against this by presenting counterexamples to undermine the biconditional relationship (Crisp 2000; 2005; 2008; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004). Abe presents an argument defending the Buck-passing Account of Value from such objections (Abe 2019a).

³ What I call reasons in this paper are normative reasons. I will not discuss motivating reasons in this paper. Also, regarding the understanding of reasons for action, I am taking an objectivist position here, that is, the position that judgments about reasons can be true independently of facts about the mental states of the person making the judgment or the people involved.

In this paper, I will attempt to show that making decisions and promises do not generate reasons, and that the puzzle of the duality of reasons is merely a pseudo-problem. Furthermore, I will argue that the bindingness of decisions and promises should not be captured by the normativity of reasons, but rather should be understood from the perspective of an agent who engages with the world from a position beyond the normativity of reasons. In my view, although the normativity of reasons itself does not change regardless of what choices we make, our choices open the way for us to become subjects who respond with partiality to certain specific reasons. Decisions and promises generate this bias, often called commitment or loyalty, and being bound by decisions or promises means continuing to be a subject with such a bias. However, this bindingness is not reducible to the normativity of reasons; rather, in a sense, it falls upon the agent as a consequence of stepping beyond the domain of the normativity of reasons. The agent's response to certain specific reasons disturbs the orderly domain of reasons and creates a bias in the normative force of reasons that would otherwise fall evenly. It is merely a fold biased toward the normative domain as seen from the agent's perspective, and no change has occurred in the domain of normativity outside the agent.

I will demonstrate this by appealing to the time-relativity inherent in the bindingness of decisions and promises.

2. Raz's argument on second-order reasons

Let us first examine Raz's claim in detail. His view that decisions and promises generate reasons is presented in his discussion of explaining the mandatory normativity possessed by rules and moral obligations.

Typically, what an agent should do is considered to be the action for which they have the strongest or weightiest reason, after comparing and weighing all the reasons the agent has in their situation. For example, making hand-dripped coffee during a work break is counted in favour of by facts such as that doing so enables me to drink coffee, that the taste and aroma of coffee give me pleasure, that the process of dripping coffee itself makes me feel good, and that watching the ground beans slowly expand as I pour hot water over them is relaxing. The fact that coffee has preventive effects against heart disease and stroke might also be counted as a reason. Even if I am not concerned about my health condition, this fact is a reason for me to brew coffee. On the other hand, the fact that brewing coffee takes time would count against brewing coffee, and if I

dislike cleaning up and find it troublesome to dispose of the remaining grounds and maintain the dripper, I have a reason to avoid unpleasantness, which would also be a reason against brewing coffee. After considering all these important matters and comparing the conflicting reasons, if the balance of reasons tilts toward brewing coffee, I conclude that I should brew coffee, and indeed that would be what I should do.

However, in Raz's view, such a simple comparison and weighing alone cannot fully explain our practical deliberation. According to him, there is a distinction between first-order and second-order reasons, and we can have second-order reasons to refrain from acting for certain reasons, or to ignore the normative force of certain (first-order) reasons in our deliberation. Raz tries to demonstrate this using the example of an agent who has made a promise (Raz 1975: 486).

Colin is now considering whether to send his child to a public school. He previously promised his wife that when deciding matters related to the child's education, he would consider only the child's interests, so he believes he should keep this promise when considering this matter. This means that considerations such as the fact that the high educational costs would prevent him from quitting his current job and thus he would have to give up his dream of publishing his book, or the fact that if Colin enrolls his child, a considerable number of families might change their children's schools as a result, possibly including families with limited financial means, should not be taken into account. Indeed, Colin thinks he should do this and tries to decide on his child's school accordingly⁴.

The importance of Colin's publishing his own book or the potential burden on other families would normally be considerations that should be taken into account, but because of the fact that he made a promise, Colin must decide on his child's school without giving any weight to these matters in his situation. In essence, Colin promised his wife that, when it comes to education, he would prioritize the child's interests, and he would be breaking this promise if he did not treat reasons unrelated to the child's interests as irrelevant.

In Raz's view, Colin's promise to his wife in this case becomes a reason to ignore certain reasons. In other words, it is a reason not to act on balance of reasons. It becomes a second-order reason concerning how to treat reasons in deliberation, specifically, which first-order reasons to give weight to. Furthermore, Raz claims that this kind of second-order reason always overrides first-order reasons such as Colin's reason to realize his

⁴ Colin's case is based on Raz's description and has been appropriately edited by the author.

long-standing dream or his reason to be careful not to put pressure on those around him that would constrain their lives. Without this, the mandatory bindingness of promises could not be explained.

In Colin's case, the promise was about the method of weighing considerations in deliberation, so the promise gives him a second-order reason, but for example, if Colin promised to help with the child's studies every day when he returns from work, Raz thinks this promise gives not only a second-order reason to ignore reasons not to help with studies in deliberation, but also a first-order reason to help with the child's studies. Even if Colin feels hesitant to look at his child's math assignment when he returns home tired from work on the weekend, he will sit down with his child because he made a promise⁵.

