

Reasoning First

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Philosophers have been fascinated, lately, with reasons, as such. Though we boast a long history of attention to Reason, and even to reasoning, the current interest is in reasons—though not in particular reasons, but in reasons as a class, reasons *per se*. We would do well to consider how we were led to this interest and what we hope to gain from it. I recommend both questions for consideration, but, for better or worse, I will not pursue them here. My own view is that we were led here, in the main, by skeptical concerns, and what we have to gain, in the main, is a better understanding of our agency, together with the avoidance of important confusions. Unlike some, I doubt that the study of reasons, as such (or, for that matter, the study of Reason or of reasoning), will tell us very much about what we ought to do or about what is good or of value.

However, rather than defend these positions here, I will instead argue that we should think about reasons, as such, differently than many have been thinking of them. Many think of reasons as facts, propositions, or considerations that stand in some relation to attitudes, actions, events, states of affairs, or perhaps some other fact or consideration. They think of the relation as either an explanatory one or, as they put it, a “normative” one. I will suggest, instead, that we should see reasons as items in pieces of reasoning. Reasons relate, in the first instance, not to psychological states, events, or states of affairs, nor even to other considerations, but rather to questions. Their relation to a question is neither explanatory nor “normative.” If we must give it a label, we could call it “rational”—but the label will be uninformative: it would mean only that the reason bears or is taken to bear on the question.

After presenting (my understanding of) the current way of thinking about reasons, I will sketch three difficulties that arise when you think of reasons in this way. The chief benefit of the alternative is that, by relating reasons, first, to questions, we bring rational agency into view: It is the

thinker, the rational agent, who settles questions and therein forms attitudes or sets themselves to act—that is, to bring about events or states of affairs. The thinker thus mediates between considerations, on the one hand, and attitudes, actions, events, or states of affairs, on the other. In contrast, the current way of thinking, which relates reasons directly to attitudes and actions, occludes rational agency—it hides the use of reasons in thought. By bringing the thinker into view, the alternative can avoid the difficulties that arise on the current way of thinking. (This paper draws heavily on two previous papers, which started life as a single paper arguing for this position—that we should think of reasons as items in pieces of reasoning.¹ I here complete the original ambition.)

CURRENT THINKING

To start, consider the current thinking. It is common for philosophers, when thinking about reasons, to begin with the thought that reasons explain. The fallen tree explains the power outage, and it is the reason for the outage. The fact it is an El Niño year explains the heavy rainfall and is the reason for the rainfall. Thought of in this way, it is easy to conflate reasons and causes—though we would do well to remember that causal relations and explanatory relations differ. As P. F. Strawson puts the point:

if causality is a relation which holds in the natural world, explanation is a different matter. People explain things to themselves or others and their doing so is something that happens in nature. But we also speak of one thing explaining, or being the explanation of, another thing, as if the explaining was a relation between the things. And so it is. But it is not a natural relation in the sense in which perhaps we think of causation as a natural relation. It does not hold between things in the natural world, things to which we can assign places or times in nature. It holds between facts or truths.²

In addition to explaining, reasons can play very different roles: they can justify, or count in favor, or show correct, or be grounds for. The fact that it is nearly dinnertime counts in favor of leaving the office and is a reason for leaving. The fact that she was innocently unaware of the problem is the reason for her silence and justifies her silence. Justifying, counting in favor, and showing correct

¹ Pamela Hieronymi, "Reasons for Action," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 111 (2011); "The Wrong Kind of Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 102, no. 9 (2005).

² Peter F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 109.

have been lumped together, recently, under the label “normative.” One now-standard approach analyzes these so-called “normative” relations as multi-place relations. For example, Scanlon claims that a reason in what he calls “the standard normative sense” is a four-place relation, holding between a fact, a person, a circumstance, and an action or attitude of that person.³ Referring to the same class, John Skorupski adds further variables and complexity.⁴

There seems to be broad agreement on the basic divide into explanatory and “normative.”⁵ Once we move beyond it, matters become more controversial, and some of the underlying difficulties start to appear. I will consider three.

THE FIRST DIFFICULTY

The first such difficulty is that the counting-in-favor-of, or “normative,” relation can seem more mysterious than the explanatory relation; in fact, it can seem, itself, to require explanation. Thus, philosophers sometimes take the explanatory relation as primitive and claim that the “normative” relation holds when a consideration explains something—often something about value (broadly speaking). For example, John Broome identifies ‘normative’ reasons (specifically, ‘perfect’ reasons) as facts that explain ‘ought’ claims.⁶ For Jonathan Dancy, reasons are grounded in values.⁷ Daniel Fogal argues that reasons are considerations that explain what there is reason to do—where “what there is reason to do” is not understood in terms of reasons, but rather in terms of “normative support.”⁸

³ T. M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), lecture 2.

⁴ John Skorupski, *The Domain of Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 2.

⁵ A noteworthy view that does not start with this divide, and that is, I think, compatible with the position I advance here, is John F. Horty, *Reasons as Defaults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ John Broome, "Reasons," in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

⁷ Jonathan Dancy, *Practical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29. Dancy does not explicitly say that value explains reasons, only that value grounds reasons. I do not know how he understands grounding and explanation.

⁸ Daniel Fogal, "Reason, Reasons, and Context," in *Weighing Reasons*, ed. Errol Lord and Barry Maguire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Pg. 13

Other philosophers, still taking the explanatory relation as primitive, characterize “normative” reasons as those that explain something “non-normative.” For example, in his early book, Mark Schroeder claimed that a consideration is a “normative reason” for action if (roughly) it is part of an explanation of why a given action would satisfy some desire.⁹ Stephen Finlay understands “normative” reasons, generally, as explanations of why something is good, and then he gives reductive, “end-relative” account of good.¹⁰

By explaining reasons for action in terms of something else, these philosophers risk an additional sort of worry. The worry is brought out clearly by Schroeder, who notes that his own view—according to which what explains your reason for action is, in every case, the possible satisfaction of some desire of yours—may make acting for reasons seem “objectionably self-regarding.” By explaining the reason by appeal to desire-satisfaction, it seems that Schroeder has turned us all into a certain kind of hedonist or egoist.

