Reasons, Answers and Goals

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Abstract: I discuss two arguments against the view that reasons are propositions. I consider responses to each argument, including recent responses due to Mark Schroeder, and suggest further responses of my own. In each case, the discussion proceeds by comparing reasons to answers and goals.

1. Introduction

We believe and act *based on* reasons all the time. But what kind of thing are these reasons? The question is interesting enough in itself. Moreover our answer to this ontological question can affect how we answer various normative questions about what makes reasons good or bad, and whether actions or beliefs based on them are justified, rational, proper and the like (see e.g. McDowell 1994, Williamson 2000, Conee and Feldman 2008, and Turri 2009). This paper evaluates two arguments against the view that reasons are propositions, and suggests responses. I call the view that reasons are propositions *abstractionism*. Abstractionism's main rival is *statism*, which says that reasons are mental states of the subject. I am partial to statism, and have argued extensively for it elsewhere,

so this paper might well be subtitled 'Advice to My Abstractionist Friends'. At one time I thought that each of the arguments discussed below provided evidence against abstractionism, but further reflection convinced me that they could ultimately be effectively resisted, and the present paper embodies my research in this regard. Given my preference for statism, I would be happy if what I say here in defense of abstractionism were proven wrong.

We can appreciate the difference between statism and abstractionism by considering what they imply about specific cases.[1] Take a typical case of perceptual belief. You see that a chipmunk is dashing under a bush, and this prompts you to believe that a chipmunk is dashing under a bush. What's the basis of this belief? The statist says it's your perception that a chipmunk is dashing under a bush. The abstractionist says it's the proposition <a chipmunk is dashing under a bush>. (I use angle brackets to name propositions.) Or take a typical inferential belief. Suppose Sarah Palin believes that Barack Obama wants to set up "death panels," and that if he wants to set up death panels, then he's a fiend. This prompts her to infer that Obama is a fiend. What is the basis of this inferential judgment? The statist says it's Palin's belief that Obama wants to set up death panels, along with her belief that if he wants to set up death panels, then he's a fiend. The abstractionist says it's <Obama wants to set

[1] Statists include Davidson (1983: 141), Swain (1981: Chapter 3), Pollock (1986: Chapter 5), Neta (2002: 669), Bergmann (2007), and Turri (2009). Abstractionists include Darwall (1983: 31–32), Scanlon (1999: 56–57), Brandom (2000: 18), Williamson (2000: Chapter 9), Schroeder (2007), Miller (2008: Section 2), and Dougherty (forthcoming).

up death panels> along with <if Obama wants to set up death panels, then he's a fiend>. Generally speaking, whenever the statist identifies the reason as mental state M with the content <Q>, the abstractionist will instead identify it as <Q>.

Let me ward off a few potential misconceptions. First, statism and abstractionism are theories of *what reasons are*, not about what makes them good or bad. Second, they are not theories of reasons that there are *to* believe or do things. That is, they are not about what in the literature are sometimes called "normative reasons," which are considerations that count in favor of a belief or action. Rather, as I have said, they are theories of *the reasons our beliefs are based on*, or as it's sometimes put in the literature, "motivating reasons."[2] Third, they are not general theories of the reasons why we believe things. When we believe something for a reason, then of course that reason helps explain our belief. But many things help explain our belief which aren't among our reasons for holding the belief. For instance if Todd Palin deceived Sarah Palin into believing that Obama wants to set up death panels, it doesn't follow that Todd's deception is among Sarah's reasons for holding that belief, even though his deception helps explain why she holds it. Finally, despite the simplicity of the cases I used to illustrate the difference between abstractionism and statism, both theories can ac-

[2] I hesitate to even mention "normative" and "motivating" reasons, since, in my experience, people understand the normative/motivating distinction in a disturbing number of different ways. Let me emphasize that nothing at all in my discussion turns on the "normative/motivating" terminology. See Turri 2009 for more on why I think the distinction is largely irrelevant to present concerns.

commodate cases where a belief is based on multiple reasons, or multiple lines of reasoning.

The next two sections each focus on one argument against abstractionism. Each argument shares the same basic form.[3]

Reasons are F.