In Raz's view, promises and decisions have the same form as practices. This insight itself seems plausible, given that personal vows or oaths have aspects of both decisions and promises. Once someone has made a decision, they should refuse to reconsider the reasons – that is, to examine whether they should truly put the content of their decision into action. They terminate their deliberations. A person who decided to finish work and go to bed early today might hesitate a bit about whether to write a reply to an email about a troublesome matter that just arrived, but would refuse to re-open deliberation by thinking, "I already decided to go to bed". Someone who decided to become a novelist might think that they shouldn't have doubts now because they decided to build a career as a novelist, even when they see their friends steadily advancing in their careers or struggle with being unable to come up with a short story concept right before a deadline. In Raz's view, deciding to do something involves ceasing deliberation about whether to do that action, that is, refusing to reconsider the considerations count in favour of or against doing it, and specifically refusing for the reason that one has already decided (*ibid.*, 490-1).

He argues that what explains the practical deliberation of someone who has made a decision is, again, the second-order reason given by the fact that they made the decision. A person with this second-order reason does not further examine whether there are additional reasons to carry out what they decided, and they ignore in their deliberation the reasons counting in favour of not carrying it out that they considered before the

⁵ Raz states that what is ignored in deliberation is only some of the reasons not to do the promised action (*ibid.* 487). For example, just because of a promise, considerations such as Colin or his child having influenza and a high fever would not be excluded from deliberation.

decision. A person who has made a decision deliberately ignores reasons they know exist by thinking, “I’ve already decided”. If a person who has made a decision begins to think about whether to stop ignoring some reasons and take them into account, or tries to obtain new information again, then their decision-based intention can be said to be partially abandoned.

Raz thus claims that promises and decisions in themselves give reasons, or are themselves reasons. This is because the agent comes to deliberate in a restricted way precisely because they made a promise or a decision. Of course, the idea of second-order reasons that Raz introduced into the discussion is itself controversial. Issues such as whether such reasons exist at all, whether the existence of first-order reasons doesn’t imply the existence of second-order reasons to consider them in deliberation, or whether the claim about the power relationship where second-order reasons overwhelm conflicting first-order reasons has any justification beyond being postulated to explain the demandingness of obligations – these would need to be sufficiently discussed before this idea could be shown to be defensible, but Raz cannot be said to have presented such a discussion.

As I have already stated, one of the goals of this paper’s argument is to show that what explains the bindingness of promises and decisions is not the existence of additional reasons generated by these practices, or more precisely, that this bindingness has a normativity that is distinctively different from the normativity of reasons⁶. Therefore, my argument can serve as a criticism of Raz’s argument. However, I do accept Raz’s insight that an agent who has made a promise or decision ends up deliberating by weighting specific reasons in a biased way.

Sometimes we keep our promises even when breaking them would be more convenient. Raz’s theory helps explain how people deliberate in these situations when they take their promises seriously. Consider someone who feels momentarily tempted to break a promise. In that moment of hesitation, they’re treating options that would result in breaking the promise – either by directly doing what they promised not to do, or by acting in ways that would make keeping the promise impossible – as temporarily acquiring the status of legitimate objects of consideration in

⁶ As an argument against Raz’s view, Abe presents an argument suggesting that the bindingness of obligation cannot be explained by the normativity of reasons (Abe 2019b). Abe points out in this paper that our understanding of the obligation to keep promises presupposes the finite capacity of agents as subjects of practical reasoning, and argues that this shows the normativity of reasons and the normativity of the obligation to keep promises are different.

practical deliberation. But then this person may think, “I have already made a promise”, and tells themselves that the matter causing their hesitation cannot serve as a justification for breaking their promise. This shifts their thinking back on track. When someone corrects their deliberation in precisely this way, we can say they have made a sincere promise.

Moreover, anyone who takes their promises even somewhat seriously will, even if they ultimately conclude that they should break the promise, ask in the deliberative process leading to such a conclusion: “Would this constitute a justification for breaking the promise?”. What we do in practical deliberation is, so to speak, to select from among the reasons to which we can respond by taking specific actions or adopting certain attitudes, those to which we may actually respond. When asking this question in deliberation, this person treats the fact that they made a promise like a filter in this process of reason selection. Some reasons that would face no obstacles if the promise didn’t exist are now blocked from the selection process because the promise prevents them from getting through.

We can see how promises work as filters by looking at what happens when someone breaks a promise. When a promisee blames the promise-breaker, they often criticize their lack of sincerity, saying things like “You broke your promise for that?”. This shows the promisee believes the filter isn’t working properly because the promisor doesn’t take their promise seriously enough. From the promisee’s perspective, whatever reason the promisor acted on shouldn’t have made it through the filtering process – it’s not a good enough reason to justify breaking the promise. In trying to explain why it is not acceptable, the promisee might say to the promisor: “If you break promises over things like this, then what’s the point of making promises at all?”. The fact that making a promise functions as a filter is the whole point of promising. However, the promisor has judged that it is acceptable to break the promise for the reason they acted upon, and this is the extent to which the promisor cares about the promise. This is likely the point at which the promisee becomes indignant. The degree to which the promisor cares about the promise determines the coarseness of the filter applied to practical deliberation.