Schroeder points out, though, that the objectionably self-regarding objection depends on what he calls the “no background conditions” view, which holds that any consideration that explains why some other consideration is a reason for action itself becomes *part* of the reason for acting. Schroeder denies this. He believes the facts that explain why a consideration is a reason for action stay in the background. Because facts about your desires do not become part of your reason for acting, your action does not become objectionably self-regarding.

However, Schroeder points out, with puzzlement, that most philosophers assume the no-background-conditions view. He thinks this strange, noting that the facts that explain a thing do not

⁹ Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 224.

¹⁰ Stephen Finlay, *Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normative Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

typically become part of that thing: the fact that someone is elected and inaugurated explains why that person is president, but those facts do not become part of the president.¹¹

I side with the majority, here, thinking that considerations which explain why a fact is a reason for action typically become “part” of the reason to act. For support, I would first point to the intuitiveness of a collection of problems that would not otherwise arise. These include not only the self-regarding objection Schroeder hopes to avoid, but also the rule-worship objection to rule utilitarianism and a handful of concerns that moral theory provides the “wrong” or “ulterior” motives for moral action. Pritchard famously thought that moral philosophy rests on a mistake because, in trying to explain why you must do your duty, it provides an ulterior motive. Kant, before him, accused all previous moral theories of making the same error. Williams worried that, by justifying saving your spouse, moral theory would (peeve your spouse and) attack your integrity, alienating you from your own motives.¹² Along the same lines, one might worry that reflective and thoughtful divine command theorists can only practice piety while Kantians can be only conscientious (or concerned with coherence)—one can worry that explanations spoil virtue. I refer to this collection of concerns as the problem of “bleed through”—and it depends on the no-background-conditions view: it depends on the thought that the explanation of why a reason for action is a reason for action will, if believed, become part of one’s reason for acting, and so color one’s motivations. While Schroeder would point to this collection of problems to support his claim that philosophers are widely committed to the no-background-conditions view (and he seems to think we can avoid these problems by denying it), I would instead point to the intuitive appeal of

¹¹ Following Amber Kavka-Warren, I will note that the illustration is off. If reasons are considerations, or facts, then at issue is not whether the fact that someone was elected and inaugurated is part of the *president*, but rather whether it is part of *the fact that* that person is the president. While it is clear that it is no part of the human, it is less clear that the one fact is not in some way “part” of the other. Talk of “parts” is unclear, in this context.

¹² Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See also “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck* (1981); “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). For an interpretation relating these three papers, see Pamela Hieronymi, “Internal Reasons and the Integrity of Blame,” (1996).

these problems as support for no-background-conditions view. They seem genuine problems, problems that do not simply disappear with the assertion that explanations stay in the background. I will later be in a position to say a tiny something about why.

For now, we are cataloging difficulties. The first difficulty is the apparent mystery of the counting-in-favor-of relation. Some explain it terms of ought facts or value, others would reduce it to some “non-normative” relation, and at least one person, T. M. Scanlon, simply takes it as primitive.

THE SECOND DIFFICULTY

A second difficulty appears when we consider, not the explanation of the counting-in-favor-of relation, but rather the explanation of actions done for reasons. It is sometimes thought that reasons for action explain action by providing motivation to act. The fact that I am hungry not only explains my eating, but it also motivates me to eat, and, one might think, it is my reason for eating. Likewise, the fact that she betrayed me motivates me to avoid her, and it is my reason for avoiding her.

Once we note that we can explain actions that are themselves done for reasons, we may want to ask the question with which Donald Davidson opened “Actions, Reasons, and Causes:” “What is the relation between a reason and an action when the reason explains the action by giving the agent’s reason for doing what he did?”¹³ That is, we may hope to understand the role of the reason for which the person acted—the agent’s reason, as Davidson calls it—in the explanation of the action.¹⁴

The most simple of views would explain the action simply by appeal to the agent’s reason: If Jae left the store because it was closing, then the store’s closing—Jae’s reason for leaving—explains Jae’s departure.

¹³ Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” in *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹⁴ This section repeats, with minor modifications, material from “Reasons for Action.”

Difficulties for the simple view appear when we remember that people are fallible: Perhaps Jae was mistaken; she thought the store was closing, but it was not. Fallibility generates two types of difficulty.¹⁵

First, if the store was not closing, then there was no reason to leave. Yet Jae's action was undertaken for a reason—she did not act on a whim, for no reason. It seems we must say that she acted for a reason that was no reason.¹⁶ To make sense of this, we need a way to talk about the considerations that someone took to count in favor of an action, on the basis of which they acted, whether or not the considerations actually counted in favor of acting. Scanlon calls these “operative” reasons; many others call them “motivating” reasons.¹⁷ Davidson has something like this in mind when referring to “the agent's reason for doing what he did.” So, it seems, this worry might be met by making a distinction and introducing new terms.

But, once make that distinction and introduce those labels, we encounter a second, more serious worry for the simple view: Operative reasons cannot *themselves* explain the action, at least in cases of error. We cannot explain Jae's departure by appeal to the fact that the store was closing—because there is no such fact. Something that is not the case cannot explain something that is.¹⁸ We need a fact, to explain Jae's departure.

The fact that seems obvious to employ, for this purpose, is the (psychological) fact that Jae *thought* the store was closing. We might, then, abandon the simple view and instead appeal to

¹⁵ Jonathan Dancy forcefully draws attention to these problems. See Dancy. I here focus on mistakes of fact. One might instead mistake what the facts count in favor of doing. Such cases generate further complication, but, I believe, can be handled in the same way I will propose handling mistakes of fact.

¹⁶ Dancy says, ‘there was no reason to do what [she] did, even though [she] did it for a reason’ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ The labels in this area are fraught. Scanlon's use of “operative” differs from that in Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (London: Hutchinson, 1975; repr., Princeton University Press, 1990), 33.

