

Reasons and Guidance

(Or, Surprise Parties and Ice Cream)

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1 Introduction

A familiar and intuitive thought is that normative reasons must be able to *guide* us. That is what reasons seem to be *for*. Considerations which cannot guide cannot do what reasons are supposed to do. To put the same point differently, it is the job of a reason to recommend that a person perform a certain act or hold some attitude. If it is do that job, the relevant person must be able to heed and respond to its recommendation.

Thoughts like this lie behind the following *response constraint* on reasons:

RC That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you are able to ϕ for the reason that p .¹

RC is distinct from the principle that *reason implies can*, according to which:

¹ For this constraint, see, among many others, Gibbons 2013; Kelly 2002; Kolodny 2005; Parfit 2011: 51; Raz 2011: 28; Shah 2006; Williams 1981. For an overview of further (more principled) considerations in support of RC, see Markovits 2010b: §2. Note that Markovits rejects RC by appeal to examples of the sort we discuss below.

RIC That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you are able to ϕ .²

While RC entails RIC, the converse does not hold. It is consistent with RIC, but not RC, that there are cases in which there is a reason for a person to ϕ , and she can ϕ , but not for that reason. We return to this below.

RC offers a plausible way of capturing the idea that reasons guide. It is also of wider significance. On a standard interpretation, it is a premise of Williams' most influential argument for a Humean theory of reasons, according to which, very roughly, that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if ϕ ing serves some motive (desire, aim, etc.) you have (Williams 1981). This is supposed to follow from RC together with a Humean theory of motivation according to which, very roughly, you cannot ϕ for the reason that p unless you think that, given that p , ϕ ing will serve some motive you have.

More recently, Kelly (2002), Shah (2006), and others have argued that RC rules out the possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief and other reasons of the 'wrong kind'. To adapt an example from Firth (1981), suppose that Jane Doe is suffering from a serious illness. If Jane believes that she will survive, she is more likely to do so. But Jane cannot believe that she will survive for the reason that doing so increases her chances of survival. Given RC, it follows that the fact that doing so increases her chances is not a reason for Jane to believe that she will survive.

Others suggest that something like RC is what distinguishes the deontic from the evaluative (e.g. Williams 1981; Gibbons 2013; Raz 2011: ch. 2; Shah 2006). If the soil is dry, it would be *good* if Lilian were to turn on the sprinkler and if rain were to fall. Why, then, is there a reason for Lilian, but not for the clouds, to water the garden? RC might provide (the beginnings of) an answer to that question.

² For defence of RIC, see Streumer 2007; Vranas 2007. RIC is often run together with RC (see, for example, Reisner 2009: 266; also Dancy 2000: 59).

RC is also thought to support some form of *perspectivism*, according to which only considerations within your ken or cognitive reach provide reasons, hence, determine what you ought to do (see Dancy 2000: 59; Lord 2015; Gibbons 2013: ch.6; Raz 2011: 110-111). Suppose that you are not able to ϕ for the reason that p unless you stand in some epistemic relation – for example, knowledge – to that consideration. Given RC, it follows that a consideration is a reason for you only if you stand in the relevant epistemic relation to it.

These remarks illustrate the importance of and interest in RC. Our aim here is not to argue for that principle or defend the views and arguments in which it appears. Rather, our first aim is to defend RC against certain influential objections. Specifically, we consider and respond to two classes of alleged counterexamples to it. In doing so, we distinguish two different readings of RC, reject one and defend the other. This serves our second aim – to clarify how RC is to be understood.

2 Challenges to the response constraint

The first alleged counterexample, due to Schroeder, involves *massively outweighed reasons*. Consider:

Joel's career, his wife and her career, his friends, his Lakers' season tickets, his family, and his loves of surfing and of mountain climbing all tie him to Los Angeles. But Joel also loves chocolate-cayenne-cinnamon flavored ice cream, which he can only get in Madison, Wisconsin (Schroeder 2007: 166).

The fact that he can only get chocolate-cayenne-cinnamon flavoured ice cream (hereafter, ice cream) in Madison is a reason for Joel to move there. But Joel is not

capable of moving to Madison for that reason, given how much he cares about all of the things tying him to LA.

The second kind of counterexample involves *self-effacing reasons*. Consider:

There is a surprise party for Beth at her house which starts at 5pm. Beth loves surprise parties and it would make her very happy to arrive home at 5pm.

However, were Beth to find out that there is a surprise party for her at 5pm, the surprise would be ruined and the party would be a disaster.

It is very intuitive to think that the fact that there is a surprise party waiting for her is a reason for Beth to go home at 5pm. Note, for instance, that an informed friend might advise Beth to go home by saying, ‘Though I can’t tell you what it is, there’s a reason for you to go home!’. But Beth cannot go home for the reason that there is a surprise party there. That would require Beth to believe that there is a surprise party, which would spoil the surprise. In that case, it would no longer be a fact that there is a surprise party waiting for Beth and, hence, there would no longer be a reason for her to go home for 5pm.³ More generally, a consideration which is a reason for you to ϕ only so long as you do not believe that it obtains, or only so long as you do not ϕ on the basis of it, looks like a counterexample to RC.⁴

Cases involving self-effacing reasons are not just of interest insofar as they seem to pose a challenge to RC. For instance, as Lord (Manuscript) points out, Beth’s case is a potential counterexample to the kind of *perspectivist* view mentioned above. The fact that there is a surprise party waiting for her is a reason for Beth to go home

³ Alternatively, it would still be a fact that there is a surprise party – a party intended to surprise – but this fact would no longer be a reason for Beth to go home.

