

## Reasons in Action

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**Abstract:** When an agent performs an action because she takes something as a reason to do so, does she take it as a normative reason for the action or as an explanatory reason? In *Reasons Without Rationalism*, Setiya criticizes the normative view and advances a version of the explanatory view. I defend a version of the normative view against Setiya's criticisms and show that Setiya's explanatory account has two major flaws: it raises questions that it cannot answer about the occurrence of one motivational 'because' within the scope of another; and it cannot accommodate the fact that, if an agent can  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$ , then she could take  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$  without  $\phi$ -ing.

### 1. Introduction

In a recent book, Kieran Setiya offers an account of what it is for an agent to perform an action because she takes something as a reason to do so.<sup>1</sup> This is meant to imply not only that the reason motivates and explains her action (p. 35), but also that it is her *ground* for her action (p. 35): it is a reason *for which she acts* (p. 30) and, in acting, she *regards it as her reason* (p. 36).<sup>2</sup> Setiya often uses variants of the phrase 'acting for a reason' for action that satisfies these demanding conditions. In this paper, I restrict the phrase to such action and challenge Setiya's account of what it involves.

Everyday talk about acting for a reason is much more permissive and flexible, covering such a wide range of phenomena that it is doubtful

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1 Setiya 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, page references apply to this book. The book advances a virtue theory of practical reasons. I am concerned only with some material in Part One, an essay in the philosophy of action in which the idea of taking something as a reason is prominent.

2 These italics indicate that, although the vocabulary is Setiya's, I am not quoting exactly. Similar language is scattered over many pages, e.g.: 'acting on the basis of reasons' (p. 22); 'reasons for acting must be seen as reasons' (p. 23); 'To act for reasons is to base one's action on reasons, as such' (p. 36); 'someone who acts because  $p$  ... thinks of  $p$  as his reason to act, and ... is moved by this recognition' (p. 39).

that there could be a unitary account of all of them. There are also legitimate philosophical uses of the phrase ‘acting for a reason’ that do not require the agent to take anything as a reason (e.g., Audi 1986, pp. 517–8, Dancy 2000, p. 1, and Bittner 2001, pp. 162–3). By restricting the phrase to the kind of human intentional action described above, I am not suggesting that such action is typical. Indeed, it is quite atypical. But it is also among the most distinctive and sophisticated action of which humans are capable.

It is natural to suppose that an agent who acts for a reason in the stipulated sense performs the action because she takes something to be a *normative* reason for performing it (‘the Normative View’), rather than because she takes something to be an *explanatory* reason for performing it (‘the Explanatory View’). Normative reasons are considerations that favor an agent’s doing something—regardless of whether she recognizes this or does what they favor. Explanatory reasons are motivational factors that causally explain what an agent does—regardless of whether they count in favor of her doing it. It is not obvious how acting for a reason could amount to the agent’s acting because she takes some factor to be an explanatory reason for her action. If she acts because she takes something to be the case, then what explains her action is this taking. But if she correctly takes a certain factor to explain her action, then what explains her action is the factor rather than the taking. A conundrum looms. The easiest way to avoid it is to accept the Normative View—as indeed I do.<sup>3</sup>

Setiya attacks the Normative View and advances a detailed version of the Explanatory View. I challenge both Setiya’s account and his criticisms of the Normative View.

My concerns are limited to the question of how acting for a reason in the stipulated sense is to be understood. I do not defend the main object of Setiya’s attack, viz., what he calls ‘the “normative” conception of

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<sup>3</sup> Supporters of the Normative View include Baier (1958, pp. 154–61), Darwall (1983, p. 32), and others who are cited in fn.7.

agency,' according to which 'we act intentionally ... "under the guise of the good",' which is meant to express the claim that 'to do something intentionally is to see some good in doing it' (p. 16). I think Setiya is right to reject this position. If my arguments succeed, they will not only cast doubt on the Explanatory View, but will also show that an endorsement of this view is not required in order to challenge the doctrine of 'the guise of the good'.<sup>4</sup>

The structure of the rest of this paper is as follows. In section 2, I outline a version of the Normative View to serve as an alternative to Setiya's account. Section 3 presents an indirect, theoretical criticism of my account based on Setiya's criteria for an adequate account of acting for a reason. Section 4 presents Setiya's substantive criticism of the Normative View. Section 5 unpacks Setiya's version of the Explanatory View. Section 6 identifies two major problems with his account. Section 7 refutes Setiya's substantive criticism of the Normative View. Section 8 refutes the theoretical criticism of my account. Finally, section 9 summarizes the ways in which my account is superior to Setiya's.

## 2. A Normative Account

The Normative View is attractive for several reasons. It avoids the puzzle described above. It does justice to the talk that Setiya associates with acting for a reason. And it provides a straightforward account of typical cases of acting for a reason. Consider Setiya's example of going for a walk for the reason that the weather is fine (p. 42). According to the Normative View, this amounts to his going for a walk because he takes the fact that the weather is fine to favor a walk. This is not only plausible, but also makes sense of the possibility that he can take this consideration to favor a walk without actually going for a walk.

I will now sketch a particular version of the Normative View to provide a definite account to contrast with Setiya's version of the

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<sup>4</sup> Setiya 2010, a more recent critique of the doctrine, does not appear to be committed to the Explanatory View.

Explanatory View. This account captures what is essential to the Normative View, but I do not claim it is the best version of the view. I will argue that it can answer Setiya's objections to the Normative View and that it avoids the problems of his explanatory account.

In presenting my account, I focus on the case in which the agent's reason for her action is specified propositionally, as in

(r) *A* is  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that *p*.

This is the present-tense form of Setiya's 'canonical expression of an agent's reason' for acting (p. 29). The phraseology in (r) is misleading insofar as it suggests that a proposition can serve as an agent's reason only if it is true. Setiya indicates that this is not intended (p. 29). I will accordingly assume that (r) does not imply *p*.

