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ABSTRACT

It is commonly held that p is a reason for A to φ only if p explains why A ought to φ . I argue that this view must be rejected because there are reasons for A to φ that would be *redundant* in any explanation of why A ought to φ . Common examples of such ‘redundant reasons’ include rewards for doing something because it’s what you ought to do. Further, I argue that the threat posed by redundant reasons generalizes to other views, including the view that p is a reason for A to φ only if p is evidence that A ought to φ .

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1. Introduction

A reason, as Scanlon once said [1998: 1], is a consideration that counts in favour of an action or attitude, or ‘shows it in a positive light’. Many hold that these characterizations of reasons are problematic: ‘the problem with these glosses is not that they are false, but rather that they don’t say enough’ [Schroeter and Schroeter 2009: 286]. This motivates attempts to provide more informative characterizations of reasons, such as the prominent view that, for p to be a reason for A to φ , p must explain why A ought to φ . I’ll call this view the ‘Explanatory Intuition’ (EI).¹

EI’s proponents argue that it offers an informative, dialectically significant, characterization of reasons. My goal is to show that EI is vulnerable to counterexamples that involve the neglected category of ‘redundant reasons’—considerations that count in favour of actions or attitudes, without explaining why we ought to perform those actions or have those attitudes.

Here’s the plan. First, I’ll explain EI. Second, I’ll introduce redundant reasons and my main argument. Third, I’ll defend each step of the argument in response to objections on behalf of EI. Fourth, I’ll argue that the challenge posed by redundant reasons generalizes, including to the view that, for p to be a reason for A to φ , p must be evidence that A ought to φ . Finally, I’ll explain why it’s vital to accommodate redundant reasons.

2. The Explanatory Intuition

Consider the thesis which Whiting calls ‘reasons as right-makers’:

¹ See, especially, Broome [2013]. This choice of nomenclature is intended to reveal interesting parallels to Markovits’s discussion of the ‘Motivating Intuition’ [2014: ch. 2].

$R = MR$. The fact that p is a reason for a person to φ if and only if it makes it right for her to φ .

As he notes [2017: 2192n2], ‘views in this ballpark’ are widely endorsed:

[E]ach individual reason helps constitute the all told status of an action. [...] [A] fact does not fill a justificatory role with respect to an action unless it makes a contribution toward that action’s all told rightness [Schroeter and Schroeter 2009: 286, 288].

A perfect reason to φ is defined as a fact that explains why you ought to φ [Broome 2004: 31].

The only function of a reason is to explain why something is the case. A justification for believing or doing something is an explanation of why it is just or right to believe it or do it, and a reason that ‘favours’ believing or doing something is one that would justify believing it or doing it in the absence of countervailing reasons [Hyman 2015: 157–8].

$R = MR$ is thought to be dialectically significant. Consider Markovits [2010: 207] on whether the fact that φ ing is right can be a reason for one to φ :

normative reasons do explanatory work. Justification is a kind of explanation. But facts cannot *explain* themselves. The fact that some action ought to be performed doesn’t *explain why* it ought to be performed, so it can’t be *a reason why* it ought to be performed.

A related issue concerns ‘pure normative testimony’. Say you tell me that φ ing is right. Can this give me a reason to φ ? A prominent view—see especially Hills [2009] and McGrath [2011]—is that it cannot. As Markovits characterized this view, ‘The problem with moral deference [...] is that morally deferential agents can’t act for right-making reasons’ [2012: 304].

What I’m calling the Explanatory Intuition (EI) is weaker than $R = MR$:

EI. The fact that p is a reason for A to φ only if p explains why A ought to φ .

Let’s walk through this characterization of reasons, step by step.

First, the ‘only if’. EI is a necessary condition for p to be a reason. By contrast, $R = MR$ is a biconditional; some of its proponents add a commitment about explanatory priority to provide an *analysis* of reasons.² These grander ambitions aren’t at play in the arguments sketched above *apropos* whether the fact that φ ing is right can be a reason to φ and whether pure normative testimony can provide reasons to φ ; those arguments turn only on the claim that reasons to φ must explain why φ ing is right. Moreover, these grander ambitions generate problems. Enabling conditions such as the fact that A can φ partly explain why A ought to φ , but enabling conditions are not reasons for A to φ : that A can φ does not by itself count in favour of A ’s φ ing [Brunero 2009; Fletcher 2013]. So, EI has important dialectical implications without facing the best-known objections to $R = MR$.

