# Way and Whiting on Elusive Reasons

A familiar idea about normative reasons is that they have the capacity to guide us in deliberation and action. Put another way, if we are unable to respond to the recommendations that reasons provide, they are not reasons for us. We can formulate that intuitive idea as the *Response Constraint* (RC):

RC: p is a reason for *S* to φ only if *S* is able to φ for the reason that *p.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, there is a class of reasons—I call them *elusive* reasons—that are apparently impossible for an agent to act *for.* A now-classic example is Mark Schroeder’s surprise party case (Schroeder 2007: 165-166). Suppose that Nate has just arrived home, and there is a surprise party for Nate in the living room. Nate loves surprise parties (but not suspected parties), so it would make him happy to go into the living room. However, were Nate to go into the living room for the reason that there is a surprise party there, he would have to believe that there is a surprise party there. But then the party would not be a surprise, and the fact that there is a surprise party in the living room would no longer be a reason for him to go into the living room. So, Nate’s reason is one that he cannot act for.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jonathan Way and Daniel Whiting (2016) have offered a novel strategy for reconciling the RC and elusive reasons based on an analysis of the kind of ability required by the RC. In this essay, I argue that this strategy ultimately fails. In the end, Way and Whiting do not avoid commitment to an interpretation of RC that is incompatible with elusive reasons.

## **Way and Whiting’s General Strategy**

Way and Whiting’s general strategy is to distinguish between a number of different interpretations of RC, concede that certain interpretations are vulnerable to counterexamples, and then argue that the version that is not vulnerable to counterexamples is also independently more plausible than the vulnerable versions. In this section I will briefly recapitulate their argument before turning to its evaluation in section two.

Way and Whiting begin by distinguishing between two readings of RC, corresponding to two notions of “ability”:

RCGeneral: p is a reason for you to φ only if you have the general ability to φ for the reason that p.

RCSpecific: p is a reason for you to φ only if you have the specific ability to φ for the reason that p.

A general ability to act for reasons is an ability to have certain *types* of responses to certain *types* of reasons. For example, you might have the general ability to perform act-type A in response to considerations of type B. Another way to think about it that Way and Whiting favor is that having a general ability to act for a reason is having the ability to follow certain patterns of reasoning (Way and Whiting 2016: 220). So understood, RCGeneral implies that p is a reason for you to φ only if you are generally able to follow a rule of reasoning of which ‘p, so I’ll φ’ is an instance. A specific ability to act for reasons is an ability to act for a reason *here and now*, which requires that there is both opportunity and no ability-defeating interference (Way and Whiting 2016: 222).

It is clear that in the surprise party case, Nate lacks the specific ability to go into the living room for the reason that there is a surprise party in the living room. The very thing that would enable him to do this—the belief that there is a surprise party in the living room—makes him unable to do it in the present circumstances. Furthermore, Way and Whiting acknowledge that agents in elusive reasons cases are not even *generally* able to engage in the relatively fine-grained reasoning that involves the elusive reason as a premise (Way and Whiting 2016: 224). Thus, Nate is generally unable to act for his elusive reason on a relatively fine-grained construal of RCGeneral.

However, Way and Whiting argue that in one important sense, Nate has the general ability to act for this reason. Normal agents in elusive reason cases are still generally able to follow patterns of reasoning of which the ‘surprise party reasoning’—viz., “if there’s a surprise party for me at location L, go to L.”—is an instance or token. For instance, Nate is able to reason “I’ll enjoy X, X is located in location L, so I’ll go to L.” This coarse-grained general ability is sufficient, so Way and Whiting argue, to satisfy a plausible conception of RCGeneral. Moreover, Way and Whiting argue that the fine-grained interpretation of RCGeneral is implausible in any case. Thus, the case for the compatibility of elusive reasons with the response constraint rests on Way and Whiting’s argument that RCGeneral ought to be construed in a relatively coarse-grained, rather than a relatively fine-grained manner. It is to these arguments that I now turn.