¹⁸ The fact that *p* is false can explain *q*, but *the fact* that *p* is false is, itself, a truth.

psychological facts to explain action. In fact, we might appeal to mental states that contain, as their content, the agent's reason for acting.¹⁹ This was Davidson's strategy.

Notice, though, how sharply we thereby separate the reasons that explain Jae's action and Jae's own reasons for acting. The reasons that explain her action are facts about her psychology, while her own reason for acting had nothing to do with her psychology. She did not take facts about her thoughts to count in favor of leaving (as she might if, say, all who did not share the beliefs of the congregation were asked to leave). Rather, she took the imminent closure to count in favor of leaving. And, even though she was mistaken about the closing, she was right to take the closing, rather than her thoughts about it, to be what counted in favor of leaving. Only so can we say that, since the store was not closing, nothing that counted in favor of leaving. And only so can we say that, if the store was closing, there was reason to leave, even if Jae was did not know it. If we insisted that our beliefs, themselves, are what count in favor of acting, we would have to say that we do not, by making our beliefs more accurate, improve our information about what we have reason to do. This is unacceptable.²⁰

Reasons that count in favor of acting are typically facts about the world at large, rather than facts about the actor's own psychology. And yet, in light of our fallibility, it seems that the psychology explains the action. Jae's departure is explained by facts about her psychology, even when she is correct. The imminent closure seems dispensable. And thus it seems, not only that the reasons that

¹⁹ Michael Smith calls these "motivating reasons." Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). What Parfit, Dancy, and Schroeder call "motivating reasons," Smith often calls "my normative reason." (Operative reasons face the further requirement that they play a role in explaining action.) I much prefer Smith's use of "motivating."

²⁰ Even Bernard Williams does not insist that your beliefs are themselves either what counts in favor of action or what you take to count in favor of acting. You have a reason not to drink the petrol, and no reason to do so, even when you believe that it is gin and desire to drink a gin and tonic. (Williams insists you have a reason only if it *possible*, given certain idealizations, for you to believe that you have that reason. See Williams, "Internal and External Reasons.") Thinking that beliefs themselves are what counts in favor of acting is extreme.

explain an action and the agent's reasons for acting are different kinds of things, but also that the second, the agent's reasons, are somehow inert, in the explanation. Call this "Dancy's Objection."²¹

Davidson himself eventually raised a second kind of objection for his own view: psychological states that contain considerations that count in favor of acting can explain a person's action, even in cases in which the agent did not act for those reasons. Davidson's example involves a climber who desires to be safe and believes that dropping the rope that is holding his partner would make him safe, and these together so unnerve him that he inadvertently drops the rope. The possibility of such "deviant causal chains" shows that Davidson has not yet answered his question: he has not yet identified the relation between the reason and the action when the reason explains by action by being the agent's reason. The considerations are the agent's reason only if they explain the action "in the right way," as Davidson put it, "through a course of practical reasoning, as we might try saying." He therefore despaired of providing a causal account.²²

And so our second, Davidsonian strategy has not succeeded: we have yet to understand the role of the agent's own reason, in the explanation of action. Moreover, as noted by Thomas Nagel, that role must, in some way, relate the reasons that explain the action to those (if any) that (in fact) count in favor of acting—lest it turn out that "we don't really act for reasons at all... we are caused to act by desires and beliefs, and the terminology of reason can be used only in a diminished sense to express this kind of explanation."²³

A third strategy (one which, I believe, was the target of Davidson's article) would deny that actions are explained in anything like the way we explain other (mere) happenings. According to this

²¹ See Dancy. I hope the parallel to certain forms of skepticism is clear: if we explain the non-veridical case by appeal to appearances, it seems we no longer have need of reality. Dancy makes the connection in "Arguments from Illusion," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 45, no. 181 (1995): 246–8. Although I see Dancy's worry, I am not, myself, gripped by it. Below I will explain why.

²² Davidson, "Intending," 79. Though many have taken the problem of deviant causal chains to set a research agenda (locate the right causal chain), Davidson's anomalous monism bars this route for him.

²³ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142.

third account, the question “Why did Jae leave?” and the question “Why did the computer crash?” bear only surface similarity. If you ask “Why did the computer crash?” you are pursuing an ordinary explanation, asking, in a quasi-scientific way, “How did it come about that the computer crashed?” But, one might think, we explain—when we make intelligible—a human action, we are engaged in a different sort of project, answering a very different sort of question. We are not asking, “How did it come about that Jae left?” in a quasi-scientific spirit. We are instead seeking to make her action intelligible by asking, “From Jae’s point of view, why leave?” That is, to explain action, *qua* action, is not to say how an ordinary event came about, but rather to say what, from the agent’s point of view, counted in favor of so acting. Thus the reasons we appeal to, in explaining the action, are the reasons the agent might use, in deciding whether to act. It will, of course, be entirely unremarkable that such “explanations,” framed as they are from another’s point of view, sometimes refer to falsehoods. When they do, then, to avoid confusion, we will mark that fact by saying, e.g., “Jae left because *she thought* the store was closing.” But, in this context, appealing to falsehoods is not a problem—we are not explaining how something came about, but rather how things appear from a certain vantage. And so the addition of “she thought” does not contribute to the explanation—it is not an appeal to a piece of psychology. It simply makes explicit what is true in any such explanation: it is given from the agent’s point of view.²⁴

While I have great deal of sympathy for this kind of view, it was a position of this sort that Davidson’s article displaced.²⁵ Davidson, in effect, pointed out that there may be a great many

²⁴ Dancy seems to adopt this kind of view: “We explain the action by showing that the answer to the . . . question [Had things been the way he supposed them to be, would his action have been the one there was most reason to do?] is yes. . . . to explain an action is to justify it only in a certain sense” Dancy, *Practical Reality*, 9. Later he says, “The explanation of an action succeeds to the extent that it enables us to see how the agent might have taken certain features of the action as good reasons to do it” *Ibid.*, 95. (Note the “might have.” That is the hook for Davidson’s objection.) It is worth noting that this view can allow other ways of explaining the event—neural explanations, for example. See *Ibid.*, 176-77. See also “Two Ways of Explaining Action,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 55 (2004).

