1. Treatments of “normativity” often approach the topic as something that needs to be settled *en route* to some thesis about morality, or, more generally, about *how we should live*. There is nothing wrong with this approach to normativity, of course—except that one risks misunderstanding Joseph Raz’s *Being in the World*, if one assumes that he approaches the topic of normativity with similar aims. His ambition is strikingly different: not any general thesis about morality or about how we *should* live, but instead an understanding of how we *do* live, our *form of life*—as Raz puts it, “our Being in the World.”

To a first approximation, our Being in the World is the distinctive kind of engagement with, and place in, the world that we, as persons, have. This distinctive engagement is manifested in our beliefs, in our intentional actions, and in the wide range of emotional responses to which we are subject. And this engagement with the world continuously draws and redraws—to put it in terms probably too pompous for Raz’s taste—the very boundaries between “ourselves” and “the world.” It determines which effects on the world do and don’t count as our responsibility, which matters to us not so much for settling what we can be blamed for as for revealing who we are and can be.

For Raz, the key to understanding our Being in the World is normativity. Normativity lies at the core of our distinctive engagement with the world, as well as of our ongoing negotiation of the frontier between us and it. The essence of normativity is not, as is often casually said, value or “oughts.” The essence of normativity is instead reasons—or, more precisely, the mutually dependent phenomena of reasons and Reason, i.e., our rational capacities.

2. Raz discusses this mutual dependence of reasons and Reason most explicitly in chapter five. I think that, if anything, Raz understates the significance of this discussion. And, like much of Raz’s work, it is not easy to follow. So my principal aim in these comments is just to explain what I take the line of thought and its importance to be.

To throw Raz’s achievement into relief, it helps to contrast his position against two foils. The first of these foils is the “quietist about reasons.” He starts with reasons. He claims that all there is to the concept of a reason is captured by what Raz says in order “to minimally locate” the topic: namely, that “normative reasons… count in favor of that for which they are reasons. They have the potential to… justify and require that which they favour” (2/8). Of course, the quietist

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2 “[A]ll normative phenomena are normative in as much as, and because, they provide reasons or are partly constituted by reasons. It makes the concept of a reason key to an understanding of normativity” (5/1). All subsequent references are either of the format “[chapter]/[manuscript page]” or of the format “[chapter]/n.[footnote number]”, using Raz’s manuscript of winter 2011.
grants that people may find this unhelpful. But he shrugs. “What did you expect? The concept of a reason cannot be reduced.” Indeed, as Raz himself observes:

It is generally agreed that the notion of a normative reason cannot be explained through an eliminative definition. That is, any explanation of it in which the word ‘reason’ does not occur will include another term or phrase whose meaning is close to that of ‘a reason,’ so that those who puzzle over the nature of reasons will not be helped by the definition. It will raise similar puzzles in their minds (2/8).

Carried forward by the momentum of his denial that reasons can be reduced (with which Raz agrees), the quietist then concludes that no further general questions about reasons can be given illuminating answers (with which, as we will see, Raz disagrees). (Here, the quietist neglects the sentence of Raz’s that follows the quote above: “We explain the notion of a normative reason by setting out its complex inter-relations to other concepts.”) There is nothing more to be said about what it is to be a reason, the quietist says. There is nothing more to be said, at least not in general terms, about which facts are reasons for what and why. Of course, we can say that my promise is a reason to keep it, and that the thermometer’s reading is a reason to believe the fever has crested, but there is nothing of theoretical interest to say about why these, and not some other facts, are all reasons for what they are reasons for. Finally, there is nothing more to be said about the role of reasons in our lives: why we should conform to them, or their hold on us.

A fortiori, these questions cannot be given illuminating answers by appealing to Reason. Reason is nothing more than a capacity to respond to reasons, independently understood. Reason contributes nothing to what reasons are—no more than the capacity to recognize triangles contributes anything to what triangles are.

The other foil is the “reductionist through Reason.” She claims, by contrast, that Reason contributes everything to reasons. Reasons just are whatever Reason does respond to, or would respond to, were it only true to itself. So Reason explains what it is to be a reason and which very facts are reasons. Moreover, possessing Reason, this reductionist claims, can itself be understood in terms that make no appeal to the notion of a reason, or anything else recognizably normative. It just is being a person, or being a self-conscious agent, or being internally coherent. This in turn explains the hold that reasons have on us, and even why we ought to conform to them. Were we not to conform to them, we would no longer be persons, agents, etc. Thus, appealing to Reason not only answers all of our questions about reasons, but answers them, ultimately, from outside of the web of normative concepts altogether.

3.
So, where do these foils go wrong? To begin with, the quietist crucially overlooks what Raz calls the “explanatory/normative nexus.” To say that R is a reason for S to X is to say something more than what the quietist says: namely, just that R counts in favor of S’s X-ing. It is also to say—as Bernard Williams observed³—that it can play a certain explanatory role.

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The nexus requires that reasons can explain agents’ beliefs or actions or emotions in a special way: In their exercise of their rational powers, agents are led to awareness of the facts that are reasons qua reasons, and to rational reaction to this awareness (3/30).²⁴

Put another way, the nexus says that reasons are what Reason can respond to. Reasons can only be understood in terms of Reason.

The reductionist, on the other hand, mistakenly holds, first, that Reason can be understood without reference to reasons and, second, that Reason somehow makes reasons into reasons. Against the first, Reason can only be understood in terms of reasons. Reason is the capacity that, when properly exercised, leads us to recognize and respond to reasons reflectively, that is, as reasons. Against the second, Reason is “a power whose purpose is to identify and respond to reasons” (5/9). Accordingly, Reason does not make reasons reasons.

This may seem contradictory. On the one hand, we are told:

**reasons dependence:** Reasons are reasons only because Reason can respond to them.

On the other hand, we are told:

**reasons independence:** Reason does not make reasons reasons.

How are these compatible?