When it comes to decisions, the fact that someone has already made a decision should function as a filter in the same way. Suppose a person who has repeatedly engaged in criminal acts such as theft, fraudulent business practices, and extortion for many years finally becomes disgusted with such a lifestyle and decides to abandon wrongdoing and find some job to rebuild her life. When she receives invitations from old

criminal companions, or when her new job feels boring and unrewarding, she will likely try to overcome her hesitation by remembering her decision. She should judge that things like temporary satisfaction from easy money or anxiety about deteriorating relationships with old acquaintances do not justify acting against her decision. Perhaps she might even think that giving in to temptation here would mean betraying herself – the self who made the decision, put in unfamiliar efforts, and began to appreciate what an honest life can offer. Her decision in this sense can be said to be a kind of promise to oneself⁷.

This person is morally required to abandon wrongdoing regardless of whether she actually makes this kind of decision. Indeed, she may have made the decision partly because she began to feel that she could no longer continue acts that go against this requirement. However, just because the moral requirement and the content of the decision coincide does not mean that a person who tries to be faithful to their decision is really only responding to this moral requirement. Clearly, she is also bound by the fact that she herself decided to withdraw from the criminal activities she had been engaged in. A person who has made such a decision often distances herself from hedonistic experiences and tries to maintain a disciplined lifestyle in ways that may seem excessively strict to others. When asked why she is so hard on herself, she might answer, “Because that’s what I decided”. Alternatively, if she fails to follow through on her decision, what would devastate her most might not be her failure to meet moral requirements, but rather the fact that she ruined her own decision – and this would not be strange at all.

Regarding both decisions and promises, the agent’s engagement in a certain practice transforms the manner of deliberation. I accept Raz’s view regarding what kind of transformation this is. However, I reject the idea that this transformation is caused by specific kinds of reasons generated by the practices themselves, and while maintaining a persuasive view of what these practices themselves are, I want to resolve the puzzle of the

⁷ Hill (1991) rejects the claim that promises to oneself are conceptually impossible, and then discusses whether a person who makes a promise to themselves becomes morally bound. He states that among promises to oneself, those made at the expense of the promisor’s self-respect, or promises concerning personal commitments and integrity, have the power to morally bind the person who made the promise. His argument contains somewhat ambivalent elements: on the one hand, he acknowledges that such kinds of promises to oneself make a moral difference, but on the other hand, he suggests the idea that self-respect has normative binding power independently of the practice of promising to oneself, and that it is rather self-respect that serves as the source of our moral duties to ourselves.

duality of reasons. In my view, promises and decisions simply demonstrate that an agent is not merely a being that responds to the normativity of reasons, but also a being that selects which reasons to respond to (though perhaps in many cases this selection is made unconsciously and accidentally) and builds up the self and the world in which the self exists by accumulating these choices⁸. In the subsequent discussion of this paper, I will basically assume that the agent's response to the fact of having made a promise or decision is the same as what Raz claims.

I will proceed with the discussion on the assumption that decisions stand in an analogical relationship to promises. Such a view seems to have the controversial implication that if I make a serious decision about something, I incur the same kind of moral obligation that I would bear when making a promise to someone. Since I am trying to explain the normative binding power of promises through a manner of deliberation that narrows the reasons to which one may respond, this concern would be legitimately directed. Indeed, it would not be plausible to think that if I act contrary to my decision, I am placed in a position where I can demand some compensation or apology from myself (just as when someone else makes a promise to me but breaks it in an unjustifiable way). However, it might not be so problematic to think that when I act contrary to my decision, I have committed a wrongful act against myself. At least for solemn decisions, it might be considered one of my duties to myself to stick to what I decided, unless there are justifying circumstances for acting otherwise.

A person who has acted contrary to his decision is both a perpetrator and, at the same time, will blame himself as a victim. Also, if we consider that wrongdoers are required to apologize and provide compensation because such acts serve as gestures that communicate to the other party that they acknowledge their fault, intend not to repeat the same thing, and recognize that the victim did not deserve what happened to them, then it is natural that such acts are not required in the case of decisions. Such gestures would help the confused victim regain composure and contribute to repairing the relationship with the victim. When the perpetrator and victim are the same person, acknowledging that what one did was a failure, calmly analyzing why one failed, and resolving not to make the

⁸ In works such as *Value, Respect and Attachment* and *The Morality of Freedom*, Raz tries to depict an agent who, while responding to important things in the domain of the normativity of reasons, also chooses for themselves what to respond to. However, he claims that the value of love, happiness, and commitment to goals explains these choices as ones for which there are reasons.

same mistake would lead to rebuilding oneself as an agent facing the world. In the case of decisions, these gestures are unnecessary. In the case of promises, only when sincere apology and compensation are accepted by the victim can the perpetrator and victim regain the relationship of mutually regarding each other as people to live with together, as it was before the breach of duty occurred – or at least both parties can come to view relationship repair as a possibility with realistic potential. In the case of decisions, accepting without deceptive evasion that one has failed and reflecting on how to live better as a fallible being would be the starting point for recovery. Through such reflection, one can regain an understanding of oneself as someone capable of recognizing what one should do and moving in that direction.