Propositions are not F.

So reasons are not propositions.

If either argument were to succeed, it would be a considerable metaphysical discovery with potentially serious implications for ethics and epistemology.

2. The Problem of Possession

The first argument is:

Possessionless

A1. You can have reasons.

A2. You can't have propositions.

C. So reasons aren't propositions.

A1 is obviously true.[4] What about A2? It can seem absurd to say that someone *has a proposition*, and so it can easily seem that the argument succeeds. I would now like to consider a couple ways of resisting the argument, one of which I find wanting, the other of which I find more promising.

[3] Compare Dougherty's (forthcoming) presentation of Williamson's (2000: Chapter 9) arguments.

[4] What it is to *have a reason* has recently received attention; e.g. see Schroeder 2008, and relatedly Turri 2010.

First, abstractionists might argue that we don't literally have the reasons our beliefs and actions are based on, but instead "have" them in some metaphorical sense in which it is plausible that we can "have" propositions.[5] This strategy won't convince unless supported by some actual linguistic data suggesting that we're dealing with non-literal talk. But I doubt such data is forthcoming. Indeed the data suggest that 'have' in 'have a reason' is used literally.

Consider these sentences:

1. Maria has one bat she strikes baseballs with.
2. Maria has one bat she feeds live crickets to.
3. Maria has one bat she strikes baseballs with and one she feeds live crickets to.

1 and 2 both sound fine. But 3 strikes us as odd because 'one bat' refers to a baseball bat, whereas 'one' then refers to a small flying mammal. 1 and 2 cannot properly reduce and conjoin to form 3. This shows that 'bat' isn't used synonymously in 1 and 2. (See Bach 1998). Consider also these sentences:

4. Maria swam across a river.
5. Maria cried a river.
6. Maria swam across a river, and cried another.

4 and 5 each sound fine on their own, but cannot properly reduce and conjoin to form 6, because 'river' is used metaphorically or idiomatically in 5 but not 4. Now consider these sentences:

7. Mario has a business.
8. Mario has several reasons for believing his business will

[5] As an anonymous referee suggested.

flourish.

9. Mario has a business and several reasons for believing it will flourish.

7 and 8 reduce and conjoin to form 9. 9 sounds just fine, indicating that 'has' has a literal meaning either in both 7 and 8, or in neither. Since it has a literal meaning in 7, it does in 8 too.

Second, abstractionists might argue, as Mark Schroeder has, that by endorsing Possessionless, we succumb to a tempting mistake due to an ambiguity of 'have'.[6] Sometimes 'X has Y' means 'X possesses Y'. But often times 'X has Y' means 'X stands in salient relation R to Y' (or vice versa). For example, 'I have a father' means that someone stands in the father relation to me. It doesn't mean that I possess a father.[7] And of course we can stand in relations to propositions. So if we can understand 'I have a reason' to mean that a proposition stands in the reason relation to me, then we can deny A2.

It's true that 'have' generally behaves this way, and that we can stand in relations to propositions. But it isn't clear that this is enough to enable a convincing response to the argument. I'll first explain why this response, as it stands, might fail to convince. Then I'll explain why I believe that something in the neighborhood fares better.

We can contrive contexts where it sounds okay to say 'I have the

[6] Mark Schroeder, personal communication; compare Schroeder 2008.

[7] At least, it doesn't *usually* mean this. One can imagine morally objectionable circumstances in which it would.

