Enacted Appreciation and the Meta-Normative Structure of Urgency

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Abstract

Some considerations are urgent and others are not. Sometimes we invite criticism if we neglect the urgency of our situation, even if our action seems adequate to respond to it. Despite this significance, the literature does not offer a satisfactory analysis of the normative structure of urgency. I examine three views of urgency, drawn from philosophical and adjacent literature, which fail to explain the distinctive criticism we face when we neglect the urgency of our reasons. Instead I argue that urgent considerations pre-empt our deliberation about less urgent considerations. Urgency, then, is a meta-normative phenomenon, setting standards for how we handle and respond to first-order considerations, requiring that we close deliberation. In the face of urgency, appropriate action is not enough: *commitment* is called for. This is how we enact appreciation of our practical reasons, independently of our carrying out the action they call for.

Keywords: urgency, pre-emption, meta-normativity, normativity, practical rationality

1. Any consideration might recommend some response, but some considerations *urge* us to act. I contend that urgency introduces a distinctive standard against which we might fail. We invite criticism for doing the right thing in too leisurely a manner. I call this *objective urgency* to distinguish it from a *sense of urgency*, which might track objective urgency more or less accurately (just as our indignant *sense of* injustice might track actual injustice more or less well).[1] Specifically, I hold that urgency is a *meta*-normative phenomenon, governing deliberation more directly than action.

Consider a (semi)-familiar story:

(Hamlet) Hamlet's uncle is an ineffective king, so Hamlet should overthrow him. The Norwegian invasion lends urgency to the situation. Tragically contemplative as Hamlet is, he ruminates for so long that when he eventually overthrows his uncle, the invasion is greatly advanced and costs many more lives to repel.

Hamlet's reason to overthrow his uncle was that he was an ineffective king. In the face of invasion, an effective king is urgently needed to protect the

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1 For urgency as a motivational state, see Elster 2009.

people. Hamlet did what he had best reason to do but did so in too slow and pensive a manner. This is not the same failure as were he loyal to his uncle. He invites a distinctive criticism for doing the right thing but *doing it wrong*.

Disasters can create urgency but so can good fortune: perhaps one's dream job is advertised briefly and at short notice. For the artist, it is often urgent that a great idea be transcribed into some medium before it becomes overgrown and indistinct. I take it that reasons are facts viewed in the light of a value (see Alvarez 2010: 40-44). Hamlet's reason to usurp his uncle was the fact that Denmark was under invasion, viewed in light of all the bads of invasion. Seen under proper evaluation, the risk to life (and limb) of each of Hamlet's subjects counts independently as a reason. However, we would double-count his reasons if we said Hamlet should ϕ because Denmark needed an effective king *and* because his people needed protecting. Practical reasons can be individuated more or less narrowly, zooming in and out of what we are interested in at different times.

Reasons can persist whilst their urgency varies. It is always important that brain tissue is oxygenated; the same reasons insist upon it. However, a nurse's reasons to perform CPR grow increasingly urgent the longer blood has not been flowing to a patient's brain (until urgency, those reasons and the patient all expire together). Reasons can remain constant, whilst urgency waxes and wanes. Typically urgency increases as we approach some time t at which it is eliminated, but we might see variations from this pattern. Our reasons to study become less urgent when a test is postponed (even if our *sense of urgency* remains high until we learn about the delay).

So is time t at the heart of urgency? Consider:

> (Proximity View) Urgency consists in the proximity we stand in prior to the time t at which some reason expires.

This view is explicit in the time management literature. Mackenzie and Nickerson separate urgency, as proximity to time t, from the *validity* of the urgent consideration – how survivable it would be to drop this particular ball (2009: 90–91). Plausibly it is implicit when Reader and Brock argue that 'non-contingent needs are … uniquely urgent in the way they demand helping action lest the needing being cease to function or even to exist' (2004: 252). There is a deadline after which our failure to meet this need is settled and irreversible.

Normative force, on this view, is grounded entirely in the importance of our reasons. My reason to ϕ is a fact that makes ϕ-ing appropriate, and which leaves me only until time t to ϕ. It might also be a fact that time t is close at hand, but we are double-counting if we call this fact a new reason to ϕ. The fact that opportunity is narrowing is not, in itself, a reason to do anything (as victims of high-pressure sales tactics can attest). Properly understood,

'urgent-but-unimportant' is an empty set. Perhaps urgency is most *apparent* when our reasons are about to expire, but this is not what makes for urgency. Proximity alone leaves no room for urgency to be a normative concept.