One consequence of this understanding of the phrase 'for the reason that' is that it is not equivalent to everyday uses of 'because' in similar contexts. 'Sam is going next door because Desirée is there' implies that Desirée is indeed next door. That's why we say something like 'Sam is going next door because he thinks Desirée is there' if we do not know she is there. Note also that one can say that an agent did something because of something without implying that she took it as a reason. 'Andrea dropped her coffee because Bertie bumped her' does not imply that Andrea took Bertie's bumping her as a reason to drop her coffee, but 'Andrea dropped her coffee for the reason that Bertie bumped her' does. Even when 'because' is used to say what motivates an agent to perform an intentional action, it is not implied that what motivates him is his reason for acting. As Setiya observes, he could 'shout at the Pirates' manager as [he] listen[s] to the radio ... because [he is] angry' without shouting for the reason that he is angry (p. 53). Despite these differences between 'because' and 'for the reason that,' Setiya sometimes uses the former as equivalent to the latter. This is often harmless, but it can make a difference.

The core of my normative account of acting for a reason is as follows.

(N) *A* is  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that *p* if and only if

- (1)  $A$  believes that  $p$  is a normative reason for her to  $\phi$ ,
- (2)  $\phi$ -ing is an intentional action,
- (3)  $A$  has this belief while  $\phi$ -ing, and
- (4) the belief causes  $A$  to  $\phi$  and does so in an appropriate way.

Some comments, clarifications, and qualifications are in order.

In clause (1), I follow the obvious line of equating someone's taking  $p$  as a normative reason for her to  $\phi$  with her believing that it is such a reason. This belief is a first-person belief that the agent could express by saying ' $p$  is a reason for me to  $\phi$ .' I will assume that such a belief is true if and only if  $p$  is the case and this favors the agent's  $\phi$ -ing. Notice that, on this account of the belief, the agent is not required to be able to describe what she takes to be a reason as a 'normative reason'. This is important because the concept of a normative reason is a philosophical concept that most agents do not have.

Clause (2) restricts (N) to intentional actions, setting aside other things that an agent could do, such as waking up at 4:00 a.m. or losing patience with a student. I include this restriction to allow for the possibility of doing things for reasons even if they are not intentional actions.

Clause (3) captures the fact that, when an agent acts for a reason, her attitude of taking a certain consideration as a reason for her action is engaged in and thus concurrent with the action itself. But the attitude could—and typically will—commence before the action.

Clause (4) should be understood as implying not only that the belief is the efficient cause of the action but also—in light of clause (3)—that, if the action takes time to perform, the belief causally sustains it. Clause (4) captures the thought that, in acting for a reason, the agent performs the action *because* she takes some consideration to be a reason to do so. Her taking it to be a reason motivates and explains her action. It must,

therefore, cause it, but not accidentally. I require that the belief cause the action 'in an appropriate way' to exclude deviant causation.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. A Theoretical Objection

A theoretical objection to my account of acting for a reason, (N), arises from two fundamental principles in the philosophy of action to which Setiya is committed. One is that everything done for a reason must be an intentional action (p. 24). The other is that 'When someone is acting intentionally, there must be something he is doing intentionally, not merely trying to do, in the belief that he is doing it.' (p. 26) Combining the two principles, Setiya says:

When *A* is doing  $\phi$  because *p*,<sup>6</sup> she is acting intentionally, and so she must be doing something in the belief that she is doing it. In order to account for this necessity, we need to break down what is involved in acting for a reason; we need to show how one of its elements is, or involves, the relevant belief. (p. 28)

Setiya would reject (N) because it does not do this. Indeed, it fails his test on two counts. First, because clause (2) restricts (N) to intentional actions, (N) leaves open the possibility of things done for reasons that are not intentional actions. Second, because (N) presupposes the idea of an intentional action and does not incorporate an account of what an intentional action is, it cannot explain why an agent who is acting for a reason must be doing something *intentionally* in the belief that she is doing it. So even if (N) is extensionally correct, Setiya must reject it on the ground that it fails to explain everything that an adequate account should explain.

### 4. A Substantive Objection

Setiya's explicit criticism of the Normative View is that a normative reason is always a good reason, but that an agent can act for a reason

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<sup>5</sup> I agree with Setiya (pp. 32–3) that an adequate account of non-deviant causation is possible.

<sup>6</sup> It is clear from the remainder of this quotation that this 'because' is meant to be equivalent to 'for the reason that'.

without taking it to be a good reason. If both claims hold, then (N) is not even extensionally correct.

Setiya summarizes his understanding of normative reasons as follows.

Reasons for acting, in one sense, are considerations that count in favor of doing something. To say that there is a reason for me to finish this book is to point to a justification for doing so. In saying what the reason is, we specify the content of the justification. It is reasons in this sense—*good* reasons or *normative* reasons—that are conceptually related to the conditions of good practical thought. (pp. 28–9)

As this passage suggests, Setiya assumes rather than argues that normative reasons are good reasons. He backs up the assumption by identifying several authors who ‘claim that acting for a reason is acting for what one takes to be a *good* reason’ (p. 16, n.29).<sup>7</sup> And many authors do hold that normative reasons are good reasons.<sup>8</sup>

Setiya supports the claim that an agent can act for a reason without regarding it as a good reason by means of four examples. First, a man ‘who thinks that sexual desire is the work of the devil ... can certainly *act* on such a desire ...—without regarding the reason for which he is acting (to satisfy his sexual urge) as any good’ (pp. 36–7).<sup>9</sup> Second, if ‘someone who enjoys philosophy for the sense of power it can give, even though he does not see such pleasures as worthwhile[,] ... asks derisive questions at talks because that will humiliate the visiting speaker,’ then he is acting for a reason even though ‘he recognizes ... that it is not a good reason’ (p. 37).<sup>10</sup> Third, if, due to *akrasia*, ‘I decide to smoke an entire pack of cigarettes tonight because I won’t be able to do so tomorrow, having quit

7 Among others, Setiya cites Anscombe (1963, pp. 21–5), Darwall (1983, p. 205), Bond (1983, pp. 30–1), Korsgaard (1997, p. 221), Raz (1999, pp. 8, 22–45), and Velleman (2000, pp. 9, 101, 140–2).