## **Digging into RCGeneral**

### **The Elliot Case**

To show that their coarse-grained construal of RCGeneral is correct, Way and Whiting argue that a more fine-grained construal yields counterintuitive verdicts in certain cases. Consider Elliot, for whom the fact that spinach contains iron is a reason for him to eat his spinach. Way and Whiting think that this case shows RCGeneral ought to be interpreted in a coarse-grained fashion. Their reasoning is as follows. If the fact that spinach contains iron were a reason for Elliot to eat his spinach only if Elliot were able, in general, to reason using the concept <iron>—e.g., “spinach contains iron, so I’ll eat spinach”—then because Elliot actually lacks this concept, that fact would not be a reason for him to eat his spinach. RCGeneral ought to be interpreted in such a way that Elliot’s reason satisfies it, and *this* requires that Elliot’s ignorance of the concept <iron> does not preclude him from the general ability to eat his spinach for this reason. This suggests the need for a relatively coarse-grained interpretation of RCGeneral according to which, for example,the fact that spinach contains iron is a reason for Elliot to eat his spinach only if Elliot is able to reason using facts that relate to the benefits of eating spinach, of which the fact that spinach contains iron is an instance or token. Elliot is able to do *this* despite lacking the concept <iron>, so the fact that spinach contains iron satisfies RCGeneral on this coarse-grained construal.

Now, notice that Way and Whiting are interpreting RCGeneral to mean that *S* has the general ability to φ for the reason that p only if, *holding fixed S’s actual beliefs*, *S* is able to do something (e.g. engage in instrumental reasoning) of which φ-ing for the reason that p is a token. Otherwise, the fact that Elliot *actually* lacks the concept <iron> would not pose a difficulty for the more fine-grained interpretation of RCGeneral. For suppose that Elliot could satisfy this more fine-grained requirement by eating his spinach for the reason that it contains iron in a world in which he has the concept <iron>. In that case, that the more fine-grained RCGeneral requires Elliot to be able to reason with the concept <iron> would not rule out this reason’s “reason-hood.” Put another way, Way and Whiting argue that the following interpretation of RCGeneral is required to vindicate the intuition the intuition that Elliot has a reason to eat his spinach:

RCGeneral\*: p is a reason for *S* to φ only if, holding fixed *S’s* actual beliefs, *S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons (where these types are construed in a relatively coarse-grained way).

But there is, in fact, another formulation of RCGeneral that is consistent with Elliot having a reason to eat his spinach, namely, RCGeneral\*\*:

RCGeneral\*\*: p is a reason for *S* to φ only if there is a possible world *w* in which *S* performs φ-type actions for p-type reasons (where these types are construed in a relatively fine-grained way).

Because there is a possible world in which Elliothas the concept <iron> and he eats his spinach for the reason that spinach contains iron, that reason satisfies RCGeneral\*\*. The crucial differences between RCGeneral\*\* and RCGeneral\* are twofold. First, *what S* must be generally able to do in RCGeneral\*\*is interpreted in a relatively fine-grained way. Second, and more importantly for the Elliott case, RCGeneral\* can be satisfied only if there is a possible world in which *S* φ’s *and S*’s beliefs are exactly what they are in the actual world. RCGeneral\*\* does not restrict the relevant worlds to that subset in which *S*’s beliefs perfectly match his beliefs in the actual world.

All very well; but why plump for my RCGeneral\*\*? First, there are intuitive uses of the term “ability” that more closely resemble RCGeneral\*\* than RCGeneral\*. For example, there is a sense in which, even as a monolingual person, I am able to speak French: I am a creature that can become fluent in another language. Becoming fluent would, of course, require the addition of many new beliefs I do not currently have. So, it is false that I am able to speak French in a sense of “able” that holds fixed my current beliefs. But I *am* able to do so in the sense that it is *possible* (logically, nomologically, and so on)for me to do this, since I am certain type of creature. Way and Whiting provide no argument that as it appears in RCGeneral, “ability” ought to be interpreted as an ability *holding fixed the agent’s beliefs*, rather than in this less restrictive way.

Second, RCGeneral\* commits Way and Whiting to an analysis of cases of reasons that is at least somewhat counterintuitive. Consider Bernard Williams’s (1981) famous petrol example. On Williams’s plausible internalist analysis, the fact that there is petrol in my drink is a reason for me not to drink it at least in part because I am *able* toact for this reason. What this “able” signifies is that, if I were fully informed and reasoned aright, I *would* omit to drink. So, this “able” does not hold fixed my actual beliefs. Way and Whiting must offer a different account of why I have a reason not to drink the petrol. On their view, it is not the case that in the relevant sense I am *able* omit drinking from the glass for the reason that there is petrol in the glass, since they hold fixed my actual beliefs, and I believe the glass is full of gin. What I *am* generally able to omit to do is something (described in a relatively coarse-grained manner) of which omitting to drink from the glass for the reason that there is petrol in it is an instance or a token. This is, at the very least, a roundabout way of explaining why there is a reason for me not to drink in this case.