It might be objected that this is not a problem. As Mackenzie and Nickerson point out, when demands pile up we must distinguish the 'urgent' from the important and drop the (apparently) *urgent-but-unimportant* considerations that prey on us. Urgency only reflects our limitations: we have until time *t* to respond to our reasons, after which no response is available. The suggestion is that our sense of urgency is an emotion that misleads us on normative matters, misrepresenting proximity to *t* as normative force.

This disagreement is mostly verbal. Mackenzie and Nickerson correctly point out that if we are practically rational, we will not be distracted by deadline proximity. To be misled in this way is to be misled by an emotional representation of our situation that marks deadlines for undue salience. This error is more likely when we are stressed and our *sense of urgency* is unusually keen. It is natural to refer to some considerations as *high-urgency–low-importance* because they feel urgent even when they are not. Dropping them is rational because they are *only apparently* urgent. Accurately representing objective urgency is what it takes for our sense of urgency to be functioning well. If our sense of urgency is an obstacle to effective agency, then it is an emotion that we can assess as deficient from the point of view of practical rationality.[2] The time management literature comes into its own by supporting agency that is less effective than we would like, so is concerned with error states like a misfiring sense of urgency. Mistaking proximity for urgency is precisely the kind of thing that makes an aid to our agency desirable, but this being so, proximity is not what we are looking for in an analysis of objective urgency.

2. We sometimes speak of moral urgency, often when we care less about whether a temporal window is closing. This is the kind of urgency in our reasons to apologize, or to condemn atrocities, for instance. Moral urgency might be somewhat temporally structured: perhaps we accrue more culpability the longer we are silent, but we might also run afoul of moral urgency if we *equivocate* in our response. Late apologies can be insufficient, as can be defensive half-apologies. One might worry that talk of moral urgency is really metaphorical. 'Morally urgent' considerations are important, even lexically prior to others, but are not really urgent. However, if one account explains both moral urgency and more obviously temporal urgency, then we have good reason to adopt it for both. For

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2 See Tappolet 2016: ch. 5 for a full account.

now, let us consider two further views of urgency: the *Priority View* and the *Emergency View*.

The Priority View stems from Scanlon's (1975) analysis of the different kinds of moral interests that give rise to more or less compelling reasons to support people. Interests are urgent, on his analysis, insofar as their effect on our wellbeing changes what support we are owed (660). Urgent interests give others reasons to support us where non-urgent interests do not. Urgency is what makes support morally necessary, rather than superogatory. Nagel adopts this view when he considers the advantages of political systems that 'grant each person the same claim to have his most urgent needs met before the next most urgent needs of someone else' (1979: 121).[3]

This view does not give any particular place to temporality and so is somewhat removed from our usual talk of urgency where there are deadlines in play. Scanlon uses the terms 'urgency' and 'important' interchangeably throughout. Does he, then, mean moral urgency? This is a closer fit, as morally urgent matters will plausibly overrule competing considerations. However, if urgency is synonymous with importance, we cannot explain the *distinctive* criticism Hamlet faces. We cannot *do the right thing wrong*. Urgency does not establish a separate normative standard on Scanlon's view, and so is not our target concept.

3. The archetypal cases of urgency are emergencies, so perhaps:

> (Emergency View) Urgency obtains in exactly those situations where emergency norms apply.

This would make urgency a meta-normative concept, picking out a set of cases identified by the particular norms that apply across them. Understanding urgency would involve asking what those norms are and why they apply only sometimes. I consider two answers.

Sterri and Moen argue that emergency norms are informal insurance policies catering to those 'relatively large needs that have to be met if we are unlucky' (2021: 2627). Our premium for this insurance is our willingness to rescue others when emergencies befall them. A child drowning in a pond is an emergency because it is a problem best solved through bystander rescue, whereas systemic poverty is not an emergency because constant ad hoc rescues would be both burdensome and ineffective. This theory runs

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3 See also Daniels 2008: 33–34, Carbonell 2012, Nielson 2013, Greaves 2015 and Kious 2017. Shue (1980: e.g. 35, 119 n. 14, 122) and Arpaly (2018) gesture to Scanlon's analysis. Parfit's (2002) response to Nagel touches on this point. Compare Frankfurt on 'the principle of precedence' (1984: 106).

on rule-utilitarian and expected-value theoretic assumptions about value and rationality.

