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Value and The Weight of Practical Reasons

Joseph Raz¹

Assuming that the value of options (actions, activities or omissions) constitutes the proximate reason for pursuing them, I will advance some considerations that encourage doubts whether we have reason to promote or to maximise value. A proper argument would require establishing a negative: that there is no reason to promote value, or something like that. Raising doubts is less demanding: it consists in explaining some aspects of the relation between values and reasons that enable us to dispense with the doubtful thesis, by illustrating alternative relations between values and reasons. Theses such as that value should be promoted bring with them a way of determining the strength of reasons (of two reasons the stronger is the one that promotes more value). Abandoning the thesis reopens the question of how to determine the strength of reasons. For the most part I will leave this task to another occasion. Starting by outlining briefly some of the assumptions and terminology I rely on and use², I indicate the theoretical doubt about promotion of value, and proceed to outline a novel argument, to show that the disagreement is not merely terminological. The argument establishes that even though the value of things and of activities is a reason to engage with them there is a range of cases in which there is not always a reason to choose the best. The concluding section touches both on the limits of the argument, and on its importance.

1) Background

We get to normativity and to reasons through an attempt to understand intentional actions. A central class of intentional actions, those that can be said to be actions done for a purpose, is marked by being explained in a special way, namely by reference to the agents' (normative) reasons for performing them, as they take them to be. Reasons in general are factors that explain (or that can be used to explain), or that

¹ I am grateful to Barry Maguire for helpful comments on a draft of the paper.

² I am relying on the account of these matters in *From Normativity to Responsibility* (O.U.P. 2011). Among other things it distinguishes various senses that can be given to the promotion of value thesis. Here I identify it informally only enough to identify the basic idea behind it.

are central parts of explanations.³ 'Last year's severe cold was the reason for the poor crop this spring.' 'The reason he stammered was a sudden drop in his blood pressure.' Normative reasons are distinctive in that they can explain people's (and some other animals') reactions to certain factors in ways that depend on their awareness of these factors, and on taking those reactions to be appropriate because of these factors.⁴ Normative reasons are marked by three features: First, the reactions they lead to can be assessed as successful or unsuccessful along a number of dimensions, one of which being that they can be rational or irrational. Second, when the reaction is successful, in that the factor that explains it really does make it apt, we can specify both the awareness of the factor and the content of that awareness as reasons that explain the reaction, only the second being a normative reason, whereas if the reaction is unsuccessful, if the factor does not exist or does not render the reaction appropriate, only belief in its existence is the reason for the reaction. And it is a reason in the explanatory sense only, though the explanation includes belief in a normative reason. Third, factors that render certain reactions appropriate are reasons for those reactions even if the agents are not guided by them (and possibly not even aware of them), provided that in principle they could be guided by them. Factors that meet this last condition are reasons, whether or not they explain any human reactions. They are normative reasons.

The formal, uninformative, answer to the question: what makes an action an appropriate reaction in a certain situation, is that in that situation there is a point to it, a value in taking it, some good done by taking it. Those who, as I do, take the value of things to constitute or provide reasons for action, allow themselves to stretch the way the term is understood in non-philosophical English. It is a natural stretch. Aspiring, as philosophers do, to very broad generalisations, we often have to use words beyond the context in which they are comfortable, for natural languages are resistant to words suitable for these very general and relatively context-independent uses.

³ Not every factor that can be used to predict or retrodict is a reason, for not every such factor contributes to an explanation of what is predicted or retrodicted. E.g. epidemiological evidence can be a good predictor without explaining what it predicts.

⁴ I will assume that reasons can belong to different ontic categories: facts, events, states, etc.

It is also natural to use ‘good’ and ‘better’ interchangeably with ‘valuable’ and ‘of greater value’. But here extra caution is needed. Not everything that is good has value, nor does what makes something good always make it valuable. Possibly, there is no value in good amoebas and what makes them good (presumably that they are good – that is free from defects – specimens of amoebas) does not makes them valuable.⁵ Furthermore, generally, though not without exception, anything that is good is good because it is good of its kind. This hammer is a good tool because it is a good hammer, meaning that it excels as a hammer. I will return to the genre-dependence of goods later. The caution here is that there is great freedom in devising species or genres with their own autonomous, and possibly arbitrary or nonsensical excellences. One may win a competition for the best green paint drinking. One does so if one is the best green-paint-drinker on the day. Is this really something of value? Possibly not. When I refer to what is good I will be referring to goods that are valuable. What is the difference between those that are and those that are not? There is no general operational test telling them apart. But they can be told apart because value is intelligible, so that what is of value in anything and why can be explained.