A third, dialectical disadvantage for RCGeneral\* is that it implies RCGeneral\*\*, but the converse does not hold. If the fact that p is a reason entails that *S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons in some world in which *S* has the same beliefs as in the actual world, then it also entails that *S* is able to do the same in some possible world. But if the fact that p is a reason entails that *S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons in some possible world, it does not follow that this world will be one in which *S*’s beliefs perfectly match her actual beliefs. Hence, if elusive reasons violate RCGeneral\*\*, then they violate RCGeneral\*.

If RCGeneral\*\* is preferable to RCGeneral\*, then one of Way and Whiting’s arguments against interpreting RCGeneral in a way that is inconsistent with elusive reasons is eliminated. To recapitulate the dialectic: if we interpret RCGeneral in a relatively fine-grained fashion, then the surprise party case is a counterexample to it. Way and Whiting argue that interpreting RCGeneral in too fine-grained a fashion yields counterintuitive results in the Elliot case. However, this result is actually due to the way that Way and Whiting interpret the notion of general ability. They evaluate general ability claims in terms of what the agent is able to do, generally speaking, *holding fixed her beliefs.* But this is too restrictive for three reasons: it is not the only way of interpreting ability claims, it commits Way and Whiting to a counterintuitive analysis of internal reasons claims, and it is stronger than, because it entails but is not entailed by, RCGeneral\*\*. Thus, we should plump for more latitudinarian interpretation of ability that figures in RCGeneral\*\*. But if we do this, then the Elliot case is not a counterexample to the more *fine-grained* interpretation of general ability.

### **Way and Whiting’s Positive Case**

Even if I am right that we ought to plump for an interpretation of RCGeneral according to which we require only that it is *possible* that *S* φ’s, not holding fixed *S*’s actual beliefs, this does not yet clinch the case for RCGeneral\*\*. For it is open to Way and Whiting to accept the more latitudinarian notion of “ability” and still insist that it ought to be interpreted in a coarse-grained way, yielding a third distinct position:

RCGeneral\*\*\*: p is a reason for *S* to φ only if there is a possible world *w* in which *S* performs φ-type actions for p-type reasons (where these types are understood in a relatively coarse-grained way).

On this coarse-grained reading, elusive reasons may yet be compatible with RCGeneral. Furthermore, Way and Whiting present a positive argument for their coarse-grained reading of RCGeneral that can be used to support RCGeneral\*\*\*. The argument is that RCGeneral must capture the idea that reasons must be able to guide us *in their capacity as reasons*, and that a coarse-grained version of RCGeneral does this. I will argue that even if true, this point does not rule out a fine-grained reading of RCGeneral, and that there is good reason to think that *both* claims are necessary in order to capture the idea that reasons must be able to guide us *as reasons.*

Way and Whiting argue that the coarse-grained reading captures the intuition that reasons must be able to guide us as reasons because having the ability that corresponds to an explanation of why certain considerations are reasons is roughly sufficient to have the ability to respond to those considerations as reasons (Way and Whiting 2016: 227).[[3]](#footnote-3) For example, consider this piece of reasoning:

I want some milk.

In order to get milk, I have to go to the store.

So, I’ll go to the store.

On Way and Whiting’s view, the fact that I want some milk is a reason for me to go to the store only if I have the general ability to follow a pattern of reasoning of which the foregoing piece of reason is an instance, viz., instrumental reasoning. But notice that the fact that I want some milk is a reason for me to go to the store because going to the store is instrumental to getting milk. In other words, my general ability to engage in instrumental reasoning corresponds to an explanation for why the fact that I want some milk is a reason for me to go to the store.

To be a bit more precise, Way and Whiting argue that RCGeneral\*\*\* must capture the following intuition:

Intuition: p is a reason for *S* to φ only if *S* is able to respond to p *as a reason*.

They further suggest that *S* is able to respond to *p* as a reason *if S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons (where this is construed in a relatively coarse-grained way). The latter ability corresponds to an explanation for why p is a reason.Thus, RCGeneral\*\*\* is able to capture at least part of the Intuition: according to the former, if p is a reason for *S* to φ, then *S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons. When *S* is able to perform φ-type actions for p-type reasons in a relatively coarse-grained way, *S* is able to respond to p as a reason, and p satisfies the Intuition.