⁴ The surprise party case appears in Markovits 2011 and Schroeder 2007: 165-166. For the use of further examples of self-effacing reasons against principles such as RC, see Markovits 2010b; Millgram 1996; Shafer-Landau 2003: ch. 7; Smith 2009; Sobel 2001.

for 5pm, but only so long as it lies beyond her ken.⁵

In addition, self-effacing reasons might seem to be counterexamples to certain analyses of reasons. Consider, for example, the view that for a consideration to be a reason for ϕ ing is for it to be a premise in good reasoning or ‘sound deliberation’ which concludes with ϕ ing.⁶ If Beth were to believe that there is a surprise party waiting for her, it would not be good reasoning for her to reason from that belief to a decision to go home for 5pm; nonetheless, what she believes is a reason for that decision.

In what follows, we defend RC against counterexamples of both sorts. Before doing so, let us mention, so as to put aside, alternative responses to each.

One tempting response to cases of massively outweighed reasons is to insist that, in the above example, Joel *can* move to Madison for the reason that he can get ice cream there; he just *won't*. And, as Schroeder (2007: 166) grants, there are senses of ‘can’ in which this seems right. For instance, Joel can move to Madison for that reason in the sense that there are possible circumstances – circumstances in which he has none of the cares and concerns which are most central to him – in which he does just that. However, Schroeder suggests that, if RC involves this sense of ‘can’, it is more or less trivial. For just about any agent, and any putative reason, there are circumstances under which that agent would be motivated by that reason, given radical enough changes to their psychology.

A different response to cases of massively outweighed reasons is to weaken the response constraint along roughly the following lines:

⁵ The point above was that RC is a premise in an argument for perspectivism. The point here is that self-effacing reasons might appear to be counterexamples to perspectivism, whatever the argument for it.

⁶ For versions of this view, see Alvarez 2010: 42; Hieronymi 2010; Raz 1978; Setiya 2014; Way Forthcoming; and, perhaps, Williams 1981.

The fact that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you are able to be *pro tanto* motivated to ϕ by the reason that p .⁷

In fact, Schroeder suggests that Joel's case is a counterexample even to this claim:

As I imagine Joel's case, he is disposed to find the facts about chocolate-cayenne-cinnamon ice cream salient, if ever he thinks about moving to Madison, but these thoughts would not actually motivate him to move, not even in any *pro tanto* sense – this disposition is masked by the presence of such clear motivations not to move to Madison. Joel, I think, is not a case of a conflicted psychology – even slightly. He feels no conflict at all – not even one that is very tiny – over only giving up his favorite ice cream (2007: 166).

Proponents of the above line of response are likely to dig their heels in here. And Joel is certainly more clearly problematic for the original constraint than the weaker one. So we risk a stalemate here. Moreover, it is unclear whether the weakened version of RC can be put to work, for example, in arguing against reasons of the wrong kind. To return to the earlier example, although Jane cannot believe that she will survive for the reason that doing so increases her chances of survival, one might think that Jane's awareness of the benefits of so believing might to some extent motivate her to do so. It is also worth noting that weakening RC in the above way does not offer a solution to the problem of self-effacing reasons.⁸

⁷ Such formulations are common (e.g. Shah 2006). People are not often explicit about why they weaken the response constraint in this way. A plausible hypothesis is that they do so to allow for outweighed reasons.

⁸ Another response to the problem of massively outweighed reasons is to reformulate RC as follows: that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if *someone* could ϕ for the reason that p . It is doubtful that this very weak constraint fully captures the intuitive idea behind the constraint though. Note, for instance, that it

The most familiar response to self-effacing reasons is to deny that they are reasons. Indeed, there is some inclination to deny that self-effacing reasons are reasons precisely because we cannot respond to them (see Kieseewetter Forthcoming; Lord Manuscript; Setiya 2009: 538; Sinclair 2012).⁹

We will suggest here that this denial is unnecessary. We will offer a unified response to the two counterexamples. Our response grants that self-effacing reasons are reasons, articulates a non-trivial sense in which agents can act for massively outweighed reasons, and avoids the stalemate over Joel and the weakened response constraint.

3 General and specific abilities

RC says that reasons must be considerations we are *able* to act in light of. But ‘able’ can be understood in different ways. For instance, if you know how to make a cake but lack the ingredients, then in one sense you are able to make a cake but in another you are not. Likewise, when Andy Murray does not have a tennis racket to hand, then in one sense he retains the ability to serve but in another sense he is unable to do so.

seems not to help distinguish the deontic from the evaluative, as the constraint is supposed to do (cf. n27). In any case, we will focus on the stronger constraint stated in the text.

⁹ McKeever and Ridge (2012: §3) try to explain how it is possible to act for a self-effacing reason. You might wonder if their explanation could contribute to a defence of RC.

Suppose that Beth’s friend tells her to go home for 5pm. Beth might then go home for the reason that doing so promotes some worthy end her friend’s advice is actually tracking. According to McKeever and Ridge, the fact that going home for 5pm promotes some worthy end her friend’s advice is actually tracking just *is* the fact that her being home at 5pm will bring a pleasant surprise. There is one fact – hence, reason – specified in different ways. So, in acting on her friend’s advice, Beth acts on the basis of the allegedly self-effacing reason. More generally, McKeever and Ridge’s suggestion is that it is possible to act for self-effacing reasons *under suitable modes of presentation*.

This is an interesting proposal but it faces some difficulties. First, it assumes a coarse-grained conception of facts which some might object to. (For fine-grained conceptions of facts, see Dodd 2000; Hornsby 1997; Strawson 1950.) Second, on the proposed account, a person’s reasons for acting will be opaque to her (for some discussion, see McKeever and Ridge 2012: 27-28). Finally, the proposal only serves as a defence of RC on the assumption that reasons-talk is extensional, which is controversial (see Suikkanen 2012). Even if the two that-clauses above refer to or specify the same fact, it might not follow that you can replace one clause with the other in a statement about Beth’s reason for acting *salva veritate*.

Perhaps there are responses to these concerns. It remains an advantage of the account we develop here that it provides a unified solution to both the problem of self-effacing reasons and the problem of massively outweighed reasons. McKeever and Ridge’s proposal does not speak to the latter.