8 This includes Darwall (1983, pp. 80, 201), Bond (1983, pp. 27–31), Smith (1994, p. 95), Scanlon (1998, pp. 19, 44–5), and Dancy (2000, pp. 1–3). Normative reasons are not assumed to be good reasons in Nagel 1970, pp. 49–51 (where ‘prima facie reasons’ need not be good reasons), Stampe 1987, pp. 345–6, Dancy 2004, pp. 15–6 (where ‘contributory reasons’ are clearly not good reasons), and Schroeder 2007, pp. 84–102 and 2011, pp. 332–6.

9 Setiya adapts this example from Watson 1975, p. 210.

10 Setiya adapts this example from Burnyeat 1980, p. 76.

at midnight, I know that this fact does nothing to justify my action' and 'that I am irrational in giving it any weight at all' (p. 37). Fourth, if Quinn's notorious radio man (1993, pp. 236–7), who has 'a brute inclination to turn on radios' for no reason (p. 37), plugs in a radio 'because [he is] going to turn it on,' he is acting for a reason even though he 'can hardly see [it] ... as a *good reason*' (p. 38).

If, as these cases suggest, it is possible to act for a reason without regarding it as a good reason, and normative reasons are good reasons, then the Normative View is mistaken.

### 5. Setiya's Explanatory Account

In working toward his version of the Explanatory View, Setiya focuses on the attitude of 'taking something as one's reason to act' (p. 39) as it is involved in acting for a reason. On his first-pass account,

(E1) 'To take  $p$  as one's reason for doing  $\phi$  is to have the desire-like belief that one is doing  $\phi$  for the [*explanatory*] reason that  $p$ .' (p. 42)<sup>11</sup>

To support the view that the taking is a 'desire-like belief,' Setiya gives an example cited earlier: 'When I go for my walk because the weather is fine,' he says, 'I am motivated by a state that is at once the belief that I am walking outside for that reason, and like a desire in causing me to do it ....' (p. 42)

Setiya identifies two problems with (E1). First, (E1), which is supposed to be part of a theory of acting for a reason, 'cite[s] the relation of acting-for-a-reason'; so it will render the theory circular (p. 42). Second, 'one can act for a reason that turns out to be false' (p. 42), and can even recognize this possibility while acting for that reason. (E1) does not allow for this possibility, because the thought that one is  $\phi$ -ing for the explanatory reason that  $p$  implies that  $p$  explains one's  $\phi$ -ing, which in turn implies that  $p$  is true.

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<sup>11</sup> My insertion of '*explanatory*' is fully justified by the text following the quotation.



Setiya's second-pass account avoids both problems:

(E2) 'To take  $p$  as one's reason for doing  $\phi$  is to have the desire-like belief that one is doing  $\phi$  because of the *belief* that  $p$ —where this is the "because" of motivation.' (p. 43)

Setiya likes (E2) not only because it avoids the problems of (E1), but also because it implies that an agent who takes  $p$  as her reason for  $\phi$ -ing believes both that she has the belief that  $p$  and that this belief plays a motivational role in explaining her action (pp. 43–4).

But Setiya rightly thinks that (E2) 'gives too weak a content' to the taking, because 'taking [oneself] to be moved by the belief that  $p$  is not sufficient for taking  $p$  as [one's] *reason* for doing  $\phi$ ' (p. 44). To see why, consider the following adaptation of an example cited earlier. Someone could 'shout at the Pirates' manager as [he] listen[s] to the radio' (p. 53) because he believes the manager has done something stupid, and also be aware that his action is motivated by this belief, without taking the content of the belief as a reason for the action. Setiya addresses the problem as follows.

If the ... [taking] is to depict me as acting for a reason, not just as being motivated by a belief, it must ... present *itself* as part of what motivates my action. The content of taking-as-one's reason is thus *self-referential*: in acting because  $p$ , I take  $p$  to be a consideration belief in which motivates me to  $\phi$  *because I so take it*. This attitude *does* depict me as acting for a reason, since it depicts me as being partly motivated by itself, namely by the very fact that I take  $p$  as my reason to act. (p. 45)

Using the adverb 'hereby' to express this self-reference, Setiya formulates his final account of the taking thus:

(E3) 'To take  $p$  as one's reason for doing  $\phi$  is to have the desire-like belief that one is *hereby* doing  $\phi$  because of the belief that  $p$ ' (where this is the 'because' of motivation). (p. 46)

Setiya holds that this 'captures the truth in the circular model' (p. 46)—(E1)—while avoiding its problems.

This leaves open the question of how Setiya bridges the gap between taking something as a reason for acting and acting for that reason. Given that the taking involves the belief that one is acting for the reason, it is enough for the taking to be true. Thus, Setiya must accept the following.

(T) If: (1) *A* has the desire-like belief that she is *hereby*  $\phi$ -ing because she believes that *p*

and

(2) this desire-like belief is true,

Then: *A* is  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that *p*.

This is neat, but it gives only a sufficient condition of acting for a reason.<sup>12</sup> It also fails to indicate how an agent's taking something as a reason is connected with her doing it when she is acting for that reason.

Setiya's position is that the taking, which is concurrent with the doing (pp. 41–2), causally sustains it (p. 57) in an appropriate way (p. 31). This yields the following account of acting for a reason.