An initial reply is that reasons dependence speaks only of possible exercises of Reason, whereas the reasons independence speaks only of actual exercises of Reason. Thus, we have:

**reasons dependence 2:** Reasons are reasons only because of possible responses of Reason.

**reasons independence 2:** No reason is a reason because of an actual response of Reason.

A further reply is to distinguish between two senses of ‘reason’. Reasons dependence speaks of reasons proper, whereas reasons independence speaks of reasons only in the sense of a “maxim-satisfying fact”: e.g., an indicator of truth, a valuable feature. Thus, we have

**reasons dependence 3:** Reasons are reasons proper only because Reason can respond to them.

**reasons independence 3:** Reason does not make maxim-satisfying facts maxim-satisfying: e.g., whether some fact is an indicator of truth, or valuable feature does not depend on any (even possible) response of Reason.

This is compatible with saying that Reason determines what the maxims are, as we will see.

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Other formulations of Raz’s are: “[I]t is possible for it to feature in an explanation of [X] as a fact that, being recognized for what its, motivated [S] to perform that action, so that [S] guided [X’s] performance in light of the fact” (3/21). “[T]he nexus is interpreted to apply to each individual agent and reason, that is it is understood to imply that the reasons an agent has on occasion are reasons that, given an appropriate understanding of ‘can,’ can explain his action in that occasion” (3/29). “[N]ormative reasons provide the standard explanation of beliefs and of actions done with an intention or purpose. Moreover, it is a necessary condition of any fact being a reason that, when conditions are appropriate, it provides such an explanation” (2/19).
But one might still worry that it is circular to say both:

*reasons dependence*: Reasons are reasons only because Reason can respond to them,

and

*Reason dependence*: Reason is the capacity to respond to reasons as such.

One reply is to understand *Reason dependence* as:

*Reason dependence 2*: Reason is the capacity to respond to indicators of truth, valuable features, etc., as such.

But one wonders whether this will work. Suppose someone asks: “On what grounds can we assume that there is one capacity—Reason—rather than several: an indicator-responsive capacity, a value-responsive capacity, etc.?” One can’t say: “Because indicators of truth, etc. are all *reasons*. That’s what unifies these capacities.” For it is supposed to be their connection to a unified capacity—Reason—that explains *why* they are all reasons.

Another reply is simply that “circularity” isn’t a problem, since we are simply trying to describe the interrelations between the concepts, not to reduce them.

So what kind of facts can play this explanatory role: can be reasons, as far as the nexus is concerned? In chapter 2, Raz argues that we can only reason directly from, or “follow,” truth-related considerations to belief. Alternatives are not “logically,” “conceptually,” or “metaphysically” possible. Likewise, we can only follow “affect-justifying” considerations in coming to have emotions. And we can follow only value-related considerations to taking actions or forming intentions.

These facts, together with the explanatory/normative nexus, give us the “maxims.”

R is a reason for belief in virtue of being a fact that is part of the case for the truth of that belief.

R is a reason for action in virtue of being a fact that is part of the case for the value of that action.

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5 “The basic classification of reasons is a classification of standard reasons [i.e. reasons that can be followed], because the fact that they can be followed is what makes reasons into reasons” (3/24).

6 At times, Raz uses the less committal “part of the case for the action” rather than “part of the case for the value of the action.” I assume that this is because no such *term* as “value” is sufficiently general in its connotations: “We could say that the case for an action is the case for the action being worthy of performance. But the idea of being worthy has connotations that do not always apply…” (2/n. 2). However, elsewhere he is less guarded: “the value of actions constitutes reasons for them” (3/7); “Reasons which are value-related are practical reasons” (3/14); there is “no sense of a reason for action that is unrelated to its value” (3/17); “Nonstandard reasons for actions and intentions do conform to the maxims governing actions and intentions in being part of the case for the value or point of the actions or intentions” (3/n. 32); and “Reasons for action are such reasons by being facts that establish that the action has some value” (4/1).
These are substantive claims, not tautologies. Again, we can make sense of a fact as part of the case for the truth of a belief, or for the value of an action, without appealing to reasons (that is, without bringing in that fact’s relation to Reason).

The nexus (through its implied maxims) has several important consequences, which I will call the “primary applications” of the nexus.

(1) The nexus gives us general characterizations of which sorts of facts are reasons for belief, reasons for action, reasons for emotion, respectively.

(2) The nexus explains why these otherwise disparate kinds of facts all count as reasons. This ought to strike us as more puzzling than it typically does. After all, what do facts having to do with valuable features, facts indicating the truth of some proposition, facts about the outrageous behavior of some public official, etc. all have to do with one another? The answer is that they are all the sorts of facts to which Reason can respond in forming beliefs, taking action, and feeling emotions.  

(3) The nexus shows that normativity cannot be equated with value, as it often causally is. On the one hand, not all reasons are valuable features of the responses for which they are reasons. Reasons for beliefs and emotions are not valuable features, but rather indicators of truth, or affect-justifying facts (5/18). On the other hand, not all valuable features of actions are reasons, even for those very actions or their associated intentions. (The maxim for action and intention states a necessary, but not sufficient, condition.) First, there are “non-standard” reasons for action and intention: that is, reasons that cannot be followed. Second, there are valuable features that violate the epistemic and availability constraints that we will discuss later. Finally, there are features that are valuable only for some non-person, such as the benefits to a wild baboon, unknown to mankind, of grooming itself.