Part of the explanation has to do with the fact that where the good of something is a value in it, it, that which is good can be good for a being whose good matters, is of value. So a good car can be good for people, and a good banana can be good for a baboon, and these goods indicate something of value because the good of people and baboons matters, because the life of people and baboons is of value. Note that for something to be good for a being it need not be that its absence is bad for that being. Possibly that being would not exist, or would not be alive without the good we are talking about. If so then the absence of the good is neither good nor bad for him. But its presence is good for him if it is one of the factors that makes, let us say, his life a good life for him to have, a life that is good for him.

Note that something may be good, of value, and indeed may be good for a being (whose good matters) and yet there may be no reason for that being to engage with it,

⁵ Nor are they in any interesting ways conditionally valuable. True, for the purpose of some experiments, let us say, good amoebas are valuable. But then for the purpose of some other experiments bad, i.e. defective, amoebas, or green amoebas, etc., are valuable.

or to protect it, etc. I will assume that the life of both people and blackbirds is valuable, but that people do and blackbirds do not have rational powers. Certain conditions are good for blackbirds; others are good for people. It is possible to explain what they are and why they are good, including explaining why the life of these beings matters, is of value (if it is). And we can reflect on the ways natural processes, ones that do not involve blackbirds or people realising that some conditions are good for them, tend to secure these good conditions. We regard these conditions as reason-giving when we think of them in relation to beings that have rational powers. So the good of blackbirds may provide reasons for people (though not for blackbirds, who do not have rational powers). It provides reasons for people when the good for blackbirds can⁶ guide (and thereby explain) their conduct. Generally speaking, it is good for agents to engage with the good. Hence, if something is good and one can engage with it, that person has a reason to engage with it and engaging with it is good for him or her in some respect (even if not overall).⁷

So at the core of reflection on normativity is an attempt to understand aspects of the life of persons, particularly their purposeful conduct, including actions, activities and omissions. Purposeful conduct is conduct guided by what the agents take to be appropriate to their situation in the world. That is the thought expressed by the familiar saying that action aims at the good.

2) Weight of Reasons - Preliminaries

Let us turn now to the relative strength of normative reasons. Our rational powers, we said, enable us to recognise how things are and what conduct is appropriate. Using them, we guide our reactions, our conduct, in light of those believed reasons. So it is natural to suppose that an inherent part of forming the view that a certain fact constitutes a reason for an action is also to form a view as to how strong that reason is.

⁶ Can in principle, meaning that there it is possible for opportunities to follow that consideration to exist (does not involve changing the past, etc.).

⁷ The last few sentences alert us to another complexity that I will generally ignore in this article: that an action is good in some respect is a reason to perform it. That one performed (or will perform) an action that one has an adequate reason to perform is good (in some respect) and that may provide a further reason, e.g. to the friends of that person, to encourage him etc. I will generally write as if the value of an action is independent of the fact that it is one that one has a reason to perform.

Comparing the strength of the reasons for all available options, we conclude which options are supported by adequate, namely undefeated, reasons.

But this description distorts the way we reason about what to do. We can form the view that a certain fact is a reason for a certain option, without any view about its strength, or about the strength of reasons of that kind (life-saving reasons, etc.). We may even be able to determine which of our options is supported by a conclusive reason without any view of the strength of the reasons involved. This is clearly the case in the event (unlikely but perhaps possible) that we have several options, all but one of which serve no reason, and only one reason applies to the remaining option. We should take the option that is supported by a reason rather than any of those that serve no reason. Or, consider situations in which two reasons partially conflict: the agents have two options such that in taking one of them they would conform to one reason but not the other whereas in taking the second option they would conform to both. Assuming no other reason bears on the situation the agents have conclusive reason to take the second option, a conclusion not supported by any premise about the strength of the reasons.

The first example shows that so long as only one reason applies to a situation its weight is immaterial to its bearing on the situation.⁸ The second example shows that even when several reasons apply their weight is immaterial so long as they do not conflict. The examples also show that the determination of which reasons are conclusive depends on additional premises that are not themselves propositions stating reasons, e.g. that no other reason affects the matter, and that one completely conforms to reason by conforming to all the reasons that apply to one.