Formulated in these terms, Hamlet is an emergency because the invasion is high-stakes and unpredicted, and people need rescuing from the Norwegians and from their bad king. The Danes' insurance against this opportunistic invasion is that someone or other seizes the crown and does the job properly. Hamlet might *transgress* this norm by being loyal to his uncle, or *fail against* it by acting too slowly – adopting too slow-moving a plan or taking too long to settle on a plan. His particular shortcoming is the latter: tragic contemplativeness. We might resist this account if we want a theory to more clearly distinguish the two ways of failing against emergency norms. Further, we have reasons to be sceptical about the underlying expected-value framework that supports the view. My chief reservation is the supposed commensurability of values. A norm can maximally protect us from morally relevant harm across hard cases only if morally relevant harm is all of a kind. Otherwise, tight trade-offs are between 'roughly comparable' options (Temkin 2012: 171–85, compare Temkin 2022: 350 and Chang 2009). If we accept a value pluralism that implies incommensurability (which I think we should, but do not have space to argue for here), then informal insurance seems inadequate. In Hamlet, the prince did what he had best reason to do, but at a morally relevant cost. He is now *kin-slayer* – plausibly, an appalling and damnable thing to be. That he did his duty to his people means he did the right thing, but that is no compensation.

By answering his reasons appropriately, Hamlet dirties his hands. Does this give us better insight into emergency norms? Walzer (2006) argued that *supreme emergencies* are situations in which certain agents must push through normal moral restrictions, because the 'ongoingness' of some moral community is at stake (43). Perhaps urgent situations are non-supreme emergencies (compare Reader and Brock 2004: 252). They do not require that we push through restrictions set by the innocence of non-combatants, as in Walzer's case, but might require that we disregard lesser sorts of reasons (such as special reasons based in family relationships). This is the germ I will develop in the next section, but for now I note some counterexamples to either formulation of the Emergency View.

Unlooked-for opportunities are urgent, but they are not emergencies. Our dream job becoming suddenly, but briefly, available does not necessitate rescue, nor must pursuing it dirty anyone's hands. Similarly, it is hard to see how aesthetic urgency could constitute an emergency, yet I think the artist's sense of urgency in expressing what they have to express is often accurate. Morally urgent considerations are an interesting case. They need not involve rescue: apologies can be morally urgent. They are also starkest when in tension with competing non-moral considerations, where they require us to do something (financially, politically …) imprudent, mirroring the dirty hands formulation.

4. I have argued that none of the proximity, priority or emergency views explains why there is something distinctive going wrong when we fail to respond to the urgency of a reason, even if we act as that reason recommends. I offer a competing analysis, on which urgent considerations *pre-empt* deliberation about less urgent considerations, and so we go wrong by entertaining pre-empted reasons. Consider two urgent situations: *Geopolitics* and *Acute Medicine*.

> (Geopolitics) Great Power is Denmark's ally. It is revealed that Great Power is abducting foreign citizens to be tortured. Denmark cannot prevent this, nor effectively lobby Great Power on this point, but can publicly condemn Great Power.

Denmark should condemn Great Power – torture is so egregious that it is morally urgent to do so. If Denmark holds its denunciation until silence becomes conspicuous, it invites the distinctive criticism we are interested in. Having stood by Great Power for so long, Denmark's condemnation is now insufficient in answer to torture. There was a moment to condemn, and it was very shortly after the news was confirmed. Denmark acts appropriately (condemns Great Power), but *does the right thing wrong* (too little, too late). This closely mirrors Hamlet, but there is another way Denmark could fail by the standard of moral urgency. If Denmark *equivocates* in condemnation (Great Power is a valuable ally, after all) then it has failed again. Whereas some injustices might rightly be condemned with a plea for nuance and mutual understanding, torture calls for full-throated condemnation. I suggest that it is the moral urgency of torture that makes this difference.

