

## **Neo-Humean Rationality and the Profoundest Problem in Ethics**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter puts forward a Neo-Humean view on reasons that combines the distinction between rationally requiring reasons and rationally justifying reasons with a Neo-Humean view on rationality which understands this notion in terms of coherence between final desires and pro-attitudes. According to this view, moral reasons consist in rationally justifying reasons whereas prudential reasons consist in rationally requiring reasons. In contrast to a reasons-based view on rationality, the view makes it possible to explain and compare an agent's moral and prudential reasons by employing the notion of rationality. The view entails that an agent's moral reasons might be stronger than her prudential reasons in that she is rationally justified to act in accordance with the former instead of the latter. At the same time, it accounts for the contention that an agent need not be irrational if she does not adhere to her moral reasons.

### **1. Introduction**

We constantly encounter conflicts between moral reasons and prudential reasons that force us to make decisions with impact on the lives of ourselves and others. The difficulty of comparing moral and prudential reasons to settle what there is strongest reason to do is known as the profoundest problem in ethics. A solution to the problem urges us to find an overarching normative perspective from which comparisons of these reasons can be made. In what could such a perspective consist? One proposal readily comes to mind: rationality. An agent has strongest reason to do what is preferable that she do from the perspective of practical rationality. One explanation why this suggestion seems natural is that it appears inconsistent to maintain that what an agent has strongest reason to do is not rational.

A view that maintains that normative reasons can be compared by employing the notion of rationality needs to provide three accounts: First, an account of the connection between normative reasons and practical rationality. Second, an account of practical rationality in terms of which comparisons can be made. Third, an account of how different reasons compare with respect to rationality.

In this paper, I propose a Neo-Humean view on rationality and reasons that aims to provide the required account. In Section 2, I consider three influential claims about the connection between reasons and rationality. In Section 3, I suggest that a Neo-Humean view

on rationality is preferable to a reasons-based view as regards how reasons are explained and compared by means of rationality. In Section 4, I argue that there is an essential distinction between rationally requiring reasons and rationally justifying reasons. Thereafter, I develop a view that combines this distinction with a Neo-Humean notion of rationality. According to this view, prudential reasons amount to rationally requiring reasons whereas moral reasons amount to rationally justifying reasons. In Section 5, I argue that the strength of reasons varies along two dimensions: requiring strength and justifying strength. The result is a Neo-Humean account of comparisons between moral and prudential reasons by means of rationality. An important upshot of the view is that moral reasons might be stronger than prudential reasons while failures to comply with moral reasons do not entail irrationality.

## 2. The Connection Between Reasons and Rationality

According to an exceedingly influential notion in practical philosophy, there is a necessary connection between the concept of normative reasons and the concept of practical rationality. A generic version of this notion can be formulated as follows:

*Reason*→*Rationality, Generic*: If an agent A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is practically rational in having a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

In what follows, I use ‘pro-attitude’ to refer to a motivating dispositional or occurrent mental state such as a desire or an intention. Moreover, I assume that the agents under discussion have access to all relevant non-normative facts. The assumption makes it possible to focus on practical rationality and set aside issues about theoretical rationality.

The notion that there is a necessary connection between the concepts of normative reasons and practical rationality is standardly understood as a stronger claim which has become particularly influential:<sup>1</sup>

*Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Tanto*: If an agent A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Darwall (1983: 20, 80–82); Korsgaard (1986: 11, 23); Smith (1994: 62, 150); Velleman (1996: 694), and Finlay (2009: 3–4). Cf. e.g. Williams (1981: 110); Joyce (2001: 49–52), and Parfit (2011: 5, 111–118).

As opposed to the generic claim, this statement entails that an agent who has a reason to  $\phi$  but lacks a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing fails with regard to rationality.

According to *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Tanto* every reason corresponds to a pro-attitude in a rational agent. It makes it plausible to think that strength of reason corresponds to strength of pro-attitude in a rational agent. The result is another influential claim:<sup>2</sup>

*Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Toto*: If an agent A has an all things considered strongest reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ .

Thus, in the same way as a reason to  $\phi$  of some strength corresponds to a pro-attitude of some strength towards  $\phi$ ing in a rational agent, an all things considered strongest reason to  $\phi$  corresponds to an intention to  $\phi$  in a rational agent.

### 3. Two Views on Rationality

There are two main views about practical rationality that represent different conceptions of how ‘practically rational’ should be understood in the above claims about the connection between reasons and rationality.

According to a reasons-based view, facts about an agent’s rationality is explained by facts about her reasons.<sup>3</sup> One instance of this view is the following:

*Reasons Explain Rationally Required Pro-Attitudes*: An agent A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  and is aware of all relevant-normative facts.

