Mark Schroeder
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University of Southern California

Buck-Passers' Negative Thesis

[B]eing valuable is not a property that provides us with reasons. Rather, to call something valuable is to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it.

– T.M. Scanlon[1]

1 buck-passing and existential facts

Buck-passers about value accept two theses about value, a *negative* thesis and a *positive*. The negative thesis is that the fact that something is valuable is not itself a reason to promote or appreciate it. The positive thesis is that the fact that something is valuable *consists in* the fact *that* there are *other* reasons to promote or appreciate it.[2] Buck-passers suppose that the negative thesis follows from the positive one, and sometimes insist on it as if it is the central part of their view. But as I'll explain here, what we say about the negative thesis is orthogonal to what we say about the positive one. Buck-passers should not care whether the fact that something is valuable is a reason to promote or appreciate it. They should care only that such facts are not what *ultimately* provide us with reasons – the ultimate reason-explanatory buck being passed on to something else. This is important, because one standard objection to buck-passing views is that the negative thesis seems intuitively to be false. If, as I argue here, the positive and negative theses of buck-passing are independent, this should not be understood as an objection against the positive buck-passing view.

The positive thesis of buck-passing is that the fact that something is valuable is very much like the *existential* fact that *there is* a reason for Nate to go into the living room:

1 There is a reason for Nate to go into the living room.

2 The fact that **1** is true is a reason for Nate to go into the living room.

[1] Scanlon [1998, 96].

[2] For consistency I've elected to use metaphysical language to describe the buck-passing view, rather than describing it at the level of language. Scanlon himself switches back and forth – for example between the formulation at the top of p 96, and that in the middle of p 97 of Scanlon [1998].

So I take it that the positive thesis of buck-passing is trivially and uncontroversially true about **1**. After all, even if **2** is true, **1** cannot be its own truth-maker. For its being true is a prerequisite to its being a reason, and so there must be some *other* reason for Nate to go into the living room, in order for it to be true in the first place. Therefore the fact that **1** is true is an uncontroversially buck-passing fact, in the terms of the positive buck-passing thesis. So that gives us an easy way to evaluate whether the negative thesis of buck-passing follows from the positive thesis. If it does, then **2** must be false.

Given this observation, the structure of my argument is simple, proceeding in two main parts. I will first isolate the principal assumption that I think leads people to think that **2** must be false, and explain why it is both controversial and highly rejectable. And then I will provide a motivation for thinking that **2** is in fact true. Since the positive thesis of buck-passing is uncontroversially true about **1**, this constitutes an argument that buck-passing's negative thesis doesn't follow from its positive thesis, and independent grounds for even buck-passers to reject the negative thesis. I'll close by noting how this enables sophisticated buck-passers to escape a standard class of what I think are really quite flat-footed objections – that the facts for which they seek to account in terms of reasons are *themselves* reasons.

2 additivity

Does the negative thesis of buck-passing follow from the positive thesis? Uncontroversially, the fact that there is a reason for Nate to go into the living room satisfies buck-passers' positive thesis. But what should make us think that this fact is not itself a reason for Nate to go into the living room? In this section I'll isolate a natural and plausible assumption about reasons that yields this result. But then I'll point to a consequence of this assumption that *ought* to be highly controversial, even if it is, in fact, widely accepted among philosophers. And that will be my account both of why it is *natural* to believe that the negative thesis follows from the positive one, and of why it is nevertheless *controversial* to believe this. In section 3 I'll turn to whether the negative thesis is true.

According to a naïve but natural view about weighting reasons, if *A* and *B* are each reasons for Ronnie to go to the party, then *A&B* must be a better reason for Ronnie to go than either individually. Call this *Additivity*. Additivity supports the inference from the buck-passers' positive view to their negative view. For example, suppose that the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go there. Surely the conjunction of this with the fact that it is a reason, is no better a reason for Ronnie to go to the party than the fact that there will be dancing there, all by itself. So by Additivity, the

existential fact cannot also be a reason for Ronnie to go there, and thus the buck-passers' negative thesis follows from their positive thesis and Additivity.

But Additivity should be controversial. Here is why: since Ronnie likes to dance, and there will be dancing at the party, I can say both of the following, and speak truly:

3 The fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go there.

4 The fact that Ronnie likes to dance is a reason for him to go to the party.

But surely, the conjunction of the fact that there will be dancing at the party and the fact that Ronnie likes to dance weighs no more in favor of his going to the party than either of them separately. So by Additivity, these two facts can't each be, literally, reasons for Ronnie to go to the party. (For they are not the same fact.)