²⁵ Davidson’s explicit target was A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (Routledge, 1961). Another was G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Co., 1957). For contemporary versions, in addition to Dancy, see Frederick Stoutland, “The Real Reasons,” in *Human Action, Deliberation, and Causation*, ed. Jan Bransen and Stefaan E. Cuypers (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998). and Alan Millar, *Understanding People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

possible answers to the question, “From her point of view, why leave?” which, as things in fact happened, played no role in her leaving—because, e.g., she did not notice them. In answering the question, “From her point of view, why do thus-and-such?”, we will make intelligible why someone *could* or *would* or *might* so act. We reveal relations of justification that hold between features of the situation. But we have not, thereby, yet done anything to explain what in fact happened. Davidson, in effect, simply reasserted the demand for a more ordinary explanation. The demand seems to me appropriate—and our questions remain outstanding: How do we relate the agent’s own reasons for acting to either the reasons which explain her action or the reasons (if any) that in fact count in favor of acting? This is the second difficulty in our catalog: the explanation of action done for reasons.

THE THIRD DIFFICULTY

Moving to a third: the standard accounts of what it is to be a reason leave open a problem that is called, by some of us, “the wrong kind of reason problem.”²⁶ Recall that the standard accounts understand “normative” reasons as considerations that count in favor of (or justify, show valuable or correct, or stand in a “normative” relation to) actions or attitudes. But certain considerations seem to *count in favor of* believing or admiring or intending (that is, they bear the same relation, whatever it is, to believing or admiring or intending that reasons for action bear to acting), and yet they seem to be the wrong kind of reasons for the attitude. For example, the fact that it would let you sleep is a reason for believing everything will work out. It surely counts in favor of believing, in just the same way it counts in favor of wearing earplugs or counting sheep. It bears the same relation to believing

²⁶ I am understanding the wrong-kind-of-reasons problem in the way I have elsewhere understood it, and I will use “wrong kind” accordingly. For a short summary, see Pamela Hieronymi, “The Use of Reasons in Thought (and the Use of Earmarks in Arguments),” *Ethics* 124, no. 1 (2013).

that it bears to those other activities. But it is the wrong kind of reason for believing. We seem to encounter the same problem for a host of attitudes.²⁷

Some attempt to address this problem by identifying, as the right kind of reason, the reasons that would show the attitude as good, or correct, or fitting, as an attitude of that sort. Thus the right kind of reason for a belief are those that show it good as a belief, the right kind of reason for admiration are those that show admiration fitting, the right kind of reason for intending to be those that show intending correct, etc. Such an account must, of course, specify what it is to be “good as” or “fitting” or “correct,” if it is to identify the right kind of reason. But there are two further, less obvious, challenges such an account must face.

First, such accounts will identify reasons of the right kind with *good* reasons, but the distinction between reasons of the right and wrong kind seems orthogonal to the distinction between good and bad. While the fact that it would help me sleep is the wrong kind of reason for believing everything will work out, the fact that I am a Capricorn and my stars are aligned is just a *bad* reason—it is not a reason of the wrong kind. We need a way to understand bad reasons of the right kind.

One might respond by claiming that reasons of the right kind are those the person *took* to show the attitude as good of its kind. Thus, the fact that the stars have aligned is a reason of the right kind so long as the thinker takes it to show that the belief is good of its kind, but it is a bad reason of the right kind of the thinker is mistaken.

²⁷ The problem seems to be that the relation in which a reason stands when it counts in favor of an action (showing the action good or worth doing) is not the relation in which a reason stands when it counts in favor of an attitude (showing something about the target or content of the attitude). In the former case, “counts in favor of” means something like “shows something good about bringing about,” but in the latter “counts in favor of” just means “is a reason for.”

This response addresses the challenge by attributing to the thinker thoughts about what makes beliefs good, *qua* beliefs.²⁸ We would be unable to draw the distinction for any thinker who lacks the concept of belief.

Even if we accepted this cost, we face another difficulty: While it is criticizable, and sometimes even irrational, to believe for bad reasons, it seems (at least to many of us) *impossible* to believe for reasons of the wrong kind. That is, it seems, at least to many people, that you cannot believe at will.²⁹ It similarly seems impossible to admire or resent for reasons of the wrong kind. An account that identifies reasons of the wrong kind as reasons that fail to show something good of its kind will leave this unexplained, because failing to show a thing good of its kind is not generally a bar to employing a reason. To illustrate: I can make a move in our chess game, not because it would be good *qua* chess move, but because it will end the game so we can all finally leave. Even though I do not think this reason shows the move good *qua* chess move, I have no difficulty acting on it. In contrast, even if I think the importance of sleep, on this occasion, massively outweighs the good of maintaining a proper epistemic state, I cannot believe in order to get a good night's sleep. And, just as importantly, even if I mistakenly think that the fact that it would help me sleep shows the belief

²⁸ Alternatively, one could posit a mechanism that does this work. See Nishi Shah and J. David Velleman, "Doxastic Deliberation," *Philosophical Review* 114, no. 4 (2005). I reply at Pamela Hieronymi, "Controlling Attitudes," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2006): footnote 4. by essentially making the point in the next paragraph in the main text.

Another strategy, pursued by Kurt Sylvan, would identify the right kind of reason as those competently *treated* as reasons, where competence is understood dispositionally. This successfully avoids the over-intellectualization problem and would allow for some fallibility and occasional performance failures. However, because Sylvan understands "reasons" as good reasons (what he calls "objective reasons"), the view will rule out cases in which a person reasons reliably badly: If I am reliably disposed to treat the fact that I am a Capricorn as a reason to draw conclusions about my fate, I will not be manifesting a competence. Perhaps this strategy could be modified, to claim that the right kind of reasons are those that are treated in the way that they would correctly be treated if they did show the attitude fitting or correct. This would avoid the over-intellectualization problem and allow bad reasons (though it would run into trouble with the next point in the main text). The difficulty will be in identify "the way they would correctly be treated, if they did show the attitude fitting." I suspect that "way" is "as bearing on the relevant question." See Kurt Sylvan, "What Apparent Reasons Appear to Be," *Philosophical Studies* (2014).