(E) *A* is  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that *p* if and only if

- (1) *A* has the desire-like belief that she is *hereby*  $\phi$ -ing because she believes that *p*,
- (2) *A* has this desire-like belief while  $\phi$ -ing, and
- (3) this desire-like belief causally sustains *A*'s  $\phi$ -ing in an appropriate way.

There are three main differences between (E) and my normative account, (N). The first is that clause (1) of (E) requires a self-referential belief about explanatory reasons, while (1) of (N) requires a belief about

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<sup>12</sup> Setiya must reject the biconditional corresponding to (T) because he allows for the possibility of an agent's  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that *p* when the agent does not believe that *p* but merely believes that she believes that *p* (p. 44). In this case, the agent's desire-like belief is false, because it implies that she believes that *p*.

normative reasons that is not self-referential. The second is that, while clause (2) of (N) restricts (N) to intentional actions, (E) contains no such restrictive clause. The third is that, while clause (4) of (N) requires that the belief *cause* *A*'s  $\phi$ -ing, clause (3) of (E) requires that it *causally sustain* *A*'s  $\phi$ -ing. The second and third of these differences require explanation.

The explanation of the second is that Setiya holds that any doing that satisfies (E) is *ipso facto* an intentional action. Setiya underwrites this claim with an account of intention according to which any effective desire-like belief that one is hereby  $\phi$ -ing because one believes that *p* is *identical* with the intention involved in the action (p. 48). Setiya generalizes this to cover other cases of intention (pp. 48–9, 51–6). For example, he identifies the intention involved in  $\phi$ -ing intentionally but without any reason with the simpler desire-like belief that one is hereby  $\phi$ -ing (pp. 52–3); and he identifies the intention to  $\phi$  in the future with 'the desire-like belief that one is hereby *going* to  $\phi$ ' (p. 49)—along with an appropriate explanation if a reason is involved. This account of intention readily explains why an agent who is doing something intentionally believes that she is doing it and why an agent who intends to do something in the future believes that she will do it. In conjunction with (E), it implies that anyone who does something for a reason thereby performs an intentional action.

The third difference between (E) and (N) arises from Setiya's recognition that on his account of intention 'one's intention in acting cannot be the efficient cause of one's *beginning* to act' because 'this intention cannot precede the action it depicts on pain of being *false*, at least to begin with' (p. 57). Setiya explains why he does not consider this a problem as follows.

Beginning to do something is one thing, doing it another. What matters for my account is that, once I have started doing something, we can say that I am doing it intentionally because I intend to be doing it: intention plays a causal role in sustaining intentional action, as it goes on. (p. 57)

In contrast, (N) (as unpacked in section 2) implies not only that the belief is the efficient cause of the action but also that, if the action takes

time to perform, the belief causally sustains it. Its functioning as an efficient cause does not give rise to any problems because, from the perspective of (N), it makes no difference whether the belief is true or false. And even if it did make a difference, this would not matter, because the truth or falsity of an agent's belief that something is a normative reason for her to perform some action is independent of whether she performs it.

### 6. Problems with Setiya's Account

I will not challenge Setiya's account of acting for a reason on the ground that it is committed to desire-like beliefs, because I accept that, whenever an agent performs an intentional action because she takes a consideration as a reason for her to do so, it is reasonable to understand this taking as a desire-like belief. I will also not take a stand on Setiya's view that 'one's intention in acting cannot be the efficient cause of one's *beginning* to act' (p. 57) even though I find this commitment unattractive.<sup>13</sup> I will focus instead on two key objections that go to the heart of Setiya's account.

My first objection concerns Setiya's use of 'hereby'. This has an air of familiarity because of its superficial similarity to everyday uses, but typical uses of 'hereby' are very different from Setiya's. The standard case is well illustrated by

(h1) I hereby undertake not to attend any other college if you admit me.

Two things are noteworthy about this 'hereby'. First, because it modifies the verb 'undertake,' it indicates that the relevant utterance of (h1) is meant to be an undertaking. If so, the utterance *is* an undertaking providing circumstances are favorable. Second, although the 'hereby' is useful insofar as it emphasizes that the utterance is an undertaking, it is

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<sup>13</sup> I also have doubts about whether it leaves room for Setiya to accommodate intentional actions—including actions for reasons—that are effectively instantaneous inasmuch as they cannot be stopped once they have been set in motion, e.g., striking a computer key.

redundant, for the omission of the word would not undermine that status if circumstances were favorable. More generally, in typical uses, 'hereby' signals that the utterance in which it occurs is a speech act of the kind expressed by the verb it modifies, and it is redundant.

We could extend this to cover certain mental acts by trading on how we express them linguistically. Consider the thought I would express by uttering

(h2) I hereby resolve to complete this paper by May 31.

If I have this thought in earnest, then it is a mental resolution. The thought has two key features. First, the concept RESOLUTION<sup>14</sup> expressed by the main verb applies to the thought itself. Second, the concept HEREBY (*if it occurs in the thought*) is redundant.

Nothing parallel applies to a Setiyan desire-like belief expressed by

(h3) I am hereby  $\phi$ -ing because I believe that  $p$ .

First, the concept  $\Phi$ -ING does not apply to the desire-like belief, but to an action which, in favorable cases, it motivates. Second, the concept HEREBY is not redundant, but bears the full burden of expressing what Setiya understands by 'the "reflective" character of acting for reasons' (p. 47). It is therefore fair to ask how Setiya's 'hereby' should be unpacked.

Setiya indicates that it is meant to express the idea that the desire-like belief 'must present *itself* as part of what motivates my action.' (p. 45) So the content of (h3) would be more clearly expressed by

(h3\*) I am, because of this desire-like belief,  $\phi$ -ing because I believe that  $p$ ,

where 'this' expresses self-reference to the desire-like belief as a whole and both occurrences of 'because' express motivation. Depending on the scope of the two occurrences of 'because', (h3\*) could have three different readings:

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<sup>14</sup> Words and phrases in capitals signify the corresponding concepts.

