

# Tenenbaum on instrumental reason and the end of procrastination

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*Abstract:* In *Rational Powers in Action*, Sergio Tenenbaum argues that instrumental rationality is constitutively rationality in action. According to his theory, we not only reason *to* action, we also reason *from* action: both the major premise and the conclusion of instrumental reasoning are intentional actions in progress. In the paper, I raise four challenges: (a) The view rests on the assumption of a symmetry between the starting point and the conclusion of instrumental reasoning. But in the cases of telic actions like building a house, proper reasoning concludes with the completion of the action. (b) Tenenbaum conceives of the nexus between ends and means in terms of the relation between a temporally extended whole and its parts. This fails to do justice to the distinction between movement and conduct. (c) The theory suggests that it is instrumentally irrational to abandon all particular ends. But it is hard to see why this should be so. (d) Tenenbaum holds that his theory of instrumental rationality can explain why procrastination is a vice. Yet the argument seems to rest on a simplification of the phenomenon.

*Keywords:* action, activity, conduct, instrumental reason, pleasure, prudence

## 1. *The rational and the real*

In *Rational Powers in Action*, Sergio Tenenbaum proposes to turn the received theory of instrumental reason from the head to the feet. The prevailing conceptual framework puts the spotlight on ordering preferences, forming intentions, and modeling plans. Their realization in action appears to be another matter. Strictly speaking, the work of reason seems confined to the inner recess of the mind while leaving all the rest to the forces of nature. According to Tenenbaum, the prevailing view not only fails to explain the rationality of action; it also rests on distorted picture of our ends and purposes. Properly conceived, the action in the external world is the first thing to consider rather than the last: “Instrumental rationality is rationality *in action*.”<sup>1</sup> Its proper work is the realization of ends; and its home office, so to speak, isn’t the inner realm furnished

<sup>1</sup> Tenenbaum 2020, viii. In what follows cited as RPA.

with a set of conative states: the taking of means proceeds from the temporally extended action of pursuing the end. The book develops the position through devastating critique of various alternatives on offer in the literature. Here, I will focus on the positive proposal.

The final line of the treatise reads: “If all went well, this book has helped us to see that, at least when practical reason is flawlessly exercised, the real is the rational and the rational is the real.” As Tenenbaum is well aware, the allusion to Hegel’s infamous formula may come as a surprise at the end of a book devoted to instrumental reason. That is not quite what Hegel had in mind: he was talking about the actuality of the good in ethical life. My question in what follows will be whether the claimed unity of thought and action can be understood within the confines of a theory that leaves open whether any of it is actually good.

It all turns, of course, on what is meant by “action.” Consider the opening paragraph of Christine Korsgaard’s *Self-Constitution*:

Human beings are *condemned* to choice and action. Maybe you think you can avoid it, by resolutely standing still, refusing to act, refusing to move. But it’s no use, for that will be something you have chosen to do, and then you will have acted after all. Choosing not to act makes not acting a kind of action, makes it something that you do. (2009, 1)

Going by this line, it is the human plight to act. But where choosing to refrain from it is already a case of it, one might ask in light of what it all counts as action. In the course of Korsgaard’s investigation, it turns out to be the great old question of how to live, in face of which we can’t but act. Accordingly, the sense of agency is essentially ethical. Tenenbaum, by contrast, investigates the power to realize ends, whatever they might be. A theory of instrumental rationality puts no restriction on their content, apart from requirements for successful realization. That is what he calls the Toleration Constraint. (RPA, 20) This suggests that, *as far as instrumental reason is concerned*, Hume was right when he pronounced: “Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.” (Hume 1978, 416) So, how could it be instrumentally irrational to prefer always postponing to finishing this paper? As befits the topic, I shall leave the latter question for the end. I will begin with an outline of Tenenbaum’s approach to instrumental reason and then turn to his account of action.

## 2. *The extended theory of instrumental rationality*

As Tenenbaum conceives it, a theory of instrumental rationality must contain the following elements: an account of the “input”, an account the “output”, and an account the principles connecting the two. The input is what the subject

reasons *from*: her “basic given attitudes.” The output is what the subject reasons *to*: her “practical exercises.” The task of a theory of instrumental rationality is accordingly to articulate the “principles governing the exercises of a (finite) rational agent’s active powers in light of her given attitudes.” (RPA, 17) The account Tenenbaum proposes is radically parsimonious. His theory only needs a sole principle for the articulation of the rational connection and one category for the representation of the conative elements so connected.