²⁹ For an argument that it is impossible, see Hieronymi, "Controlling Attitudes."; "Believing at Will," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary Volume* 35 (2009).

good qua belief (because, perhaps, a good night's sleep will help with tomorrow's scientific investigations), I still will not be able to believe for this reason.

ALTERNATIVE

With these three difficulties in mind (the mystery of the “normative” relation, the difficulty of identifying the role of the agent's reason in the explanation of actions done for reasons, and accounting for the difference between the right and wrong kind of reason for certain attitudes), I would like to suggest an alternative account of reasons, one which re-arranges the pieces and thereby rearranges the philosophical tasks. When trying to understand reasons, we should not start with the fact that reasons explain, or justify, or count in favor of, or motivate events, states of affairs, attitudes, or actions. They do all of these in virtue of a further, more fundamental fact about them. I suggest we begin instead with this thought: Reasons are items in pieces of actual or possible reasoning. Reasoning is thought organized in a certain way: directed at a question or conclusion. Thus, I would suggest, reasons are considerations that either bear or are taken to bear on a question.

An important thing to note: Reasoning can be wrong, mistaken, off, and still be reasoning. Thus, on this way of understanding reasons, bad reasons are still reasons—they are just bad reasons. Good reasons are considerations that actually bear, or that are correctly taken to bear, on a question. Bad reasons are considerations that are taken to bear on a question but are not good reasons.³⁰

Another important thing to note: taking is not believing. This alternative account does not claim that reasons are considerations *believed* to bear on a question. To take a consideration to bear on a question is not to form a belief about the consideration, the question, and the “bearing on” relation. Rather, to take a consideration to bear on a question is to employ that consideration in addressing the question. Again, reasons are items in pieces of reasoning.

³⁰ So, Jae had a reason to leave, but it was not a good reason, because the store was not, in fact, closing. The distinction between good and bad admits all the different layers that the distinction between justified and unjustified admits: correctly taken to bear, given omniscience and omnibenevolence, or given goodwill and what the thinker believes at the time, or given what the thinker ought to have known, had they exercised due care, or... etc.

Finally, reasoning is organized thought, not explicit deliberation. Explicit deliberation is a conscious activity that unfolds across time. Organized thought need not be. I can take reasons to bear on, or to settle, a question without explicitly deliberating about that question.

The most important change, in moving to this proposed alternative, is this: Considerations no longer become reasons in virtue of some relation in which they stand to an event, a state of affairs, an action, or an attitude—whether explanatory or “normative.” Instead, considerations become reasons in virtue of their relation to a question. With this alternative in view, I hope the idea of relating *considerations* directly to *events* or *states of affairs*—even psychological states and events that are actions—will seem odd, a kind of unholy juxtaposition of the rational and the empirical.³¹ But, more to the point, by relating reasons first to questions, we thereby require questions to mediate between considerations, on the one hand, and, on the other, the actions or attitudes they might explain, justify, count in favor of, show correct, or ground. This mediation by questions is the most important change, because it allows us—in fact, it requires us—to bring rational agency into view: it is the rational agent who, by settling questions, by concluding or deciding, forms attitudes and sets themselves to act—sets themselves to bring about events or states of affairs. It is thus the agent, the thinker, who mediates between considerations, on the one hand, and states of affairs or events, on the other. Views that relate considerations directly to attitudes or actions, even by appeal to multi-place relations that include the agent, thereby obscure the agent’s role—they obscure the activity of the thinker, in concluding or deciding or committing. The most important contribution of this alternative account is that it brings rational agency (reasoning, concluding, deciding) into view. I hope now to show how doing so helps to address the difficulties we have considered.

IDENTIFYING THE WRONG KIND OF REASONS AND THE “VOLUNTARY”

Let us start with the wrong kind of reasons problem. Notice, first, that certain states of mind (e.g., belief, intention, admiration, resentment) can relate to questions in two distinct ways. A state of

³¹ One might recall the quote from Strawson, about the difference between explanatory and causal relations.

mind sometimes appears in the *content* of a question, as part of what the question is about. We can ask why she believes her country is less safe, or when he became so angry, or why they admire him so much. But certain states of mind relate to questions in a different, more direct—or, perhaps, more indirect—way. Consider the relation between the question of whether the butler did it and the belief that the butler did it. By settling the question, you form the belief. But the question is not about your belief. It is about things at some distance from you: the butler and his crime. Still, by settling it positively, you make something true of yourself—right here at home, so to speak. You make it the case that you believe the butler did it. The relation between the question and the state of mind seems indirect if you consider the question's content: the question is not about the state of mind. But it seems direct if you consider agency: by settling the question positively, one *therein* believes.

I would suggest that we understand certain states of mind—most centrally, belief and intention—as themselves forms of question-settling. It is this form, I think, that gives applicability to the request for one's reasons.³² But in saying this, in saying that to believe *P*, for example, is to settle the question of whether *P*, or that to intend to *x* is to settle the question of whether to *x*, I do not mean to posit a new, independent psychological event or activity, the settling of a question, that somehow accompanies believing or intending. Rather, I mean to claim that belief, intention, and the rest, are, themselves, helpfully thought of as question-settlings; question-settling is something like a genus into which these attitudes fall as species.

If we see these attitudes as forms of question-settlings, then we can both distinguish the right from the wrong kind of reasons for them and say why they are not voluntary—in fact, we uncover a useful characterization of what “voluntary” means, in this context.