According to a Neo-Humean structure-based view, by contrast, facts about an agent’s rationality is explained by facts about coherence between attitudes towards ends and means. An important instance of this view concerns the coherence between final desires and pro-attitudes towards means to realize their ends:

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Raz (1999: 96–99); Kieseewetter (2017: 162), and Lord (2018: 11).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Kieseewetter (2017: Ch. 7) and Lord (2018: Ch. 2).

*Coherence Explains Rationally Required Pro-Attitudes:* An agent A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as A has a final desire for an end F and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is a necessary means to realize F.

There are some grounds to think that a Neo-Humean view is preferable to a reasons-based view with respect to explaining and comparing reasons by reference to rationality.<sup>4</sup>

First, it might be noticed that a reasons-based view seems unable to provide informative accounts of why an agent has a moral or prudential reason by employing the notion of rationality. According to this view, one normative notion—practical rationality—is explained in terms of another normative notion—normative reasons. Assume that it is asked whether an agent has a moral reason to perform a certain action. A potentially helpful answer is that she would be rational in, say, wanting to perform it and then propose a story of why this is the case. According to a reasons-based view, however, the explanation why she is rational in wanting to perform the action is that she has a reason to perform it, which hardly is particularly revealing. Second, it might be worried that a reasons-based view is unable to provide informative comparisons between moral and prudential reasons by employing the notion of rationality.<sup>5</sup> Assume that we set out to compare an agent's moral reason with her prudential reason by means of rationality. According to a reasons-based view, we are then to compare moral and prudential reasons by means of reasons. Thus, it may be feared that the notion of rationality becomes redundant when comparing reasons on this view.

It might be responded that a reasons-based view on rationality can be combined with conceptions of what reasons consist in that makes it possible to avoid these difficulties. It may be doubted, however, whether this is the case on views compatible with a reasons-based approach. The most influential view maintains that the notion of reasons is primitive and cannot be further explained in any informative manner.<sup>6</sup> There are other views about how reasons should be understood that are available to a reasons-based view. However, most of them maintain that the normative notion of reasons should be understood in terms of some other fundamental normative or evaluative notion.<sup>7</sup> A reasons-based view thus suggests that moral and prudential reasons are to be compared with regard to a notion of reasons that cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> In Strandberg (2025: 1–28), I argue against a reasons-based view in detail.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sagdahl (2022: 151–152, 156).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Scanlon (2014: 2) and Parfit (2011: Ch. 1).

<sup>7</sup> For example: Reasons are considerations that explain what an agent ought to do (cf. Broome (2004: 28–55) and Kearns and Star (2009: 31–56)) or contribute to realizing states of affairs that are intrinsically valuable (cf. Raz (1999: 22–45); Wedgwood (2009: 321–342), and Maguire (2016: 233–262)), or make it fitting for an agent to respond in certain manners (cf. McHugh and Way (2022: Ch. 2–3)).

explicated without making reference to some fundamental normative or evaluative notion. Again, it might be worried that the resulting reasons-based view is unable to provide informative comparisons between moral and prudential reasons by means of rationality.

The above considerations are by no means conclusive. However, think that a Neo-Humean view is in a better position to supply the account we are looking for. It explains rationality in terms of coherence between attitudes towards ends and means. Coherence is not a normative or evaluative notion: it merely consists in a particular type of coherence between attitudes that can be characterized in non-normative and non-evaluative terms. At the same time, coherence is evidently normatively *relevant*, since it is uncontroversial that incoherence is a distinguishing mark of irrationality and coherence a distinguishing mark of rationality. As a result, it might be hoped that it can provide informative explanations of why an agent has a moral or prudential reason in terms of rationality conceived as coherence. Moreover, it might be hoped that it can provide informative comparisons between moral and prudential reasons by means of rationality thus understood.

However, a Neo-Humean view of rationality suffers from a well-known problem: It seems incompatible with the existence of moral reasons. According to *Reason*→*Rationality*, *Pro Tanto*, for an agent to have a reason to  $\phi$ , she needs to be rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. According to a Neo-Humean view, this entails that she needs to have some final desire for an end F such that she is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. This assumption seems false as regards moral reasons which are categorical in that they apply to an agent irrespectively of her pro-attitudes. Thus, on a Neo-Humean view on rationality, it seems difficult to maintain the existence of moral reasons.

#### **4. Neo-Humean Rationality and Two Functions of Reasons**

In this section, I outline a Neo-Humean view on reasons that is compatible with the existence of prudential as well as moral reasons.<sup>8</sup> It consists of a combination of the distinction between rationally requiring reasons and rationally justifying reasons and a particular Neo-Humean view on rationality.

##### **4.1. *Rationally Requiring Reasons and Rationally Justifying Reasons***

Let us take a closer look at the following claim:

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<sup>8</sup> I defend this view in Strandberg (2018: 69–100) and Strandberg (2024: 256–273).

*Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Tanto*: If an agent A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

As indicated, this claim has dominated much of the debate on reasons in metaethics. There are presumably a number of explanations of why this is the case. There is intuitively a tight connection between the concept of reasons and the concept of rationality as is evinced by ordinary thought and talk. Moreover, the claim seems to be supported by reflection on prudential reasons. For example, on the assumption that Ava has reason to get a certain medicine because it would reduce her severe pain, it is plausible to think that she is rationally required to want to get it. In addition, it is plausible to maintain that what distinguishes normative reasons from conventional reasons—such as pure etiquette reasons—is that the former have a necessary connection to rationality whereas the latter do not.<sup>9</sup>

However, there are grounds to think that the claim is false as a general statement of reasons since it does not seem to hold for moral reasons. One way to see this is to notice that the claim squares badly with our conception of agents that are not attentive to their moral reasons. The claim entails that if an agent has a reason to  $\phi$  and is aware of all relevant facts, she is irrational if she lacks a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. However, it seems possible to think of counterexamples. For example, we can conceive of a complete egoist who has a moral reason to help another human, lacks any inclination whatsoever to do so, but is not necessarily irrational even if she is aware of all relevant facts. Moreover, the claim does not comply with our conception of what kind of criticism that is suitable to direct to agents. An agent who is irrational might be subject to rational criticism expressed by words like ‘foolish’, ‘stupid’, and ‘idiotic’.<sup>10</sup> An egoist who lacks any inclination to help another human in need might evidently be subject to moral criticism expressed by words like ‘inconsiderate’, ‘bad’, or ‘mean’. However, it seems misplaced to maintain that she also needs to be subject to rational criticism and use the terms associated with it about her.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that there are grounds to doubt *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Tanto* should not lead us to the conclusion that there is no necessary connection between the concepts of reasons and rationality. As noticed, there is a weaker claim:

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Smith (1994): 95–96; Joyce (2001): 49–52, and Lillehammer (2002): 54–57.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Bedke (2008: 98–100); Parfit (2011: 33), and Ridge (2014: Ch. 8).

<sup>11</sup> I discuss the difference between rational criticism and moral blame in Strandberg (2022: 345–360).

*Reason*→*Rationality, Generic*: If an agent A has a normative reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is practically rational in having a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

The contention that an agent who has a reason to  $\phi$  is *rational* in having a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing is compatible with reasons having two types of functions with respect to rationality: an agent being *rationally required* to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing and an agent being *rationally justified* to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

The weaker claim is able to explain the same phenomena as the stronger claim. It saves the conceptually necessary connection between reasons and rationality. Moreover, it leaves open the possibility that as regards *some* reasons, an agent who has a reason to  $\phi$  is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. In addition, it can be employed to distinguish between normative reasons and conventional reasons by maintaining that the former have a necessary connection to rationality while the latter do not. At the same time, the weaker claim avoids the problems with the stronger claim. It is compatible with the possibility that an agent who has a moral reason to  $\phi$  and is aware of all relevant facts is not necessary irrational in lacking a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. As a result, an agent might be subject to moral criticism without being subject to rational criticism.

The contention that reasons have two functions with respect to rationality allows us to make a distinction between rationally requiring reasons and rationally justifying reasons, for short ‘requiring reasons’ and ‘justifying reasons’.<sup>12</sup>

The principal characterization of requiring reasons:

*Rationally Requiring Reason*: An agent A has a rationally requiring reason to  $\phi$  insofar as  $\phi$  has a feature R which makes A rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

*Rationally Required Pro-Attitude*: A feature R makes an agent A rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as (i) it is irrational for A to lack a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua Gert has developed the distinction in a number of important contributions. See e.g. Gert (2004: Ch. 2, 4); Gert (2007: 534–543), and Gert (2016: 157–159). My way of drawing the distinction differs from Gert’s in some significant respects. See Strandberg (2018: 73–75).

if  $\phi$  has R, and (ii) *ceteris paribus*, it is not irrational for A to lack a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing if  $\phi$  does not have R.<sup>13</sup>

The principal characterization of justifying reasons:

*Rationally Justifying Reason:* An agent A has a rationally justifying reason to  $\phi$  insofar as  $\phi$  has a feature J which makes A rationally justified to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

*Rationally Justified Pro-Attitude:* A feature J makes an agent A rationally justified to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as (i) it is rational for A to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing if  $\phi$  has J, and (ii) *ceteris paribus*, it is not rational for A to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing if  $\phi$  does not have J.<sup>14</sup>

Two aspects of the distinction between requiring and justifying reasons should be mentioned: First, the distinction is compatible with various views about in what rationality consists that specify ‘feature R’ and ‘feature J’ in different manners.<sup>15</sup> Second, if an agent has a requiring reason to  $\phi$ , it follows that she has a justifying reason to  $\phi$ .<sup>16</sup> This is so since, if it is irrational for an agent to lack a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing, it is rational for her to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

#### 4.2. Requiring Prudential Reasons and Justifying Moral Reasons

It is now possible to formulate a Neo-Humean view on reasons by employing the Neo-Humean view on rationality outlined above.

