1. Introduction

This article is an interim report on my struggles to try to understand some of the logical features of desires as they relate to rationality and to actions. I begin with a discussion of practical reasoning and what is sometimes called “the practical syllogism”.

Discussions that I have seen of practical reason and the practical syllogism usually — not always — exhibit a certain conception of rationality that I think is probably mistaken and, if so, profoundly so. I remember this conception of rationality from the economic theory I learned as an undergraduate, and it is also exhibited by many versions of decision theory. If it is as widespread as I think, it is worth looking at very closely.

I hope I am not being tendentious in labelling it, “the classical conception”. According to this conception human rationality is at least partly constituted by the precepts of practical reason. On this conception we human beings are supposedly given a set of desires prior to engaging in practical reasoning, and on the basis of these primary desires, we reason from our beliefs about how the world is to form secondary desires (or intentions, or on some views, actions themselves) about how to satisfy...
our primary desires; on this view we reason from our “ends”, which are given by the primary desires, and our beliefs about the “means”, to form desires for the means. Thus for example a paradigm of practical reasoning would be a case of a man who has a primary desire to go to Paris, a set of beliefs about the means to get to Paris and who then reasons to form a secondary desire, e.g., to buy a plane ticket.

Implicit and sometimes explicit in this classical conception are a set of constraints which rationality is supposed to place on human desires.

1. Rationality requires that the set of desires be consistent. There will of course be conflicts of the sort where the satisfaction of one desire frustrates another, but a rational agent cannot simultaneously both want that p and want that not p.²

2. Rationality requires that the preferences of an agent be well ordered prior to engaging in deliberation. Since practical reasoning typically involves the allocation of scarce resources (for example, money) among competing ends, it is essential that a rational agent have a well ordered ranking of his or her preferences.

3. Rationality requires that an agent who has the appropriate combination of beliefs and desires is thereby committed to certain secondary desires (or intentions, etc.) and the aim of a deductive logic of practical reason is to state the principles according to which these can be logically derived from the primary desires and the beliefs.

I think all these principles are false. And they are not harmlessly false, in the way that idealizations in the sciences give us literally false but importantly true idealized models (e.g. frictionless systems) but they are importantly false, and treating them as true has given us a misconception of the real nature of practical reason. I think many people would concede that they are literally false, but would maintain that it doesn’t really matter, because what we are trying to construct is not a mere description, but a model of rational behavior, and it doesn’t matter if the model is not literally true as long as the it gives us insight into the phenomena. I think, on the contrary, that in many ways the classical conception prevents us from getting certain important insights. I will not try to provide an alternative model but will try to state some of the facts which, I believe, should constrain any such model. However, the

²For example, Elster (1983), p.4 “Beliefs and desires can hardly be reasons for action unless they are consistent. They must not involve logical, conceptual or pragmatic contradictions.”