The sole principle of instrumental reason is the *principle of derivation* according to which an instrumentally rational agent takes sufficient means to her ends. The articulation in terms of sufficient means allows deriving the *principle of coherence*, which excludes the pursuit of incompatible ends. (RPA, 45) After all, pursuing ends that can’t be jointly realized makes it impossible to take sufficient means to one’s ends. Accordingly, an instrumentally rational subject is efficacious and coherent. What the power thus specified governs is the relation between intentional actions: doing something for the sake of something else one is doing. It is a familiar Aristotelian doctrine that the conclusion of practical reasoning is action. According Tenenbaum, the same holds for its starting point: we not only reason *to* action, we also reason *from* action. The “basic given attitudes” figuring as conative input are intentional actions of pursuing ends; the corresponding “practical exercises” figuring as output are intentional actions of taking means. The relation is of course mediated by the agent’s cognitive conception of the means-end connection: the minor premise of the instrumental syllogism.<sup>2</sup> But “both the conclusion and major premise are intentional actions.” (RPA, 44)

The argument for the thesis proceeds through a critique of the received views. One of Tenenbaum’s central objections is that these positions fail to account for the rationality of action, since they present the reasoning as stopping short of the doing and issuing instead in choices, decisions, or intentions that stand in causal relations to movement or change in the external world. Properly conceived, the reasoning “reaches all the way down to, for instance, the movements of one’s limbs.” (RPA, 16) That the reasoning must also be taken as descending *from* intentional movement is said to follow from the impossibility of assessing rationality in light of what would be available in a momentary snapshot of subject’s conative attitudes. (RPA, 50) According to classical decision theory, the rationality of the output is supposed to be determined by reference to the *fully determinate* desires or preferences that the subject has *at a moment*. But in the pursuit of projects that take time to complete, our ends are usually indeterminate because (a) their content is vague, (b) our initial conception doesn’t

<sup>2</sup> For the most part of book, Tenenbaum treats the minor premise as expressing knowledge; the task of the final chapter is to show how the theory can accommodate conditions of uncertainty and risk.

rule out all unacceptable realizations, and (c) the relevant degree of perfection isn't settled in advance. The *realized* end is determinate; but the determination takes place in the course of the realization: in the process of reasoning out the means in reaction to the challenges arising along the way and in coordination with one's other ends. For this reason, the "given attitudes" figuring as conative "input" must be conceived as the temporally extended pursuit of ends. Hence the name of the position: the Extended Theory of Instrumental Rationality.

### 3. *The symmetry thesis*

It is central to Tenenbaum's teaching that instrumental reasoning not only concludes in action but also begins with action: anything apt to provide a starting point for instrumental reason must belong to the same category as the conclusion. This thesis of a formal symmetry between input and output is something that the position shares with the standard view where both appear as conative mental states. That is not how Aristotle seems to present the practical syllogism. He says that the conclusion is an action; but he doesn't make an analogous remark about the mayor premise. In fact, he seems quite concerned to stress that the rational source of movement isn't always another movement.<sup>3</sup> To the untutored mind, it would at any rate appear that we aren't always in the midst of motion. So, a central task for Tenenbaum's approach is to explain how we are to understand the concept of intentional action such that everything fits into this mold.

Going by Tenenbaum's introduction of the term, an intentional action is "an event or process in the external world." (RPA, 12) For the purposes of the treatise, mental actions are set aside. The official paradigm is "bodily action." (RPA, 15) But Tenenbaum works with a specific conception of what that amounts to. For beings like us, realizing an end usually takes time and involves taking several steps. Consider building a house, writing a book, or training for a marathon. Such things aren't done in a day. The action is temporally extended and divides into phases. Where this is so, it is usually also possible to truly predicate the respective action concept " $\phi$ " in a judgment that exhibits what is sometimes called the *broad progressive* where the truth of " $S$  is  $\phi$ -ing" is compatible with  $S$  currently not making any progress in her  $\phi$ -ing. (RPA, 71) A person can be truly described as being in the process of building a house, even though she is currently sitting of a sofa taking a nap or having a sandwich. Tenenbaum describes those phases as "gaps" in the overarching action – as opposed to its "fully active

<sup>3</sup> The premises appear under the heading of the good and the possible. (See *De Motu Animalium*, 701a23-24; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147a29-32.) Of course, the good figures as the object of pursuit. But not all pursuit falls into the category of movement. (See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b1-4.) I will come back to the latter point in the next section.

parts” where the agent *is currently* making progress by taking concrete means to her end. Accordingly, he calls temporally extended actions, which include such inactive phases, “gappy” actions.

The notion of “gaps” in the fully active engagement makes space for the idea of the coordinated pursuit of multiple ends: say, scheduling the training sessions for the marathon in such a way that there is still enough time in the day to also make some progress on the book and the house one is working on. However, the concept of “gappy” action is also supposed to provide the conceptual resources to conceive of *any* end or purpose – any “basic given attitude” providing the conative “input” for instrumental reason – as physical action. What about future-directed intentions where there isn’t anything yet that the agent is or was doing *actively*? Tenenbaum holds that forming an intention can be treated as a limiting case of the engagement in a temporally extended action; it is just that the “gap” is at the beginning – “prior to the fully active parts of the action.” (RPA, 124) However, the proposal seems incompatible with the initial introduction of the term where an intentional action appears as a countable particular: an event or process in the external world. The latter idea also seems contained in the official definition of “gappy” action:

[W]e can call a (token) action *A* ‘gappy’, if it extends through an interval of time  $t_0$ - $t_n$  such that at some intervals contained in the  $t_0$ - $t_n$  interval, the agent is not doing anything that is a (constitutive or instrumental) means to *A*.<sup>4</sup>

The talk of a token-action suggests a countable individual in the external world. But how is that particular to be individuated where there is only a “gap” without any active parts around it? In a footnote Tenenbaum suggests that Helen Steward’s account of intentional actions as processes would be congenial to his approach. (RPA, 12, Fn 29) According to her view, however, processes are modally robust individuals that are individuated by reference to the spatio-temporal location of their “initial segments.”<sup>5</sup> When one spells out the proposed treatment of future-directed intentions through Steward’s definition, the so-called “(token) action” will end up as an item that has its original home in the mind or at least somewhere within the inner limits of the agent’s body.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> RPA, 71. The passage is meant as a preliminary definition or “first approximation.” But the further complications introduced by the final definition make no difference for the present considerations.