(h3.1) (I am  $\phi$ -ing) because (I have this desire-like belief because I believe that  $p$ ).

(h3.2) (I am  $\phi$ -ing because I have this desire-like belief), because (I believe that  $p$ ).

(h3.3) (I am  $\phi$ -ing because I believe that  $p$ ), because (I have this desire-like belief).

Two considerations show that (h3.3) is the best alternative. First, ' $q$  because  $r$ ' implies  $q$ ; so (h3.3) straightforwardly accommodates Setiya's commitment to the view that a desire-like belief expressed by (h3) is true only if the agent is  $\phi$ -ing because she believes that  $p$ . Second, (h3.3) does better justice than either (h3.1) or (h3.2) to Setiya's view that 'we *choose* the reasons on which we act' (p. 39). For it can only be through the desire-like belief that the agent makes  $p$ , or the belief that  $p$ , a reason why she is  $\phi$ -ing. This supposed causal structure of the desire-like belief's making the belief that  $p$  explain the agent's  $\phi$ -ing is reflected in the form of (h3.3).

But, in the absence of further explanation, (h3.3) is puzzling precisely because it requires that the agent's having the desire-like belief motivate her not just to  $\phi$ , but to  $\phi$ -because-of-her-belief-that- $p$ . In other words, (h3.3) requires the agent's desire-like belief to motivate her-belief-that- $p$ 's-motivating-her-to- $\phi$ . It is not clear what this could mean.

We should grant that there are psychological explanations that have the same form as (h3.3), viz.,

(b) ( $q$  because  $r$ ) because  $s$ .

This applies to cases in which one mental state brings it about that another mental state motivates the agent to perform some action. Consider Dan, a timid department head who has always followed explicit instructions from the Dean regardless of what he thinks of their merits. Suppose Dan comes to recognize that his compliance has not served his department well and resolves to resist the Dean's instructions when he thinks that following them will be damaging. If he does this, we could reasonably claim that

- (b1) Because of his resolution, Dan is resisting the Dean's instructions because he believes that following them will damage his department,

which is an instance of (b). We can make sense of this example by noting that Dan's resolution changes his overall motivational state in such a way that a belief that would not previously have motivated him to resist the Dean's instructions now motivates him to do so.

A parallel approach cannot, however, work for (h3.3) because of Setiya's view that the desire-like belief does not initiate the agent's  $\phi$ -ing, but merely sustains it. In addition, Setiya must accept that the same applies to the belief that  $p$ , because he holds that the belief that  $p$  gets its motivational force from the desire-like belief. He must also accept that the desire-like belief does not initiate this belief's sustaining the agent's  $\phi$ -ing, but merely sustains it. In summary, the desire-like belief is true if and only if the following three conditions are satisfied.

- (c1) The desire-like belief causally sustains the agent's  $\phi$ -ing.
- (c2) The belief that  $p$  causally sustains the agent's  $\phi$ -ing.
- (c3) The desire-like belief causally sustains the belief that  $p$ 's sustaining the agent's  $\phi$ -ing.

This is puzzling. Let us grant that the agent's  $\phi$ -ing is causally sustained by both her desire-like belief and her belief that  $p$ . Let's also grant that her belief that  $p$  would not help to sustain her  $\phi$ -ing in the absence of the desire-like belief. But it still does not follow that (c3) is satisfied. If it did, then in the case in which an action is causally sustained by both a belief and a desire, and the belief would not help to sustain the action in the absence of the desire, it would follow that the desire causally sustains the belief's sustaining the action. But this is obviously not so. So I don't understand what it would take for (c3) to be satisfied. Yet it is (c3) which, within Setiya's framework, captures what is most central to (h3.3).

Let us try to avoid this problem by modifying the case of Dan so that causal sustenance replaces event causation as far as possible. After he has

worried for some time about the damage caused by his compliance without deciding what to do about it, the Dean gives him a new instruction to do something that he believes will damage his department. Dan suddenly resolves to resist and tells the Dean that he will not follow the instruction. His belief sustains his action, and it does so because of his state of resolution. This seems to be a case of what we need: one mental state's causally sustaining another mental state's sustaining an action. But, again, nothing here goes beyond the two states' sustaining the action together, where one would not do so in the absence of the other.

My first objection, then, is that it is not clear how to understand Setiya's account of taking something as a reason to act as this is involved in acting for a reason. No similar objection applies to (N), according to which the taking that motivates the action is a straightforward, non-reflexive belief that a certain consideration is a normative reason for one to perform the action. On this account, the taking is not about motivation at all, and the conditions under which someone acts for a reason do not involve one mental state's sustaining another mental state's sustaining an action. I am nonetheless committed to 'the *active* and *reflective* character of the attitude that we take to reasons, in acting on them' (p. 39) insofar as I understand the attitude as a first-person belief about a reason for one to perform a certain action, which happens to be the action that the attitude motivates. Setiya wants more, but it is not clear that he can get it.

My second objection is that Setiya's account cannot accommodate what I take to be an important general principle about reasons, viz., that if an agent can  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$ , then it is possible for the agent to take  $p$  as a reason for her to  $\phi$  in the knowledge that she is not  $\phi$ -ing.<sup>15</sup> For instance, if someone can go for a walk for the reason that the weather is fine, then he could take the weather's being fine as a reason to go for a walk when he knows that he is not going for a walk. In such a

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<sup>15</sup> Knowledge matters here because Setiya can handle cases in which the agent is under the illusion that she is acting by treating her taking as involving the false belief that she is acting.



case, the agent's taking cannot be the desire-like belief that he is hereby  $\phi$ -ing because he believes that  $p$ , because (by hypothesis) he does not believe that he is  $\phi$ -ing. What alternative is in the offing?