This distinction gets marked in different ways by different theorists.¹⁰

Following Mele (2002), we will use ‘general ability’ for the sense in which you are able to make a cake in the above case, or in which Murray is able to serve. A general ability to ϕ is an ability to ϕ in a wide range of circumstances, if not the present circumstances (here and now). If you have a general ability, in this sense, it might often fail to manifest. This could be because of a lack of *opportunity* – as when you lack the ingredients to make a cake – or because of some kind of *interference* – as when you are too tired to concentrate on what you are doing. When you lack the opportunity to manifest a general ability, or when something interferes with this ability, then you lack *specific ability*. A specific ability to ϕ is an ability to ϕ in your present circumstances (here and now).

A general ability can be thought of as a kind of *power* or *competence*. As such, there is a crucial difference between having a general ability (in the above sense) and being able to *acquire* such an ability. A monoglot speaker of English lacks the general ability, hence, the power, to speak Mandarin, though she might have the ability, general or specific, to acquire that ability (cf. Maier 2015).¹¹

Given the distinction between general and specific abilities, we can distinguish two versions of the response constraint:

RC_{General} That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have the general ability to ϕ for the reason that p.

RC_{Specific} That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have the specific ability to ϕ for the reason that p.

¹⁰ See, for example, Honoré 1964; Kenny 1975; Maier 2015; Whittle 2010.

¹¹ Contrast ‘You can speak Mandarin – I’ve heard you’ and ‘You can speak Mandarin – I’ll teach you’. The former ascribes a general ability, while the latter ascribes an ability to acquire that ability.

Perhaps RC_{Specific} entails RC_{General} – we take no stand on that here – but the converse does not hold. We will argue that, while both massively outweighed reasons and self-effacing reasons are counterexamples to RC_{Specific} , neither is a counterexample to RC_{General} . In doing this, we will show that RC_{General} is the version of the response constraint that is most plausible anyway.

Given the distinction between general and specific abilities, we can also distinguish two versions of the principle that *reason implies can*:

RIC_{General} That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have the general ability to ϕ .

RIC_{Specific} That p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have the specific ability to ϕ .

Ordinarily, *reason implies can* is understood to concern specific ability, along the lines of RIC_{Specific} (see, for example, Vranas 2007: 169-70). So understood, only RC_{Specific} , not RC_{General} , entails reason implies can. Nonetheless, RC_{General} is consistent with RIC_{Specific} , which we grant for present purposes.

What is it to have the general ability to ϕ for the reason that p ? After all, reasons are specific considerations – for example, that it is now snowing in Boston, or that the game is about to start. What is it to have a general ability to respond to such a consideration?

A general ability must be an ability to have a certain *type* of response to certain *types* of reasons. For example, you might have a general ability to perform acts of the wearing boots type in response to considerations of the snow in your circumstances type. A useful way to develop this is to connect responding to reasons with *reasoning*. When you ϕ for the reason that p , we can think of you as engaging in

a piece of reasoning: ‘p, so I’ll ϕ ’.¹² A general ability to have a certain type of response to a certain type of reason can then be thought of as a matter of having the general ability to follow certain *patterns* or *rules* of reasoning. For instance, your general ability to wear boots for the reason that it’s snowing can be thought of as the general ability to follow the rule ‘if it’s snowing (in your circumstances), wear boots!’

So understood, RC_{General} implies that that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you are able in the general sense to follow a rule of reasoning of which ‘p, so I’ll ϕ ’ is an instance. In what follows, we will work with this way of understanding RC_{General} . However, we stress that this is primarily an expositional device. Those who prefer to understand general abilities to make types of responses to types of reasons in other ways can still accept the substance of our defence of RC_{General} .

Before moving on, it is worth noting that abilities can be more or less general. Both a reason and the relevant response will be tokens of various types, some more specific than others. So, there is not really a binary distinction between a general and a specific version of RC but a spectrum of response constraints ranging from the most specific to the most general. Since this observation does not make a difference to the discussion to follow, and for ease of presentation, we will continue to contrast RC_{General} and RC_{Specific} .

4 Massively outweighed reasons

Massively outweighed reasons are not counterexamples to RC_{General} .

In the above case, Joel can in general make responses of a certain type – for example, decisions to move – for a certain type of reasons – namely, those having to do with the obtaining of ice cream. Alternatively, Joel does have a general ability

¹² To be clear, the claim is not that, whenever a person ϕ s for the reason that p, she reasons from (the premise) that p to (the conclusion) ϕ ing but only that reasoning of this sort provides a useful model for acting for a reason.

which might be manifest in moving to Madison for the reason that he can get ice cream there. For instance, Joel is in general able to follow a rule or pattern of reasoning such as: ‘ ϕ ing would get me ice cream, so I’ll ϕ ’. This ability might manifest itself, for instance, in Joel’s going to the ice cream parlor when he is in Madison. Of course, this ability does not manifest in his moving to Madison. But that is just because there are so many things – all the things keeping him in LA – which *interfere* with this ability, and stop him exercising it.

These points do not trivialize RC_{General} . Joel’s ability is an ability to act on instrumental considerations: to act for the reason that ϕ ing would achieve F, when F is something he desires. Since there are many things which Joel does not desire, there are many Fs such that Joel lacks a general ability to reason ‘if ϕ ing would get me F, I’ll ϕ ’. For instance, Joel might lack the ability to reason ‘if ϕ ing would get me marmite, I’ll ϕ ’, or ‘if ϕ ing will get me killed, I’ll ϕ ’.¹³

Cases of massively outweighed reasons are also important because they show that we should expect nothing stronger than RC_{General} to be true. It is a platitude that reasons to act can be outweighed. If an agent is responding properly to reasons, awareness of outweighing reasons will block the manifestation of their ability to respond to a reason. In some cases, like Joel’s, this might mean not just that an agent *will not* respond to an outweighed reason but that they are not *able* to do, in the sense that they lack the specific ability to do so. This does not show that the outweighed reason is not in fact a reason.