<sup>5</sup> See Steward 2013, 807. Tenenbaum refers to an earlier paper where Steward doesn’t articulate the criteria of individuation. But the early paper already contains the claim that processes are spatio-temporally located individuals.

<sup>6</sup> When Michael Thompson argues that intention is, metaphysically speaking, on a par with action in progress, he insists that the progressive is “general” and reserves the introduction of “a genuine particular” for the perfective. (See Thompson 2008, 137.) This might provide an alternative way of ensuring the symmetry between mayor premise and conclusion. By the same token, however, the

On the face of it, the trouble with pure intending as potential input is related to a corresponding difficulty on the side of the output. The aim is to provide an account of the rational realization of ends in the material world. But in the case of finite ends like building a house, this would appear to introduce a categorical asymmetry between starting point and conclusion. At least that is what the philosopher of common sense suggests when presenting the pure form of the technical syllogism in his *Logic*.<sup>7</sup> As Hegel has it, the *intended end* is general and subjective, while the *realized end* is particular and objective. The transition is the *taking of the means*: the action in progress or the reasoning as rational realization unfolding in time. The reasoning concludes in the completed action: the doing folded into a fully determinate particular. In the case of the example at hand, quite literally a thing: the house that was built. Or so Hegel suggests. Tenenbaum, by contrast, avoids the puzzle about the transition from mind to world by situating already the *intended end* in objectivity. But why should the reasoning be described as reaching down to movement, if movement already figures as its given starting point?

The idea would be absurd, if we were meant to take the talk of a token-action as signifying the *fully determined* particular that stands at the end: the done deed where everything has been settled. The action figuring as input is meant to be a *determinable* that gets determined through the execution of the project. However, the same should hold for the action figuring as output. After all, the theory represents both by action sentences in the progressive. Tenenbaum suggests that the “active parts” of the overarching action can’t themselves all be “gappy”: there must be some basic actions that *only* have active parts. (RPA, 72) Still, qua being in progress they must be conceived as determinable rather than fully determined. As long as the finish line lies still ahead, it isn’t all settled yet, and something might interfere. So conceived, the reasoning seems to stop short of the realized end. Completion or success appears to fall outside its scope. Whatever explains the transition from the *determinable* to the *fully determined*, it doesn’t appear to be the rational realization. And what holds for the overarching process, should equally apply to any step along the way: its completion will also lie beyond the scope of the rational realization. But unless the completion of some of the phases can be understood through the reasoning, it is unclear how the respective process can count as a progressing physical ac-

question would arise whether the reasoning so conceived reaches all the way to the respective particular that is under the relevant descriptions the completed action or realized end. For the discussion of the analogous point about practical knowledge see Haase 2018.

<sup>7</sup> In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel treats the instrumental syllogism in the chapter “Teleology” abstracting from the idea of the good, which is introduced a later in the book. For the asymmetry thesis see esp. Hegel 2010, 12.169.

tion in the perspective of the reasoning. So, how can we say that the rational is the real and the real is the rational?

#### 4. *The monolithic conception of action*

Another question to ask of an account of rational realization is whether it can do justice to the variety of the things we pursue. G.E.M. Anscombe once complained that “modern philosophy of the Anglo-American tradition” is guilty of “a great fault”: she called it “the monolithic conception of desire, or wanting, or will.” (2005, 154) One might also describe it as the view that one pro-attitude operator will do for all intents and purposes. A possible motive for seeking such uniform representation is the commitment to the program of decision theory where anything that plays a role in rational choice must fit into the slot of preferences to be compared and weighted. Tenenbaum adamantly refuses this program, *inter alia* on the ground that the ends we pursue are non-comparative. At the same time, he also seems concerned to ensure that anything figuring as input for instrumental reason fits one category: “[A]ny kind of policy, project, long-term action, and so forth can be understood [...] as a continuous (though “gappy”) action.” (RPA, 126) Accordingly, it seems sensible to wonder whether Tenenbaum endorses what one might call a monolithic conception of action; and if so, whether that is a mistake.

The difficulty is that the notion of action was originally introduced through reflection on the pursuit of finite ends like building a house or writing a book. While all individual doing arguably stops at some point, such telic action verbs specify what it is for the action so described to end on its own terms: by reaching completion instead of being interrupted. This isn’t always so. Some ends are infinite in that they don’t define a terminus or stopping point to be reached through the act of realizing. Take the end Tenenbaum discusses under the heading of the policy of faithfulness. (RPA, 133) Traditional marriage vows tend to mention a natural stopping point, but death doesn’t enter the formula as the target state to be brought about by the having and the holding. It wouldn’t be in the spirit of the vows either to take them by analogy to holding a weight until the gym trainer calls time. The difference hasn’t escaped Tenenbaum’s notice. But he treats it in a certain way.