According to the Neo-Humean view on reasons I propose, reasons are explained by reference to rationality:

*Rationality Explains Reasons:* Facts about an agent A’s normative reasons are explained by facts about A’s practical rationality.

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<sup>13</sup> The *ceteris paribus* clause means that (ii) is true unless  $\phi$  has some other feature such that it is irrational for A to lack a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. The most obvious example is that  $\phi$  has some other feature R’ such that A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

<sup>14</sup> The *ceteris paribus* clause means that (ii) is true unless  $\phi$  has some feature such that it is rational for A to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. One example is that  $\phi$  has a feature R such that A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. Another is that  $\phi$  has some other feature J’ such that A is rationally justified to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing.

<sup>15</sup> Gert defends a substantive reasons-based view on rationality. See e.g. Gert (2004: Ch. 3, 7).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gert (2007: 542).

The Neo-Humean view on reasons I propose explains reasons in terms of rationality, and the Neo-Humean view on rationality I propose explains rationality in terms of coherence as specified above. Thus, the Neo-Humean view on reasons I put forward explains reasons in terms of coherence between final desires and pro-attitudes towards means to realize their ends.

Let us now return to the distinction between requiring reasons and justifying reasons.

We might start with requiring reasons and consider how ‘feature R’ is specified by the Neo-Humean view on rationality. In fact, we have already seen in what ‘R’ consists on this view:

*Coherence Explains Rationally Required Pro-Attitudes:* An agent A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as A has a final desire for an end F and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is a necessary means to realize F.

Four clarificatory remarks: First, an agent’s final desire for an end F concerns something that is of most importance to her in that she has a desire for F for its own sake and not merely as a means to realize some further end. More precisely, an agent has a final desire for an end F insofar as it is not counterfactually dependent on her having a desire for some other end F’. Consequently, she would have a desire for F even if she becomes aware that the realization of F is not a means to the realization of another end F’.<sup>17</sup> Second, in order for a desire for F to be a final desire for F, the agent needs to persist in having a desire for F if she becomes aware what it would be like in case F is realized. Unless an agent persists in her desire for F under this condition, F would not concern something that is utmost important to her, and it would consequently not be a final desire. Third, an agent being aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F should not be understood to entail that she conceives of F or  $\phi$ ing under any particular descriptions. It is sufficient that she is aware of some, perhaps indirect, evidence that  $\phi$ ing, under some description, is necessary to realize F, under some description. Finally, there are no principal limitations on what F concerns as long as it is something that is of most importance to an agent. For instance, F might consist in an end that concerns the agent’s own well-being or the well-being of other agents. In this context ‘well-being’ is understood broadly so as to comprise what, intuitively, is in an agent’s interests or good for her.

The Neo-Humean view on rationality then entails the following claim about an agent’s requiring reasons:

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g. Svavarsdóttir (2018: 289).

*Coherence Explains Rationally Requiring Reasons:* An agent A has a requiring reason to  $\phi$  insofar as A has a final desire for an end F and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is a necessary means to realize F.

As pointed out, there are no principal restrictions on what F is concerned with provided it is something that is of most importance to her. It is evident that much of what tends to be of utmost important to us is the well-being of our family and friends. Consequently, it seems plausible to think that an agent has requiring reasons to perform actions that are necessary to realize their well-being even if the agent's own well-being is not directly affected. That said, it is reasonable to assume that an agent's final desires to a high extent are concerned with her own well-being. In a narrow sense of 'prudential reasons', we might understand an agent's prudential reasons as reasons to perform actions that promote her own well-being. Thus, an essential subset of an agent's requiring reasons plausibly consists in prudential reasons to perform actions which promote necessary means to realize the ends of her final desires that concern her own well-being. I refer to them as 'requiring prudential reasons'.<sup>18</sup>

We might next turn to justifying reasons and consider how 'feature J' is specified by the Neo-Humean view on rationality.

Assume that an agent A has a final desire for an end F and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F. According to the claim about rationally required pro-attitudes above, it follows that she is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. The explanation is that she would have incoherent attitudes if she lacks a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing. Assume now that A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for an end G and that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. In line with the previous reasoning, B is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing on the assumption that she is aware that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. The explanation is that B is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing because she would have incoherent attitudes if she lacks a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. Hence, from the perspective of rationality there is no relevant difference between the situations of the two agents, since both are rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards a necessary means to realize the end of a final desire of theirs according to the same rational principle, and the

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<sup>18</sup> It is commonly objected that an agent might have desires such that these views are committed to implausible claims about her reasons. In my view, there are convincing responses to this worry. See especially Street (2009: 273–298). Cf. Strandberg (2018: 69–100) and Strandberg (2025: 1–28).

explanation is the same in both cases: they would have incoherent attitudes in lacking the pro-attitude in question.

