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3.8 Logic and practical reasoning

Aristotle's practical syllogism

Aristotle spells out a form of **reasoning** called the practical syllogism. A syllogism is a form of argument that has one major premise, one minor premise, and a conclusion. The *practical* syllogism is a syllogism in which the conclusion takes a practical form, such as the choosing of an action.

In lecture 3.8, Prof Hansen gives an example of how one might explain his opening the fridge door.

Premise 1: Chad's belief: "If I open the fridge, I'll find a sandwich to eat."
Premise 2: Chad's desire: "I want to eat a sandwich."
Conclusion: *Chad opens the fridge door.*

Prof Hansen notes that this kind of reasoning does not have to conclude with an **action**. Instead, the conclusion could be:

- an **intention**: "I intend to open the fridge door."
- a **normative judgment**: "I should open the fridge door."
- a **desire**: “I want to open the fridge door.”

But note that if the **conclusion** takes the form of an intention or a normative judgment or a desire, then **Premise 2** must *also* take the same form.

This model of mental reasoning in the West, according to which both belief *and* desire are needed in order to produce an action, leads to a famous conclusion by **David Hume** (1711-1776):

Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions.

The idea: Belief (reason) is powerless without desire (passion); belief alone cannot explain a person's behavior. **Desires** are always the driving force that lead a person to act.

Note that this model of practical reasoning leads very naturally to the view of **psychological egoism**. If everything I do is driven by my desires, then it must be that everyone is always an egoist, because that's the only way we can act. The natural mental process of humans, thinking (reasoning), is to satisfy desire, i.e. “selfishness”.