(4) The nexus solves the “wrong kind of reasons” problem (3/1). Suppose believing P would make me happy, or have some other valuable consequence. Surely, that counts in favor of believing P. So why isn’t it a reason, or at least the right sort of reason, to believe P? The quietist has no answer whatsoever, since he says that a fact’s counting in favor of a response exhausts its nature as a reason. But once we move beyond quietism, and accept the nexus, the answer is simple. The fact that believing P would make me happy is not a reason to believe P,

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7 “[In what sense are reasons for the two types [practical and adaptive] reasons in the same sense?” (3/26)
8 “[Normativity is not to be explained by value” (3/26).
9 “Nonstandard reasons for actions and intentions do conform to the maxims governing actions and intentions in being part of the case for the value or point of the actions or intentions” (3/n. 32). “Here two kinds of factor may make a reason non-standard. First, if following it is self-defeating. Second, in the case of intentions, if the formation of the intention is impossible as it violates some necessary condition for having an intention. These conditions are met when the reason for the action is a reason for an action not performed from that reason, and when the reason for the intention does not provide a reason for the action (not even as a way of having or of facilitating the having of the intention)” (3/23).
because I cannot follow that fact, as such, by forming the belief that P. Of course, there can be causal chains from the fact to that belief. But they do not involve my exercising Reason in light of that fact.

(5) The nexus, and the related maxims, play many other roles, in various arguments throughout the book. For example, it crops up in defense of the “guise of the good” thesis¹⁰ and in opposition to the “buck-passing” theory of value.¹¹

(6) Most importantly, the nexus explains reasons’ hold on us: the role that reasons play in our lives. Again, it seems the quietist can say nothing about reasons’ hold on us. He views reasons simply as considerations that count in favor certain responses, with no necessary or essential connection to our rational capacities. For the quietist, reasons might as well be like the commands of an authority that we could never hear, or could choose to turn a deaf ear to.

4.
There’s more to be said about this last application of the nexus, (6). Ultimately, the question of reasons’ hold on us crystallizes as: Why is seeking to recognize and respond to reasons, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, inescapable for us? Why is it inevitable that we function rationally?

Two points are crucial. First, the question is not, at least not in the first instance, about conforming to reasons, but instead about exercising Reason. These are different things. One can conform to (although not follow) reasons without exercising Reason, and one can exercise Reason without conforming to reasons.

Second, the question is not a normative question, namely: What reason do we have to exercise Reason, i.e., to function rationally? Indeed, Raz adds, that we have no such reasons, and that there is no need or place for such reasons. “[W]e need no reasons to function rationally, just as we need no reason to hear sounds in our vicinity. So long as we are conscious our powers of hearing and our rational powers are engaged, though not always successfully” (5/19).

So, the question of why reasons have the hold on us that they have is, as it appears to be, a nonnormative question about, in the first instance, the exercise of Reason. The answer, in brief, is that it is constitutive of our being persons that they should have such a hold. More precisely:

(1) Part of what it is for us to be persons is for us to have beliefs and act with (independent) intentions.

¹⁰ Raz uses it to defend the guise of the good thesis against the suggestion of Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), that one can act intentionally just insofar as one knows why one is doing what one is doing, without necessarily believing “that the reasons for which one is acting are reasons to act in that way” (4/24). If knowing why one is doing what one is doing requires being prepared to explain it in terms of the nexus, Raz replies, then it does require such a belief.

¹¹ The buck-passing theory denies what (3) establishes: that we “can establish their value without raising the question of whether there is reason to bring them about” (4/29).
(2) Part of what it is for us to have beliefs is for us to recognize and respond to (what we at least take to be) indicators of truth, which is to say to function rationally in the relevant respects.

(3) Part of what it is for us to act with an (independent) intention of so acting is for us to recognize and respond to (what we at least take to be) the value of the action, which is to say to function rationally in the relevant respects.

(4) Therefore, part of what it is for us to be persons is for us to recognize and respond to (what we at least take to be) reasons. As long as we are persons, we will function rationally. Doing so is thus inescapable for us.

Having given this answer, Raz anticipates a lingering sense of dissatisfaction:

“But having conceded that this is so only shows that a general rational capacity is constitutive of personhood, and not that reasons or normativity are constitutive of personhood… It is not enough to point out that creatures with no rational capacities are not persons. Clearly there is nothing amiss with pigeons, even though they do not have rational capacities. A vindication of normativity has to show what is amiss with failing to conform to reasons on this or that occasion” (5/29).

This dissatisfaction seems to have two parts. First, one might object, “This is only a description, not a vindication! Showing that exercising Reason is constitutive of personhood does not vindicate exercising Reason. It shows only that, insofar as we are persons, we cannot help but exercise Reason. So Raz’s view is just like Humean skepticism, except that a contingent claim about human nature has been replaced by a constitutive claim about personhood!”

First, Raz seems to reply, the aim is not to vindicate, in some normative sense, the exercise of Reason. Again, there are no reasons to function rationally and, indeed, no need or place for such reasons.

Second, the explanation of the hold of reasons is not like Humean skepticism. For one thing, it does not imply that exercising Reason is arbitrary. Moreover, it is part of a broader view that holds that exercising Reason is not arbitrary. While there is no reason to exercise our rational powers, there is, of course, a purpose—indeed a constitutive purpose—in it: namely, that, insofar as we do it successfully, we recognize and respond to reasons. Finally, the purpose can be given further substance by appealing to the maxims, which tell us what, in general, our reasons are. The purpose is to find indicators of truth, valuable features, and so on.

The second part of the dissatisfaction seems to say: “Even if a vindication, a vindication of Reason not of reasons! Even if you vindicate exercising Reason, you haven’t vindicated the right thing. You haven’t vindicated conforming to reasons. Or at least—granting that exercising Reason may involve conforming to reasons for the most part—you haven’t vindicated conforming to reasons on each particular occasion.”

12 This seems to be the point about pigeons.
13 The pigeons business doesn’t make this point. But the rest of the objection seems to: “…shows only that a general rational capacity is constitutive of personhood, and not that
To this, Raz replies that there is no answer to the question, “Why should I conform to these reasons that I have?” other than to remind you that, as you grant, you have those reasons. What else can “should” mean but “have reason to”?