The contrast between finite and infinite ends is initially introduced by way of the following example: “Unlike the end of running a marathon, singing has an internal structure that never fails to give purpose to one’s life.” (RPA, 56) Of course, singing a song usually goes by more quickly than a marathon. What Tenenbaum has in mind is a distinction between two kinds of terms: telic action verbs like “to run a marathon” and activity verbs like “to run” or “to go for a run.” In the present tense deployment, the former describe action on the way to completion. The latter, by contrast, don’t specify a terminus internal to the act

and accordingly represent action going on indefinitely. So, when the bare terms figure in the place of the object of current pursuit, the corresponding act of realizing will be directed in the one case at the *completion* and in the other at the *maintenance* of the respective action. As Tenenbaum has it, both kinds of verbs can figure in the description of “gappy” action. After all, it can be true that you are running a marathon or going for a run, even though right at this moment you are standing still to have a drink or to take a phone call. In each case, your instrumental rationality will be assessed with the view to how you manage the “gaps” and the “active parts” in relation to the respective temporal profile of the overarching action of which they are phases. (RPA, 127) Stopping for drinks and phone calls all the time tends to undermine the aim of reaching the finish line or, for that matter, the goal of maintaining a run.

Formally speaking, this is supposed to be all that is needed. Any kind of end, Tenenbaum suggests, can be accommodated in this framework when one notes “a continuum of indefinite length of gaps between fully active parts.” (RPA, 126) Personal policies are said to have “the same structure as activities” insofar as “the constitutive and instrumental means for the end of the activity are for its continuation or perseverance, not for its completion.” (RPA, 127) Once one conceives of “policies [as] instances of long-term gappy actions”, the account developed in reflection on the management of the “gaps” and “active parts” in “‘mundane’ long term actions like baking a cake” can be “extend[ed] to a policy such as ‘exercising regularly’.” (RPA, 130) In the latter case, the instrumental rationality of the agent is a matter of whether the relevant interval contains sufficient “active parts” for maintaining the policy. (RPA, 131) In the case of a relaxed exercising regimen, it is only required to exercise often enough. Other personal policies, like the traditional take on faithfulness, are *strict* rather than *loose* in that don’t allow the occasional night outside. (RPA, 133)

With these details in view, one might say that the proposed conception of action isn’t uniform but rather binary: “An instrumentally rational agent engages in the fully active parts [...] for the sake of [...] the acceptable *completion or maintenance* of the larger action.” (RPA, 74, my italics) Note, however, that the disjunction appears within one structure. What does the work for the account of the instrumental reason is the idea of “engag[ing] in the fully active parts [...] *for the sake of* [...] the larger action.” (RPA, 74, original italics) In the resulting picture, the coordinated pursuit of multiple ends involves distinguishing various levels and keeping track of intricately nested action descriptions. But the instrumental nexus is always couched in terms of the relation between an overarching action and its active phases. In this respect, the conception seems monolithic. The question is whether that is problematic.

Among the purposes to be accommodated in the framework is “the end of engaging in the enjoyment of pleasant activities.” (RPA, 70) This can mean that I’m seeking something pleasant to do or that I’m aiming at making time for activities I know to be enjoyable. Yet the basic case is surely the one where I’m taking pleasure in what I’m currently doing. Say, I’m eating gummy bears. Having another one is a means to maintaining this pleasant activity. But in what sense does what is so maintained appear in the perspective of the maintaining as a “larger action” for the sake of which I’m engaged in a present “active part”? Conceiving of writing this sentence as a “part” of writing a paper goes together with understanding my present act in relation to the steps I have taken up to this point. In the gummy bear scenario, I may be aware that I have been doing it for a while. Yet those gummy bears I ate during that time are nothing to my current pursuit. Sitting in my tummy they will eventually become an impediment to keeping going. But until they do that possibility might not enter my mind. My only concern is to keep the supply constant. Experience might teach me to take a more structured approach. In turn, you may find me in a restaurant having a five-course meal. Now, there is a “larger action” with “fully active parts”, but here it also holds that I’m engaging in the former for the sake of engaging in the latter. And if it all works out, the times between the courses aren’t “gaps” in my enjoyment of this pleasant activity. Provided abundance of resources, addiction extends this structure to infinity. While the occasional smoker chooses to have a cigarette thinking that it will be enjoyable, the true smoker relishes all day in gapless pleasure spending the times between the smoking sessions in joyful anticipation. And yet smoking doesn’t thereby figure as a purpose of life.

With the view to the artful management of addiction or lured by Kant’s alleged remarks about the positive effects of tobacco consumption on contemplation, a person might also adopt a smoking-policy. But that seems like a different kettle of fish. As Tenenbaum uses the term, it covers a wide range: from plans or “intermediate policies” adopted in the pursuit of finite ends like training for a marathon all the way up to such things as the “policy of loyalty.” (RPA, 189, 133) The proposed account is meant to cover all of them: “[A]ny kind of policy [...] can be understood [...] as a continuous (though “gappy”) action.” (RPA, 126) Initially, the line isn’t put forward as a thesis about the “metaphysics of actions or policies”; it is said to only express the claim that “from the point of view of the theory of rationality, there are no differences between actions and policies.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In the dialectic of the book, intentions for the future, plans, and policies come up, because philosopher like Michael Bratman suggest that they are related to additional principles of “diachronic rationality.” (Bratman 2018) Tenenbaum argues that there is no need for such further principles, once one realizes that ordinary action already involves managing one’s agency extended in time. But that still leaves the question how to fit those items into his theory.