Furthermore, by considering the most serious damage that a person who has acted contrary to their decision might experience, we might be able to show that there is some persuasiveness to the idea that this is an example of wrongdoing against oneself. Let us recall the example of the person who decided to abandon criminal activities. Suppose that, unfortunately, due to financial pressures or ongoing unfair treatment at work, she gives in to temptation and goes against her decision. Probably, when she calms down and understands what she has done, she will blame herself. And again, the greater the degree of devotion she had required to carry through her decision, the more miserable she will feel. This is because it seems that she had shaped her way of being toward carrying through her decision, but her own actions have destroyed it⁹. Or perhaps the rootlessness of not being able to think that she can now do anything meaningful, having brought about such collapse, makes her even more miserable. What she suffers is serious damage to her self-understanding as an agent. If one can appreciate the values contained in the world only by being able to engage with the world as an agent capable of accomplishing something meaningful, then her connection with the world would be severed, even if temporarily, by acting contrary to her decision. It seems clear that acts that lead others into this kind of self-distrust are morally wrong. It is difficult to see why such acts would not be wrong simply because one is doing them to oneself.

⁹ I think that decisions can become something that constitutes the agent themselves, and that agents may even identify themselves with such decisions. This understanding of decisions draws on Frankfurt's discussion of caring (Frankfurt 1982).

3. Further problems with claiming the duality of reasons

A person who keeps a promise to do φ and actually does φ might, when asked “Why are you doing φ ?”, answer “Because I promised to do so”. Since this seems to serve as an explanation showing what the agent is doing, we are inclined to think that having promised to do φ at some point is a reason for the action. The same could be said for decisions. In that sense, it is coherent to think that promises and decisions generate reasons.

However, if one accepts the duality of reasons like Raz does, one ends up expanding our understanding of normative concepts such as desirability, value, and goodness to match what we consider to be normative reasons for action¹⁰. If the fact that I promised to do φ or the fact that I decided to do φ becomes a reason, then we must think that the desirability of doing φ has somehow increased. However, action φ does not become an action that brings about better consequences due to promises or decisions, nor does the value of doing φ itself increase. This means that if we think promises and decisions can generate reasons, we risk separating what it is for there to be a reason to do something from what it is for something to be desirable (at least in the ordinary sense of the term)¹¹.

Some might think that if we take the position that there is intrinsic value in keeping promises or following through on decisions, this problem does not arise while still denying the duality of reasons, because through my promise or decision, φ becomes an action that keeps a promise or realizes a decision. But in that case, it’s because I already have a reason to keep promises and realize what I’ve decided that I make a promise or decision at some point. This means that my promise or decision is a response

¹⁰ Raz himself seems to maintain the view that decisions and promises become reasons for action (Raz 2016a). Also, Raz also claims that when something becomes a goal in life, the achievement of the goal becomes important to the agent’s life, and therefore goals also become reasons for action (Raz 1998).

¹¹ Indeed, when explaining the case of an agent who says that being able to follow sound principles is a reason for action, Raz states the following. What this agent considers to be a reason would not, according to a narrow understanding of good or value, be talking about the value of the action or the good-making property that the action has, but he uses these terms in a broad sense, and attributing goodness to an action from the fact that it is required by a principle is “simply describing his views using a broader concept of value, one that allows that an action can have value either because it advances the realization of good ends or because it is required by a valid principle, as well as in other ways”, and there is no theoretical problem (Raz 2010: 115). Also, in another paper, he acknowledges that the fact that doing an action is the agent’s duty makes an action good (Raz 2016b: 153).

to reasons that already exist, not an act that generates new reasons. Therefore, this understanding does not imply a claim about the duality of sources of reasons. However, in my view, such an explanation cannot capture the bindingness of promises and decisions. I will discuss this in more detail later, but let us return to pointing out the problems in Raz's argument.

Raz takes the position of trying to explain what it is to bear a moral obligation, or what it is for an agent to be bound by rules, by reducing it to the fact that the agent has a certain kind of reason (which is a reason to ignore specific reasons, and a reason to deliberate in a specific way), and he was trying to give an explanation of morality as a whole that reflects our understanding of actual practices. Keeping promises is a typical example of moral obligation, and decisions, in Raz's view, are practices with a form parallel to promises. Given that we refer to the fact that we ourselves made a promise or decision in explaining our actions, and that these facts are currently thought to have the power to influence conclusions in the deliberation of an agent deciding what to do, claiming that making a promise or decision in itself gives reasons was necessary for Raz to build a consistent, comprehensive moral theory.