I began by contrasting the quietist about reasons with the reductionist through Reason. Let me conclude by summing up how Raz, as I understand him, negotiates between these extremes. For Raz, the reductionist goes too far in claiming that:

(i) The notion of a reason can be reduced in terms of the notion of Reason.—Neither notion can be understood independently.

(ii) Actual exercises of Reason somehow determine which reasons we have.—To the extent that Reason determines which reasons we have, it does this in virtue of possible, not actual exercises of Reason.

(iii) Reason somehow completely determines which reasons we have, unfettered by any external constraint (5/21).—Although Reason determines what the maxims are, it does not determine which facts satisfy the maxims (with obvious exceptions for cases in which the relevant facts depend on language, culture, etc.).

However, the reductionist is correct in holding, against the quietist, that Reason contributes something to reasons:

(iv) Part of what it is for something to be a reason consists in a relation to Reason. This is just the nexus.

(v) Reason determines, at an abstract level, which kinds of facts are reasons. These are just the maxims, implied by the nexus.

Again, the reductionist goes too far in thinking that:

(vi) Constitutive connections between Reason and nonnormative concepts somehow explain why we should conform to reasons, or even why we should exercise Reason. Neither aspiration makes much sense.

Nevertheless, something of the reductionist’s aspiration can be realized:

(vii) We can explain, in nonnormative terms, the “hold” that reasons have on us, by appealing to a constitutive connection between exercising Reason and being a person. That is, we can explain, without reducing reasons to something other than what they are, the role that they play in our lives. What more could we sensibly hope for?

5.

I find this big picture powerful and persuasive. As I absorb it, and get a better feel for the interconnections, I find myself more and more a reformed quietist. So if I am to question anything in Raz’s treatment, I have to turn to less important, more internal matters.

Let us call the applications of the nexus that we have already discussed—(1)–(6)—the “primary applications.” At various points, Raz makes further, “secondary applications” of the nexus: “far reaching consequences,” as he puts it (5/5). That is, he suggests that the nexus implies certain epistemic and availability constraints on reasons, or at least reasons for action. Epistemic constraints say that whether something is a reason depends, at least in part, on what is, or can be,
known by the agent or others. *Availability constraints* say that whether something is a reason, at least for action, depends on whether it is available to the agent to perform.

It’s not clear to me how these constraints do follow from the nexus. And if they do not follow from the nexus, then it is not clear to me that all of these constraints—especially, the epistemic constraints—are altogether advisable.

As I read him, Raz makes five relevant claims:

1. **The nexus implies a *lax epistemic condition on what can be* a reason:** namely, that a reason cannot be “unknowable,” which Raz seems to favor construing as: “no one at the time would have found out about it regardless of their best efforts” (6/4).\(^\text{14}\)

2. **The nexus implies a *stricter epistemic condition on whether a reason is adequate* in a given situation.** I say “stricter,” because this condition may fail even though the lax condition is met. In that case, the reason is still a reason, just not an *adequate* reason in the situation (6/13). Raz says little about the contours of this strict epistemic condition, other than to *suggest* (i) that the condition is satisfied if one’s present ignorance resulted only from the failure to take an earlier opportunity to acquire the relevant information (6/16), (ii) that it is satisfied if an advisor knows, can tell the agent, and would be credited by the agent, but (iii) that it is not satisfied if an advisor knows, can tell the agent, and would not be credited by the agent (6/16).

3. **However, the nexus does *not* imply a *too strict* epistemic condition on whether a reason is adequate in a given situation (let alone a reason at all): namely, a condition *so* strict as to let “temporary epistemic limitations” affect whether a reason is *adequate*.

Such “temporary epistemic limitations” are illustrated by two cases:

**Drug 1:** “Drug A is very likely to relieve the condition but will not completely cure it. One of drugs B and C will completely cure the skin condition; the other though will kill the patient, and there is no way that she can tell which of the two is the perfect cure and which the killer drug…. Jill would have known which is the best option if only she could have asked the chief pharmacologist of the hospital. She tried in vain to contact him. He is temporarily out of reach and she must act quickly” (6/18–19).

**Promise:** Max promised Jack to bring him supper to his hospital bed every night (because Jack cannot stand the hospital-provided food). Yesterday Max heard

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\(^{14}\) Examples where unknowability “negates” a reason are the following: (i) Rex, who unwittingly leaves before the randomly moving meteorite strikes his home (3/29–30); (ii) the “overgeneralization” case of the ignorant agent Jane and the knowledgeable “onlooker” Marilyn, whose “knowledge derives from scientific advances which took place years after [Jane’s action] (or were completely obliterated from collective human memory long before it)” (6/16); and (iii) Drug 2, which is like Drug 1, except that there is “no way of checking their relevant DNA composition” (6/18).
that Jack died. He rang the hospital and it confirmed that Jack died. So he did not go to the hospital that evening. In fact Jack did not die, but given limited visiting hours there was no way that Max could have discovered the mistake in time” (6/24).

4. The nexus implies a lax availability condition on what can be a reason.
   “It is not the case that I have reason to attend the symposium that was recorded by Plato in the dialogue of that name, nor is it the case that I have reason to travel outside the solar system, but I have reason to go to the concert conducted by Abbado tonight even though I cannot as it is sold out. I do not know how to distinguish in the abstract between reason-negating and other impossibilities. Perhaps it is just a matter of the likelihood that the impossibility will lift, or that it is temporary” (8/4).

5. The nexus also implies a strict availability condition on whether a reason is adequate in a given situation. Reasons for strictly unavailable options are defeated (in the situation). An option is strictly “available to me if, given how things are [independently of what anyone knows], then if know what would constitute trying to perform it I can succeed [by my ability] in performing it if I try.”