The examples illustrate another point: that a reason is conclusive (when it is) is not an inherent feature. It is relative to a situation, so that the same reason may be conclusive in one situation but not in another, and in each situation that depends on its

⁸ Jonathan Dancy has suggested that there are reasons that can be ignored for no reason. They are enticing reasons, but there is nothing amiss in just ignoring them (see "Enticing Reasons" in *REASON AND VALUE* edited by R.J. Wallace, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler, M. Smith, (O.U.P. 2004) p.91. I have cast doubt on the possibility of such reasons (*ENGAGING REASON* (O.U.P. 1999) p. 101-102, and on the difference between them and reasons that are defeated by all others, and are incommensurate among themselves.

relations with other reasons that apply in that situation.⁹ A situation consists of an agent and options open to him or her at a given time. One feature of many situations is that with any single option there are several reasons for and several against it. We do colloquially sometimes refer to all the reasons for an option taken together as the reason for it, and to all the reasons against it, taken together, as the reason against it. It is convenient to do so in theoretical writings as well. The reason for an option is conclusive if the reasons for it have more weight, are better, more stringent or stronger (and I will use all these terms and others interchangeably) than the reasons against it (where the loss of opportunities involved in taking that option is among the reasons against it). A reason for an option is undefeated if none of the available options is supported by a stronger, weightier, or better reason.¹⁰

One important principle lies behind these remarks: compliance with many reasons allows for degrees (simplest example: owe the bank \$100 – repaying any sum below that would be partial compliance with the duty to pay \$100). Any reason is also a reason for partial compliance (If I have only \$50 I cannot refuse to pay on the ground that that I do not have a reason to pay that, I have only a reason to pay the full debt). And of course, we should comply with all the reasons that apply to us, we should come as close as possible to complete compliance with the reasons that apply to us (call it the principle of complete compliance).¹¹ Where there are several independent reasons of equal strength and I cannot comply with all of them I have to comply with as many as I can. Some rescue examples considered in philosophical discussion are like that: Assume that the only reasons that apply to me are the ones detailed in the following story. Several people will drown if I do not save them. I have reasons to save each one of them, and they are all of equal strength. I should save as many as I can. That is the only way I come as close to complete conformity with reason as possible. Needless to say in many

⁹ I avoid various difficult questions, such as the duration of the time that defines a situation, and what is the likelihood that an act, activity or omission would take place if tried, which would make it an available option.

¹⁰ As is evident from these terminological stipulations, often no single reason is undefeated or conclusive, because in the given situation the undefeated or the conclusive reason is all the reasons for an option taken together.

¹¹ Here and throughout when referring to reasons (in the plural) I assume that they are independent reasons.

cases different reasons will vary in strength. That is when the weight of reasons determines what comes closer to complete compliance.

Doesn't that explanation make me care about the number of reasons I conform to rather than about the drowning people? That would be doubly to misunderstand the situation. First, I take practical reasons to be reasons for a particular mode of conduct: an act, activity, or omission. They are satisfied when that conduct occurs. Unless the conduct they are reasons for includes an intention or a motive (e.g. reason to volunteer out of love of country) they are satisfied when the conduct occurs, whatever the agent's motivation that brought it about may be (e.g., I have reason not to turn on the light even once it gets dark, and I do not because I am asleep – I have conformed with the reason). But what matters is not that there is yet another reason I conformed to, but that my conduct should be appropriate to how things are in some respect, and my conduct is appropriate to how they are in that respect. That is stated by saying that I conformed to a reason that applied to me, but the statement does not express a fetishism of compliance with as many reasons as possible, but concern about how things are and how my conduct is related to the way they are. The second distortion is to think of a person concerned to behave as he should, one who follows the reason that applies to him, and is not merely conforming to it, as someone who has this fetishism about clocking up as many reasons he conforms to as possible. Perhaps such attitudes are possible. But they are neither typical of those concerned to follow reasons that apply to them, nor are they rational. That one has, let us say, a conclusive reason to φ tells one that one would do well to φ , that one would conform with reason to φ . But it does not tell one why one should φ , meaning what good one would do by φ -ing. This is not a point about the appropriateness of using this expression or that. There is no linguistic impropriety in saying that one does know the answer to the question 'why should one φ ?', namely that there is a conclusive reason to φ . But that is not an informative answer. People who are responsible about their conduct are moved by considerations that constitute reasons: the plight of the poor, the delightful quality of the wine, and respond to them.

3) Promoting Value: a Theoretical Doubt

Advocates of the thesis that we should always promote value are led, regarding rescue cases like those mentioned here, to the very same conclusions to which the considerations explained above led. My aim was to show that no assumption about promoting value is needed to reach these conclusions. They follow from the fact that if we have reason to rescue one person then we have reason (of the same kind) to rescue each of the people who need rescuing in that situation, and from the implications of that fact. That shows that, at least in cases of this kind, rejecting the promotion of value thesis does not lead to absurd results.

But why doubt the thesis? After all, one may say, saving the life of one person does some good and saving the life of several people does more good. I should do as much good as I can. Therefore I should save as many people as I can, and in doing so I am promoting value. The doubt may be subtle, but it is important. Of course there is a sense in which if I save two people I do more good than if I save one: I do the same good to two people, rather than just to one. But it does not follow that in doing so I increase the amount of good in the world, or promote value (and therefore, it does not follow that I have a reason to increase the amount of good in the world).