proposition <Sarah published a book>'. Suppose you and I are playing a strange game. The game is to see who can think about their assigned proposition for the longest time. You get assigned <Barack published a book>, and I get assigned <Sarah published a book>. A third party enters and asks, 'Who's supposed to be thinking about Sarah?'. I respond, 'I am. I have the proposition <Sarah published a book>'. This sounds fine. Now given that we can generate this effect in the context of our strange game, if Schroeder's response to Possessionless were correct, then we should expect it to sound okay to say 'I have the proposition <Sarah published a book>' when it's salient that this proposition is my reason for believing something. But that doesn't happen. Consider: I say, 'Sarah published something'. Everyone asks what my reason is for thinking this. I respond, 'Sarah published a book'. Everyone believes me. It still sounds ridiculous for me to say, 'So I have the proposition <Sarah published a book>'. And it would likewise sound ridiculous for others to say of me, 'He has the proposition <Sarah published a book>'. Consider a different case. Barack and Joe both believe that Sarah published something. We ask them what their reasons are for thinking this. Barack says, 'Sarah published a book'; Joe says, 'Sarah published a journal article'. We all believe that they're being sincere. Now someone asks, 'So which of these two gentleman has the proposition <Sarah published a book>?'. The question is unintelligible. But it wouldn't be unintelligible if the abstractionist proposal currently under consideration were true.

Let me put the worry slightly differently. Even when the reason

relation is salient — because, say, we've just been asked what our reason is for believing Sarah published something, and we respond by saying 'She published a book' — it still sounds awful to say 'I have the proposition <Sarah published a book>'. We can think of other contexts where it makes sense to say you have that proposition, contexts where we could understand what relation 'have' picks out. (This is the point of my 'strange game' example above.) But it makes no sense in the context of the reason relation. Why would that be, if the reason relation relates us to the proposition in question, *and that fact is very salient in the context*? Why would 'have' have such a hard time picking out the reason relation? Why can't we hear it that way?

That's one basis for being dissatisfied with Schroeder's response. But lurking in the neighborhood is a related, complementary, and perhaps more effective response.

The alternative response features the locution 'have, as an F'. We can say things like 'I have, as my answer, the number 2' and 'I have, as my main goal, a cure for malaria'. Save for special contexts, from those statements we cannot infer either 'I have the number 2' or 'I have a cure for malaria'. Likewise, from the statement 'I have, as my reason, the proposition <Sarah published a book>', we should not expect to be able to conclude 'I have the proposition <Sarah published a book>'.

Returning now to Possessionless, we can see that it straightforwardly begs the question, provided that 'have' is understood in a way relevant to the debate over the nature of reasons. In order to

ensure that 'have' refers to the relevant relation throughout, we need to read it like so:

A1'. You can have, as reasons, reasons.

A2'. You can't have, as reasons, propositions.

C. So reasons aren't propositions.

But then A2' obviously begs the question.[8]

I have one residual worry about this latest response. Once it's clear that we're talking about the answer relation or the goal relation, we can hear the unadorned 'have' as predicating the relevant relation. So if I say, 'I have, as my answer, the number 4. What about you?', you can respond, 'I have the number 8'. That sounds fine – we unproblematically hear it as involving the 'have, as an answer' relation. And if I say, 'I have, as my goal, a cure for AIDS. What about you?', you can respond, 'I have a cure for malaria'. We hear this as involving the 'have, as a goal' relation. But if I say, 'I have, as my reason, the claim that she published a book. What about you?', it's not entirely clear that you can felicitously respond, 'I have the claim that she published an article'. It isn't clear that we hear this as predicating the reason relation, or even whether it's acceptable.[9] Perhaps we must *always* say 'I have, as my reason' to hear it as predicating the reason relation. It's an open question how significant this disanalogy is between reason-talk on the one hand,

[8] Perhaps 'have' always means 'have, as an F'. If so, all the better for the response to Possessionless just sketched. But the response doesn't require this. It's enough that the abstractionist can liken talk of having reasons to other respectable 'have'-talk, such as having answers or goals.

[9] My correspondents are ambivalent on the question.

and answer-talk or goal-talk on the other.

3. The Problem of Powerlessness

Here is the second argument.

Powerless

B1. Reasons are causes.

B2. Propositions don't cause anything.

C. So reasons aren't propositions.

Why accept B1? Because reasons must explain the attitudes based on them, and the best account of reasons' explanatory role is that they are causes, so reasons are causes (compare Davidson 1963: 10).[10] Why accept B2? Because propositions are non-spatiotemporal objects, and all non-spatiotemporal objects are causally powerless, so propositions are causally powerless.[11] Notice how easily statism accommodates the causal profile of reasons: mental states can cause one another, and reasons just are mental states, so reasons can be causes.[12]

Abstractionists might object to the argument for B1. They might dispute the claim that the best account of reasons' explanatory role is that they are causes. It's natural to think that this would require

[10] For an extended explanation and defense of the causal theory of reasons, see Turri unpublished.