This classification of conditions alone raises questions. In particular, what is the distinction between the strict epistemic conditions, which affect the adequacy of reasons, and the too strict epistemic conditions, which do not? And why does this distinction matter? The apparent answer to the first question is: the too strict conditions are temporary, while the properly strict conditions are more permanent. And the apparent answer to the second question is, as Raz writes, that “we do not normally attach theoretically significant kinds of impossibility to passing, temporary conditions” (6/20).

But in what sense of “temporary” is either claim tenable? Of course, the distinctions in this area are bound to be vague, open at the margins to stipulation, etc. Moreover, it is unfair and counterproductive to seek anything other than general orientation. My difficulty, however, is in seeing how this distinction gives us any orientation, or at least any in the right direction.

First, Raz’s favored account of lax epistemic impossibility—that no one at the time would have found out about it regardless of his or her best efforts—might be only temporary. Indeed, this seems so in the case of Rex and the meteorite. Our ignorance of where the meteorite will land is now universal and unavoidable no matter what anyone does. But this ignorance is only temporary, since we will know, all too soon, where it lands.

“Yes,” one might reply, “but only after it’s too late!” That’s no reply. By “temporary limitation,” Raz clearly cannot mean “limitation that will be removed before the time comes to act.” The epistemic limitations that he describes as only “temporary” nevertheless remain in place until it is “too late.”

Second, does it change Drug 1 or Promise—the cases of too strict epistemic conditions—to imagine that the relevant limitation will remain in place permanently? It seems perfectly compatible with Promise, for example, that Max “can,” in a too strict sense, never find out his
failure to keep his promise, because his friend dies the next day, and a mistake is made on the death records, which he is then told when he calls (and would be told him were he to call again). Would this really affect our treatment of the cases?

To sum up these first two points, there being more or less insuperable obstacles to knowing something at a given time is one thing; how long these obstacles remain in place seems to be something else. In the meteorite case, insuperable obstacles are in place only momentarily, whereas in the extended Promise case, more modest obstacles are in place indefinitely.

Finally, the fact that an action is strictly unavailable is surely a theoretically important kind of impossibility. Certainly, it is important enough, by Raz’s own lights, to affect the adequacy of reasons. But the strict unavailability of actions is clearly often temporary (as Raz seems to say when he distinguishes it from lax unavailability, or “deeply impossible” actions). When my paycheck comes in, or when I am released from prison, options that are presently strictly unavailable to me will become strictly available. So how can it be said that: “we do not normally attach theoretically significant kinds of impossibility to passing, temporary conditions”?

6. Bracketing for the moment the question whether the epistemic and availability constraints are correct, do they really follow from the nexus? Several questions can be raised here.

First, there is at least one reasonable specification of the nexus that suffices for all of the primary applications, but implies none of these epistemic or availability conditions.

Compare a claim sometimes made about colors:

The nexus-like claim: Part of what it is to be red is that, necessarily, X is red only if it is disposed to look red in appropriate conditions, to someone with appropriate capacities. This claim isn’t meant as a reduction. (As a reduction, the claim would face the difficulty of identifying the response on the right-hand side without reference to redness.) On the other hand, it is not meant as only a necessary truth, but also an essential truth, telling us about what it is for something to be red. (After all, it is also true that necessarily, X is square only if it is disposed to look square in appropriate conditions.) As such, it is very similar in spirit and structure to the nexus. (Whether either claim should be endorsed is a further question.)

Tellingly, the nexus-like claim implies nothing like the availability or epistemic constraints. Imagine some red object. Now contrive in your imagination to prevent anyone from seeing it, perhaps by placing it in some distant corner of the cosmos, or giving it “finkish,” or Medusa-like powers to turn observers to stone. That doesn’t somehow make it colorless. Granted, changing its chemical composition or structure, say by heating it until it becomes transparent, would make it colorless. Painting it blue would affect its color in a different way. But merely interposing obstacles between the object and observations of it doesn’t affect its color. Our idea of something’s having a color (to the extent that we accept the nexus-like claim) is an idea of something’s having a certain power, in virtue of its “intrinsic” characteristics, to do certain things when certain “external” circumstances obtain: namely, those circumstances that are suited to the manifestation of the power. The fact that it is not possible for those external circumstances to
obtain has no bearing on whether the thing has the power, only on whether it is possible for the power to be manifested.

So why not say the same about reasons? The idea would be that a fact, in virtue of certain “intrinsic” characteristics, has the power to be followed as a reason (as Raz sometimes puts it, a “motivating power”) when in “external” conditions suited to the manifestation of this power. The intrinsic characteristic in this case would of course not be some feature of an object’s surface, but instead being a fact of the kind described by the Raz’s maxims. For example, a fact about the value of an action has the power to motivate, rationally, that action. A fact that is evidence for P has the power to motivate, rationally, the belief that P. And so on. The fact that a reason is not, or could not be put, in external conditions suited to the manifestation of the power, does not somehow deprive it of that power. For example, that we cannot believe or know the fact does not somehow deprive it of the relevant power. So no epistemic or availability condition whatsoever would follow from the nexus so understood.

To be clear: I’m not recommending this interpretation of the nexus. My point is just (a) that it is no less natural or more vexed than any other interpretation on offer,\(^\text{15}\) (b) that it implies the primary applications of the nexus, and (c) that it does not imply any epistemic or availability condition.

Indeed, at times, Raz grants that there are viable interpretations of the nexus that do not imply the lax epistemic constraint:

suppose that a fact cannot guide because it is impossible for people to believe in it, but would be capable of guiding, and therefore of figuring in an explanation of actions, were it possible to believe in it. Is it a reason...? Whichever conclusion one comes to on this and similar issues is likely to be stipulative...\(^\text{16}\)

And, for what it’s worth, Williams himself—the source of the inspiration for Raz’s nexus—explicitly rejects an epistemic constraint. For Williams, whether you have reason to drink the stuff in the glass depends on whether it is in fact petrol, not whether you, or any one else, does or could know about it.