The doubts I am airing here are well known: As I mentioned, any good is or can be good for someone who matters, someone whose good matters, namely is of value. This is not a claim about the priority of 'good for' over 'good *simpliciter*'.¹² Good novels and good food are good *simpliciter*. But they are good only if they can be good for people, or for other beings who matter.¹³ Which beings matter is, of course, a normative question. Possibly a family (a group) or a university (an institution) matters in itself. There clearly are things that are good for the family or the university, making them a better family or a better university (or making their history better) independently of whether or not they are good for any member of the family or of the university. Possibly there is value in those goods, independently of their value to any individual

¹² And of course it is not an observation about the meaning of any term.

¹³ What makes novels good is their insight, humour, etc., and they are good for people to read because they are good novels. But they would not be good novels if people could not read them in the right spirit.

person. I am not assuming that only individual people or animals of some other species matter in themselves.

Whether or not families or universities are valuable in themselves, what raises the question, what makes them candidates for being 'beings who matter' is that they are agents with psychological and normative properties (such as intentions, determination, indecision, bigotry, generosity) that are not reduced to those of any individuals, even though they may have them only in virtue of activities or properties of individuals. If these are preconditions for being beings that matter then the world is not such a being. Whatever value there is in it or in its existence is simply due to its ('instrumental') value in facilitating the existence of beings that matter. There are additional issues that cannot be considered here.¹⁴ The rest of the article aims to illustrate one complexity in the relations between value and reasons, which illustrates how thinking of reasons as based on or reflecting the principle of the promotion of value obscures the ways the value of options affects the weight of reasons.

4) On Not Having Reason To Choose The best: Examples

Consider a range of activities that can be good for beings who matter, beginning with examples: a good dance, a good holiday, giving or attending a good party, a good climb to the top of the mountain, a good lecture, and so on. And consider also a range of objects that can be good: a good film, or novel, or poem, or painting, and so on.¹⁵ Engagement with, involvement with all of them can be good for the people involved. I will assume that participating in the activity or attending to the object in ways that are

¹⁴ For my views on the value of people see VALUE, RESPECT, AND ATTACHMENT (C. U.P. 2001), and on the relation of value and well-being see, e.g. "The Role of Well-Being" *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 *Ethics* 2004. I argued that people do not have their own well-being as one of their ends, and that there is no reason for them to pursue it. I also allowed for the rationality of adopting various aspirations regarding the shape and manner of one's life, e.g. some people may aspire to have a well-rounded life, with a wide range of experiences of radically different kinds. Others may not care for that at all. Some people may be risk seekers, others not. Such optional aspirations could explain why some people seek the best in this context or that. My argument here is merely that there is no general reason to do so if one does not have the relevant aspirations.

¹⁵ My examples do not assume that all items of the kinds discussed can be ranked by their values – there may be a large degree of indeterminacy and of incommensurability among them. Furthermore, they are neutral as to the determinants of degree of value: the examples allow for relativities to taste etc. as well as to changes over time.

sensitive to their good features is good for the participants or those so involved.¹⁶ I do not mean, good overall, but good in some respect. So dancing rhythmically, being attentive to one's partner, etc. is good for the dancer, as is reading a novel with understanding, and so on. In this section I will rely on examples. The next section will explain them. Only in the final section will I demarcate the range of cases to which the examples belong.

What I doubt is that one has more reason to engage with a better object or activity than with one that is good but not as good, that is, while what is a good about an action (or activity or omission) is a reason for it, I doubt that the fact that it will either engage with a better object or will be a better act (i.e. belong to a better action, activity or omission) is essentially a better reason to perform it, or to omit it. Perhaps there are some kinds of objects or activities such that one has more reason to engage with the better one of the kind. I doubt that that is generally the case. I will illustrate the doubt by a few examples that stand for many others. Imagine a person writing a novel, and suppose that he is as talented a novelist, as talented in writing novels, as anyone is ever likely to be. I am assuming that we could say of such a person that he can write a novel that is better than any so far written, and that it is not certain that he will succeed if he tries. He has the ability, but not in a sense that, barring bad luck, trying assures one of success (which is what is implied by my ability to cross the street). I am also assuming that regarding the best novel, the best painting, the best holiday etc., best is best *pro tem*, and there is nothing that is the best possible. Probably my reflections on the subject do not depend on that assumption, but it seems true.