³² This claim will be more fully defended in a manuscript currently in progress. See also "Two Kinds of Agency," in *Mental Actions*, ed. Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Sorteriu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

To start, we can distinguish the right from the wrong kind of reason. The right kind of reasons for an attitude that is a question-settling are considerations that bear or are taken to bear on the relevant questions. Reasons of the wrong kind manage to count in favor of the attitude in some other way—typically by showing the attitude in some other way good or useful or worth having.³³

We can also give a useful characterization of what we might mean by “voluntary,” and we can see why believing is not voluntary in this sense.³⁴ An activity is voluntary, in the relevant sense, if it can be done for *any* reason that you take to show it worth doing. You can raise your right hand, run for office, or plant azaleas for any reason that you think shows it worth doing—to win a bet, or make a joke, or make a point. In contrast, you cannot believe something, e.g., that the butler did it, in order to win a bet, make a joke, or make a point—even if you think it would be worth doing. You can only believe what you take to be true. We can thereby specify the sense in which ordinary actions are voluntary, while believing is not.

Finally, we can say why believing is not voluntary, in this sense: You might find yourself with reasons that show believing *P* good to do that you do not take to bear on whether *P*. You could get a good night’s sleep if you could believe everything will work out, but you do not take the possibility of a good night’s sleep to show that everything will work out—you take it to show, instead, that it would be good to believe that. But the question of whether everything will work out and the question of whether it would be good to believe everything will work out are different questions, and you cannot settle a question for reasons you do not take to bear on it.³⁵

Why can you not settle a question for reasons you do not take to bear on it? Because, if you settle a question for a reason, you have *therein* taken the reason to bear on the question. And so, as a conceptual matter, you cannot settle a question for a reason that you do not take to bear on it. Thus,

³³ See "The Wrong Kind of Reason."

³⁴ This section, about this specific sense of “voluntary,” repeats, with minor modification, some material found in "I'll Bet You Think This Blame Is About You," (forthcoming).

³⁵ This argument is made, at length, in "Controlling Attitudes."; "Believing at Will."

if you find yourself with reasons that you take to show believing P worth doing (or, a belief that P worth having) that you do not take to bear on whether P , you will find yourself with reasons that you take to show believing worth doing, but you will not be able to believe for those reasons. And so it is that belief is non-voluntary: you cannot believe for any reason you take to show believing worth doing.

Perhaps surprisingly, just the same is true of intention. You might have reason that you take to be sufficient reason to *intend* to φ —reason enough to house the intention—but that you do not take to be reason enough to φ —not reason enough to act. Perhaps you have no intention of marrying your partner, and they are unhappy about this fact. Because you like to please your partner, you would be happy to house the intention—so long as you do not need to go through with the marriage. You are out of luck. In order to intend to marry, you have to decide to marry—to intend, you must settle the question of whether to *act*, not just the question of whether to intend. And so, even though you take yourself to have reason enough to intend, you will not be able to intend. Somewhat surprisingly, then, although you can *act* at will—though you can act for any reason you take to show the action sufficiently worth doing—you can no more intend at will than you can believe at will.³⁶ While actions are voluntary, intentions are not.

³⁶ It is difficult to generate the problem for intention, because there are very few constraints on the reasons for which one can act (most any consideration could, in principle, bear on the question of whether to x) and it is possible to act as a way of making yourself intend. (So, if you are unhappy that I have no intention to attend your party, I can decide to attend your party in order to keep you happy—even if what you really care about is my intention, not my attendance.) In fact, the case of pleasing your partner is not the exactly a case of the wrong kind of reason for intending, because, if you thought that housing the intention were reason enough to *marry*, you could decide to marry in order to have the intention. The reason *bears* on the question, but you do not take it to be *sufficient* reason to settle the question. In contrast, the Toxin Puzzle case (Gregory Kavka, "The Toxin Puzzle," *Analysis* 43 (1983).) and the original case of Mutual Assured Destruction are ones in which the reason to intend does not bear on the question of whether to act, because the reason to intend disappears before the time of action, and this is known in advance. These cases present reasons that are genuinely of the "wrong kind".

The full argument that you cannot intend at will appears in Hieronymi, "Controlling Attitudes." The marriage example appears in "Responsibility for Believing," *Synthese* 161, no. 3 (2008); "Reflection and Responsibility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 1 (2014); "Forgiveness, Blame, Reasons..." in *3am: magazine*, ed. Richard Marshall (2013).

The same is also true of a wide range of attitudes—of any attitude that manifests our take on the world, on what is true, important, worthwhile, insulting, wonderful, horrifying, trustworthy, or impressive, for which we can be asked our reasons. This range of attitudes must be non-voluntary, in the sense just explained, in order to play the roles they play and bear the significance they bear in our lives. If a state of mind is voluntary, one can do it any reason one takes to show it worth doing—you can, for example, imagine a red circle for any reason you take to show it worth doing. But if a state of mind is voluntary in this way, it will not reveal your take on what is true, or important, worthwhile, insulting, etc. Instead, like an ordinary action, it reveals your take on what is worth doing—in particular, it reveals your take on whether imagining a red circle, e.g., is worth doing.

We have just connected questions of voluntariness with the wrong-kind-of-reason problem: Attitudes that are non-voluntary, in sense in which believing is non-voluntary, are also, and *therefore*, subject to a wrong-kind-of-reason problem: you might find yourself with reasons that you take to show them worth having that you do not take to bear on the relevant questions.

EXPLAINING ACTIONS DONE FOR REASONS

In addition to clarity about the wrong-kind-of-reason problem, about voluntariness, and about our agency with respect to our attitudes, we also gain some degree of clarity about the role of the agent's reason in the explanation of actions done for reasons. We can adopt an extremely simple, formal account that will explain an action by appeal to what are, from the explainer's point of view, facts, while also both preserving the proper role of the agent's own reasons for acting (if the agent had reasons³⁷) and relating the agent's reasons to the reasons (if any) that in fact count in favor of acting.

The account is embarrassingly simple: We explain events that are actions done for reasons by appeal to the following complex fact: the agent took certain considerations to settle the question of whether to act, therein intended so to act, and successfully executed that intention in action.

³⁷ The account accommodates action for no (particular) reason (by allowing that we can settle a question for no reason).