So, my first question about Raz’s claim that the nexus implies the constraints comes to this: What is the argument for that claim, given that (as Raz sometimes grants, as Williams exemplifies) there are interpretations of the nexus that are no less natural or more vexed, that suffice for the primary applications, but that do not imply epistemic or availability constraints?

\(^\text{15}\) Of course, this relies on some contrast between the intrinsic “character” or “nature” of the fact and external circumstances that allow that power to be manifested, which may be vague at the margins. But the seems no more vague, or otherwise problematic, than any alternative interpretation. And Raz has no problem with claims about, say, what is “possible given the nature of [a] reason” (3/22).

\(^\text{16}\) And later, he says that, the lax epistemic constraint may only “seems to follow” from the nexus, since “even unknowable facts can be known about, and thus guide behavior.” But elsewhere, such as in the case of Rex and meteorite, he is more categorical.
Second, how do the stricter epistemic and availability conditions, which have to do with the adequacy of reasons, follow from any interpretation of the nexus? The nexus speaks only of a necessary condition on being a reason. It says nothing at all about the adequacy of reasons.

Third, if the availability conditions on reasons for action and their adequacy did flow from the nexus, then similar availability conditions on reasons for belief and emotion (and their adequacy) ought to flow from the nexus. The nexus applies to all reasons. But there is no similar availability condition on beliefs and emotion. It is not as though someone who can’t bring himself to believe the horrible truth thereby loses a reason, or an adequate reason, to believe the horrible truth. Likewise, the fact that Kompetitive Kolodny can’t feel unalloyed joy at his friend’s success doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have a reason, or an adequate reason, to.

Finally, the claim that the epistemic and availability conditions flow from the nexus seems more plausible to the extent that they flow from a common specification of “possible.” The nexus uses only one sense of “possible.” But it is unclear whether we can find a common specification of “possible” that will give us the epistemic and availability conditions that Raz seems to favor.

To illustrate, suppose we use the sense of “possible” that Raz seems to prefer for the lax epistemic condition:

R is a reason for S to X only if there is someone, T, such that, if T had made an appropriate effort at the time of S’s X-ing, T would have known about R.

To imply this lax epistemic constraint, the nexus would have to be understood as:

R is a reason for S to X only if there is someone, T, S such that, if T had made an appropriate effort at the time of S’s X-ing, T would have rationally responded to R by X-ing.

Suppose that there is only one person, T (who isn’t S), who would have known about R if she had made an appropriate effort at the time. So the lax constraint is satisfied. However, suppose that T could not have realized the relevant value by any action of hers (e.g., perhaps R has to do with a friendship to which S, but not T, is party). So the nexus needed to deliver the lax constraint is not satisfied. This would not be a problem if Raz was content to deny that R is a reason for S. But I take it that Raz would not want to deny this.

The point is not that no specification of ‘possible’ can be found to deliver the desired constraints. It is instead that this specification would be so gerrymandered as to suggest that it was driven not by the intuitive appeal of the nexus, but instead by independent considerations. It is to these independent considerations that I now turn.

7. Now I ask: Whether or not these epistemic and availability conditions flow from the nexus, are there independent reasons for accepting them?
To begin with, as Raz notes, both constraints play a role in relieving agents of criticism. Suppose an agent had conclusive reason to do X, but did not do X. If we then learn that some relevant epistemic, or availability, condition was not met, we may be reluctant to criticize the agent for failing to do X. However, as Raz argues convincingly, this does not show that the epistemic, or availability, condition is a condition on reasons, or adequate reasons. It may show only that the epistemic, or availability, condition is a condition on criticism.\(^\text{17}\)

**Strict availability constraint:** Can we reach sensible conclusions about what we have adequate reason to do without strict availability constraint? Here is a line of thought, which has been making the rounds, that suggests that we can. The idea, roughly, is that while “cannot” does not imply “not ought,” it does imply “not ought \textit{try}”: The fact that, say, saving patient A’s arm is unavailable will presumably undermine the derivative reason to \textit{try} to save A’s arm. (For if saving A’s arm unavailable, then \textit{trying} to save A’s arm has no probability of achieving it, and in general the “strength” of a reason for a derivative action depends on the probability that it helps to bring about the “root” or “source” action.) Consequently, the reason to \textit{try} to save A’s arm will be inadequate, relative to alternatives, such as saving B’s finger. So we get the right results: you ought to save B’s finger.

On its own, however, this does \textit{not} give us the right results. The reason to \textit{save} A’s arm presumably outweighs the reason to save B’s finger, even if the reason to \textit{try} to save A’s arm does not.

We would also need to suppose that what there is adequate reason to do is relative to a set of relevant alternatives. If the question is “Do I have adequate reason to save B’s finger, \textit{without restriction}?” the answer is no, since I have more reason to save A’s arm. But if the question is, “Do I have adequate reason to \textit{try} to save B’s finger, \textit{relative to available options}?”, the answer is yes, since \textit{saving} A’s arm is excluded from consideration. But one might doubt, on Raz’s behalf, that this really dispenses with strict availability constraint. For that very constraint seems to be the principle delimiting at least the default, most natural, most deliberatively salient, etc., set of relevant alternatives.

But what if the question, “What do I have adequate reason to do?” is almost always, when raised in the context of deliberation that \textit{aims to reach a decision}, shorthand for “What do I have adequate reason to \textit{decide} to do?” This would get the right results, since one has more reason to decide to save B’s finger than to decide to save A’s arm. And it isn’t obvious to me that it smuggles in the strict availability constraint. It just appeals to the point that practical deliberation typically aims at decision.