This is actually what many philosophers believe. These philosophers hold that *neither* of these facts is literally a reason for Ronnie to go to the party, but *only* their conjunction.[3] But though pragmatic explanations of the appropriateness of asserting sentences **3** and **4** can be given,[4] this view is committed to holding that each of these sentences is literally false. And so Additivity commits us to holding that like **3** and **4**, nearly everything that we ever say about *what* our reasons *are* is actually literally false, and in need of pragmatic explanation. Whether or not this is a *common* view, it should certainly be a *controversial* one. Not only is it committed to a substantial view about how to *weight* reasons, it is committed to a *very* substantial view about the semantics and pragmatics of ordinary ascriptions of reasons. It holds that the sentences ascribing reasons are almost always literally false.

Once we recognize cases like this one, it is certainly *possible* to react by proposing that almost everything that we say about what are reasons are is really literally false, and in need of pragmatic explanation. But another quite natural reaction is to suppose that the highly plausible assumption of Additivity must be *amended*, by restricting it to cases in which *A* and *B* are in some sense (in need of further explication, of course) *independent*. Intuitively, the reasons attributed by **3** and **4** are *not* independent, because it is only because Ronnie likes to dance that the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for him to go there. This intuition is precisely what makes the pragmatic view that neither

[3] See, for example, Nagel [1970, 90-95], Crisp [2000], and Raz [1999, 228]. This view, it is worth noting, is usually motivated not by Additivity, but by another highly rejectable assumption about the connection between reasons and *explanation*. See Dancy [2005], chapter 2, for discussion.

[4] Such explanations are usually modeled on Davidson [1963], even though in that article Davidson is concerned with reasons in the *motivating* sense, rather than the *normative* sense, as we are.

is really a reason but only their conjunction seem less implausible than it otherwise might. But if that is right, then there might be other ways in which two reasons might fail to be independent. In particular, even if **2** is true, **1** is obviously not independent from the (distinct) reason that is its truth-maker. Since even if **1** *is* a reason for Nate to go into the living room, it would obviously not be an *independent* one, it is not at all obvious that we should be able to use Additivity in order to reason that **1** is not such a reason.

Buck-passing, therefore, should not be committed either way on the question of whether to give a pragmatic explanation of why it is appropriate to assert sentences like **3** and **4**, or to make these sentences come out literally true. Buck-passing is supposed to be a view about *value*, but this question is about the semantics and pragmatics of reason-ascriptions, and about the undeniably complicated question of how to weight reasons. So even if some buck-passers happen to like Additivity and the pragmatic view, the two issues should be orthogonal. Yet if Additivity is false, there is no reason to think that the buck-passers' negative thesis must follow from their positive thesis.

3 the linking thesis

Compare, then, how to treat the uncontroversially buck-passing existential fact that there is a reason for Nate to go into the living room. Should we say that this fact is, or is not, a reason for Nate to go into the living room? Grant that it is not an *additional* reason for him to go – it adds nothing to the reason which serves as its truth-maker. But if Additivity is up for grabs, then that doesn't settle the issue of whether the existential fact *also, derivatively* counts as a reason for Nate to go into the living room. I offer the following motivation for holding that we *should* say that the existential fact *also* counts as a reason.

It is natural to think that there is a *connection* between normative reasons to do things, and the reasons *for which* people do things. For after all, it is possible to evaluate whether or not the reasons *for which* someone did something were, in fact, good or bad reasons *for* her to do it. This relation – the way in which the reasons *for which* you do something are related to the reasons *for* you to do it – is the *basing* relation, of importance both in ethical theory and in epistemology. If there is anything natural or unified to say about the *basing* relation, it is natural to think it is this: when you act for a reason, you must believe or perceive or bear some other similar epistemic relation to something which is the kind of thing, if it is true, *to be* a reason for you to do it.[5]

[5] Some have argued for considerably stronger views – that when you act for good reasons, your motivating reason and the normative reason are *identical* – a single kind of thing which, if true (or which obtains) is a normative reason, and if you believe it, is a motivating reason. Compare Dancy [2000]. The view I'm suggesting here is much weaker – I'm making no claim about what your motivating reason *is*, but only about the conditions under which you can count as having acted for a reason.

This natural Linking Thesis is supported by plausible examples: suppose that you tell Ronnie, who likes to dance, that there will be dancing at the party tonight, and this motivates him to go there. Plausibly, he does not go there for no reason at all – he acts for a reason. And in acting for this reason, he believes something – that there will be dancing at the party – which is in fact a reason for him to go there, if it is true. And since it *is* true, Ronnie counts as having gone to the party for a reason which is in fact a good reason for him to go there. Obviously, the Linking Thesis is controversial. And it is not very hard to see that it will turn out to be plausibly incompatible with Additivity. But it is nevertheless a natural thought. The following example, along with the Linking Thesis, motivates holding that **2** is true.