This argument is plausible, but I do not think it helps Way and Whiting’s case against a more fine-grained interpretation of RCGeneral. The first thing to notice is that RCGeneral\*\*\* and RCGeneral\*\* are not incompatible. It is perfectly possible that the fact that p is a reason for *S* to φ requires *both* the general ability to follow *general* patterns of reasoning as well as the general ability to follow the specific pattern of reasoning that includes p as a premise. It follows from this that an argument *for* RCGeneral\*\*\* is not an argument *against* RCGeneral\*\*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In addition, while Way and Whiting might be correct that “φ-ing for the reason that p is not sufficient for responding to the fact that p *as* a reason to φ” (Way and Whiting 2016: 226), it is arguably necessary. After all, if I did not have the general ability to go to the store because I want milk, how could I have the ability to respond to the fact that I want milk *as a reason* to go to the store? Acting for this reason—i.e., acting *on the basis* of reasoning that includes the fact that I want milk as a premise—is at least *part* of the appropriate response to the reason *as* a reason.[[5]](#footnote-5) This suggests a role for a fine-grained general ability as a condition of the ability to respond to considerations as reasons. Together with the coarse-grained ability, this yields an account of the ability to respond to reasons as reasons that I will call “Respond as Reasons” or RR:

RR: *S* is able to respond to p as a reason iff (a) *S* is able to follow the specific pattern of reasoning involved in φ-ing for the reason that p; and (b) *S* is able to follow the general pattern of reasoning of which φ-ing for the reason that p is a token or instance.[[6]](#footnote-6)

RR says that that the ability to respond to a reason as a reason requires both a coarse-grained and a fine-grained ability. If that’s the case, then *both* RCGeneral\*\*\* and RCGeneral\*\* are needed to capture the Intuition; they are, in fact, complementary.[[7]](#footnote-7) But then elusive reasons still pose a challenge to *some* true response constraint—namely, RCGeneral\*\*—insofar as they are incompatible with a fine-grained ability to respond to reasons.

Thus, from the fact that the more coarse-grained interpretation of RCGeneral helps capture the intuition that the existence of a reason implies the ability to respond to it as a reason, it does not follow that the more fine-grained interpretation is false. In fact, there is good reason to believe that the more fine-grained ability is needed in order to capture the same intuition. And if that’s the case, then elusive reasons are still incompatible with *some* true response constraint.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that Way and Whiting’s strategy fails to reconcile elusive reasons with the response constraint. First, their argument that a fine-grained interpretation of RCGeneral commits us to counterintuitive results in the Elliot case turned out to be false. The actual reason we get the wrong verdict in the Elliot case is Way and Whiting’s overly restrictive conception of general ability, which holds fixed the agent’s actual beliefs. Second, their positive case for the coarse-grained interpretation of RCGeneral, while plausible, did not rule out a fine-grained interpretation. Further, there is reason to think that the fine-grained interpretation is also needed to fully capture the intuition that the existence of a reason requires the ability to respond to that reason as a reason. Thus, I conclude that elusive reasons remain a serious challenge to the response constraint and similar constraints.

## **References**

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1. For discussion of this constraint, see Rossi (forthcoming); Way and Whiting (2016); Gibbons (2013); Raz (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In other work I have called such reasons *blindspot reasons*, since they are blindspot propositions for the agent whose reasons they are (redacted). A blindspot proposition is a proposition such that, for some agent, it is logically impossible for that agent to believe it truly. On the assumptions that (1) to act for a reason p requires believing that p and (2) reasons are true propositions or facts, blindspot reasons are impossible to act for. For further examples of blindspot reasons, see Markovits (2011); Smith (2009); and Sobel (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See their n. 21 for qualifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To be sure, Way and Whiting do not claim that the two interpretations are incompatible, so that an argument for one is an argument against the other. Rather, they claim that their positive case provides a rationale for preferring one over the other (Way and Whiting 2016: 225). Still, it is worth noting that accepting this rationale does not *commit* us to denying the other interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Notice that this argument is not question-begging in the context. The claim is that the fine-grained ability to φ for the reason that p is necessary for responding to p as a reason, not that it is necessary for the existence of p as a reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note that (a) implies (b), but the converse does not hold. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note that RR and Intuition jointly imply RCGeneral\*\*\* and RCGeneral\*\* when we interpret “ability” along the lines I have suggested in the last subsection. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)