Second, the ‘explains’. The notion of explanation is metaphysical, not epistemic.³ And these explanations can be partial or full: p can be a decisive reason that fully explains why A ought to φ , or a *pro tanto* reason that partly explains why A ought to φ [Schroeter and Schroeter 2009: 287].

Third, the ‘ A ought to φ ’. Following Schroeter and Schroeter [2009: 289] and others, I’ll treat this as equivalent to ‘it is right for A to φ ’: either phrase denotes the relevant ‘all-things-considered’ normative status. Some generalize EI beyond *all-things-considered*

² See Broome [2004]. Cf. Schroeter and Schroeter [2009].

³ On this point, see Broome [2008: 100], Schroeter and Schroeter [2009: 289–91], Whiting [2017: 2193n7]; though cf. Hyman [2015: 136]. We will discuss epistemic views in section 5.

‘rightness’. For Alvarez [2010: 15], *moral* reasons explain *moral* rightness, *prudential* reasons explain *prudential* rightness, and so on. My arguments work for such permutations of EI.

A final note. I’ll frame the discussion around EI to simplify the dialectic, putting aside until section 4.3 the problem posed by defeated reasons.⁴ The cases that concern us don’t involve defeated reasons, so this simplification won’t turn out to undermine the force of the challenge to proponents of EI.

3. The Central Argument

Some reasons to φ cannot explain φ ing’s all-told normative status. An intuitive example to consider involves rewards for doing the right thing:

The Gods Reward the Rational. You face a choice between φ ing and ψ ing. All things considered, you ought to φ (for reasons *A*, *B*, and *C*). The Gods appear before you and tell you that, if you do whatever you ought to do, They will reward you with an eternity of pleasure in the afterlife.

Two questions. First, is the fact that They will reward you for φ ing a reason for you to φ ? Intuitively, it is. *Of course* the reward of an eternity of pleasure counts in favour of φ ing! If you have qualms about this—perhaps you fear the ‘eternity’ part—we can vary the reward. They are the Gods, after all. So, let’s grant the intuition for now.

Second, can EI capture such intuitions? Arguably, no. Call the fact that They will reward you for φ ing ‘*Reward $_{\varphi}$* ’.⁵ Call the fact that you ought to φ ‘*Ought*’. According to EI, *Reward $_{\varphi}$* is a reason for you to φ only if *Reward $_{\varphi}$* (partly) explains *Ought*. But *Reward $_{\varphi}$* cannot (partly) explain *Ought*. *Reward $_{\varphi}$* is true only if *Ought* already true: *Reward $_{\varphi}$* cannot make a difference to *Ought*. Worse yet, *Reward $_{\varphi}$* is true only because of *Ought*: *Ought* cannot then be true because of *Reward $_{\varphi}$* . In this sense, *Reward $_{\varphi}$* is a ‘redundant reason’: it counts in favour of φ ing but cannot explain *Ought*.

We can now set up the basic structure of my main argument:

- P1. If EI is true, redundant reasons are reasons for *A* to φ only if redundant reasons explain why *A* ought to φ .
- P2. Redundant reasons do not explain why *A* ought to φ .
- C1. So, if EI is true, redundant reasons are not reasons for *A* to φ .
- P3. However, redundant reasons *are* reasons for *A* to φ .
- C2. So, EI is not true.

4. Three Responses

Where can the proponent of EI resist the argument? First, she can deny P2: ‘redundant reasons’ to φ can explain why we ought to φ (despite their apparent redundancy). Second, she can deny P3: ‘redundant reasons’ are not reasons to φ (despite apparently counting in favour of φ ing). Finally, she can accept the conclusion, but shift to a modified version of EI.

⁴ This problem is well-known. See Schroeder [2007: 35–6] on Toulmin [1950].

⁵ *Reward $_{\varphi}$* isn’t the only candidate reason to φ . An alternative is the fact that They will reward you for doing whatever you ought to do (*Reward $_{\sigma}$*). Some of my arguments are stronger with *Reward $_{\varphi}$* ; some are stronger with *Reward $_{\sigma}$* . I focus on *Reward $_{\varphi}$* for simplicity.

4.1 Are Redundant Reasons Explanatory?

First, proponents of EI can deny P2—that is, hold that *Reward* _{φ} explains *Ought*. The clearest motivation for this is that there are familiar cases of *overdetermination*, where facts might be redundant, yet still explanatory.