However, such an argument also closes off the possibility of explaining what kind of force reasons have in supporting actions, that is, the conception of reasons, through what we understand as the normativity of value. The reasons for action are the most basic units of normativity, and the fact that there is a reason to perform an action can only be explained with tautological expressions such as that something counts in favour of that action, or that there exist considerations that make the action intelligible. When trying to understand this normativity substantively, one of the few clues is what we understand about the normativity of value. Cutting the connection between our understanding of value-related concepts and the concept of reasons, or expanding our understanding of evaluative normativity to accommodate the existence of reasons (whose source is our choices or will) for the sake of argumentative consistency, is also abandoning the clues for understanding the concept of reasons itself. This is a choice that may work to the disadvantage of an argument that attempts to understand the agent's practical deliberation as a whole by taking the concept of reasons as foundational. Originally, reasons were introduced into the discussion as simple basic concepts in order to unravel the complexity of morality and arrive at a more complete understanding of morality. If we simply incorporate into the concept of reasons itself the

elements of morality that we want to explain, we will not be able to approach a substantive understanding of morality.

Furthermore, the supposition that we can create reasons is subject to Bratman's bootstrapping objection (Bratman 1987: 23-7). If we can freely create reasons for action through promises and decisions, then in some cases, it might be possible to transform actions that would not otherwise be what we should do into actions that we should do by making promises or decisions¹².

4. Denying the duality of reasons

So far, I have broadly shown the problems with Raz's argument. But it is not sufficient as an argument merely to criticize Raz's claim and simply deny that decisions and promises generate new reasons. As Raz states, we are indeed bound by the fact that we made a promise or decision, and we also understand this to be the very nature of these practices. Knowing that it will bind us, we voluntarily make decisions and promises. We must also provide an explanation for why agents, who understand their own actions as being done for some purpose and who decide their actions after deliberation, engage in precisely this kind of practice.

I mentioned earlier that by taking the position that there is intrinsic value in keeping promises and following through on decisions, one could explain how an agent is bound by promises and decisions while still denying the duality of reasons. According to this view, for example, if someone promises to do φ , then doing φ becomes an action that keeps a promise. Keeping promises has value, so I have a reason to keep my promises. At

¹² Raz presents two responses to this objection. One is that we cannot decide or form intentions at will, so the bootstrapping problem that Bratman worries about does not arise. The other is to willingly acknowledge that decisions bootstrap and then claim that the reasons produced by decisions are a special kind of reasons. (Raz 2016a: 65). In my view, it is possible that an agent's making a promise or decision can change what would not otherwise be an action the agent should do into an action they should do. I even acknowledge that there may be cases where the act of stealing becomes what an agent should do (under limited conditions) by promising to do so. In such cases, of course, the person who stole should rightfully be condemned by the victim and other members of society. But this is not because some special kind of reason is generated. Making a promise or decision cannot change the reasons themselves. I think it would be problematic if promises and decisions could remake the domain of reasons, but I do not see a problem with thinking that an agent's engagement with the world can change the facts about what they should do without remaking the domain of reasons.

first glance, it seems that the promise to do φ generates an additional reason to do φ because φ becomes an action that keeps a promise only after I promise to do φ , but in reality, I am merely responding to the reason to keep promises that I already had. To respond to the reason to keep promises, one needs to make a promise. My promising to do φ is a trigger that makes the reason to keep promises effective in binding me to do φ . For decisions as well, one could make the same form of explanation by appealing to the value of commitment or strength of will in carrying out decisions, claiming that the agent is merely responding to the reason to realize what they decided, and thus deny the duality of reasons.

In what follows, I will show that such arguments do not succeed, and through doing so, I will develop the claim that the essence of making decisions or promises, and being bound by them, cannot be captured solely by the normativity of reasons. What I am most dissatisfied with in the view stated above is that it leaves out the time-relativity of the binding force of decisions and promises from the explanation. I will clarify what this means next using the example of promises.

5. The time-relativity of obligation

In my view, arguments that fall into the puzzle of the duality of reasons make the mistake of calling something a “reason” based solely on the fact that it makes an action intelligible, even while understanding that what has a binding or demanding character – the very thing that explains practices such as promises and resolutions – possesses a time-relative character. On the other hand, arguments that attempt to resolve the puzzle of the duality of reasons by claiming that the binding force in question derives from time-neutral reasons fail to account for the fact that the normativity of obligation is fundamentally time-relative.

A person who fulfills what they promised will explain their action by saying “Because I promised him I would do so”, but this serves as an explanation of action only during the period when the promise is valid. For example, if the promise has already been amicably dissolved, it would be strange for this person to try to explain their action by saying “Because I had to keep the promise”. Even if a person who made a promise to someone to do φ actually does φ , if this action was performed after the promise was dissolved, φ is no longer an act of keeping a promise. The statement “Because I promised him I would do φ ” becomes incoherent as an

explanation of action. An agent is required to do φ because they promised to do φ , but this demanding force is time-relative.