Our suggestion is that cases of massively outweighed reasons are counterexamples to RC_{Specific} but not to RC_{General} . A proponent of RC_{Specific} might respond as follows. With Schroeder, we seem to assume that, if a person’s disposition

¹³ Of course, Joel might have *other* abilities which might be manifest in reasoning in one of these ways. The point is that his general ability to act for instrumental considerations is not an ability to reason in these ways.

to ϕ is masked in a circumstance, she lacks the specific ability to ϕ in that circumstance.¹⁴ In the case of Joel, his disposition to be moved by the prospect of ice cream is masked by his love of surfing and the like. It remains the case that he has a disposition to act for the sake of ice cream. Further, the manifestation conditions for this disposition seem to be met – for instance, Joel is aware of the fact that the ice cream is only available in Madison. Surely, the thought continues, he retains the specific ability to move to Madison for this reason. To deny this is to suggest that one lacks the specific ability to ϕ in any circumstance in which one's disposition to ϕ fails to manifest or, more generally, in which one does not ϕ . This is implausible.

Here is a way to put this proposal. When introducing the distinction between general and specific abilities, we said that you lack specific ability when you lack the opportunity (as when you lack the ingredients to make a cake) or when something interferes (as when you're too tired to concentrate on what you're doing). In effect, the present suggestion is that opportunity, together with the appropriate disposition(s), suffices for specific ability. Interference does not preclude specific ability.

However, it is not clear what justifies the differential treatment of opportunity and interference. As we put it before, when you have the specific ability to ϕ , you have the ability to ϕ in your present circumstances – here and now. But if someone prevents Andy Murray from serving, he is not able to serve here and now, anymore than he can when he is on the plane with his racket in the hold. To put it another way, when you have the specific ability to ϕ , it is up to you whether to ϕ . But interference stops it being up to you whether to ϕ just as much as lack of opportunity does.¹⁵

¹⁴ On masking, see Johnston 1992.

¹⁵ These points can be bolstered by noting that the distinction between opportunity and non-interference is not clear-cut. Note also that it is not clear that the proposal under consideration does better than RC_{General} at capturing the thought that reasons are supposed to guide us – in the same sense that Murray cannot be guided to serve when he lacks a racket, he cannot be guided to serve when

Does this mean that one lacks the specific ability to ϕ in any circumstance in which one does not ϕ ? It might seem that it does (cf. Honoré 1964: 464). After all, suppose you want to ϕ and also want to ψ , when you know you cannot do both. If you choose to ϕ , then it seems that your disposition to ψ must have been interfered with, by your choice, or by the strength of your desire to ϕ .

However, we think that the problem here lies with the connection between dispositions and abilities being relied on. In the specific sense of ‘able’ which we have tried to elucidate, what one is able to do is constrained by some of one’s psychological features but not others. For instance, our deep cares and concerns can constrain our options: a loving parent may not be able to choose to kill their child, a proud politician may not be able to bring themselves to apologise for their mistake. In this way, our specific abilities – what we can do here and now – are constrained by our psychology. Our claim, following Schroeder, is that Joel’s attachment to Los Angeles constrains his options in this way. But our cares and concerns leave us with plenty of options open. So it hardly follows that what Joel can do in the here and now is only what he in fact does. If accounts of abilities which connect abilities very closely to dispositions struggle to accommodate these features of abilities, that is a problem for those accounts, rather than for anything we have argued for here.¹⁶

Of course, one might simply stipulate a sense of ‘able’ in which one is able to ϕ when one has a disposition to ϕ and the manifestation conditions for this disposition are met. And one might defend a version of the response constraint that uses this sense of ‘able’. In effect, this would be a version of the response condition which is

something prevents him serving. We consider how well RC_{General} captures the original thought about guidance below.

¹⁶ More precisely, the problem arises from the following two claims: (i) if your disposition to ϕ is masked, you lack the specific ability to ϕ ; and (ii) if you desire to ϕ but do not ϕ because of a conflicting desire or choice, you have a disposition to ϕ which is masked. It would take us too far afield to explore which of these claims should be rejected. For discussion of the link between abilities and dispositions, see Clarke 2009; Vihvelin 2013: ch.6; Whittle 2010.

more general than RC_{Specific} but less general than RC_{General} . One worry about this approach is that it is not clear that it could be what defenders of the response constraint have had in mind, given that the sense of ‘able’ it relies on is stipulative and, as the discussion above indicates, does not seem to correspond to the ordinary senses of ‘able’ we have elucidated. But we need not press this worry too strongly. We can accept that this proposal also accommodates the case of Joel. The choice between it and RC_{General} is then to be made on independent grounds. The rest of the paper will provide such grounds. In the next section, we argue that RC_{General} , unlike the present proposal, also allows for self-effacing reasons.¹⁷ In the following section, we provide a further rationale for specifying the abilities required by reasons in the way that RC_{General} does.

5 Self-effacing reasons

Consider again Beth. Does she have a general ability which might be manifest in going home for the reason that there’s a surprise party there? You might think not. After all, Beth is not in general able to follow the rule ‘if there’s a surprise party for me at location L, go to L!’

However, things are not so straightforward. For there are other patterns of reasoning which the surprise party reasoning exemplifies which Beth does follow. For instance, Beth has the general ability to reason from desiring an end, believing that p and believing that, given p, ϕ ing will help her achieve that end, to intending to ϕ . Suppose that Beth loves bowling. And suppose that she knows that, given that the number 10 bus goes to the bowling alley, taking the number 10 bus promotes bowling. In that case, Beth might reason: the number 10 bus goes to the bowling

¹⁷ The present proposal does not allow self-effacing reasons because such reasons are conditional on the manifestation conditions for the relevant disposition – for example, knowledge or belief in the fact that provides the reason – not being satisfied.

alley, so I'll take the number 10 bus. The surprise party reasoning is also an instance of this pattern of reasoning. So Beth does have a general ability to reason in a way which 'there's a surprise party at home, so I'll go home' exemplifies.