My novelist may have reason to write (or to try to write) the best novel. He may have taken a bet that he will, or his mother will die happy if he does. My question is whether he has a reason to try to write the best novel in the absence of such contingent factors, to do so just because that would be the best novel. I do not think that he does. Furthermore, the very ambition seems inappropriate for a serious novelist. A person whose sole reason for writing a novel is to write the best novel, and whose decisions about characters, narrative style, tone of voice, trajectory of development and

¹⁶ And that applies to what are sometimes called 'other-regarding' goods, like attending to the sick.

anything else are taken just in order make it the best, is score keeping, and cares not at all about any of the goods that novels can realise. But suppose that the writer's reason is different: to bring to life and preserve the glory and the tragedy of the culture of X, or to give voice and rid himself of the inner pressure to do so, to the agonies he suffered in adolescence, or to expose the ridiculous pretensions of this or that group, or to chance his ability to express in literary form the vagaries of communication and how our fortunes, good or ill, depend on the failures and fragilities of communication, in totally unpredictable absurdist ways, and so on and so forth. Whatever his ambition he will want to realise it successfully, namely to produce a good novel, though not necessarily by the standards currently known as the standards of good novels. He may even aim for ridicule or to display another form of dissociation from some existing novel that is a foil for his. But there is no reason for novelists to aim to write the best novel. Similarly, a writer whose reason is, say, to portray the life of a neglected community, does not have a stronger, weightier reason to do so, namely to portray that community in a novel that will be the best novel. To aspire to do so is in many circumstances to be moved by an unworthy competitive urge, exposing the hollowness of one's ambition. The same does not apply to a hope that the novel will be the best. That is consistent with having a serious aim in writing it, and a hope, not necessarily endearing, but otherwise unobjectionable, that in doing so one would also produce not only a good novel, but one better than any other.

Let me take a more concrete example. Suppose one is a Florentine sculptor living in the 1470s, not long after Donatello. Would it be an unworthy ambition to make a St. John that will be better than Donatello's? Not necessarily. One may wish to do so because one sees the Baptist differently from Donatello and wants to show that different vision, artistic or theological, or because one wants to test oneself, or to establish one's reputation, to gain recognition or acceptability etc. When we deal with more concrete ambitions of this kind, one can imagine some artists having reasons to better this or that work or other artist, perhaps not as their only reason for a work, but as one of them. What these examples do not show is that every artist has reason to aspire to be the best, or the best at the time, or to surpass the most admired work of the time and so on. Nor do they show that creating the best would be, other things

being equal, a better experience, or a better activity for its creator than creating a good work that is not the best (or more generally that, other things being equal, it would be a better activity or experience to create a better work than a good work that excels in other ways even though it is not as good overall). The existence of a valid reason of that kind will depend on contingent factors.

Similar conclusions apply to other objects and activities (organising a wedding reception, a piano competition and so on). But what about consuming or enjoying the creations of others? Isn't it the case that of two novels the stronger reason is to read the better one? Of two paintings the stronger reason is to attend to the better painting, or of two concerts the better reason is to go to the better concert and so on? Not necessarily.

Let me start with ordinary reasons for choosing a novel to read: I am tired and want something soothing to take my mind off the day's troubles. A detective story will hold my attention and keep me off my daily worries. That book brings to life the experience of Bangladeshi women who migrated to Britain, and will open up to me the experience of a troubled and fascinating community. This book develops new and fascinating narrative techniques. It is both challenging and rewarding in its control of narrative forms. She (the novelist) has a unique insight into the difficulties of relationships. I always respond to her work. It is a novel about loyalty and its ambiguities, a topic that always fascinates me. And so on.

Let such reasons be conceded. But, one may ask, is it not the case that, other things being equal, the stronger reason is to read the better book, either because its being better is an independent reason or because it increases the weight of the reasons for reading it?

The language I used in discussing the examples in the previous section implied the claim that being better than ... , or better than some, or better than all, while providing information on how good the object or activity is, or how good it is of its kind, does not establish that that is something agents have reason to pursue, and it does not establish that that is something that is good for them. In some circumstances engaging with what is best or better is good for some agents, and they have reason to do so.

These can be instrumental reasons or a result of a promise or of a valuable personal goal of the agents. Many people would be curious about what is happening in literature these days. One of their aims is to be knowledgeable about what is best on the literary scene. In other words, people's personal projects will provide many with, sometimes strong, reasons to keep up with the best books, or the best holiday resorts and the like. Such cases do not establish that just being the best, or among the best, constitutes a reason. After all, personal projects may provide reasons to read Armenian literature of the early 19th century, without thereby establishing that being an Armenian writing of that period constitutes a reason.

While my examples aim to illustrate theoretical truths they presuppose a substantive view of the value of this or that case and of the reasons they do or do not provide. The hope is that those who do not share these beliefs about the cases illustrated would, nevertheless, be helped by them to find other cases that, given their substantive beliefs, do illustrate the theoretical points. Others may realise that they do not disagree after all; that they were misled into thinking that they do by overlooking the role of personal goals, and the like. But we need a general explanation of that view, an explanation that will tend to substantiate it.