Yet it is not clear how there can be a division of labor here. Where the real is the rational and the rational is the real, the theory of practical rationality and the metaphysics of action should be one and the same. A few lines further down Tenenbaum indeed presents it as a consequence of his theory that “policies [...] must be regarded as ordinary actions.” This suggests that, metaphysically speaking, they are to be counted as such. But how do we count them?

With respect to ordinary actions like crossing the street or going for a run, one can ask: “Are you *still* doing it, or are you doing it *again*?” Suppose an hour ago I saw you moving across. When I look up now, there you are a little further up the street doing the same as before. So, I wonder. Your answer will have consequences for the list I’m keeping on how many runs you go on per week. On the assumption that personal policies are to be situated on a continuum with activities, it would seem to follow that I could make an analogous list counting your policies of the year. Take a loose exercising regimen or a strict drinking policy. In both cases, the question may arise whether you are *still* on track or *again*, after having fallen off the wagon. And yet when you do the same as before, it makes no sense to ask whether it is the same one. During a year one can lose a habit and acquire it afresh; it doesn’t follow that there are two within that interval. It is the same here. In the little book I’m keeping on you, a personal policy is something that you do, but it doesn’t fit the category of token-action extended through an interval.<sup>9</sup> The nexus of realization is not a relation of “larger action” to its “active parts”; it is rather akin to the relation between your general conduct in a certain area and its manifestation on a particular occasion.

On reflection, it sounds strange to describe the execution of a policy in terms of the management of “gaps” and “active parts.” Say, you have a policy to break up fights. It would seem that if your policy is *loose* rather than *strict*, then it can also be on active service when you choose to let those two go on with their brawl. And if your policy is *strict*, then it should be at work in any social situation to assess whether some fight is going on. Going by Tenenbaum’s account, a “fully active part” would be the breaking up of a given fight. But what if no one around you is fighting? Does maintaining your policy require you to get yourself into situations where people are fighting or, if you can’t find any, arrange for people to have a fight? That can’t be right. The description in terms of engaging in a “fully active part” for the sake of maintaining the existence of a “larger action” seems to introduce the wrong kind of connection.

<sup>9</sup> On the face of it, the alternative presented in the book doesn’t exhaust the philosophical options. Bratman originally introduced his notion of “personal policies” as an enrichment of the furniture of the agent’s mind: it’s not just beliefs and desires, as the standard story would have it. (See Bratman 1989) Tenenbaum insists that policies aren’t mental states but rather token-actions. However, one can deny that policies are items in the mind without thereby affirming that they are on a continuum with going for a run.

There is a yet another purpose that figures in the theory: “the pursuit of happiness, or the pursuit of a good life.” Tenenbaum stresses that this is “an end that the agent pursues.” (RPA, 47) According to the theory, the pursuit of an end is an intentional action. It follows that the pursuit of happiness must be an action. So, one would want to know of what kind. Lenny Kravitz sings about it in terms of motion: “My mama said that love’s all that matters. But I’m always on the run.” (Kravitz, 1991) Still, he isn’t literally talking about going for a run. So perhaps it is an instance of very long-term gappy action. Yet where are the gaps? Sleeping better not be a hiatus in the practice of living well. The relevant sense of agency seems to fit neither of Tenenbaum’s two categories: activity verbs and telic action verbs. Living well is arguably not like running as if it could go on forever; nor does leading a good life appear to be analogous to running a marathon. Aristotle does say that in choice one’s whole life is at stake. But he doesn’t mean that one should make all choices with the view to the bucket list. He excludes the children from choice and *praxis*. And yet he wouldn’t deny that a little one might resolve to always run away when father comes home.

### 5. *Preferring not to*

As a power of reflection, practical reason puts us in the position to step back from any particular purpose or, for that matter, from all of them. A few pages after coining his famous formula about the rational and the real, Hegel presents this possibility as a distinguishing mark of human agency: by contrast to a brute animal, a human being can “abandon all things” and “renounce any activity of life, any end.”<sup>10</sup> Take the writer from Melville’s story of Wall Street: Bartleby, the scrivener. Towards any determinate course of action that comes up as option, Bartleby eventually adopts the stance expressed by his infamous formula: “I would prefer not to.” Ultimately, he abandons all ends and renounces of any activity of life. Korsgaard would of course insist that even Bartleby can’t escape the human plight to act: from the perspective of her theory, the scene appears as self-constitution done badly. Yet she also holds that the notion of agency can’t be understood within the confines of a theory of instrumental reason. So, what is to be said about the scenario from the standpoint of Tenenbaum’s teaching about the flawless exercise of the latter power?