It might be thought that Setiya could claim that in such a case the agent's taking is the belief that  $p$  is a *normative* reason for her to  $\phi$ . But given the above principle, Setiya cannot consistently make this claim. For, in conjunction with the principle, it implies that an agent cannot  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$  unless it is possible for her to take  $p$  as a normative reason to  $\phi$ . This contradicts Setiya's view that an agent can  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$  even when she does not regard  $p$  as a normative reason for her to  $\phi$ . So Setiya has two options: he must either reject the principle or show how to make sense of an agent's taking  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$  when she knows that she is not  $\phi$ -ing in terms of explanatory rather than normative reasons.

I have not been able to discover any good counterexamples to the principle. Not even the cases that Setiya offers as evidence against the Normative View (see section 4) count against it. If the man who thinks that sexual desire is evil can have sex for the reason that this alleviates his sexual urge, then he can take the fact that having sex will alleviate his sexual urge as a reason for having sex when he knows he is not doing so. If a man attending a philosophy talk can ask derisive questions for the reason that this gives him a sense of power, then he can take the fact that asking such questions will give him a sense of power as a reason to ask them when he knows he is not asking them. If Setiya can smoke an entire pack of cigarettes tonight for the reason that he will not be able to do so tomorrow, then he can take this to be a reason to smoke the entire pack when he knows that he is not doing so. If the radio man can plug in a radio for the reason that he is going to turn it on, then he can take the fact that he is going to turn the radio on as a reason to plug it in even when he knows that he is not plugging it in. These possibilities are all plausible both when the agent is successfully resisting temptation and when, because of the circumstances, he cannot perform the action, but would do so if he could.

I therefore hold that the principle should be treated as a presumptively true generalization that an account of acting for a reason should accommodate. The principle is open to potential counter-evidence, but cannot fairly be dismissed by an action theorist simply on the ground that it is at odds with his theory. So it is reasonable to ask whether Setiya can treat an agent's taking  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$  when she knows that she is not  $\phi$ -ing as a belief about an *explanatory* reason. If so, there is going to have to be something that she thinks her belief that  $p$  explains. This cannot be her  $\phi$ -ing, because she does not believe that she *is*  $\phi$ -ing. What, then, can it be?

Perhaps it's her having an *inclination* to  $\phi$  on which she does not act. But even if she has this inclination, her taking it that her belief that  $p$  explains the inclination is not equivalent to her taking  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$ . Suppose that during psychoanalysis Evelyn wonders why she feels inclined to break the teapot her mother gave her, but soon loses sight of the question as she yields to a barrage of seemingly disconnected thoughts. Then it dawns on her that she has the inclination because she believes that her mother is trying to make her into something that she does not want to be. Does Evelyn's recognition that she has the inclination because of this belief imply that she takes her mother's trying to make her into something that she does not want to be as a *reason* for her to break the teapot? Surely not. But perhaps we can transform it into a reason by means of Setiya's strategy of adding some self-referential motivation. So let's assign Evelyn the desire-like belief that she is *hereby* inclined to break the teapot because she believes that her mother is trying to make her into something that she does not want to be. But then it turns out that Evelyn is taking her mother's trying to make her into something that she does not want to be as a reason for *being inclined to break the teapot* rather than as a reason for breaking it, which is what we needed.

But perhaps we were wrong to suppose that Setiya needs something other than an action for the agent to think her belief that  $p$  explains. Perhaps he could go modal and have the agent think that her belief that

$p$  could explain her  $\phi$ -ing. However, even if we could enhance the content of her thought with the self-referential motivation needed to transform a mere explanatory 'because' into an explanatory-reasons 'because,' it still does not follow that she takes  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$ . Someone might believe that it is possible for him to smoke his whole pack of cigarettes tonight for the reason that he won't be able to do so tomorrow, but be pleased that he has no inclination to do it. If so, he does not *actually* take his not being able to smoke the pack tomorrow as a reason to smoke it tonight, but merely recognizes that he *could have* taken it as a reason in acting.

As these examples suggest, an agent's taking  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$  in the knowledge that she is not  $\phi$ -ing cannot plausibly be understood as a belief about an explanatory reason. I therefore conclude that Setiya's account of acting for a reason cannot do justice to the principle that, if an agent can  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$ , then it is also possible for her to take  $p$  as a reason for her to  $\phi$  when she knows that she is not  $\phi$ -ing. In contrast, (N) easily accommodates the principle by treating the taking involved in the action and the taking that applies when the agent knows that she is not acting in exactly the same way, viz., as a belief that  $p$  counts in favor of her  $\phi$ -ing.

The above two objections constitute a powerful case against Setiya's version of the Explanatory View. I now proceed to show how an advocate of the Normative View can answer Setiya's criticisms.

### 7. Reply to the Substantive Objection

Setiya's substantive objection to the Normative View is that it cannot account for the possibility of an agent's acting for a reason without regarding it as a good reason. Setiya offers the examples presented in section 4 as evidence that this is possible. I do not find this evidence compelling, because each example is easier to understand as one in which the agent's action is *motivated by* some factor that he does not take to be a good reason for the action than as one in which the agent acts because he takes that factor to provide *a reason for* his action. Consider, e.g., the man who acts on his sexual urge despite believing it is evil.

While it is easy to imagine his being motivated to have sex by this urge, it is much more difficult to imagine him having sex *for the reason that doing so alleviates the urge*. Indeed, it is far more likely that, desperate for an excuse, he deceives himself into thinking he is having sex for this reason.