[11] Compare Benacerraf's (1973) famous argument against platonism in mathematics.

[12] I take it that something like this line of thought helps motivate Davidson's identification of a "primary reason" as the combination of "a belief and an attitude" (later: an "intention"), given that Davidson thinks that reasons explain action by causing it (1963: 6–11).

defending an alternative account of their explanatory role. But progress on this front has been minimal (Wilson 1989, Ginet 1990, Mele 2003: Chapter 2, and Turri unpublished). However there's an alternative strategy.[13] The strategy is to claim that although it is true that *your having the reason* must cause your belief, it isn't true that *the reason itself* must cause your belief. It's a subtle distinction between *a reason causing the belief* and *your having of the reason causing the belief*, and because everyone agrees that you must have a reason in order for your belief to be based on it, the abstractionist can explain why many people have mistakenly thought the causal theory seemed so obviously true.

The strategy is interesting, though there's some reason not to be entirely satisfied with it. First, after carefully considering the proposal, I find it implausible that I'm making the mistake it attributes to me. I doubt that I would mistake the causal efficacy of *having a reason* for the efficacy of the reason itself, any more than I'd mistake, for example, the causal efficacy of *having a dog* for the efficacy of the dog itself. This is especially true in a context where the potential mistake has been explicitly suggested, and we're on alert. Second, the proposal says, 'while it is true that *your having the reason* must cause your belief, it isn't true that the reason itself must cause your belief,' but abstractionism actually entails something *much* stronger. If abstractionism is true, then not only is it true that reasons *need not* cause your belief, it's also true that reasons *could*

[13] An anonymous referee first suggested this strategy to me. See also Schroeder 2007: Chapter 1.

not possibly cause your belief, or anything else for that matter. This consequence is much more difficult to accept than the relatively modest claim that *sometimes* reasons explain by virtue of a non-causal relation, which is the most formidable response to B1, and the most popular one in the literature on causal theories of reasons for both action and belief.[14]

But I will set aside these worries, since my main concern presently lies elsewhere. I think this new suggestion for responding to B1 could be bolstered by producing analogous cases where the having of X causes Y, but X itself does not. For unless we find such analogs, the strategy will look like special pleading, resting on a radical and unprecedented causal asymmetry between *the having of X* and *X* itself. And here I think we might once again profit from comparing reasons to answers and goals.

My having the answer to a question might cause me to win a prize, but the answer itself, <Topeka is the capital of Kansas>, does not. My having the goal of curing malaria might cause me to study parasitology, but the goal itself, *to cure malaria*, does not. In each of these cases, it seems that my being in a certain state with a cer-

[14] An anonymous referee asks, "If you already accept that reasons are not causes, why would you be bothered by the implication that in no possible world reasons are causes?" I don't see it as my aim here to convince such a person. My point is that opponents of the causal theory of reasons have, by and large, responded by arguing that it's possible for some reasons to explain non-causally. (B1 is supposed to be a necessary truth about the nature of reasons, so a possible case would be enough.) But no clear example of such a case has been offered. This would be *surprising* if reasons *necessarily* explain non-causally.

tain content — my believing that Topeka is the capital of Kansas, and my aiming to cure malaria — causes the relevant outcomes, even though it's implausible that the abstract representational content of those states could cause anything.

4. Conclusion

The analogy between reasons on the one hand, and answers and goals on the other, offers aid and comfort to abstractionists. Further benefit is gained by pointing out how natural it is to speak of our beliefs and actions as being based on answers and goals, e.g. 'His belief is based on the answer to the previous question' and 'Her actions were based on her goal to finish at the top of her class'. One satisfying outcome for abstractionists would be for reasons to *just be* answers and goals.[15] They might do well to explore this possibility further.[16]

[15] In the final analysis, *preferences* will probably also feature in the account.

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