It is part of the theory that instrumental rationality can require giving up some ends. According to the *principle of coherence*, the following holds: “When an instrumentally rational agent realizes that her ends are incompatible (can-

<sup>10</sup> The famous formula appears close to the end of the Preface of his *Philosophy of Right*; the above remark is from §5 of the Introduction. See Hegel 1991, 20 and 38.

not be jointly realized), she abandons at least one of the ends from the smallest subset of her ends that cannot be jointly realized.” (RPA, 45) But the principle doesn’t tell us how to choose between incompatible ends. An arbitrary choice between *A* and *B* can be instrumentally required, if pursuing either the one or the other serves a further purpose. Yet it can’t be presupposed that the subject always has a further end for which this is true. In his introduction of the notion of “basic given attitudes”, Tenenbaum says that they provide the “standard of success” and are not themselves “subject to direct evaluation in the theory of instrumental rationality.” (RPA, 11) But the *toleration constraint* doesn’t quite hold for the subject the theory about – at least not when one takes “given attitudes” to the particular purposes the subject might find herself pursuing. By Tenenbaum’s own lights, the status of given attitudes changes when the idea of their totality enters the scene. In forming such conception, the pursuing subject distinguishes herself from each of them: from the particular objects of her pursuits or the contents of her will. From the standpoint of such reflective stance, any one of them appears as something that is potentially to be renounced or abandoned when it turns out that they hinder each other. The question is what a theory of instrumental rationality can say about how to proceed from here.

According to Hegel, instrumental reason reaches at this point an impasse that it cannot move beyond by its own resources. Going by the notes of his students, he pronounced in his lectures that arbitrarily “putting oneself in only one of them setting all the others aside” would mean to give up the standpoint of reflection and thus to “relinquish [one’s] universality, which is the system of all drives.” Yet “the idea of forming a hierarchy to which the understanding (*Verstand*) usually resorts,” the possibly apocryphal quotation continues, “is equally unhelpful since no criterion for ordering is available here so that the demand tends to run out in tedious general platitudes.”<sup>11</sup> Taken by itself, instrumental rationality can’t provide much guidance once we leave the idealized scenario where the philosopher assumes for the purposes of presentation that the only concern on the agent’s mind is how to get a cover or, for that matter, how to maximize gains in the stock exchange. When the “sum total of satisfaction” is at stake, there is nothing for the “calculating understanding” (*berechnende Verstand*) to compute. On an admittedly flatfooted reading of Melville’s story on Wall Street, *Bartleby* might be described as the unsettling embodiment of that impasse, situated fittingly right in the heart of what is arguably the original home of decision theory. In the cool hour of reflection, one must admit that the material reflected upon doesn’t contain a standard for comparing. Accordingly, there is no rational ground for affirmation and denial –

<sup>11</sup> The line is from the Addition to §17 of the *Philosophy of Right*. I amended the translation. See Hegel 1991, 50.

pursuit and avoidance. From the logical point of view, the only way to maintain the stance of rational reflection instead giving oneself over to arbitrary particularity is to politely decline each invitation or demand: "I would prefer not to."<sup>12</sup>

It is an intricate question how Tenenbaum's theory stands to the Hegelian verdict on the limitations of instrumental reason, taken by itself. On the one hand, the arguments against the familiar story about maximization seem analogous: our ordinary ends are non-comparative and the appeal to strength of desire ultimately depends on normative hedonism so that it runs afoul of the *toleration constraint*. (RPA, 62) On the other hand, Tenenbaum accepts the challenge to show that his own theory can provide an account of rational ordering in the pursuit of multiple ends. Roughly speaking, the proposal is this. Tenenbaum introduces the following auxiliary hypothesis: our ordinary ends have an "internal structure" that allows the distinction between better or worse actualizations. (RPA, 47) Given the hypothesis, he argues, the theory can "generate preference orderings out of its basic non-comparative, non-graded attitudes." (RPA, 54) In this way, the theory is meant to incorporate the insights of decision theory and in effect supply an account of the rational standards guiding the revision of incompatible project with the view to the coordinate pursuit of the totality of one's ends. For the present purposes, the crucial question is whether the conceptual framework can provide a cure for *Bartleby's* ailment and show that "when practical reason is flawlessly exercised, the real is the rational and the rational is the real." (RPA, 229)

Note that the *toleration constraint* would seem to exclude not only normative hedonism but just as much its denial. By the same token, it cannot be ruled out either that from the point of view of the subject all that modifying and revising comes at a cost. After all, the ensuing work of coordinating and scheduling may seem like a nuisance. Considering this, the subject might arrive at the reflective preference not to engage in any of that. As Tenenbaum has it, forming a conception of the totality of one's *particular ends* goes together with the introduction of what he presents as a *general end*: "the pursuit of happiness." (RPA, 47) As I argued above, such pursuit doesn't seem to fit Tenenbaum's category of temporally extended (though "gappy") action. In fact, it has been disputed that the definition of the term introduces a link to the concept of physical action. A person might take it as a substantive question whether happiness is to be sought in living an active life (by taking means to particular ends) or rather in reaching a state of blissful inactivity (by freeing oneself from such worldly ambitions).