Notwithstanding my concerns about Setiya's examples, I agree that an agent can act for a reason without considering it a good reason. Here's a better example:

Goran's aged mother is gruesomely mauled by a dog with no witnesses present, and dies a few hours later. Goran is convinced that the dog responsible is one of the pit bulls that have become popular in the neighborhood, and thinks his mother's death is a reason for him to poison pit bulls that roam freely in public areas. He is aware of powerful reasons for not poisoning them, and recognizes that doing so will probably do more harm than good. So he knows that what he takes to be a reason is completely outweighed and is therefore not a good reason. But the police are not interested, he is incensed, and he is disinclined to act like his usual balanced, measured self. So he throws caution to the wind and starts poisoning pit bulls in the belief that his mother's gruesome death is a reason (albeit not a good reason) to do so.

Despite agreeing with Setiya that someone can act for a reason without regarding it as a good reason, I deny that this counts against the Normative View because I reject Setiya's assumption that normative reasons are good reasons.

A normative reason, to repeat, is a consideration that favors doing something. Here 'doing something' should be understood broadly so that it covers all doings for which there could be reasons. This includes not only performing intentional actions, but also not performing them, having 'motivated desires' (Nagel 1970, p. 29), holding 'judgment-sensitive attitudes' (Scanlon 1998, p. 20), and doing things that are not intentional actions but are subject to indirect intentional control, such as waking up at midnight. Normative reasons are considerations that one

could take into account in deciding what to do,<sup>16</sup> advising somebody on what to do, and appraising the conduct of oneself and others. That's what makes them normative.

Now, there are often both reasons for and against doing something: both pros and cons. This could hold even if, say, the cons win hands down. In this case, not every pro would be invalidated as a reason. But, by hypothesis, no valid pro could be a good or sufficient reason. It follows that there are normative reasons that are not good or sufficient reasons. A normative reason is a consideration that favors doing something, *however slightly*. This includes normative reasons which are of very limited force, which could be outweighed, attenuated, or undercut by countervailing considerations, and which are not strong enough to qualify as significant, sufficient, good, justifying, or compelling reasons even if they contribute toward such reasons.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, I am not aware of any good arguments for the opposing view that normative reasons are always good reasons, even though it is often presented as obvious. Why, then, is it so common? I will mention several factors that help to explain why somebody might be tempted by the view even though they do not justify it.

First, the most compelling examples of normative reasons are good reasons, while weaker reasons are often subject to dispute.

Second, it is natural to associate the concept **NORMATIVE** with the concept **GOOD**, for the ultimate goal of normative thinking is to determine what acts and attitudes are worthwhile, justified, required, or in some other way good. Although this is typically in the forefront of the most captivating normative discussions, it does not imply that all normative thought directly concerns such goods.

Third, it is all too easy to slip from the recognition that all good reasons are normative into thinking that all normative reasons are good

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16 This is not to suggest that deciding whether to do something typically involves an enumeration of such considerations (Velleman 2009, p. 22).

17 For more systematic arguments in support of the claim that normative reasons can be extremely weak, see Schroeder 2007, pp. 92–102 and 2011, pp. 332–6.

reasons. Dancy, e.g., observes that when we are thinking of good reasons, 'we are thinking normatively' and could, therefore, 'call such a reason a *normative reason*', and immediately proceeds to say that 'All such reasons are good reasons.' (2000, p. 1) But the fact that all good reasons are normative reasons does not imply its converse.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, as noted by Dancy (2000, p. 5), the distinction between normative and explanatory reasons made its way into recent philosophy through Frankena's revival of Hutcheson's distinction between 'justifying' and 'exciting' reasons (1958) and Baier's distinction between 'justificatory' and 'explanatory' reasons (1958, pp. 148–61).<sup>19</sup> As a result, normative reasons have often been described as 'justifying' or 'justificatory' reasons. This encourages the idea that they are reasons that justify some act or attitude, which implies that they are good reasons. But although a normative reason is a consideration that could be taken into account in determining whether an act or attitude is justified, it does not follow that every normative reason must justify what it is a reason for.

Fifth, it is important to distinguish between merely apparent reasons and real reasons, i.e., considerations that favor something independently of whether they are thought to. In English it is possible to mark this distinction by describing real reasons as 'good reasons,' where 'good' means *well-founded* or *true*. But this does not imply that real reasons are good reasons in the sense that they are strong reasons. Scanlon, however, unwittingly collapses these two senses of 'good' when he says that a normative reason is 'a *good* reason—a consideration that really counts in favor of the thing in question' (1998, p. 19).

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18 Dancy mitigates the force of this objection by allowing that 'there can be good reasons not to do an action even when there are better reasons to do it' (2000, pp. 4–5), but this still does not allow for reasons of very limited force. As indicated in fn.7, Dancy recognizes in a later work (2004) that not all normative reasons are good reasons.

19 See Dancy 2000, pp. 20–5. As Dancy observes, it is doubtful that the Hutcheson/Frankena distinction corresponds to the distinction between normative and explanatory reasons.

Sixth, the terms '*pro tanto* reasons' and '*prima facie* reasons' are often applied to weaker or unconfirmed reasons, which may be taken to suggest that they are not normative reasons. However, many reasons that are assigned these labels are recognized as real reasons. And what kind of real reasons could they be other than normative reasons?

Seventh and last, as Schroeder notes, 'When we say that there is a reason to do something, we generally mean that it is a *relatively weighty* reason to do it.' (2011, p. 332) Stampe made a similar point many years back, observing that 'we say that a person "has no reason whatever" for an action when we mean merely "no good reason".' (1987, p. 345) This certainly applies to me, for I often catch myself saying that there is *no reason at all* for doing something that I consider inappropriate even though I am aware of considerations that count, however slightly, in favor of doing it. We should not, however, let our philosophical judgments be dictated by our inclination to overstate.<sup>20</sup>

The assumption that all normative reasons are good reasons is unwarranted. Thus, the Normative View can easily accommodate the fact that an agent can do something for a reason without considering it a good reason.