Using this form, we answer the ordinary explanatory question, “How did it come about that Jae left the store?” by appealing, in part, to the fact that Jae settled a *different* question—the question of whether to leave. To answer *our* explanatory question, we appeal to the fact that Jae settled *her* practical question for her (operative) reason. Her operative reason thus appears in our explanation; but it appears *as* her operative reason, bearing, for her, on her question. Following Davidson’s intuitions, we have explained the action by providing ourselves with something like “a course of practical reasoning” (albeit a very short one).

We have also avoided Davidson’s criticisms: We have done more than make the action intelligible from Jae’s point of view. We have claimed that certain considerations were those for which the Jae, in fact, formed an intention, which intention she executed in the event that was the action. We have, I think, satisfied the demand for a more ordinary form of explanation.

Relatedly, the account avoids the possibility of deviant causal chains: the agent, for certain reasons, settles the question of whether to act, *therein* intends to act, and executes *that* intention in the event that is the action. The connections are too tight for deviance.³⁸

Moreover, the account also provides a fairly clear view of the relation between the reasons (if any) that in fact counted in favor of leaving and the reason that explains the action: the complicated fact that explains the action includes within it the fact that the agent *treated* certain considerations as reasons “in the standard normative sense.” It thereby addresses Nagel’s concern.

One might still harbor Dancy’s worry: the agent’s own reason—the imminent closure—seems dispensable. But once we have shown the role it plays, I think we need not be troubled. It seems appropriate that the agent, or the agent’s activities, should, so to speak, “stand in” for those

³⁸ One might object: That fact that it does not allow for deviance shows that the account is not explanatory. It merely provides an *analysis* of action done for reasons. No explanation will be given until the pieces of this analysis are filled in. This is an interesting objection. For now, I will simply note that I have provided, for action done for reasons, something like the following explanation of how it came about that the Sox won: by the end of the game, they had scored more runs than their opponent. I agree this is an uninformative explanation, perhaps no explanation at all. But, if we hope to explain the win (rather than, say, movements of humans on a field), any (further) explanation must fill out this form. Likewise, I will be satisfied if it is agreed that, if we are to explain action in a way that preserves the role of the agent’s reason for acting, the explanation should fit into the form or analysis here proposed.

(purported) facts that the agent takes to be reason-giving. It is the agent, not the facts that call for action, that brings the action to be.³⁹

We should notice, though, that not all of the reasons that might explain an action fit into this form. In fact, not all the reasons that both explain and *justify* actions will fit. This is as it should be. The question of whether to act and the question of why someone acted as they did or whether they acted well or as they ought are different questions, and we should expect that we can sometimes answer the latter without answering the former. For example, the fact that he was deceived, or the fact that she was innocently unaware, might both explain and justify an action done for reasons, but, of course, neither of these were the agent's reason for acting. And, we sometimes explain an action (even our own, current action) by setting it in a context that makes it intelligible, without providing the agent's reasons. If asked why I am breaking eggs, I might explain that I am in the middle of making an omelette. I have made myself intelligible to you. But I doubt I have provided you with my reason for breaking the eggs: my own reason for acting cannot, I think, be the fact that I am already in the process of so acting. (We might also wonder whether explanations such as "she was hungry" or "I just felt like it" are functioning to give the agent's own reason, or are rather simply placing in context. It may be an open question, or perhaps even indeterminate in certain cases.)

By more clearly separating the practical question of whether to act from the justificatory question of whether someone acted as they ought or had reason to, we easily allow for the many different layers of which justification admits: We can ask, did the person do as they ought or had reason to, *given what they knew at the time?* Or, given the facts *they did not know but ought to have known?* Or, given things *as they in fact were?* Each can receive a different answer. In fact, we leave open the possibility of justifying or showing correct (or beautiful) things other than actions and attitudes done for reasons: as, it seems, we should.

³⁹ Much of the sub-section above again repeats, with minor modification, material found in "Reasons for Action."

THE MYSTERIOUS “NORMATIVE” RELATION

Finally, let us turn to the category of the so-called “normative.” The word came into prominent use in the philosophical literature, I believe, after the publication of Christine Korsgaard’s *Sources of Normativity*.⁴⁰ In that work, Korsgaard invites her reader to choose for themselves “the normative word”—the word that indicates, to the reader, that it would be incoherent to continue practical deliberation, incoherent to keep asking whether you really *must*, e.g., tell the truth (that is, whether you really should, or ought to, or have most reason to, tell the truth, or whether telling the truth would be the best thing, etc.). For Korsgaard’s argumentative purposes, she explicitly wants the word to slip between these different ideas. But slipperiness now seems its legacy, as a piece of philosophical jargon. Depending on the writer, “normative” may now mean “having something to do with reasons,” or with values, or with standards, or with questions of appropriateness, or, even with blame or the “reactive attitudes.” Worse, one can now find the word qualifying any of these—so that, in addition to reading about “normative reasons,” one can now read about “normative standards,” or even “normative criticism.” I have heard the phrase “non-normative good.” In fact, given that the distinction between explanatory and “normative” reasons need not track the distinction between good and bad reasons, someone might like to refer to the “*normative* normative reasons.” The situation has become absurd.

My own preference is to simply avoid the word, when speaking in my own voice, and to insist on more precision. In doing so, we may lose touch with what some people think of as a pressing philosophical project—an outcome I would welcome. To explain:

As noted at the start, those considering reasons as such tend to see them as considerations standing in some relation (perhaps a multi-place relation), and tend to divide them, broadly, between explanatory and “normative.” Many then seem content to treat the relation in which explanatory reasons stand to that which they explain (the “explanatory relation”) as primitive, but find

⁴⁰ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

“normative” relations somewhat mysterious, themselves in need of an explanation. That is to say, it seems we need to explain why or how certain things make other things good or bad, correct or incorrect, important or unimportant, apt or inapt, obligatory or permissible.