The pattern of reasoning here is relatively coarse-grained. It might be thought that reasons should be connected to more fine-grained abilities – abilities which are more closely connected to the content of the particular reason. And it might be thought that Beth has no such abilities with respect to the surprise party reasoning.

In fact, though, Beth does have some such abilities. For instance, Beth might well have the general ability to reason 'there's a surprise F at location L, so I'll go to L', when a surprise F is something that she enjoys or is interested in. Beth might manifest this ability in going into a house for the reason that there will be a surprise gift there, or for the reason that she will have a surprise visitor. (To be clear: the surprise here is not that there is a gift/visitor but what/who it is.)

However, it is true that Beth lacks certain more fine-grained abilities which the surprise party reasoning exemplifies. In particular, as already noted, she lacks the general ability to reason: there's a surprise party for me at L, so I'll go to L. So, if RC_{General} is understood to imply that the surprise party is a reason for Beth to go home only if she has this ability, then RC_{General} implies that the surprise party is not a reason for her to go home. The question thus seems to be how fine-grained an ability we should take RC_{General} to require.

It is worth noting that, even when interpreted so as to imply that the surprise party is not a reason for Beth, RC_{General} does not rule out all self-effacing reasons. Consider a version of the surprise party case in which Beth knows that, if going home would make her happy, then there is a surprise party there. In such a case, the fact that going home would make her happy is a self-effacing reason. But Beth does have the

general ability to reason: going home would make me happy, so I'll go home. It is just that this ability is interfered with when she knows that going home would have made her happy only because there is a surprise party there.

Furthermore, when understood in this very fine-grained way, RC_{General} seems too strong. Consider: spinach contains iron. That seems like it might be a reason for Elliot to eat his spinach. But Elliot lacks the concept of iron. So, he is not able to eat spinach for the reason that it contains iron (or for any other iron-involving reasons). Given the very fine-grained version of RC_{General} , it is not a reason for him to do so. That seems wrong. At least, it seems to run counter to our ordinary talk of reasons. Consider, for instance, that we would be happy to advise Elliot to eat his spinach on the grounds that it contains iron.

In contrast, less fine-grained interpretations of RC_{General} allow that the fact that spinach contains iron is a reason for Elliot to eat his spinach. After all, Elliot is able to perform the type of action to which eating spinach belongs on the basis of the kind of fact which relates to, say, the benefits of doing so, of which the fact that spinach contains iron is a token or instance.¹⁸

So we have seen that the surprise party case is a counterexample only to the most fine-grained ways of interpreting RC_{General} . Moreover, we have seen that even the most fine-grained interpretation allows some self-effacing reasons and also has some questionable implications. Since, as we have also argued, RC_{General} should be preferred to RC_{Specific} , we take this to show that the surprise party case is not a counterexample to the most plausible versions of the response constraint.

¹⁸ In response, it might be denied that the fact that spinach contains iron is a reason for Elliot to eat it. But this seems costly and theoretically driven. Alternatively, it might be denied that eating spinach for the reason that it contains iron requires Elliot to possess the concept of iron. But this also seems dubious. It is highly plausible that ϕ ing for the reason that p requires that you believe or otherwise represent that p . In turn, it is highly plausible that representing spinach as containing iron requires the concept of iron. Cf. n9 above.

Nonetheless, it may seem unsatisfying to leave things there. While we have suggested that reflection on cases, such as Elliot's, provides some reason to prefer more coarse-grained interpretations of RC_{General} , it would be more satisfying to offer a rationale for interpreting the principle in one way rather than another. In the next section, we will sketch the beginnings of such a rationale.

6 Responding to reasons as such

Consider: Why is the fact that there is a surprise party waiting for her there a reason for Beth to go home for 5pm? A natural answer to this question might be: Because Beth loves surprises and, if she goes home for 5pm, she will promote something she loves. Corresponding to this explanation is Beth's general ability to reason 'p, so I'll ϕ ' when she thinks that, given p, ϕ ing promotes something she loves.

In light of these observations, we can address the question of how to specify the general ability which, according to RC_{General} , is a condition on a consideration's being a reason. The specification of the general ability should correspond to an explanation of why the relevant consideration is a reason for the relevant response.¹⁹

In support of this suggestion, recall that RC_{General} is supposed to capture the intuitive idea that reasons must be able to guide us. Plausibly, though, the underlying thought here is more specific: reasons must be able to guide us *in their capacity as reasons* (cf. Shah 2006: 485ff). That is, a reason to ϕ must be able to guide you to ϕ in virtue of being a reason to ϕ .

Reasons must be able to guide in this way because it is only so that they make available certain kinds of important normative status. For example, to be doxastically justified in believing that p, you need to believe that p because there is justification (a

¹⁹ There will, of course, be multiple explanations, at different levels of generality, for why a consideration is a reason for a person to act or hold some attitude. Our claim is only that the general ability must correspond to *an* explanation.

justifying reason) to believe that p , and to be creditworthy for ϕ ing on certain grounds, you need to ϕ because those grounds make it right to ϕ (cf. Arpaly 2004; Arpaly and Schroeder 2014; Markovits 2010b).²⁰

Importantly, ϕ ing for the reason that p does not suffice for responding to the fact that p *as* a reason to ϕ . This is perhaps clearest in the theoretical case. For instance, suppose that you reason:

There is a spider web in the window

If there is a spider web in the window, there is a spider nearby

So, there is a spider nearby.

If your premises are known, you here come to believe that there is a spider nearby on the basis of facts which constitute a reason for your belief. However, it does not follow that you respond to these reasons *as* reasons. For instance, suppose that in drawing this inference you are following the *arachnophobe's rule*: from any premises concerning spiders, conclude that there is a spider nearby. In that case, your inference would not result in a (doxastically) justified belief. You would not be responding to the relevant reasons as reasons (cf. Firth 1978; Millar 1991; Turri 2010; Lord and Sylvan Forthcoming).