In contrast, reasons that make actions intelligible are time-neutral. The fact that one can obtain pleasure by doing something will support pleasure-producing actions regardless of the time point, and reasons for pursuing truth do not exist only in particular eras. These reasons are time-neutral.

However, when claiming that promise-keeping has value and that a person bound by their own promises is responding to that value, it should be assumed that the normative force binding the agent operates with neutral efficacy with respect to time points. Whether I make a promise or not, no change occurs in the value of promise-keeping, and promise-keeping should have value at any time point.

I am bound by the promises I make from precisely the moment the promise is established, and the binding force of the promise does not extend to me before that or after the promise has been legitimately dissolved. A person who explains their actions by referring in backward-looking way to a past event of making a promise is considered to be trying to state that something they did at some point in the past has imposed on them an obligation to keep the promise.

Given this time-relative nature, any claim that appeals to something of value when explaining the bindingness of promises fails to capture this feature of the time-relativity of binding normativity. I therefore believe that all such explanations that attempt to avoid the duality of reasons fail, precisely because of this fundamental mismatch in temporal character between binding normativity and reasons¹³.

Before going further, I should say something more about the time-relativity of normative force. In fact, that a fact giving an account of action can fulfill its role as explanation only within a specific period is merely a superficial manifestation of its being time-relative. The fundamental difference between what has time-relative normative force and reasons is

¹³ One might claim that while some reasons are time-neutral, others are time-relative – therefore, things that only have time-relative force can still count as reasons. Of course, one could think in this way and call whatever explains the binding force that appears to arise from making promises or forming decisions “reasons”. However, extending the concept of reasons in such a manner would encounter problems of the same kind as those involved in separating our understanding of desirability from our understanding of the normativity of reasons, which I discussed in Section 3. If we extend the concept of reasons in this way, it becomes unclear what reasons – which serve as the basic units that explain what we understand about practical matters – actually are in the first place.

this: the former derives its power to explain action from something that exists only temporarily, while the latter does not. Reasons themselves are not temporally limited in their normativity, but the period during which one can respond to individual reasons may be limited. Therefore, it often happens that facts explaining actions as responses to reasons appear time-relative.

For example, a person who was asked by someone at the same dinner table to pass the pepper and handed over the pepper would explain their action by saying they were asked to do so. Naturally, this explanation is valid only from the point when the other person asked them to hand over the pepper. Therefore, this appears to be a time-relative explanation of action. However, the fact that the other person asked for pepper only made manifest that the other person wanted pepper to enjoy their meal more, and even if the other person had not asked, this person would have had a reason to pass the pepper. What this person is responding to is a reason to promote others' enjoyment. Even if this person had somehow sensed this from the other person's demeanor and passed the pepper without being asked, it would be a response to the same reason. Also, passing the pepper is appropriate only while seated at the dinner table, but this is simply because one can increase others' enjoyment through this action only during the meal. This person has this reason at times other than when seated at the same dinner table as the other person. This is because enjoyment has value. This value is not brought about by some trigger.

Someone might respond to my argument as follows. An agent bears the obligation to keep promises regardless of the point in time. This obligation is merely *activated* during the period when the promise is established, but the bindingness of promises is inherently time-neutral. When an agent refers to their past action to explain what they are doing in the present, it is not because they bear an obligation due to that action, but merely because they are trying to show that they have become subject to the effectiveness of the obligation by that action¹⁴.

¹⁴ Scanlon's proposal for dissolving the puzzle of the duality of reasons also falls into this type of argument. Scanlon states that the fact of having made a promise does not create reasons. By making a promise, the promisor transforms their situation into one where it would be wrong to disappoint the promisee's expectations by not keeping the promise. His view is that a person bound by a promise they have made is not responding to newly created reasons by the act of promising itself, but that the preexisting reasons they can respond to have changed because they have transformed their situation. (Scanlon 2004: 244-5. See also Scanlon 1998: 295-327).

In response to such a reply, I first want to demonstrate that it is unpersuasive to think that the normativity of moral obligations is time-neutral.

In my view, an agent bears the obligation to keep a promise solely because of the mere fact that the agent made the promise at some point in the past. This view may indeed seem like a naive understanding of obligation. However, there are several other moral obligations that are understood to be incurred because of events that occurred at some point in the past. For example, a person bears an obligation to apologize because that person has done something wrong to another. The fact that this person bears an obligation to apologize is immediately apparent from the fact that the past action was wrong, or from an understanding of what it means to do something wrong to another person. A person bears an obligation of reciprocation or returning a favour because others have been kind to them or helped them. Once it is understood what it means to receive kindness from someone, or what kind of mutual relationship is created by receiving a favour, it is immediately understood that this person bears an obligation to return the favour.