Someone might respond that this is unfair to Setiya, because he (along with several others) uses 'good reason' merely as a stylistic variant of 'normative reason',<sup>21</sup> and is not claiming that we can act for reasons that we consider insignificant or insufficient, but that we can act for reasons that we regard as having no normative weight whatever.

For the sake of the argument, I will now assume that Setiya does use 'good reason' as equivalent to 'normative reason'. And I readily grant that Setiya thinks that agents can act for reasons which they regard as having no normative weight at all. It is, however, important to recognize

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20 For a pragmatic account of the inclination to deny that there are reasons for an agent to do something when insignificant reasons are available, see Schroeder 2007, pp. 93–7 and 2011, pp. 332–3.

21 Given the above considerations, it should be evident that this practice is inadvisable because of the distorting effect it can have on judgments about normative reasons. But let's set that aside for now.

that this thesis is meant to apply to ordinary people. And ordinary people do not distinguish between normative and explanatory reasons, or speak or think of reasons as having, or not having, normative weight. No doubt they sometimes act for reasons that *Setiya* counts as having no normative weight, and these will often be reasons that they too regard as suspect. But they would think of these reasons as *not good, stupid, inappropriate, bad, inadequate, irrational, outrageous, immoral*, or something like that. We are not justified in interpreting such everyday characterizations of reasons as implying that the reasons are not normative reasons. It is not surprising that *Setiya* understands these characterizations thus, because he has very demanding standards for normative reasons. I hold that his standards are too high, because they fail to admit all pros and cons.

Even if *Setiya* were to insist that very weak reasons should not be counted as normative reasons, this would not justify treating them as explanatory reasons, because very weak reasons are not usually efficacious. So, regardless of whether very weak reasons are described as normative, the fact that someone can act for such a reason provides no support for the Explanatory View.

My proposal is that when people act for reasons that they regard as very weak or otherwise suspect, we understand them as implicitly taking those reasons as normative reasons that are inadequate and are, in that sense, not good reasons. This accommodates the claim that an agent can act for a reason without regarding it as a good reason while obviating the need for an unnecessarily complex account of acting for a reason that is open to serious challenge. My approach is also consistent with a rejection of the doctrine that ‘we act intentionally ... “under the guise of the good”’ (p. 16), which is, after all, *Setiya*’s primary target.

### 8. Reply to the Theoretical Objection

The theoretical objection to my version of the Normative View is that it cannot do justice to the principle that whenever an agent does something for a reason, ‘she is acting intentionally, and so she must be



doing something in the belief that she is doing it.’ (p. 28) As I have indicated, the charge is correct. My defense is that the first part of the principle is false, because many things that we do for reasons—inasmuch as we do them because we take certain considerations as reasons for doing them—are not intentional actions.

You can wake up at 4:00 a.m. for a reason, e.g., that you have to get to the airport by 5:30 to check in for a flight to Amsterdam. Assuming you don’t wake up in the belief that you have to get to the airport but in a state of confusion, how do you manage it? Easily. On going to bed, you believe that your having to get to the airport by 5:30 is a reason to wake up at 4:00, so you set an alarm clock, or do something else that will make you wake up at 4:00. In this case, the taking is not concurrent with the relevant doing, viz., the waking up. But there are cases in which it is. Suppose you believe that the inconsiderate behavior of a student in class is a reason to lose patience with him. So you release the psychological restraints that check your inclination toward affective responses that are usually unproductive, as a result of which you lose patience with the student. Then losing patience is not an intentional action, but you still do it for a reason that is concurrent with your doing it. Of course these examples both involve intentional actions, which are required to bring reasons into play: the setting of the alarm clock in the first and the release of the control mechanisms in the second. But this does not undermine the claim that you wake up for a reason and lose patience for a reason.

It remains a question whether Setiya’s thesis that ‘When someone is acting intentionally there must be something that he is doing intentionally ... in the belief that he is doing it’ (p. 26) is correct, and, if so, how its correctness is to be explained. My reasoning supports the view that this question goes beyond the question of what is involved in acting for a reason in the relevant sense. I don’t know whether Setiya’s thesis is correct, but, if it is, an adequate account of intention-in-action should explain it. This does not, however, support Setiya’s strategy of importing reasons for actions into the intentions-in-action that those

actions involve. It also does not imply that an account of acting for a reason should explain why an agent who acts for a reason ‘must be doing something in the belief that she is doing it’ (p. 28). Thus the fact that my version of the Normative View does not satisfy this requirement is not a strike against it.

### 9. Overview

I have been considering two approaches to the question of what is involved in acting for a reason (in a very restricted sense), viz., the Normative View and the Explanatory View, focusing on a version of the former that I outline in section 2 and Setiya’s version of the latter. The argument for preferring Setiya’s account to mine is that it can do two things that mine cannot do, viz., accommodate the fact that an agent can act for a reason without regarding it as a good reason, and explain the principle that whenever an agent does anything for a reason, ‘she is acting intentionally, and so she must be doing something in the belief that she is doing it.’ (p. 28) These criticisms can, however, be answered: the account can easily do justice to the possibility of an agent’s acting for a reason without regarding it as good reason, because normative reasons need not be good reasons; and the account need not explain the principle that whenever an agent does anything for a reason, then she is acting intentionally, because this is not the case. Setiya’s account, moreover, has two major flaws: it raises questions that it cannot answer about the occurrence of one motivational ‘because’ within the scope of another; and it cannot do justice to the fact that, if an agent can  $\phi$  for the reason that  $p$ , then it is possible for the agent to take  $p$  as a reason to  $\phi$  when she knows that she is not  $\phi$ -ing. It is, therefore, reasonable to stick with the Normative View.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful for the comments and objections of anonymous referees, which have led to significant improvements.

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