5) On Not Having Reason To Choose The Best: Exploration

So, again: is there no reason for everyone to prefer the better book? I am not sure. I am inclined to think that we have an epistemic reason to believe that, other things being equal, we are more likely to find something responding to reasons we have in a better book than in a good but less good one. It is a weak epistemic reason, but when all else is equal it has some force. What I do not see is how it is a practical reason for reading the better book. More accurately, that the book is good, has some valuable features, is a reason to read it. My doubt is about the claim that as between two good books, the features that make one the better book or the fact that they make it the better of the two, provide a reason to read it rather than the other good book, or that in the given circumstances they enhance the strength of the reason to read it.

Before proceeding to explain why this is so I wish to put aside one objection to the claim that it is so. It may be thought that my examples point to a mistaken

conclusion because they assume that all goods that are goods of a kind must be ranked, if at all, relative to a stable, agent-independent kind. The novel that I have best reason to read tonight may not be the best novel, but it is the best instance of the kind “novel I have reason to read tonight”, or if we assume that the novel I should read tonight is the most entertaining of those within easy reach that I have not read before, then I have most reason to read the best novel of the kind: entertaining novel within easy reach tonight that I have not read before.

So far as I can see there is nothing wrong in speaking of such a kind, and the linguistic awkwardness or inelegance of doing so does not matter. Many such ephemeral kinds will be of little consequence, but perhaps they may be relied upon to sustain the theoretical claim that one always has best reason to choose the best option of those available. Except that in order to do so the kind must be a normatively significant one, and the grounds for ranking the relative value of the options of that kind needs to be independent of the reason for pursuing them. That is, it must be the case that one has reason to do the best of the kind because it is the best, and not that it is the best because there is best reason to do it.¹⁷ These conditions are not met in the illustrations of the objection: the only reason why the kind mentioned has any normative significance is because it reflects the strength of reasons that the agent has in the situation postulated in the example. That is why the objection fails.

In the previous section I suggested that some common motives for pursuing ambitions such as to write the best novel are unworthy. In a way they are analogous to the ambition to conform to as many reasons that apply to one as possible, an ambition I discussed in section three. There I distinguished caring about the substance of the reason and caring about it as being a reason. Analogously, we should distinguish caring about writing the best novel from caring about writing a novel that has features that would make it best. Does one not have reason to write such a novel? One does. My claim is that that reason does not necessarily have greater weight than reasons to write a novel that has other valuable features, even though they do not establish it as the best. In other words, that the good features make it the best novel does not establish that the

¹⁷ See above p.

reason to write a novel with these features is the best reason (among reasons to write a novel). This is the claim that needs explaining.

We need to return to the dependence of cultural goods on genre. We need to understand how, even though the features that make a cultural good good are features that provide reasons for engaging with it, the fact that they make it better than other members of the genre it belongs to does not make those reasons stronger or more stringent reasons. Cultural goods, and all my examples are of cultural goods, and most intrinsic goods are cultural goods, belong to genres. We understand them by understanding the genres to which they belong: is it a novel or a poem or a history book or an autobiography? Without an answer we cannot understand the object we are reading, nor can we evaluate it. Cultural goods, namely literary genres, artistic genres, types of social activities and relationships are constituted by standards that determine criteria for excellence within the genre. Thereby they determine the criteria that vindicate this or that as the best novel or painting etc. Alternatively, if one rejects, for all or for some cultural goods, the possibility that anything is best, these standards determine the criteria by which works of the genre, or relationships or activities that belong to it, are compared regarding their relative excellence.

The best novel is best because of, first, certain of its features (its mastery of language, of narrative style, its imaginative sweep, its understanding of social complexities, its psychological insight, its sense of the absurd, its playfulness, its variability of tone and texture, its ingenious plotting, etc.) and second, the way they are mixed together, the ways they interact: Each one of the features that contribute to its excellence provides a reason to read it. Similarly, various of the ways in which the elements of the novel are related to one another contribute to its excellence and provide reasons for reading it (or enhance the weight of the other reasons for reading it; the distinction will often be artificial, and therefore immaterial). But why should my or your response to them or interest in them correspond in inclusivity and degree of interest or appeal to the ranking that determines their position as best or better?

My interest and yours should be guided by good-making features of the work, its valuable components and their interrelations, when those are valuable. But if by the

standards of the genre certain features in a certain mix make the work better than others, the reason to produce or engage with such a work is stronger, weightier, than the reasons to engage with the others, then other things being equal I am at fault (and if aware of the facts and in control of my faculties and actions, I am irrational) in not pursuing that option, the one that the standards determine to be best, rather than the less good one. While my interest should be guided by good-making features, why need it be guided by the relative excellence of works, etc., in the different genres? I do not know of any reason why it should.