Suppose that Nate's friend tells him that there is a reason for him to go into the living room, but does not tell him what this reason is. Perhaps he *cannot* tell him. Perhaps the reason is that there is a surprise party waiting for Nate in the next room, and telling him *that* would spoil the surprise. (Suppose, if necessary, that Nate also hates unsuccessful surprise parties.) But importantly, Nate trusts his friend and is reasonable to trust him. So he goes into the living room. I think that in this case it is hard to maintain that Nate did not act for a reason. His going into the living room was not mere behavior, or something of which we need some unique independent account. Just as in going to the party in the belief that there would be dancing there Ronnie acted for a reason, so also, in going into the living room in the belief that he had a reason to do so, Nate *did* act for a reason.

So if the Linking Thesis is correct, and Nate really did go into the living room for a reason, it follows that the existential fact that there is a reason for Nate to go into the living room must *itself* be the right kind of thing to be a reason for him to go there. And this is not a crazy result. Even if Nate shouldn't place *extra* weight on **1** if he *knows* what the reason *is* which makes it true, he would be irrational not to place weight on it, in the situation in which he knows it is true, but does *not* know what the reason is which makes it true. And if we take this view, then we will deny the buck-passers' negative thesis about the paradigm case for their positive view. We will say that **1** is itself a reason, though a derivative one, for Nate to go into the living room.

I don't claim that this is the kind of argument that will convince the dogmatic that **2** is true. It is patently not. Anyone who accepts Additivity will believe that **1** cannot itself be a reason for Nate to go into the living room, and hence believe that the Linking Thesis must be false. But what I am pointing out is precisely that Additivity is a substantial and indeed, a controversial thesis. So although it is perfectly *coherent* to accept Additivity, insist on a pragmatic explanation of reason-ascriptions, and deny the Linking Thesis, it is also perfectly coherent to deny Additivity, accept the literal truth of reason-ascriptions, and

accept the Linking Thesis. A buck-passer who does so can insist that all there is to facts about what is good is facts about what there is reason to do – so the reason-explanatory buck gets passed. But she can also agree that like other existential facts about reasons, the fact that something is valuable *is* itself a reason. Against such a buck-passer, it is no objection that intuitively, the fact that something is good is itself a reason to appreciate it. She *agrees*.

4 generalized objections to buck-passing

Buck-passing about *value* is just one in a wide family of attractive views according to which one or another concept is best understood as analyzed in terms of reasons. Such views are attractive on very general grounds – it is more and more common for philosophers to think that *what makes* normative concepts normative is that they are ultimately to be understood in terms of reasons.[6] For example, according to some, the fact that something is funny consists not in the fact that people *are* amused by it, but in there being *reasons* of an appropriate kind to be amused at it. According to others, the fact that something is terrifying consists not in the fact that people *are* terrified by it, but in there being *reasons* of an appropriate kind to be terrified by it. It has even been suggested that the fact that a reason is of a certain *weight* consists not in the fact that agents *place* that much weight on it in their deliberations, but in there being reasons of an appropriate kind *to* place that much weight on it in deliberation.[7] Many attractive views have this general kind of form.

Against such views, as against all views in the "buck-passing" family, it is often alleged that the fact that something is funny *is* itself a reason to laugh at it, the fact that something is terrifying is itself a reason to be terrified by it, and the fact that a reason has a certain weight is itself a reason to place that much weight on it in deliberation. But as before, these are only objections to buck-passers' negative thesis. And as I've explained here, not only does the negative thesis not *logically follow* from the positive thesis, there *is* independent motivation for rejecting the auxiliary assumptions necessary to derive it. This goes for *any* buck-passing view. Sophisticated buck-passers, I suggest, should get over their hang-ups about the negative thesis, and embrace the result that whether it follows from the central, positive, part of their view turns on orthogonal questions about reasons' weight, the semantics and pragmatics of sentences ascribing reasons, and the connection between normative and motivating reasons. About these questions, buck-passers can take any view they please.[8]

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[6] Compare, for example, Scanlon [1998], Hampton [1998], Dancy [2004], and Schroeder [2005].
[7] Schroeder [2007].
[8] Special thanks for discussions with Nate Williams, Roger Crisp, John Broome, Gideon Rosen, and Gil Harman.

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