What more is needed? We will not attempt a full answer to this difficult question here. What we will suggest is that that *one* way to respond to that p as a reason to ϕ is for one's ϕ ing for the reason that p to manifest an ability which

²⁰ The idea we appeal to here is that you are creditworthy for ϕ ing only if you ϕ for the reasons that make ϕ ing right. These authors also claim that ϕ ing for the right reasons is sufficient for creditworthiness. We do not commit to that claim here.

corresponds to that in virtue of which that p is a reason to φ .²¹

To see the plausibility of this, consider the spider inference again. Suppose your inference to the conclusion that there is a spider nearby manifests your ability to engage in modus ponens reasoning, that is, reasoning of the form: p , if p then q , so q . Here your ability corresponds to that in virtue of which your premises constitute a reason to believe that there is a spider nearby. Roughly, your premises constitute this reason because their form is such as to guarantee that, if they are true, your conclusion is true too. That is a plausible explanation of why your reasoning in this case allows you to respond to reasons as reasons, and so results in a justified belief.

We have suggested that, when you have an ability which corresponds to an explanation of why certain considerations are reasons, then you have an ability to respond to those considerations as reasons. If that is right, then we have a rationale for interpreting RC_{General} in the way we have recommended.

According to RC_{General} , for a fact to be a reason for you to make some response, you must have the general ability to make responses of that type for reasons of that type. The question we have addressed in this section is how to specify the relevant ability – in particular, the reason and response types. Our suggestion was that the specification should correspond to an explanation for why a consideration of the relevant type is a reason for the relevant type of response. The rationale for this is that, when a subject manifests the ability so specified, she is responding to the consideration *as a reason* for the relevant response.

7 Objections and replies

²¹ It might be that this is not quite sufficient either. It might be that such an ability is sufficient only if you have that ability *because* it is the sort of ability which corresponds to the explanation of reasons in this way. This would not impugn our point.

We have argued that neither massively outweighed nor self-effacing reasons require us to give up RC, understood as the claim that only considerations we have the general ability to act on can be reasons. We have also argued that, given the possibility of outweighed reasons, this is all we should have asked for. And we have suggested that RC, when interpreted in the way we propose, captures the idea that reasons are supposed to guide us *as reasons*.

7.1 Is the response constraint toothless?

The version of the response constraint we have proposed may seem very weak. This might make one worry that it is toothless.

However RC_{General} still has much of the potential significance of the response constraint.²² For example, RC_{General} still supports skepticism about reasons of the wrong kind. To return to the above example, Jane is not able (in the general sense) to form beliefs on the basis of considerations which reveal so believing to bring certain benefits. So, given RC_{General} , the pragmatic consideration is not a reason for believing (though it might be a reason for, say, taking certain actions, like visiting a hypnotist).²³

Moreover, RC_{General} seems still to draw a line between the deontic and the evaluative. While Lilian has the general ability to perform actions like that of watering the garden for reasons such as that the soil is dry, the clouds do not. So, while it would be good if both the clouds and Lilian were to water the garden, only Lilian has a reason to do so.

²² It does not quite have all of the significance which some have taken the constraint to have. As we argue elsewhere (Way and Whiting Manuscript), RC_{General} cannot sustain the arguments for perspectivism about reasons we mentioned in the introduction.

²³ Jane does have the general ability to reason ‘ ϕ ing will benefit me, so I’ll ϕ ’, when ϕ ing is an act-type. But she does not have the general ability to reason in this way when ϕ ing is an attitude-type. It is the lack of this latter ability which rules out pragmatic reasons for belief and other reasons of the wrong kind.

One might allow that RC_{General} implies that Lilian, but not the clouds, can have reasons to water the garden, but object that that principle cannot *explain* this difference between them. After all, one might note, RC_{General} can be met by a putative reason for an agent to ϕ even when that agent cannot, in the specific sense, ϕ at all. For instance, Lilian retains the general ability to water her garden for reasons such as that the soil is dry even when she is away from home, and so not able, in the specific sense, to water her garden. In this case, that the soil is dry might be a respect in which it would be good for Lilian to water the garden but, given RIC_{Specific} , it is not a reason for her to do so. RC_{General} cannot explain why this is.

We have granted that reason implies can in the specific sense; that is, we have granted RIC_{Specific} . And we are also happy to grant that this principle plays a role in distinguishing the deontic from the evaluative. However, this principle is not by itself enough to explain this difference. Even when one can ϕ , in the specific sense, there is a difference between respects in which it would be good to ϕ and reasons to ϕ . Suppose that it would be good if Jessica got taller, insofar as it would allow her to join the basketball team. Though Jessica can get taller, the fact that getting taller would allow her to join the basketball team is not a reason for her to do so. RC_{General} helps to explain this: Jessica lacks a general ability to get taller, or to perform other types of action to which getting taller belongs, for reasons concerning the benefits of doing so.²⁴ So RC_{General} can still play an important role in explaining the difference between the deontic and the evaluative.

In addition, RC_{General} can still serve as a premise of an argument for a Humean theory of reasons. RC_{General} implies that that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have a general ability to reason: p , so I'll ϕ . A Humean view of motivation implies that you

²⁴ Of course, it is also true that Jessica lacks the general ability to get taller for any kind of reason. But there can also be cases in which someone is able to ϕ for some kinds of reasons but not others. RC_{General} can help to explain why only the former kind of considerations can be reasons for such an agent.

have such an ability only if you have some desire which you take to be served by ϕ ing, given that p.²⁵ Together, these claims imply that that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if you have some desire which you take to be served by ϕ ing, given that p.