We might next ask how the first agent A should relate to there being an agent B who has a final desire for G and that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. Let us assume that A does not have any final desire that concerns B's well-being. It should first be emphasized that A is not *rationally required* to have a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. The explanation is that she, in contrast to B herself, would not have *incoherent attitudes in lacking* a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. However, it seems plausible to think that A would be *rationally justified* in having a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. The explanation is that she would have *coherent attitudes in having* a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. It would be coherent in the sense that from the perspective of rationality there is no relevant difference between the pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing that A is rationally required to have and the pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing that B is rationally required to have. More precisely, it would be to 'treat similar cases alike' in the sense that in having a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing, A would treat B's pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing, where this is a pro-attitude B is rationally required to have, in the same way as A would treat her own pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing, where this is a pro-attitude A is rationally required to have according to the same rational principle. Moreover, it is a matter of coherence of the same type, since in both cases it is a matter of coherence between final desires and pro-attitudes towards necessary means to realize the ends of these final desires. The same type of reasoning applies to all other agents who find themselves in the same type of situation.

In view of this reasoning, the Neo-Humean view on rationality might specify 'feature J' in the following manner:

*Coherence Explains Rationally Justified Pro-Attitudes:* An agent A is rationally justified to have a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing insofar as A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for an end G and  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize G.<sup>19</sup>

The assumption that an agent A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G and that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G should not be taken to entail that she conceives of G or  $\psi$ ing in any particular manner. As before, it suffices that A has access to some evidence that G,

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<sup>19</sup> The claim holds even if the agent A and B are the same agent. Also in this case the agent is rationally justified to have a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. The consideration also applies to the next claim.

under some description, concerns something that is of most importance to B and that  $\psi$ ing, under some description, is needed to bring G about.

The Neo-Humean view on rationality entails the following claim about an agent's justifying reasons:

*Coherence Explains Rationally Justifying Reasons:* An agent A has a rationally justifying reason to  $\psi$  insofar as A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for an end G and  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize G.

We might understand an agent's moral reasons as reasons to perform actions that promote the well-being of other individuals, where 'well-being', again, is understood broadly. It follows from the above argument that a subset of an agent's justifying reasons consists in moral reasons to perform actions which promote necessary means to realize the ends of other agents' final desires that are concerned with their well-being. I refer to them as 'justifying moral reasons'.

The above argumentation can be illustrated by a schematic example. Assume that Ava is in pain and that she is aware of a medicine that would reduce it. On the assumption that she has a final desire not to be in pain, it follows that she is rationally required to want to get the medicine and that she has a requiring prudential reason to get it. The explanation is that she would have incoherent attitudes if she does not want to get it. Suppose that Ava is aware that there is another agent, Bill, who also is in pain and that there is a medicine that would reduce it. On the assumption that Ava is aware that Bill has a final desire not to be in pain, it follows that Ava is rationally justified to want to provide Bill with the medicine and that she has a justifying moral reason to do so. The explanation is that Ava would have coherent attitudes if she wants to give Bill the medicine in that she would have the same type of attitude towards reducing Bill's pains as she has towards reducing her own pain.

It should be noticed that an agent may have both a requiring prudential reason and a justifying moral reason to perform the same action. An agent might have a requiring prudential reason to do what promotes the necessary means to realize the end of another agent's final desire. One explanation can be that she would be subject to some type of sanction if she refuses to perform the action. At the same time, she has a justifying moral reason to promote the necessary means to realize the end of this agent's final desire.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Moreover, an agent might have justifying prudential reasons. One explanation is that there are different means to realize the end of a final desire. For example, assume that there are two medicines X and Y that reduce Ava's

## 5. Neo-Humean Rationality and Comparability of Reasons

In the last section, we found that there are reasons to reject *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Tanto* notwithstanding its massive influence. We saw, however, that the rejection of this claim still makes it possible to accept a weaker claim, *Reason*→*Rationality, Generic*, which leaves room for the distinction between requiring prudential reasons and justifying moral reasons.

Consider now another influential claim mentioned above:

*Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Toto*: If an agent A has an all things considered strongest reason to  $\phi$  and has access to all relevant non-normative facts, then A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ .

Assume that reasons can be compared by means of rationality. According to *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Toto*, it follows that an agent might have an all things considered strongest reason, which takes into consideration both her moral reasons and her prudential reasons, to perform a particular action that she is rationally required to intend to perform.

In what follows, I consider two Neo-Humean accounts of how requiring prudential reasons and justifying moral reasons are to be compared by means of rationality that differ depending on whether they accept or reject *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Toto*.<sup>21</sup> As we shall see, I recommend the account that discards also this claim.