<sup>12</sup> In his reading, Gilles Deleuze brings out this character of *Bartleby's* formula: it expresses neither acceptance nor refusal – not even a preference, just a "non-preferred." (Deleuze 1998, 71). Of course, Deleuze would resolutely refuse a Hegelian framing. Going by his terms, "*Bartleby* is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America." (90)

The space for that question would appear to be opened by Tenenbaum's own observation that the pursuit of happiness can also give rise to further ends. He calls them *general means* such as "wealth, health, and the cultivation of our skills and talents." (RPA, 47) But skills and talents are not only things that an instrumentally rational subject might come to regard as in need of cultivation. Observing that their ends or purposes tend to hinder each other, the instrumental reasoner might devise a more radical solution than the mere adjustment and coordination of their given drives. Sometimes the rational thing to do is to look for other things to pursue. And if you can't get no satisfaction, why keep trying in that way? Going by the *toleration constraint*, it looks as if the theory will also have to allow for the subject to adopt "general means" of the following kind: aims like avoiding the frustration of one's will by interfering forces, the disappointment of facing the meager fruits of one's labors, or the dread of noticing that the only point of completing the task at hand appears to consist in providing the resources for engaging in the next project of the same kind. In light of such reflective attitudes, abandoning or renouncing all particular ends would appear as an instrumentally rational conclusion. The purest version of this posture of mind would arguably consist in maintaining the general stance of reflection by insisting like Bartleby: "I am not particular." (Melville 2002, 30)

One might try saying that this is one of the shapes that the unity of the rational and the real might take. However, this would be tantamount to giving up on the thesis that instrumental rationality is rationality *in action*, at least in the sense suggested by the line that the reasoning reaches all the way down to the movements of one's limbs. Resolutely standing still or refusing to move are of course intentional actions in the relevant sense. But such endeavors will be among the projects that those reflective attitudes would recommend to resolutely renounce. If instrumental reason is exercised here, its work will be entirely within the inner limits of the agent's body. To hold on to the official line about the rational and the real, it would have to be denied that instrumental rationality is flawlessly exercised in that scenario. But this seems to infringe on the *toleration constraint*.

## 6. *Instrumental virtue and the end of procrastination*

The debate about what is to be expected from a theory of instrumental reason is at the same time a dispute about which topics properly belong to ethics. Tenenbaum contrasts "instrumental practical rationality" and "substantive practical rationality." (RPA, 23) The former is concerned with the rational realization of ends, whatever they happen to be. The office of the latter is the determination of what is good to pursue. As Tenenbaum has it, these are "two separate pow-

ers” whose perfections are “prudence” and “[practical] wisdom” respectively. One of the marks of their separation is that “a purely instrumentally rational agent” is conceptually conceivable. Even in our case, they can come apart in two ways. It is not just that the evil and the shameless may be clever; the good or practically wise might fail to be prudent: “Lack of prudence is one of these obstacles that stepmotherly nature can put between the good-willed agent and the object of her will.” (RPA, 23) Cleverness or prudence is the same excellence of mind whether it operates in evil or in good people. The task of a theory of instrumental reason is to provide a general account of “what the prudent agent knows.” (RPA, 24)

Presented in this way, the definition of the proper scope of instrumental rationality puts at the same time a limitation on the reach of substantive practical rationality. Aristotle would beg to differ. On his view, practical wisdom is a kind of knowledge that one only has insofar as one does act well. Another aspect of this disagreement comes out in a later chapter where Tenenbaum argues that courage and resoluteness are to be treated as “instrumental virtues” that the shameless might manifest as well. (RPA, 169) So conceived, defining courage doesn’t require venturing into ethics; it belongs to the office of the theory of instrumental rationality. By way of illustration, Tenenbaum discusses a character called Shifter: someone who abandons their end whenever danger arises. Doing so is in line with the principles of derivation and coherence. Nevertheless, Shifter is said to exhibit instrumental irrationality insofar as they lack the proper disposition of the will:

An ideally rational agent not only takes means that are available to her will in pursuing her ends, but her power to pursue ends is also not restricted by the internal shortcomings of her own will. In other words, cowardice undermines the agent’s powers to bring about ends not necessarily by leading the agent into incoherence in the pursuit of certain ends, but by simply restricting the ends that are available to the agent. (RPA, 180)

The same verdict should apply to the reflective attitudes of avoidance considered in the last section. After all, they certainly present a restriction to the ends available to the agent. So, either the doctrine solves the *Bartleby* conundrum, or it runs into the same problem. In an earlier passage, Tenenbaum seems to admit that the agent’s concern with “the ends she *might* have” presupposes that “her continued rational agency is among her ends.” (RPA, 41) But if the theory was to assume that the latter purpose mustn’t be abandoned, suicidal tendencies would also have to be ruled as instrumental vices, not to mention preferring the destruction of the world to scratching one’s finger.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This is not what Tenenbaum seems to have mind, for he allows that courage may be exhibited

In the respective chapter, Tenenbaum presents an argument that appeals to Kant. Here, the “constitutive” character of instrumental virtues gets derived from the thesis that instrumental reason is “inextricably connected in the successful and paradigmatic case with the power to pursue good ends.” In effect, the verdict of irrationality is grounded in the diagnoses of a “restriction to the general power to pursue the good.” (RPA, 181) So conceived, one couldn’t talk about instrumental virtue in connection with the idea of a merely instrumental creature. The Kantian derivation appears to presuppose the metaphysical impossibility of such a kind of being. Moreover, the relevant conception of the good couldn’t be left in the abstract, for that wouldn’t provide an inextricable connection between those two powers in the successful and paradigmatic case. This looks like an ambitious program that would require venturing into ethics. In the book, Tenenbaum appeals to it only for the purposes of elucidation; the notion of instrumental virtue is not meant to depend on it. But it is hard to see how the teaching could be developed from the reflection on prudence or cleverness, considered on its own.