This results in a Humean view of reasons. But it might not be the view that Williams, for example, is after. Consider his example of Owen Wingrave:

Owen's family urge on him the necessity and importance of his joining the army, since all his male ancestors were soldiers, and family pride requires him to do the same. Owen Wingrave has no motivation to join the army at all, and all his desires lead in the other direction: he hates everything about military life and what it means (Williams 1982: 106).

Williams' view is supposed to deliver the verdict that there is no reason for Owen to join the army. But the version of the Humean view which $RC_{\text{Generalism}}$ supports seems not to do so. According to it, the fact that pride is at stake is a reason for Owen to join the army only if he is able in general to perform acts of that sort for reasons of that sort. And we can imagine that Owen satisfies this condition – he is able to perform other acts of signing up, for example, to tennis tournaments and anti-war demonstrations, for reasons of pride. Of course, given the Humean view of motivation, this requires that Owen have a desire which performing such acts satisfies, given pride-related considerations. But, again, we can imagine that Owen has some such desire.

So, RC_{General} delivers a weaker version of the Humean view of reasons than the kind Williams' argument is supposed to deliver. However, the significance of this

²⁵ We are not here endorsing the Humean view.

point should not be exaggerated. First, if, as is natural for Humeans to assume, strength of reasons is correlated with the ease with which someone might be motivated by a reason, the resulting view will still imply that Owen's reason to join the army will be very weak. This may be enough for many Humeans' purposes.²⁶ Second, the problem here is primarily a problem for Williams, not for the proponent of RC_{General}. His argument requires a stronger constraint on reasons than RC_{General} but, as discussed above, such constraints are open to counterexamples.

The aim here is not to argue for or against the Humean theory of reasons. The discussion serves instead to show that RC_{General} still has enough bite to figure in a case for that theory. If that case does not support the version of the Humean theory originally intended, that is an interesting result for both Humeans and their opponents.

7.2 Reasons and guidance

At the outset, we introduced RC as capturing the thought that reasons are *guides*. One might wonder whether the version of RC we defend really does this. After all, it is consistent with RC_{General} that there are cases in which there is a reason for a person to perform some act and yet she lacks, not only the specific ability to act for that reason, but the specific ability to act (full stop). As noted above, RC_{General} entails RIC_{General}, but not RIC_{Specific}. How, one might ask, can a reason guide a person to do things she cannot in the specific sense do, whether for that or some other reason or, indeed, for no reason at all?

It seems to us that there is a clear sense in which a reason of this sort is a

²⁶ It is worth noting in this regard that Owen, as imagined here, looks very similar indeed to Joel. It is therefore hard to see a rationale for claiming that there is a reason for Joel to move to Madison but not for Owen to join the army. Note also that, since Owen's sense of pride could, in at least a fairly specific sense, lead to some degree of *motivation* to join the army, versions of Humeanism which take reasons to correspond to what one could be motivated to do – as Williams himself sometimes seems to suggest (e.g. 1981: 110) – will also imply that Owen has some reason to join the army. For general discussion of what Humeans should say about the strength of reasons, see Schroeder 2007: chs. 5 and 7.

guide. By way of analogy, suppose that a tourist has a guidebook for Rome. It remains a guide even if she forgets to bring it when visiting the Forum, hence, even if she cannot in the specific sense be guided by it on that occasion. Indeed, it remains a guide even if she cannot in the specific sense visit the forum or anywhere else in Rome (say, because she will never have an opportunity to travel to Italy). The book is a guide in the sense that it is a token of a type which in general provides guidance to the tourist and others. In the same sense, a reason is a guide, even it cannot in the specific sense guide a person on a particular occasion, so long as it satisfies RC_{General} .

However, if the reader insists that to use the notion of guidance in this way is strained or otherwise infelicitous, we can allow that RC_{General} does not fully capture the original thought about guidance.²⁷ The point would then be that that thought does not stand up to scrutiny but there is a closely related thought which RC_{General} captures, which is not open to the relevant objections, remains intuitively appealing, and which has substantial import, as discussed above.²⁸

7.3 Does our proposal generalise?

We have argued that the surprise party case is not a counterexample to RC, suitably understood. But other writers have offered different examples of self-effacing reasons, not all of which seem entirely analogous to the surprise party case. So it

²⁷ One way to press this worry is to observe that the very weak version of the response constraint stated in n8, according to which that p is a reason for you to ϕ only if *someone* can ϕ for the reason that p , allows that reasons are guides in a similar sense. The problem, one might think, is that neither constraint captures the idea that reasons are guides for the particular agent – just as a guidebook which the tourist has left behind is no help to the particular tourist.

However, while we grant that RC_{General} may not fully capture the original thought about guidance, we think that it comes closer to doing so than this very weak constraint. A reason that meets RC_{General} will be able to provide guidance to the particular agent given opportunity and lack of interference. That is not true of a reason that meets the very weak constraint. To continue with the analogy: a reason which meets the very weak constraint might be like a guidebook written in a language which the particular tourist cannot understand, and so is of no use to the tourist even if she carries it with her in Rome. That is not true of reasons which meet RC_{General} .

²⁸ Recall that we have also granted RIC_{Specific} . It may be that this principle in combination with RC_{General} comes closer to capturing the initial thought about guidance.

might be wondered whether our response to the latter generalises. While we cannot consider all such cases here, we will offer some comments on how other kinds of self-effacing reasons should be handled.

One important class of cases of self-effacing reasons involves facts about our own deficiencies. To take an example from Johnson (1999: 61), suppose that you are under the delusion that you are James Bond. This fact seems like a reason to visit a psychiatrist. But you cannot go to the psychiatrist for this reason. If you could, you would not be deluded in the first place.²⁹

However, as Setiya (2009) observes, we often can recognize and take steps to remedy our deficiencies. The argument of this paper bolsters this response. Even if you were so deluded that you lacked the specific ability to recognize and respond to some delusion, you might retain the general ability to recognize and respond to deficiencies (including more specific deficiencies, such as believing against the evidence). On the interpretation we have defended, this is all that is required to meet the response constraint.

