

Is There a Liberal Principle of Instrumental Transmission?

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1. THE LIBERAL TRANSMISSION PRINCIPLE AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Transmission principles concern how some reasons for action are grounded in the fact that the action in question is a means to something else we have reason to do.

A widely accepted transmission principle:

Necessary Means Transmission: If A has a reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a *necessary means* for A to ϕ , then A has a reason to ψ .¹

A more controversial proposal:

Liberal Transmission (LT): If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is a means for A to ϕ , then A has a reason to ψ .²

- ϕ -ing is a *means* to ψ -ing iff ϕ -ing helps to bring it about that one ψ -s.
- p is an *intrinsic reason* to ϕ iff p is a reason to ϕ that is not grounded in the fact that ϕ -ing is a means to another action that one has reason to perform.

Why *Liberal Transmission* is of philosophical interest:

- It is important to know whether we can rely on *LT* in practical deliberation.
- J. Raz uses *LT* in his argument against the wide-scope account of instrumental rationality.
- M. Schroeder's account of means/end-incoherence presupposes *LT*.
- J. Way relies on *LT* in his argument for scepticism about 'wrong kind reasons'.³

2. PROBLEMS FOR THE LIBERAL TRANSMISSION PRINCIPLE

2.1 First Objection: Too many reasons

If you have an intrinsic reason to tell a joke/an intrinsic reason to avoid feeling hungry, *LT* licences the conclusion that you have a reason to tell a racist joke/a reason to kill yourself.⁴

More generally: If you have an intrinsic reason to ϕ , *LT* implies that you have an instrumental reason to ψ for any action ψ that is an almost ineffective, highly inefficient and otherwise extremely objectionable means to ϕ -ing.

A common reply: appealing to the pragmatic implicatures of reason-statements allows one to debunk those intuitions that the aforementioned objection against *LT* relies on:

¹ See e.g. Bratman (2009, 424), Kiesewetter (2015, 945), Schroeder (2009, 245), and Way (2010, 225).

² See Bedke (2009, 678), Raz (2005a, 3), Schroeder (2009, 246), and Way (2012, 494).

³ See Raz (2005b, 12), Schroeder (2009, 246), and Way (2012, 494).

⁴ See Broome (2005, 7) and Rippon (2011, 17).

- (i) Asserting the existence of a reason is supposed to standardly carry the conversational implicature that the reason in question is *not massively outweighed*.
- (ii) It is argued that intuitions about negative reason existentials therefore do not reliably differentiate between circumstances in which we have *no reasons at all* for a given action and circumstances in which we have *massively outweighed* reasons for this action.⁵

Why this reply is unconvincing:

- (i) It is often not misleading to call massively outweighed reasons “reasons”, even if pragmatic implicatures have not been cancelled (consider e.g. the 1 vs. 1000 rescue case).
- (ii) Gricean considerations cannot provide a sweeping debunking of all intuitions about negative reason existentials. The relevant implications remain implausible even in contexts where the alleged conversational implicature has been cancelled.

2.2 Second Objection: Too many ‘oughts’

LT implies that we sometimes have decisive reasons to take each of two different sufficient means to what we have intrinsic reason to do:

Rescue case: Suppose you have a reason to save a person from drowning (and no reason not to save her). Assume further that you can save her (a) by throwing her a lifebelt, and also (b) by throwing her a rescue rope. You have no reason not to throw the lifebelt, and also no reason not to throw the rescue rope.

Decisive Reason: If A has more reason to ϕ than reason not to ϕ , then A has decisive reason to ϕ (i.e. reasons that make it the case that A ought to ϕ).

Together with *Decisive Reason*, *LT* implies both that you have decisive reason to throw the lifebelt, and that you have decisive reason to throw the rescue rope. However, if you merely throw the rescue rope, you have not failed to do something you ought to have done.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE TO LIBERAL TRANSMISSION

Proponents of *LT* might appeal to the fact that this principle provides a vindicating explanation of both of the following intuitions:

- (1) Assume that ϕ -ing is favoured by an intrinsic reason. Even if there are no necessary means to ϕ -ing, we still seem to have a reason to take means to ϕ -ing.
- (2) Intentionally performing an action as a means to another action we have reason to perform seems to qualify as acting for a reason, no matter whether the means is necessary or not.

Consider the following alternative to *LT*:

Generic Instrumental Reason (GIR): If A has an intrinsic reason to ϕ , then A has a reason to *take some means to ϕ -ing*.

⁵ Cf. Bedke (2009, 684–685), Raz (2005a, 3–4), and Schroeder (2005, 7–9).

Clarification: *GIR* does not claim that there is a means to ϕ -ing that one has reason to take. It rather claims that one has reason to perform an action of the type *taking some means to ϕ -ing*.

GIR avoids the shortcomings of *LT*, but it can capture both intuitions that seem to support *LT*:

- Note that (1) is ambiguous. Under one reading, (1) is very plausible and straightforwardly follows from *GIR*. Under another reading, (1) does not support *LT*.
- As regards (2), intentionally ϕ -ing for a reason does not require the existence of a reason that specifically counts *in favour of ϕ -ing*. It is enough that ϕ -ing is *a way of doing what one has reason to do*. (Consider the structurally similar phenomenon of acting out of duty: I can send a 100 € note to an organization that helps refugees and thereby act out of duty without it being my duty to *send a 100 € note*. I could also transfer the money or send a cheque.) *GIR* guarantees that there always is an action supported by a reason in cases where ψ -ing is a means to an action ϕ that one has intrinsic reason to perform – the relevant action is the act of *taking a means to ϕ -ing*.

4. IS *GENERIC INSTRUMENTAL REASON* AN INDEPENDENT TRANSMISSION PRINCIPLE?

Maybe *GIR* can be derived from *Necessary Means Transmission*. Among other things, this depends on whether *taking a means to ϕ -ing* can be considered a necessary means to ϕ -ing.

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ENN Meeting, 20 November 2015, HU Berlin.
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