\(^{17}\) However, as Raz notes, we sometimes use ‘ought’—and presumably also ‘reason’—in a concessive way, so as to make avoid any implication of criticism. “[W]e sometimes say not ‘you did all that could be expected of you’ but ‘yes, that was what you ought to have done’ to express the view that the action was justified, that you were justified in taking it. But that is a concessive use of ‘ought’. If we say ‘you should not have done what you did’ even though we are not saying that the action was unjustified, a criticism is conversationally implied… Hence the reassuring, concessive use of ‘ought’” (6/26).
Lax availability constraint: Even if we accept this rationale for the strict availability constraint (on adequate reasons), however, it is not similarly a rationale for the lax availability constraint (on reasons). Indeed, once we have the strict constraint, how can the lax constraint make any difference to deliberation at all? After all, any action that violates the lax constraint already violates the strict constraint. So it is already off the deliberative agenda as something that we might have adequate reason for.

However, Raz might say, the lax availability constraint still can make a deliberative difference. Even when there is not adequate reason for an action (because it is strictly unavailable), the fact that there is still reason for that action may continue to be relevant for further deliberation about compensation, second-best actions, and so on. (This is an important theme of chapter nine.) And there is still reason for that action only if it is laxly available. For example, when I can’t go to the concert tonight, I still have reason to, because it is laxly available, which bears on my deliberation about compensation, second-best actions. But when I cannot go to Plato’s symposium, there is no reason, because it is laxly unavailable. So there is no deliberation about second-best actions, compensation, etc. Thus, it might be said, the distinction between what is laxly and not laxly available does matter to deliberation.

But, still, why not simply say that there is also reason to go to Plato’s symposium, but just that, since no relevant compensating or second-best actions are strictly available, this reason is invariably defeated in every situation we might encounter? It’s not clear to me, then, that there are independent grounds for a lax availability constraint on reasons for action.

Strict and too-strict epistemic constraints: It can be hard to see how we could reach sensible deliberative conclusions about what we had adequate reason to do without allowing strict—or even the “too strict,” “temporary”—epistemic limitations to affect what we have adequate reason to do. This is brought out in “Jackson” cases like Drug 1. In such cases, people sensibly reach deliberative conclusions “in favor of” what they know are not the first-best options, because, in some strict—or too strict—sense of “possible,” it is not possible for them to know what the first-best option is. This seems to suggest that strict, and even too strict, epistemic conditions are necessary.

This has been a prime motivation for a “subjective” ought, which is relative to the evidence available to the agent. And it has been a prime motivation for my and John MacFarlane’s view, that ought is “assessment-sensitive.” On our view, what one ought to do depends on the evidence available to the assessor of the ought-claim, where “availability” might well be understood in “too strict” terms. From the standpoint of deliberation, the assessor just is the deliberating agent. So what the agent ought to do, from that standpoint, is what is recommended by the evidence available to the agent; it’s just like the subjective ought. And I thought we had to say this, in order to explain how deliberators could reach sensible deliberative conclusions, in Jackson cases, in favor of what they know are not first-best options.

Raz’s response is ingenious, and it suggests, in characteristically Razian style, that a whole line of philosophical worry (the subjectivist’s, mine) may be based on a mistake. Why assume, Raz

18 “Ought: Between Objective and Subjective,” unpublished manuscript.
asks, that the sensible deliberative conclusion is a conclusion about whether one has *adequate* reason, or *ought*? Why not say instead that it is a conclusion about what is the “best approximation” to what one has reason to do?

The best approximation is (a) the option with—*something like*—the highest expected value given the epistemic probabilities, relative to the agent’s epistemic situation, (b) not of *all* the options strictly available to him, but instead of all the options that *he can knowingly perform.*

Raz doesn’t make (b) explicit, but it is essential. After all, in Drug 1, *giving the drug that will cure the skin condition* is strictly available to Jill (since strict availability is not *epistemic*), and it has the highest expected value (given the epistemic probabilities relative to her epistemic situation). The problem is that it is not an action that she can *knowingly* perform.

Raz’s solution may well be right. It may show that we need no “too strict” epistemic constraint on the adequacy of reasons. But then my question is why it does not also show that we need no *strict* epistemic constraint on the adequacy of reasons. Why not say that, *in general,* deliberative conclusions take the form of “best approximation” judgments? If that’s the general form our deliberative conclusions take, then we don’t need the strict epistemic constraint in order to ensure sensible deliberative conclusions.

*Lax epistemic constraint:* Finally, Raz suggests at one point that if we drop the lax epistemic condition, then we risk “overgeneralization”: implying that people have reason in situations in which, intuitively, they do not have reason. Raz gives a case of someone failing to give proper medical treatment, because no one would have known at the time that the medical treatment was effective. Most will agree, he says, that the effectiveness of the treatment was not a reason to give it. By contrast, Raz finds it clear that in a case like Promise, the epistemic situation does not affect even the adequacy of the reason.

Here I can only report that my own intuitions are torn in the *same* way in both cases. On the one hand, I am inclined to accept, in both cases, the verdict relative to the agent’s epistemic position: i.e., no reason. On the other hand, I am inclined to accept, in both cases, the verdict relative only to the facts (as they are presented in the case): i.e., yes, reason. It all depends on whether I am thinking about criticizing the agent, or about advising the agent.

8. To sum up: I don’t see why Raz’s availability and epistemic constraints should follow from the nexus. There are independent grounds for the strict availability constraint, although perhaps there is an alternative to it. But I see no independent ground (i.e., not rooted in the nexus) for the rest. The lax availability constraint seems otiose. And to the extent that Raz’s devastatingly simple “best approximation” idea is accepted, it seems to vitiate any need for epistemic constraints on reasons or their adequacy. So, having suggested that there may be no reason *for* these constraints, is there any reason *against* them?