It is quite typical that different people should be drawn to the same novel, or the same painting, or the same holiday resort, or want the same person to be a friend, for different reasons, and they may all be valid reasons. Moreover, they can be valid yet conflicting reasons (naturally in different objects): some may be attracted to irreverence, others to an instinctive manifest respectfulness, and so on. So long as they all derive from genuinely good-making features of the object, we must acknowledge that they are all valid. That is compatible with it being OK for us personally to prefer some of them, while having no taste for some others. However, most of our tastes are acquired tastes (even though they may have roots in some of our hard-wired tastes), and their acquisition should be guided by the good features of their objects, and of the activities and experiences of engaging with them. Once we acknowledge that there is a stronger reason for one, our liking must follow that reason. We now have a reason to like one object better than the others, and it is a failing in us if we do not, even if we cannot. As already avowed, I do not see any reason why we must adjust our liking in that way, because I cannot see why we have a better reason to engage with the better object.

This view is reinforced by the nature of genres. Far from being immutable they are constantly in flux. Part of the way they, and the standards of excellence that define them, function is by providing not only models to emulate, or to immerse oneself in, but also ways of defining oneself, and one's aspirations and hopes in life, against them – there are wonderful activities that (without denying their excellence) are not part of one's life, and possibly one does not wish them to be. Or, one may wish to engage in the goods of the genre in ways that reveal new or neglected aspects of it, thus subtly positioning oneself both within the common standard, but also somewhat outside it. As

when one throws parties that are recognisably like the best that others do, but also show one's own twist on that pattern. And there are many other variations from the established standards of excellence, including their rejection in favour of alternatives, alternatives that do not make sense except in reaction to the existing norm. Perhaps the emergence of Brechtian theatre is an example of both imitation of and reaction against the theatre of his time. I am not suggesting that every time I choose to go to a lesser play I am changing the standards of excellence for drama. I do not, and may have no such wish. Sometimes my choice itself is an acknowledgement of the excellence of the experience that I am rejecting or postponing – now, I say to myself, is not the right time for it. I have adduced the different ways in which standards of excellence for a genre function in the life of the genre and of people familiar with it to suggest that while reaction to them should acknowledge their value, it need not give preference to the better instances of the genre over the less good ones. The observations about the way genres, and their defining standards, function also help to meet the main challenge to my argument.

Is not the thought that one novel is better than another inconsistent with the thought that I have no better reason to read it than to read the other? The assumption that they are inconsistent is precisely what I am challenging. My suggestion is that the standards that govern genres develop in ways that while determining what are degrees of excellence of that kind, do not automatically translate into what one has better reasons to engage with, not even *pro tanto* reasons. This suggestion would be challenged if the view I am taking would, if shared, undermine the existence of genres and of the standards that constitute them. This is not a totally fanciful possibility. These genres, and the standards defining them, constitute cultural goods. They exist and persist because they are sustained by social practices, at least in some places and for some times. If the view I am advocating would undermine the ability to participate in the practice, or to value and respect such practices engaged in by others, then this view would if shared make the continued existence of cultural goods impossible.

But in fact my suggestion is not inconsistent with interest in and admiration for cultural goods, though it is – and should be – at odds with taking them to be immutable. As we saw the standards that constitute these goods fulfil a vital role in their

development. They are essential both for understanding and for the appreciation and valuation of works of the genre, and vital for their development. But they do not fulfil these functions by inspiring veneration and acceptance. On the contrary, both the creation of new works and new types of valuable activities and relationships, and their understanding and interpretation, strive against the limits that those standards establish, and acquire their meaning through the way they modify, reaffirm or challenge the standards. Acknowledging the crucial roles of genres and their constitutive standards does not require, and does not justify, taking them to determine the strength of reasons to engage with these works or activities. Thus a proper understanding of the way genre-constituting standards function in the life of a genre undermines the thought that we should be guided by them in the sense of taking the objects or activities that they designate as better or best to be supported by stronger reasons.

Furthermore, the view I suggested does not deny that the degree of excellence of paintings, buildings and other cultural goods affects the strength of some practical reasons. Values provide two kinds of reasons: reasons to respect what is of value and reasons to engage with it.¹⁸ The reasons I have been discussing so far are reasons to engage with cultural goods: to organise parties or participate in them, to write novels or read them and so on. But we have other reasons regarding cultural goods, reasons to respect them that include reasons to preserve and protect them. These reasons are sensitive to degrees of excellence of individual works. Other things being equal the reason to save or to protect the better work are stronger than the reasons to save or protect lesser works of the same genre. These reasons, to preserve and protect, are reasons to respect the value of those objects and therefore they are sensitive to their relative value.