The Aphorisms of Hippocrates begin: 'Life is short, the Art long; opportunity fleeting, experiment treacherous, judgment difficult' (Hippocrates 1931). There is, Hippocrates tells us, a proper moment (*kàiros*) for each intervention. The kàiretic moment in urgency is narrower than in non-urgency, so consider:

> (Acute Medicine) Patient is experiencing progressive nerve damage. Doctor thinks that Drug would halt the progression. The test to confirm this takes a day, and Drug takes four to ten days to be effective, with no way to predict which patients are at which tail of the normal distribution. Each day of progression makes more nerve damage irreversible. Drug's side-effects are less severe than significant nerve damage, but patients vary unpredictably in how much nerve damage will significantly impair their quality of life.

Doctor could run the test, securing high degrees of certainty but condemning Patient to more nerve damage. If this was only a question of correct diagnosis and prescription, then Doctor should maximize certainty. However, the task in medicine is to act correctly, *in time*. The epistemic

value of certainty is not commensurable with the value of functioning nerves, and that Doctor was more certain in their choice is no consolation if Patient loses use of their legs. Indeed Patient might have grounds to complain that Doctor was insulating themselves from the burden of judgement, protecting their feelings and reputation at the expense of Patient's interests.

Williams argues that we sometimes invite criticism for indulging in 'one thought too many' (1981: 18). We go wrong in this way when we fail to recognize some reasons as decisive, as settling the question of what we should do (whom we should save, in his example). Notice that we can have the best all-things-considered reasons to do something and enjoy wide latitude to deliberate further (to further increase certainty, to hone skills in careful deliberation). I suggest another application: we go wrong when we fail to *close deliberation*, even if our reasons are not yet decisive (leaving one option in the lead but none over the line). To close deliberation is not just to stop thinking about something; it is to *commit* to some course of action (see Bratman 1999: chs. 2.2 and 7). In Geopolitics, Denmark indulged in one thought too many, giving weight to pre-empted considerations. In Acute Medicine, concerns about what could go wrong are important but can eventually become indulgent. I offer the Pre-emptive View of urgency:

> (Pre-emptive View) Urgent considerations are those that foreclose or prohibit further deliberation.

In urgent circumstances, further deliberation is not supererogatory, but inappropriate. Whichever reasons are decisive also *pre-empt* other considerations. An adequate response to urgency is to close deliberation. Whatever ϕ our reasons call for, their urgency calls on us to *commit*. Urgent reasons recommend some action, but as Walzer suggests of 'supreme emergencies', they also require us to 'push through' certain competing considerations. In Geopolitics, Denmark should not consider diplomatic self-interest before condemning torture. In Acute Medicine, higher degrees of risk become preferable the more nerve-tissue Patient stands to lose.

5. Some distinctions will help clarify this account. The first is between pre-emption as I mean it, and Raz's pre-emption (1986: 52). On his view, reasons given by political authorities pre-empt deliberation by scooping up and replacing our practical reasons. Rather than considering whether to pay tax or not, I should trust that an authority has properly incorporated my practical reasons into my legal responsibilities. Urgency involves no such substitution. Our original urgent reasons are the ones that require, if we are to appropriately respond to them, that we deliberate no further. On Raz's view, interrogating pre-empted reasons is inappropriate because we should offload deliberation onto an authority that is, *ex hypothesi*, more reliable

than we are (1986: 46–47). In urgency, it is inappropriate to deliberate further because to do so is to respond inadequately to our urgent reasons.

The second distinction is between pre-emption and lexical priority. A consideration enjoys lexically priority if what we should do, all things considered, cannot be changed by any number or strength of lexically subordinate considerations (unless prior considerations are tied). That a consideration pre-empts another does not mean that it changes what we have best reasons to do. Rather, it means that we are criticizable or not for how we try to establish what we have best reasons to do. We mishandle lexically prior considerations if we take them to be outweighed by lexically subordinate considerations. We mishandle pre-empting considerations if we get far enough to be weighing up the considerations that are pre-empted.

Finally, urgency as pre-emption is not the same as practical certainty (Chang 2009). Further deliberation could always increase our certainty that we know what to do, but we cannot deliberate indefinitely. Practical certainty is the threshold at which further deliberation becomes irrational because it defers action without increasing our chances of judging correctly (250). Three distinctions matter. Firstly, we can as easily be practically irrational for seeking additional certainty in *non*-urgent circumstances – we needlessly delay. Secondly, however, this is not to fail by a strict standard. Further deliberation is superfluous, but not necessarily inappropriate. Finally, we can fail by urgency's standard even when further deliberation *would* increase our chances of being right. Urgent circumstances such as Acute Medicine require that we proceed with significantly less than practical certainty. If a patient is actively dying and competing explanations invite contrary treatments, doctors must roll the dice.