Kant himself seems to express skepticism about the latter kind of project when he discusses the distinction between “imperatives of skill” and “imperatives of prudence” in the *Groundwork*. The former are said to be *problematic*, insofar as they concern *possible* purposes: ends that one might or might not pursue, like building a house. The latter, by contrast, are *assertoric*, since happiness is an end that all human beings *actually* pursue by natural necessity. One might think that imperatives of prudence therefore present action as necessary. Kant denies this on the ground that it is impossible for us to determine by principle what would make us truly happy. So, it all comes down to “empirical counsels.” In this connection, Kant mentions frugality and reserve; but he doesn’t appear to think of them as requirements of rationality, for he stresses that they “are to be taken as counsels (*consilia*) rather than as commands (*praecepta*) of reason.” (Kant 1997, 4:418) The same should hold for courage and resoluteness insofar as they are considered from the standpoint of prudence, taken by itself.

It seems worth mentioning another remark Kant makes in this connection. He observes that “in early youth it is not known what ends might occur to us in the course life.” For this reason, “parents seek above all to have their children learn a *great many things* and to provide for *skill* in the use of means to all sorts of *discretionary* ends.” Kant connects the observation with a complaint about the common neglect of teaching the little ones “the worth of things that they might make their ends.” (4:415) Arguably, this is ultimately for them to decide.

by jumping into a shark infested pool to retrieve a five-dollar bill – provided that the person has “a fetish for five-dollar bills or [...] no reflective preferences between seriously risking their lives and marginally adding to their wealth.” (RPA, 186, Fn 35)

But whatever they end up doing with their lives, it will appear as a restriction or limitation in light of the infinite possibilities of what they might have become or could have done. That is what it means to lead a life: with any choice one determines oneself and limits oneself such that one will eventually be judged not by one's potential like a child but rather by one's actuality. Considered in abstraction, the idea of the irrationality of restricting the ends available to oneself would be analogous to the wish to remain forever young. Leaving aside that growing up among human beings tends to create a great impediment for the possible end of running with the wolves, this looks like another guise of the impasse Hegel was talking about.

When one steps back from all particular purposes, one's will appear as general or universal: as infinite potentiality. In Hegel's dialectic, this appears as the merely "negative notion of freedom": the reflective retreat from any determination. (Hegel 1991, §5) Of course, Hegel deems this is hopeless confusion: "A will [...] that wills only the abstract universal, wills nothing and is therefore no will at all. In order to be a will, [it] must restrict itself in some way or other." (§6) Unless one pursues particular ends, one doesn't realize oneself as agent. This is the impasse, put in abstract terms. Moving beyond it requires, according to Hegel, thinking the unity of the general and the particular in the singular: "self-determination" or "concrete freedom." (§7) That is what he complained Kant failed to achieve. Another name for it is the formula about the identity the rational and the real in ethical life. By the same token, what is there for us to know in matters of prudence figures in Hegel's system as something can't be separated from the standards of ethical life: it is part of practical wisdom.

One of Tenenbaum's central cases for an independent account of prudence is the treatment of the vice of procrastination. According to a famous argument by Korsgaard, it would be impossible to violate the principle of instrumental reason, if it was the only principle of practical reason. For, any action that would be a candidate for a violation of the principle to take means to one's end introduces another end for which the agent *is* taking means. Accordingly, one could always say that they changed their mind. (Korsgaard 1997) Tenenbaum argues that procrastination provides a counterexample. Say, I am pursuing the end of writing a paper for a book symposium. Writing sentences is the characteristic way of taking means. Then my usual tendencies set in: I keep fiddling with the introduction while looking around for passages to quote. According to Tenenbaum, I would be instrumentally irrational, if I consequently failed to produce during the relevant interval sufficient "active parts" for my "gappy" action to be completed in time. One might try to defend my sanity by saying that I must have changed my mind before it was too late and abandoned the end of finishing the paper. But this, Tenenbaum argues, wouldn't save me from the charge of irrationality, since

it implies that I was taking means without pursuing the end. (RPA, 202)

It seems to me that the argument rests on two assumptions that are disputable. The first is that procrastination doesn't introduce its own propose. Often procrastinating is a means to the end of writing: it provides the leisure to come up with ideas. In that case, missing the deadline may be due to the cognitive mistake of losing track of time. But procrastination can also be purposive in other ways. It might, for instance, be a manner of venting anger about there being a deadline or a way of manifesting one's freedom from the task, proving to oneself that one isn't a scheduling machine. It can also be a way of holding on to the infinite potential of one's work in progress instead of eventually facing the meager reality of one's final product. The second assumption underlying the argument is that, despite being indeterminate in many other respects, my pursuit of writing a paper was from the beginning fully determinate in the following respect: it is all about the product. But one might engage in working on a paper not just for the sake of its completion, but also with the view to maintaining an activity that seems worthwhile: because it provides an occasion for learning from a wonderful book, because it is enjoyable, or simple because it gives one a task. By the same token, it wouldn't be instrumentally irrational to keep going without aiming to finish in time.

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