6. Value, Good for and reasons:

I have argued that regarding some cultural goods, while the features that make them valuable provide reasons for engaging with them, the fact that one of them is better than another does not in itself establish that the reason to engage with it is weightier, better, than the reason to engage with the other. It establishes that the good satisfies the

¹⁸ See my *VALUE, RESPECT AND ATTACHMENT* (C.U.P. 2001) Chapter Four.

criteria of excellence of the genre to which it belongs to a higher degree. But that is not in itself a reason to engage with it, nor a factor that affects the weight of reasons to engage with it, special conditions apart.

Am I not confusing the value of a good (a novel or a party) with the value of the option to engage with it? An option is an action that is available to the agent at the time, one that he or she can choose. The proximate reason for an action (or activity or omission), i.e. for the option of performing it, is its value. Its value may be due to the fact that it is an aspect or a constituent of a larger whole, or because it facilitates something worthwhile. Naturally, when the value of the action is derived from the value of what it is a part of or of what it facilitates, its value may differ from the value of what it derives from. The argument of the last section is, however, still relevant. The argument applies directly to cases in which the good in question is the activity that constitutes the option (e.g. a solo rock-climb, or singing with no audience). But it is also relevant to cases in which the option is engaging with some cultural good, thus deriving its value from that good. In such cases one would expect that, other things being equal, the better the cultural good the better the option. That expectation turns out to be unfounded regarding cultural goods to which my argument applies. That is one lesson of the argument of the last section.

Am I not confusing what is good with what is good for the agent? No, for as explained it is good for agents to engage with what is valuable, provided they can do so in the right way (with understanding, with the appropriate attitudes, etc.). Of course, engaging with some valuable thing may not be as good as engaging with another. My claim is that the fact that one cultural good is better than another does not establish that, other things being equal, engaging with it is better for an agent than engaging with the other.

Here, in considering how the value of different options makes them good for an agent, we encounter considerable complexity, and we also realise the limited range of cases to which my argument applies. First of all the argument does not apply without much modification and qualification to the facilitative, instrumental, value of options.

It has other limits as well. Think of a choice of career (and careers, occupations and professions are almost always cultural goods): Should one not always choose the best career? To the extent that careers can be ranked in quality (and I am more sceptical about this than most people) the answer is: No, because the best career may not be best for that person. But should I not choose the career that is best for me? And to the extent that my conduct affects someone else's choice of career, should my conduct not be directed to get them to have the career that is best for them? Here the answers are Yes and No. Considering the No will take us beyond the scope of this article, and into an examination of the moral constraints on the ways we may affect other people, with the intention to do so.

The Yes is simpler. I argued, in effect, that it is a mistake to think that necessarily what is better is, other things being equal, better for agents.¹⁹ In this discussion what is good for people should not be equated with what they have adequate reason to choose. We are looking for an asymmetric relation: they have adequate reason to choose because it is good for them, but not the other way round. One view has it that what is good for people is what serves their well-being. I will rely on that view in discussing careers. The claim is that analogous arguments would apply to these, or if not to other examples, whatever view of what is good for people turns out to be correct. Careers belong with a different class of cases than my previous examples. The careers people pursue affect the quality of their life in a variety of ways. Occasional activities, like the novel they read this week or the party they attend, do not except contingently (at the party they may fall for the person who then becomes their partner, etc.). My examples belong with cultural goods that bear on the quality of one's life only if they are part of one's long-term pursuits or relationships.²⁰ Careers are themselves long-term pursuits, and therefore have properties that bear on the quality of one's life. Hence deliberation about choice of career is bound to be different from deliberation about occasional engagement with cultural goods. But that does not undermine the argument of the

¹⁹ And the argument assumes that the agents can appreciate and benefit from engaging in activities, and with objects of value of the kinds we deal with.

²⁰ For a discussion of these matters see my *THE MORALITY OF FREEDOM* (Oxford 1986) 289-320, and 'The Role of Well-being' *PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES* *op.cit*

article, which apply at least to cases where the action does not bear on the quality of agent's life.

The upshot is that the fact that normative values constitute reasons, and that some valuable objects or activities are better than others, does not establish that other things being equal the better (or weightier) reason is to pursue the better or more valuable good. What we have undefeated or conclusive reason to do depends in part on the principle of complete compliance. It also depends on the values options serve. But it does that in complex ways that remain to be explored. The argument of this article highlighted the difference between the way the value of options affects the weight of reasons to engage with cultural values and reasons to respect cultural values.