Or, better, we need to explain *what it is* for certain things to make other things good or bad, correct or incorrect, important or unimportant, required or permissible, etc. A satisfying explanation of “normativity” must do more than restate the case for specific answers to specific questions—do more than say why, for example, it is important to brush your teeth or why you are obliged to keep your promises or why it is inapt to end the song on that chord. To answer specific questions is, after all, simply to give further considerations that count in favor of brushing your teeth or keeping your promises or resolving the chord, not to illuminate the “normativity” of those considerations or of their special relation to the activity. Nor, it might seem, will it do simply to class some of these answers into domains and notice their structure or similarity—to say that moral obligations arise in this way, while prudential requirements arise in that—because, again, such a grouping will do nothing to explain the “normativity” of the domain identified.⁴¹ And so it might seem that we must answer a higher-order question about “normative” relations, in general—what they are, how they hold, and why we are entitled to reason with them. Such an explanation is very difficult to give. However, absent one, it can seem we are forced to choose between either simply granting a strange new primitive or else either discrediting or reinterpreting the thoughts that traffic in these terms.

If we instead adopt the view here suggested, the philosophical tasks rearrange themselves. We will no longer think that reasons stand in either “explanatory” or “normative” relations to events or states of affairs. They stand, rather, in relation to questions. The relation in which a reasons stands to a question is neither explanatory (and so, somehow, unproblematic) nor “normative” (and so, somehow, problematic). It is, rather, the *question* that is explanatory or otherwise.

⁴¹ Scanlon appeals to domains in just this way, and he accepts a primitive. See Scanlon.

In fact, it is now difficult to see how to draw the distinction between “explanatory” and “normative.” The question “Why did the engine fail?” seems explanatory, and the reasons that bear on it might be called explanatory reasons.⁴² But is the question of whether the butler did it an explanatory or a normative question? Reasons for or against believing the butler did it—what some would call “normative reasons” for or against this belief—bear on the question, “Did the butler do it?” but their relation to *that* question seems no more (nor less) “normative” than that which holds between the question “Why did the engine fail?” and the considerations that bear on it. If the considerations that bear on whether to take an aspirin or resolve the chord are “normative” in some further sense, that might be in virtue of the fact that, in asking those questions, I am asking what to bring about, rather than what is the case. But now we have drawn a distinction between (what is sometimes called) the “practical” and the “theoretical” or “epistemic”—while, on many uses, epistemic reasons are normative.

We might, of course, stipulate some class of questions as the “normative” ones, but I do not see which are the obvious candidates—nor, more importantly, do I see why we would want to do so.

To be sure, we will not avoid the philosophical task of understanding what it is for something to be good or bad, correct or incorrect, justified or unjustified, obligatory or permissible. But once we give up the idea that the “explanatory” relation is unproblematic but “normative” relations require explanation, we may not feel the same need to give an entirely general account. The appeal to domain-specific answers—to different answers for music, politics, medicine, epistemology, and

⁴² There is complication here. The extreme heat explains the failure, but it seems to be the *answer* to the question, rather than a consideration that bears on it. So perhaps the reasons that bear on explanatory questions are not explanatory reasons—distancing us even further from the standard account. Thanks to FIND for raising this issue.

metaphysics—may no longer seem so dissatisfying (even if we will want, reasonably, to consider their interaction).⁴³

Returning now, briefly, to the no-background-conditions view: Once we appeal to questions, the view seems natural, because, typically, by showing that or how some other consideration bears on a question, a consideration will itself, thereby, bear on that question. Suppose you are wondering why the fact that she is exhausted is a reason to help her, and you are told that it is because you would want help, if you were exhausted. You accept this explanation. Now, it seems, you will think the fact that you would want help, if you were exhausted, bears on the question of whether to help her, given that she is exhausted. If you think of reasons as considerations that bear on questions, it will seem that, typically, a reason that explains why another consideration is a reason to act will, itself, become part of the reasons for action—because it thereby bears on the question of whether so to act. (There are, however, interesting exceptions, such as in games or institutional roles or *reductio* arguments.)

CONCLUSION

The case for starting with the use of reasons in thought—for thinking of reasons as items in pieces of actual or possible reasoning—is large but cumulative. By doing so, we can avoid the wrong-kind-of-reason problem, understand why beliefs and other attitudes are not voluntary, and recast certain metaethical worries. Elsewhere I have suggested that we also provide ourselves a with way to understand our answerability for our actions and attitudes and a way to model of a central form of weakness of will.⁴⁴ However, the greatest benefit lies in avoiding the difficulty that underlies the

⁴³ One might look for an explanation or elaboration of the “bearing on” relation. Again, I doubt we will find more than domain-specific answers. The fact that the butler had ready access to the home bears on the question of his guilt. If we want to explain why that fact bears on that question, we will point to facts about the crime and what was required to commit it. In giving that explanation, we will have taken for granted other “bearing on” relations, which may, in turn, be explained. I do not see a problem here, nor a general (rather than domain-specific) question that remains mysterious. (I am thus sympathetic to the views found in *Ibid.* and Sarah Buss, “Against the Quest for the Source of Normativity,” (in progress).)

⁴⁴ See Pamela Hieronymi, “The Will as Reason,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009); “Reflection and Responsibility.”

rest: By modeling reasons as considerations standing in relation to events or states of affairs, the more standard accounts obscure the role and activity of the thinker. It remains mysterious what we do with reasons, how anyone acts on a reason, or how anything is anyone's reason for believing, resenting, trusting, or acting. Yet rational agency, the activity of settling a question, is, itself, something we would like to understand, explain, and evaluate. We help ourselves by exposing it.

What we will not do, I think, by thinking about reasons as such, is to discover which are the *good* reasons. If we think about reasoning, we might learn something general about reasons and agency. But even if we were to understand what makes for good reasoning, I am doubtful that understanding good reasoning, as such, will help us understand very much about how to live or how to treat other people or which actions are good—any more than it will help us to understand very much about how to bake a cake or which things are beautiful. But, at this point, that is mere conjecture.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ As noted, this paper draws heavily on earlier work, and gratitude shown there should be repeated here. In addition, thanks are due to John F. Horty, audiences at Rice University, the University of Maryland, College Park; the *Ethics of Belief* conference at Harvard University; and members of the Ethics Workshop at UCLA. Finally, Kurt Sylvan provided extremely helpful comments in his role as editor.

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