Now, suppose I am in a difficult situation because I made a big mistake or had an accident. If a neighbor, seeing my plight, helps me, I will be obligated to thank them and offer some form of gratitude. Let's assume that this obligation is time-neutral and that it was activated by the neighbor's kind act. According to this assumption, I actually always have a reason to express gratitude for kind actions, though I am rarely conscious of it. But since I can only express gratitude after someone has been kind to me, I cannot respond to this reason until I have received kindness. If I have a reason to express gratitude, I should also have a reason to perform actions that facilitate expressing gratitude. This would imply that I have a reason to put myself in difficult situations so that I can receive kindness or help. Of course, having this reason does not mean that I should do this above all else. However, if we try to understand what it means to have an obligation to express gratitude solely in terms of a time-neutral reason to express gratitude, we must admit that as long as the agent bears this obligation, they also have this reason. While it may seem a bit strange to think there is a reason to put oneself in a difficult situation, this in itself might not constitute a serious theoretical flaw. It is merely acknowledging that such a reason exists. But what a person is doing when they respond to this reason and put themselves in a difficult situation is fundamentally not much different from someone who, unable to have direct communication with the person they are interested in, deliberately drops something in front of that person to create an opportunity to establish a relationship.

Such behavior would normally be considered to be deviantly appropriating the fact that kind acts bind people more closely through obligation. That is why its affectation or desperation can seem both endearing and comical, and to some people, improper.

The problem lies in the point that if we understand the obligation of reciprocation by appealing to time-neutral reasons and solely through their normative force, we end up capturing obligations from reasons that underpin practices which have appropriated our conception of obligations. The reason we deeply thank people who have been kind to us and feel we must reciprocate is simply because we have received unexpected goodwill beyond what could reasonably be expected from the nature of our relationship up to that point. It is because the recipient understands that the other person has extended goodwill to them, transcending the previous nature of their mutual relationship, that the person who has received a favour becomes strongly concerned with the benefactor's interests in an attempt to respond somehow. This is what we normally understand about an agent coming to bear the obligation to return a favour because of the fact that a kind act was performed by another person. It is different from responding to the desirability of a relationship newly tied by obligation or the desirability of the act of reciprocation itself. It seems more persuasive to understand the obligation of reciprocation as a response to the fact itself that an act of unexpected goodwill was performed, which also means understanding this obligation as time-relative.

My responding to a reason to help someone out of a difficult situation, among many reasons, can transform my relationship with the person I helped, even if I didn't intend it to. Let's say I had no special attachment to the person I helped, I considered their interests to be just as important as anyone else's, and I acted simply because I judged that helping them was the action for which I had the most reason in my situation. Even so, the other person is placed in a situation where they must show that they do not consider my goodwill as something to be taken for granted. This is because if they neither appreciate my effort nor express gratitude, they would be conveying to me the message that they consider me a being who can be disregarded. Through my kind act, the relationship between myself and the person I helped changes into precisely such a relationship. The person I helped becomes more attentive to my interests and more careful about whether I feel I am being treated poorly. My act of goodwill rewrites the arrangement of reasons in the world the other person lives in. To bear the obligation of reciprocation is to respond to reasons in a way that accommodates the bias in the domain of reasons that has been

disturbed by another's kind act (this bias arises solely from the perspective of the person bearing this obligation). This way of responding to reasons is the kind of practical deliberation that Raz pointed out, which excludes certain reasons. Or to put it another way, the relationship between me and the person I helped has changed into one where the other person engages in practical deliberation that excludes certain reasons.

6. *Grounding obligation in human relationships*

My claim about the time-relativity of the obligation to keep promises can also be reinforced by M. Gilbert's argument that the obligation to keep promises arises from a joint commitment between the promisor and the promisee¹⁵. Based on this idea of hers, I shall argue that what underpin the practice of promising is not some normative force that exists time-neutrally, but rather the human relationship between the promisor and the promisee. Gilbert explains how the promisee can demand that the promisor perform the promised act and how the promisor bears an obligation directed toward the promisee using the concept of *owing*. If I promised a person X that I would go to a place P tomorrow, then I owe X my going to P tomorrow. This means that X is in a position to appropriately consider my going to P tomorrow as X's in a specific sense. Because X is owed this, X can demand that I go to P tomorrow (Gilbert 2011: 88). The model of promising that Gilbert devised to explain this understanding of the obligation that the promisor bears toward the promisee is the concept of joint commitment. When a promise is made, the promisor and the promisee come to regard the promised action as something they jointly own. It is a joint commitment because both parties become bound to the promised action (*ibid.*, 94-100). According to Gilbert, the promisee is also bound by the promise. First, the promisee bears an obligation not to interfere with the fulfillment of the promise. Additionally, contrary to what is commonly thought, the promisee is not in a position to unilaterally rescind the promise. Even if the promisee says it's okay to dissolve the promise, there are cases where the promisor may refuse¹⁶. If a joint

¹⁵ Gilbert proceeds cautiously and states that her view is that the obligation to keep promises cannot be explained solely by preexisting moral demands and must be understood as arising from the establishment of a joint commitment, but she does not deny a preexisting moral demand to keep promises (Gilbert 2011: 102).