A rather different class of examples involve facts about positive character traits whose manifestation involves acting for certain reasons. For instance, suppose that ϕ ing would be modest, or spontaneous. That might seem to be a reason to ϕ . But you cannot respond to that reason by ϕ ing on the basis of it. What is done for the sake of modesty is not modest; what is done for the sake of spontaneity is not spontaneous (cf. Smith 2009).

We grant that these examples must be handled in a different way. But we deny that they pose any threat to the response constraint. The claim that ϕ ing would be modest is, we suggest, underspecified. Very roughly, it could mean either:

²⁹ Cf. Markovits 2010b. For other examples of this type, see Millgram 1996; Shafer-Landau 2003: ch.7; Smith 2009.

ϕing because you do not care about how you are ranked would be modest³⁰

or:

ϕing is what a modest person would do.

The second of these could indeed be a reason to ϕ but it is no counterexample to RC_{General} . You might ϕ because it is what a modest person would do – for instance, if you were trying to habituate yourself into becoming modest.

The first is not plausibly a reason to ϕ, since it does not point to a feature of ϕing as such, but only a feature of ϕing in a certain way. So it is also not a counterexample to the response constraint, understood as a constraint on reasons for actions and attitudes.³¹

7.4 Do decisive reasons require specific ability?

Consider:

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

³⁰ For illustrative purposes, we here draw on the account of modesty defended in Arpaly and Schroeder 2014. Our substantive point depends only on the uncontroversial point that whether an act is modest depends on the reasons for which it is performed.

³¹ In response, it might be said that the first consideration is a reason to ϕ-because-you-do-not-care-about-how-you-are-ranked and that this reason is a counterexample to RC_{General} . Notice though that *all* reasons to act from certain motives, or for certain reasons, seem to fail the response constraint. Indeed, since it is not clear what it would be to act-for-a-reason for a reason, they fail the weaker constraint that only the kinds of things which can be done for reasons are subject to reasons. We think that this should make us dubious that there are such reasons (see Whiting forthcoming for further discussion).

The grounds given so far for rejecting the claim that reasons imply specific ability do not undermine this claim. Moreover, the claim that decisive reasons imply specific ability may seem more plausible than the claim that reasons in general do. To say that there is decisive reason to ϕ in some circumstance is to make an overall verdict about what to do in that circumstance. Whether or not reasons in general can guide us, in the specific sense, it may seem important that overall reasons can.

If Decisive is true, then, even if the fact that there is a surprise party waiting for Beth can be a reason for her to go home, it cannot be a decisive reason for her to do so. For we have granted that Beth lacks the specific ability to go home for the reason that there is a surprise party there. And this might still seem implausible. The fact that there is a surprise party waiting for her might seem to make it the case that Beth ought to go home.³²

Should we accept Decisive? As it stands it faces two serious problems. First, many suppose that one might lack the specific ability to act for a decisive reason because one is unaware of that reason. Second, everyone should hold that one might lack the specific ability to act for a decisive reason because one is in some way irrational.

We might try revising Decisive to accommodate these points:

Decisive* p is a decisive reason for you to ϕ only if you have the specific ability to ϕ for the reason that p (absent ignorance that p and irrationality).

One worry is that this move is ad hoc. If we are granting that there are cases in which

³² Decisive implies that the fact that going home would make her happy is also not a decisive reason for Beth to go into the living room, at least in the version of the case in which Beth could infer that there's a surprise party waiting for her from the fact that going home would make her happy.

an agent lacks the specific ability to respond to decisive reasons, such as cases of irrationality, why not suppose that self-effacing reasons are just further examples of such cases? Why expect any straightforward truth about when agents will have the specific ability to respond to decisive reasons?

In any case, Decisive* raises further problems. Consider the following:

Joel is deciding whether to go to the party at Jack's or the party at Jenny's. He knows that both parties will be lots of fun. But he also knows that at Jack's, but not Jenny's, he can get chocolate-cayenne-cinnamon flavoured ice cream. However, although he is in no position to know this, the road to Jack's is blocked, and so he won't be able to get there.

Ought implies *can* (in the specific sense).³³ So, it is not the case that Joel ought to go to the party at Jack's. The fact that the party at Jenny's will be lots of fun is a strong reason to go to Jenny's. Indeed, it is plausibly a decisive reason to go there – it's easy to imagine that Joel has no other options that would be more worth pursuing.

However, absent irrationality, Joel might lack the specific ability to go to the party at Jenny's for the reason that it will be lots of fun. He has the general ability to reason 'the party at Jenny's will be lots of fun, so I'll go there'. But this ability might well be blocked here. Given his ignorance that he cannot go to Jack's, his desire for ice cream will prevent him going to Jenny's. This is not irrational – indeed, it would be irrational for him to go to Jenny's given his information. So the case seems like a counterexample to Decisive*.³⁴

³³ Of course, some deny this. But it is not open to a proponent of Decisive* to do so, since that principle entails that *ought implies can*.

³⁴ We discuss cases of this structure in more detail in Way and Whiting Manuscript.

Again, further refinements to Decisive might be proposed. It might be suggested that that p is a decisive reason for you to ϕ only if, absent irrationality, and given knowledge of all the normatively relevant considerations, you have the specific ability to ϕ for the reason that p . But again it is unclear what the rationale might be for adding a condition of this sort in response to counter-examples, while insisting that no such conditions could be added to allow for self-effacing reasons.

8 Conclusion

We conclude that while both pro tanto and decisive reasons for ϕ ing may require a general ability to ϕ for such reasons, neither requires the specific ability to do so. And in that case neither massively outweighed reasons nor self-effacing reasons undermine the response constraint, when interpreted in the way we propose. That constraint on reasons is both defensible and remains of theoretical significance. It captures the idea, not only that reasons are guides, but that reasons are guides *in their capacity as reasons*.³⁵

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