6. Pre-emption explains the distinct normative standard of urgency. Hamlet responded to his reasons with appropriate action but responded too pensively – failing to close deliberation and commit. Further deliberation was not superogatory, but inappropriate. We may deliberate as much as we like about non-urgent considerations, but there is a point at which deliberating further means we have failed to respond appropriately to an *urgent* reason.

This highlights an appreciative dimension to agency that is easily obscured. We often think of reasons as being individuated by the action they call for, and thinking of these actions as discrete and publicly visible. Yet the same fact, viewed in the same light, is as much our reason to be outraged by torture as our reason to stop it. We fail to respond fully to an injustice, so the old thought goes, if we are not angered by it (Aristotle 2011: 1125b27–26a8). But appreciation goes much further than privately experiencing some Ψ. Appreciation can be enacted (we punch the air, cry *euoî*) even if an act of appreciating is hard to cleanly individuate. I argue that closing deliberation and committing to some ϕ is a means of *appreciating* our reasons. Torture

calls for condemnation and rescue, and it calls for it to be issued *decisively*. If we tarry or equivocate, hesitating to commit to our condemnation, we fail to respond as fully as our reason calls for. This analysis invites us to ask not only whether we have selected some appropriate ϕ, but whether we have approached our reasons in the right spirit.

Nguyen (2020: 14–19, 52–73) argues that agency comes in different *modes*, from the careful analytic modes of chess and philosophy to the light improvisational mode of playing charades. He argues that we can cultivate private 'inventories of agency', libraries of modes we are fluent in. This supports our autonomy because, with richer inventories, we are better equipped to find actions appropriate to our reasons in more situations. But if Hamlet can *do the right thing wrong*, then this is not the end of the story. Our choice of which mode of agency to adopt could be liable to criticism if, though reliable in terms of what to do, it was cold, inhuman or trivializing. I suggest that our choice of mode might be one way of *appreciating* the reasons in question, expressing deeper and more sensitive virtue. Hamlet's reasons to overthrow his uncle were first-order normative considerations. Their urgency concerned how he should approach these reasons. His action responded adequately to his reasons but, by dithering, failed to enact *appreciation* of those reasons. Nguyen's modes of agency might provide the vocabulary we need to better advise Hamlet.

My view tells one story about both moral and straightforwardly temporal urgency. We run out of *time* to legitimately deliberate as deadlines loom, but we run out of *logical space* to permissibly deliberate in the face of moral urgency. Denmark should not have waited to see how the wind was blowing before condemning Great Power. Reasons to keep Great Power sweet were pre-empted and should not have been considered. The evil of torture closes the matter, and further deliberation on the matter is not just unnecessary but unvirtuous. If Denmark could realistically have stopped the torture, it would have been temporally as well as morally urgent. Each day (hour, moment) Denmark did not prevent extraordinary rendition through Danish airports would be a new failure. The reasons to do anything else (maintain the status quo, ask Great Power to stop) are pre-empted by the moral status of torture.

I sacrifice the theoretical simplicity of Sterri and Moen's account, but do so advisedly. My account is sensitive to the complexity of moral life. Temkin suggests that drowning-child cases *confront* us with the humanity of a person in a way that systemic poverty does not (2012: 76). We might ask why a *confrontation* changes what we should, all-things-considered, do (compared to mere observation). Why would someone have one-thought-too-many if they considered whether they might save more children overall by selling their Rolex? It is because reasons concerning the child drowning before them call for ϕ (rescue), perhaps some Ψ *and for commitment*. Serious counterfactual thoughts about the ruined watch would express failed appreciation of the situation. They save

the child in the wrong mode, and so invite (some) criticism. We are *confronted* with someone's humanity when we cannot get away – when that humanity stands in the way of our (permissibly) considering other things.

7. Urgency determines how we should handle our first-order practical reasons. Our responses to reasons are more adequate the more we appreciate their normative properties, and sometimes this appreciation must be enacted in various ways. Whatever specific ϕ is called for, decisiveness or commitment is the kind of appreciation that urgency demands.

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