### 5.1. Strong Comparability of Requiring Prudential Reasons and Justifying Moral Reasons

The first account accepts *Reason*→*Rationality, Pro Toto*. Thus, an agent's requiring prudential reasons and justifying moral reasons can be compared by means of rationality. Moreover, an agent might have an all things considered strongest reason, which takes into account both types of reasons, to perform a particular action that she is rationally required to intend to perform.

According to the most plausible version of this account, an agent's requiring prudential reasons are stronger than her justifying moral reasons in virtue of being rationally requiring. In conflicts between such reasons, an agent has an all things considered strongest reason to act in accordance with her strongest requiring prudential reasons. This account is subject to

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pain equally well. In that case, she has a requiring reason to take X or Y. At the same time, she has a justifying reason to take X and a justifying reason to take Y.

<sup>21</sup> In this paper, I do not discuss normative pluralism according to which moral and prudential cannot be compared, since I argue that it is possible to compare reasons in terms of rationality. For defences of dualism, see e.g. Copp (1997: 86–106); Tiffany (2007: 231–262); Baker (2018: 230–252), and Sagdahl (2022: Ch. 3–6). For criticism, see e.g. Dorsey (2013: 114–139); Case (2016: 1–19), and Brown (2024: 497–511).

considerable problems. First, it seems plausible to assume that an agent's moral reasons can be stronger than her prudential reasons.<sup>22</sup> Assume that Ava has a prudential reason to get a medicine since it would lessen a slight pain of hers and a moral reason to give it to Bill since it would allow him to avoid a much worse pain. It seems plausible to maintain that she has stronger reason to give the medicine to Bill than to get it herself. Second, the view that an agent's prudential reasons are stronger than her moral reasons in combination with the contention that reasons are to be compared by means of rationality entails that an agent who intends to act on her moral reason instead of her prudential reason is irrational. However, it seems that Ava need not be irrational if she gives the medicine to Bill instead of getting it herself.

## 5.2. *Weak Comparability of Requiring Prudential Reasons and Justifying Moral Reasons*

The second account rejects *Reason*→*Rationality*, *Pro Toto*. Thus, an agent's requiring prudential reasons and justifying moral reasons can be compared by means of rationality. However, it is not the case that an agent has an all things considered strongest reason to perform a particular action that she is rationally required to intend to perform. Importantly, this is compatible with maintaining that an agent might have a *qualified strongest reason* to perform a particular action where the qualification is determined by the rationally requiring and rationally justifying function of reasons.<sup>23</sup>

According to this account, the two functions of reasons with regard to rationality correlate with two types of strengths with regard to rationality: rationally requiring strength and rationally justified strength. More precisely, an agent's requiring reasons vary in rationally requiring strength whereas an agent's justifying reasons vary in rationally justifying strength. When this distinction is combined with the Neo-Humean view on rationality, it is plausible to assume that strength of reasons depends on strength of final desires. It is then possible to argue that an agent's justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  might be stronger than her requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$  in a particular sense: An agent might be rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$ , where  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize another agent's stronger final desire, rather than to intend to  $\phi$ , where  $\phi$ ing is a necessary means to realize her own weaker final desire.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stroud (1998: 170–189). For discussion see e.g. Portmore (2011: Ch. 2); Tanyi (2012: 159–189), and Archer (2013: 100–114).

<sup>23</sup> This account is highly indebted to Gert's account of the strength of rationally requiring and justifying reasons, but deviates from it in significant respects. For example, Gert considers the requiring strength and the justifying strength of reasons rather than strongest requiring reasons and strongest justifying reasons. See e.g. Gert (2004: Ch. 2, 4) and Gert (2007: 534–562).

Let me now outline this account in more detail. The most transparent manner of doing so is to present it in the same order as the Neo-Humean view on reason was presented in the last section.

The notion of strongest requiring reasons can be formulated as follows:

*Strongest Rationally Requiring Reason:* An agent A has strongest requiring reason  $\phi$  insofar as  $\phi$  has a feature R which makes A rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ .

*Rationally Required Intention:* A feature R makes an agent A rationally required to intend to  $\phi$  insofar as (i) it is irrational for A not to intend to  $\phi$  if  $\phi$  has R, and (ii) *ceteris paribus*, it is not irrational for A to lack an intention to  $\phi$  if  $\phi$  does not have R.

In the last section, it was argued that an agent A is rationally required to have a pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing insofar as she has a final desire for an end F and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F. It was further argued that A would be rationally justified in having a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing insofar as she is aware of an agent B who has a final desire for an end G and  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. The explanation is that A would have coherent attitudes in having a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. In having a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing, A would ‘treat similar cases alike’ in the sense that she would treat B’s pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing, where this is a pro-attitude B is rationally required to have, in the same way as she would treat her own pro-attitude towards  $\phi$ ing, where this is a pro-attitude she is rationally required to have.