¹⁶ Rosati discusses the cancellation of promises in more detail (Rosati 2011).

commitment is formed between the promisor and the promisee, they both become bound by the promise, and the obligation to keep the promise arises only when the joint commitment is established.

If the essence of the obligation to keep a promise is that a certain kind of relationship is established between the promisor and the promisee, this should provide further grounds for considering the obligation to keep promises as time-relative. Moreover, the observation that promising is a practice in which the promisor and the promisee jointly commit to the promised action seems to direct our attention to the fact that the human relationship established between the promisor and the promisee provides the groundwork that makes the promise itself possible. For example, for me to say “I promise to love you and never betray you no matter what happens from now on” and for this promise to actually be established and for the promisee and me to both become bound by this promise, we must be at least somewhat close. In cases where I am meeting the other person for the first time or where we are in an adversarial relationship, this promise would not normally be formed.

I earlier used the example of the obligation of reciprocation to argue for the time-relativity of the normativity of obligation, and what I was stating there was that when an agent responds to some specific reason, it can incidentally create a relationship between people, and through this, the normative effectiveness of obligation arises¹⁷. I believe that it is precisely

¹⁷ Recall the example of someone who passes the pepper when asked. In Section 5, I argued that it would be superficial to view such cases as responses to time-relative normative force. However, there is actually still room to understand this case as a response to something time-relative. If someone at a dinner table is asked to pass the pepper by another diner but doesn't do so, it seems reasonable for the requester to feel angry. Alternatively, the same person could continue eating while pretending not to notice the other person's desire for the pepper, even though she realizes it. In this case, however, it would be unreasonable for the person who wants the pepper to feel angry – unless he is aware that the other person has noticed his desire for the pepper. Although there is no difference in that this person is not responding to reasons to pass the pepper, there appears to be a difference depending on whether the other person made an explicit request. What likely explains this is the fact that we stand in a relationship where we can legitimately expect and demand that others respond to explicitly stated requests that can be easily accommodated, such as reaching out a bit to grab the pepper shaker. Failing to respond to a small request made at the dinner table constitutes expressing hostility, contempt, or lack of consideration toward the other person by deliberately ignoring demands that our mutual relationship makes reasonable, thereby communicating these attitudes in a manner that is evident to the other person and reveals one's readiness to openly display such negative attitudes. Now, the problem is that the human relationships that ground these mutual demands we impose on each other seem to be established even between complete strangers with whom we are

our responding to individual reasons that creates human relationships, and these created human relationships are what ground the practice of promising and the obligation to keep promises. That said, promising also has an aspect as a practice in which the agent, by engaging in it, introduces a bias into their domain of reasons or narrows that domain. Just as someone who impulsively extends a hand to a person in distress gets caught up in a new phase of the relationship with the person they helped, even if someone impulsively makes a promise to reassure another despite knowing they should not make such a promise, once the promise is established, the agent transforms their relationship with the promisee through the promise¹⁸. Promising biases one's concern toward some important things among many, and by doing so, the person who made the promise distances themselves from many other valuable things in their life. The more actions one takes to make and keep a promise, the more one's life approaches certain valuable things and moves away from others. The greater this distance becomes, the more difficult it becomes to change what one prioritizes, and the agent becomes increasingly bound by the promise.

7. Conclusion

The obligation to keep promises, or at least some of the other important obligations, are time-relative and cannot be captured solely by the normativity of reasons. Promises do not create new reasons, nor is a person

not particularly intimate. That is, unlike relationships such as friendship, family ties, or collegial connections, this relationship appears to be formed by default between people, and we always seem to stand in this relationship with others. This makes the human relationships that ground the demanding of certain normative constraints appear time-neutral. In response to this concern, it could be answered that this is merely a relationship between mutually harmless neighbors and is subject to change. Indeed, if the person who said "pass the pepper" had previously acted hostilely toward the person whom he is asking and committed various wrongdoings against her, their relationship would have been altered as a result. The person being asked, who is probably reluctantly sitting at the same table, might reasonably feel indignant that the other person would brazenly ask her to pass the pepper as if nothing had happened. Of course, there might still be reasons for this person to pass the pepper anyway.

¹⁸ A person who impulsively helps someone in a difficult situation is considered to be bound to accept the reciprocation from the person they helped. Indeed, not allowing the person they helped to express gratitude and continuing to make them feel indebted can transform the relationship between the two into something potentially unhealthy.

bound by a promise simply responding to some preexisting reason. We have no choice but to live within the bias that we have created through our actions, and this is not because there is a reason to live that way.

Similar claims could be made about decisions and vows. However, in these cases, they would be based not on the human relationships in which the agent is situated, but on the agent's engagement with things of value or the agent's relationship with themselves. A person bound by a decision encounters something of value, chooses to prioritize it, and by doing so, biases their life and gives it form. The more they distance themselves from many things in order to realize what they have decided, the more they become unable to turn back. And they try to be answerable to precisely such a self. But deliberating and making choices along the fold they themselves have created in their life is not done for a reason to do so.

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