I think there are grounds to resist the epistemic constraints, if (i) they are relative to the agent (even if only in the weak way of the lax constraint: that is, relative to what could be known in the agent’s day and age) and/or (ii) imply that a judgment *about* what there is reason for is, in part, a
judgment about what some person can or does know. In brief, the problem is that epistemic constraints, so understood, distort our practical thinking; they introduce a foreign, irrelevant element into deliberation and advice.

One kind of distortion is, indirectly, described by Raz himself. In arguing against the “belief view,” which says that one has a reason only if one believes that one has, Raz points out that it is distorting to reflect on what one believes about it, rather than to focus on what is valuable about the action. “It is not having the thought that the dish would be tasty that seems to us to recommend eating it, it is that it would be tasty.” But if that is a good objection, why doesn’t it tell equally against epistemic conditions? Why not similarly: “It is not whether it is knowable to me that the dish would be tasty that seems to us to recommend eating it, it is that it would be tasty”?

Another kind of distortion appears in prospective deliberation cases. What does Fred have reason to do tomorrow? He knows that X-ing will do great good. So he judges: I will have reason to do it. Now Fred learns that there is a possibility that tomorrow this fact will be forgotten, and that no one will be able to recover the knowledge in time, no matter how hard they try. So, if he accepts the lax epistemic constraint, he has to withhold judgment about whether he has reason to X tomorrow, until he can determine what people may or may not know tomorrow. But that seems irrelevant to what he has reason to do.

A final kind of distortion appears in advice cases. If we accept an epistemic constraint, then the advisor cannot simply advise the agent on the basis of her knowledge of the action’s value, because whether the advice is true depends on the advisee’s epistemic condition.

Raz seems to suggest that this can never be a problem. If some advisor knows, and if this advisor can tell the agent, then the victim can know: the epistemic constraint is satisfied. So what the advisor says is true. This seems plausible on the lax epistemic constraint. If the advisor can tell the agent, then it must both be the case that the advisor knows and that the advisor is one of the agent’s contemporaries. So someone would have known it at the time, because someone did know it at the time.

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19 On my and John’s view, against (ii), the truth of an ought-judgment may depend on what the assessor can or does knows, but the judgment is not about that. Moreover, against (i), what the assessor can or does know is in no way relative to the agent; he needn’t even be a contemporary of the agent.

20 At first, I was puzzled by Raz’s argument against the belief view: namely, that “ignorance, mistakes, and uncertainty presuppose something about which we are ignorant, uncertain or mistaken.” At first, I thought: “The belief view is surely compatible with mistakes: that is, cases in which we mistakenly believe have a reason that we do not have. For the view claims only that believing that one has a reason is a necessary condition for having a reason, not that it is sufficient.” I take it that the real argument against the belief view is that, while it may be compatible with “false positives,” it isn’t compatible with “false negatives”—cases in which we mistakenly fail to believe that we have a reason that we do in fact have.
But is it plausible on the \textit{strict} epistemic constraint? Although we aren’t told much about that constraint, Raz does say that if the advisee cannot \textit{credit} the advice, then the strict constraint isn’t satisfied (6/16). But that leads us straight into the problem. For it seems distorting that the advisor should \textit{first} have to settle \textit{whether her advice can be credited} by the agent, before knowing whether what she is saying is \textit{true}.\footnote{Note that the same problem arises for Raz’s “best approximation” suggestion. Suppose that I am another doctor who also suffers from temporary ignorance about which medicine will cure the patient. However, I know more than the agent. That is, I know that the drugs have been mislabeled. That is, I know that what the agent believes is Drug C is actually the one with the properties that he mistakenly attributes to Drug A.}

Raz says something here, however, that gives me pause. How can I reject epistemic constraints on the grounds that they are distorting, without rejecting the strict availability constraint on the same grounds? Why isn’t the strict availability constraint, which \textit{also} looks to factors besides the value of the action, similarly distorting? As I have said, I am not sure what we need the strict availability constraint. But if we do, then I have only a question-begging answer. This is that the strict availability constraint just is part of the basic practical question. That question is something like: \textit{Among those options available to the agent}, which are recommended, over the others, in virtue of their value? What the agent or someone else can \textit{know}, by contrast, seems no part of the content of the question. Or at least that is what the examples just discussed seem to me to show.

\footnote{Note that the same problem arises for Raz’s “best approximation” suggestion. Suppose that I am another doctor who also suffers from temporary ignorance about which medicine will cure the patient. However, I know more than the agent. That is, I know that the drugs have been mislabeled. That is, I know that what the agent believes is Drug C is actually the one with the properties that he mistakenly attributes to Drug A.}

So what am I to think about the agent’s deliberative conclusion, which on Raz’s view is to be read as, “Giving Drug A is the best approximation”? It would be natural for me to think, “No! That’s wrong! It’s Drug C! \textit{That’s} the safe bet!” But what can I mean? Not: “He has most reason to give Drug C.” I know that’s false. Either he has most reason to give A, or he has most reason to give B. Not: “Relative to \textit{my} epistemic position, it is the best approximation to give C.” This wouldn’t \textit{disagree} with the agent’s conclusion. Not: “Relative to \textit{his} epistemic position, it is the best approximation to give C.” That’s also false. Relative to \textit{his} epistemic position, it is the best approximation \textit{to give A}.

To this, Raz might reply that it’s actually true. Given that I am there, the agent’s epistemic position is changed, and the best approximation relative to his position \textit{is} to give C. But this threatens to undermine the point of the “best approximation” suggestion, which was to give agents a deliberative conclusion that they could reach in cases of temporary epistemic limitation: which might include limitations imposed by a knowledgable, potential advisor’s refusal, or inability, to inform the agent.