It is plausible to assume that the more important an end is for a rational agent, the more determinate is her pro-attitude towards means to realize it. According to the Neo-Humean view on rationality, it is then reasonable to think that strength of final desires corresponds to strength of pro-attitudes towards necessary means to realize the ends of final desires in a rational agent. It might then be suggested that an agent A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$  insofar as she has a final desire for F, does not have any final desire that is stronger than the final desire for F, and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F.

It is now possible to run a parallel argument as regards what an agent is rationally justified to intend to do. Assume that an agent A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G that is stronger than any of B’s other final desires and that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. It might be argued that A is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$ . The explanation is that she would have coherent attitudes in intending to  $\psi$ . It would be coherent in the sense that from the perspective of rationality there is no relevant difference between the intention to  $\phi$

that A is rationally required to have and the intention to  $\psi$  that B is rationally required to have. Just as A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$  because the final desire for F is stronger than her other final desires, B is rationally required to intend to  $\psi$  because the final desire for G is stronger than her other final desires. Thus, in having an intention to  $\psi$  A would ‘treat similar cases alike’ in the sense that she would treat B’s intention to  $\psi$ , where this is an intention B is rationally required to have, in the same way as she would treat her own intention to  $\phi$ , where this is an intention she is rationally required to have. Moreover, in both cases it is a matter of coherence between strongest final desires and intentions for necessary means to realize their ends.

Assume that B’s final desire for G is stronger than A’s final desire for F. Moreover, suppose that A’s final desire for F and B’s final desire for G are incompatible such that both F and G cannot be realized. In line with the above argument, A is rationally justified to treat B’s intention to  $\psi$  in the same manner as she would treat her own intention to  $\phi$ . As B’s final desire for G is stronger than A’s final desire for F, it follows that A is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  rather than to intend to  $\phi$ . It should further be noticed that the fact that A is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  entails that she is not rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ . We get:

*Coherence Explains Rationally Required Intentions:* An agent A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$  insofar as (i) A has a final desire for an end F, the final desire for F is at least as strong as any of A’s other final desires, and A is aware that  $\phi$ ing is a necessary means to realize F, *unless* (ii) A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for an end G, B’s final desire for G is at least as strong as A’s final desire for F, and  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize G.

We get the following claim of strongest requiring reasons:

*Coherence Explains Strongest Rationally Requiring Reasons:* An agent A has strongest requiring reason to  $\phi$  insofar as A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$  according to (i) and (ii) in the above claim.

We might next consider the notion of strongest justifying reasons. It can be formulated as follows:

*Strongest Rationally Justifying Reason:* An agent A has strongest rationally justifying reason to  $\phi$  insofar as  $\phi$  as has a feature J which makes A rationally justified to intend to  $\phi$ .

*Rationally Justified Intention:* A feature J makes an agent A rationally justified to intend to  $\varphi$  insofar as (i) it is rational for A to intend to  $\varphi$  if  $\varphi$  has J and (ii) *ceteris paribus*, it is not rational for A to intend to  $\varphi$  if  $\varphi$  does not have J.

The above reasoning entails the following claim:

*Coherence Explains Rationally Justified Intentions:* An agent A is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  insofar as A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for an end G, the final desire for G is at least as strong as any of B's other final desires, and  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize G.<sup>24</sup>

We get the following claim of an agent's strongest rationally justified reason:

*Coherence Explains Strongest Rationally Justifying Reasons:* An agent A has strongest rationally justifying reason to  $\psi$  insofar as A is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  according to the above claim.

We can now see in what sense an agent A's rationally justified reason to  $\psi$  might be stronger than her requiring reason to  $\varphi$ . First, in case A is aware of an agent B who has a final desire for G that is stronger than her own final desire for F, and F and G are incompatible, she is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  rather than to intend to  $\varphi$ . Second, the explanation is that B's final desire for G is stronger than her own final desire for F. Thus, A's justifying reason to  $\psi$  is stronger than her requiring reason to  $\varphi$  in the sense that she is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  instead of intending to  $\varphi$ , and the explanation is that B's final desire is stronger than her own final desire. It might be formulated by saying that A is *more justified* to intend to  $\psi$  than to intend to  $\varphi$  because intending to  $\psi$  is supported by a stronger final desire than intending to  $\varphi$ .

Above it was mentioned that an agent's requiring prudential reasons at least partly consist in reasons to perform actions which promote necessary means to realize the ends of her final desires that concern her own well-being. Correspondingly, an agent's justifying moral reasons consist in reasons to perform actions which promote necessary means to realize the ends of other agents' final desires that concern their well-being.

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<sup>24</sup> The claim holds even if the agent A and B are the same agent. Also in this case the agent is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$ . This also applies to the next claim.

It should be emphasized that the Neo-Humean view on justifying moral reasons I propose does not entail any particular normative theory. The view maintains that an agent A who is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G and that  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G has a justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  and is rationally justified to have *some* pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing. It does not entail that she has a pro-attitude towards  $\psi$ ing of any particular strength. Similarly, the view maintains that whether an agent A has strongest justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  and is rationally justified to intend to  $\psi$  depends on whether B has a final desire for G that is stronger than A's final desire for F. It does not entail any particular view about the exact correlation between the strength of these reasons and strength of final desires. Moreover, it does not entail that final desires and other pro-attitudes can or should be aggregated in any particular manner. The view can consequently be developed in numerous manners by different normative theories.

In order to clarify the implications of the proposed account, we might consider four types of cases. They also illustrate to what extent it complies with our intuitions about the relation between moral and prudential reasons.

*Case 1:* An agent A has strongest requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$  and it is not in conflict with any of her justifying moral reasons. That is, A has a final desire for F, does not have any final desire that is stronger than the final desire for F, and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F. Moreover, there is no agent B who has a final desire for G that is in conflict with A's final desire for F. In that case, A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ . Example: Ava is in pain and there is a medicine that would relieve it. It is not the case that Bill, or any other agent, is in need of the medicine. Ava is rationally required to intend to take the medicine.

*Case 2:* An agent A has strongest requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$  that is in conflict with a justifying moral reason to  $\psi$ , which is not her strongest justifying moral reason. As in Case 1: A has a final desire for F, does not have any final desire that is stronger than the final desire for F, and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F. However, in the present case A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G that is much weaker than A's final desire for F, and the final desires are in conflict. In that case, A is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ . Example: Ava is in pain and there is a medicine that would relieve it. Bill is also in a pain and the medicine would relieve it, but his pain is much less than Ava's. Ava is rationally required to intend to take the medicine.

*Case 3:* An agent A has strongest justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  and it is not in conflict with any of her requiring prudential reasons. That is, A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G, does not have any stronger final desires that is incompatible with the

final desire for G, and  $\psi$ ing is necessary to realize G. Moreover, it is not the case that A has a final desire for F which is incompatible with B's final desire for G. In that case, A is rationally justified, but not rationally required, to intend to  $\psi$ . Example: Bill is in pain and there is a medicine that would relieve it. Ava is not in need of the medicine. Ava is rationally justified, but not rationally required, to give the medicine to Bill.

*Case 4:* An agent A has strongest justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  and it is in conflict with her requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$ . That is, A has a final desire for F, does not have any final desire that is stronger than her final desire for F, and is aware that  $\phi$ ing is necessary to realize F. Moreover, A is aware that there is an agent B who has a final desire for G that is in conflict with A's final desire for F, B's final desire for G is stronger than A's final desire for F, and  $\psi$ ing is a necessary means to realize G. In that case, A is rationally justified, but not rationally required, to intend to  $\psi$  instead of intending to  $\phi$ . Example: Bill is in pain and there is a medicine that would relieve it. Ava is also in pain, but her pain is less than Bill's. Ava is rationally justified, but not rationally required, to give the medicine to Bill.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended a Neo-Humean view on reasons that combines the distinction between rationally requiring and rationally justifying reasons with a Neo-Humean view on rationality. I would like to highlight four features of the view: **(i)** It is compatible with the existence of moral reasons in spite of explaining them in terms of coherence. **(ii)** In contrast to a reasons-based view, it is able to provide informative comparisons between moral and prudential reasons by means of rationality. **(iii)** It entails that an agent who has a moral reason need not be irrational in lacking a pro-attitude to act in accordance with it. **(iv)** It provides a manner of comparing an agent's moral and prudential reasons according to which the agent's moral reasons might be stronger than her prudential reasons.

It might be objected that the view does not provide an answer to what an agent should do in case her moral reason is in conflict with her prudential reason. There are two manners of understanding this worry.

The worry might be that the view has not provided an answer to what the agent should do in the sense what she is rationally required to do. Reply: If the agent has strongest requiring prudential reason  $\phi$  that is in conflict with a justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  which is not her strongest reason of this type, the view *does* entail that she is rationally required to intend to  $\phi$ . However, if the agent has strongest justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  that is in conflict with a requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$  that does not belong to her strongest reasons of this type, she

is rationally justified, but not rationally required, to intend to  $\psi$ . Rather than constituting an objection to the view, I think it is one of its major benefits. As argued, an agent need not be rationally required to intend to act in accordance with her moral reason, but rather rationally justified to do so, even if her moral reason intuitively is stronger than her prudential reason.

Alternatively, the worry might be that the view has not provided an answer to what the agent should do in the sense what she has strongest reason to do. Reply: The view *does* provide an answer to what the agent has strongest reason to do in the sense of what she has strongest requiring prudential reason or strongest justifying moral reason to do. In particular, an agent's justifying moral reason to  $\psi$  might be stronger than her requiring prudential reason to  $\phi$  in that she is more justified to intend to  $\psi$  than to intend to  $\phi$ .<sup>25</sup>

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