Consider causal overdetermination. Two assassins, Xiao and Ying, are independently hired to kill Zhang. They happen to shoot Zhang at the same time; each shot would be lethal on its own. Who killed Zhang? In a sense, each shooting is causally redundant: if Xiao had not shot, Zhang would still be dead, and ditto for Ying. But, plausibly, each shot causally explains why Zhang is dead, despite its redundancy.

Now consider metaphysical overdetermination. That Xiao is an assassin fully grounds the existential fact that there is an assassin. But so does the fact that Ying is an assassin. Both the fact about Xiao and the fact about Ying explains the existential fact that there is an assassin, but redundantly.

So you may think: likewise, *Reward* _{φ} explains *Ought*, even though some other fact(s) also explain *Ought*. If this line of thought is right, ‘redundant reasons’ are just an ordinary instance of normative overdetermination, in the sense that ‘there are several normative reasons to φ , each of which provides [a full] explanation of why one ought to φ ’ [Brunero 2013: 811].

This line of thought is wrong. Redundant reasons are not like familiar cases of overdetermination. To see why, consider an analogous example:

The Gods Reward the Strongest. In Wakanda, there is a magic heart-shaped herb that increases one’s strength. One can only take this magic herb as a reward for being the strongest. T’Challa and M’baku ask the all-knowing honest Oracle which of them is the strongest person. Because the Oracle answers ‘T’Challa’, he gets to take the magic heart-shaped herb.

Two questions. First, does taking the magic herb help make T’Challa *stronger* than he was? Of course! Second, does taking the magic herb help make T’Challa *the strongest*? No! T’Challa only gets to take the magic herb because he’s already the strongest. If M’Baku was the strongest, he would have been able to take the herb instead. This is not a case of overdetermination. It’s not that there are two independent sufficient causes of why T’Challa is strongest—that (say) he did more training than M’Baku, and that he took the herb. There has to already be a sufficient cause of T’Challa’s being the strongest in order for T’Challa to be able to take the heart-shaped herb. (This problem resurfaces even if we index these claims to times.)⁶

This causal case is analogous to *The Gods Reward the Rational*. The Gods put Their collective thumb on the scale for an act (they increase x ’s strength), but only if that act is already what’s supported by the weight of reasons (they increase x ’s strength because x is already the strongest). They make whatever is best even better; they don’t make it what’s best.

I don’t want to rest my case on this argument by analogy. So, let me offer two further arguments for why *Reward* _{φ} does not (partly) explain *Ought*.

⁶ Let me explain. You might think the herb doesn’t contribute to making T’Challa the strongest *when* he takes it, but it contributes to making him the strongest *after* he takes it. But consider a modification of the case (which is closer to the plot of *Black Panther*). At each point in time, the Gods reward whoever is the strongest by making them stronger. At any point in time, M’Baku can challenge T’Challa, who will then be stripped of the powers of the herb to see who is stronger. T’Challa gets to take the herb again only if he remains the strongest without the power of the herb. The herb still makes him stronger, but *at no point* can taking the herb make a difference to whether T’Challa is the strongest.

First, intuitively, $Reward_{\phi}$ is not explanatorily relevant to whether *Ought* is true due to its redundancy. We can bolster this intuition by appealing to several plausible constraints on explanations. I'll focus on one: $Reward_{\phi}$ explains *Ought* only if $Reward_{\phi}$ can make a difference to whether *Ought* is true, but $Reward_{\phi}$ can't make a difference to whether *Ought* is true, so it cannot explain *Ought*. This line of thought rests on the constraint that explanations must be potential difference-makers. This is weaker than the common view that explanatorily relevant facts must be actual difference-makers. Strevens [2004: 158] defends such a view about causation:

the explanatorily relevant parts of any causal network are the elements that made a difference to whether or not the *explanandum* occurred. It is important to note the *whether or not*. To be explanatorily relevant, a causal factor must not merely make a difference to how the *explanandum* occurred; it must make a difference large enough to bear on whether or not it occurred at all.

As he noted, the 'idea that difference-making is a necessary condition for explanatory relevance is not a new one' ([*ibid.*: 159]; see references therein), and not just for causal explanations. If the fact that P doesn't make a difference to whether Q is fully grounded—if the only sets of facts that could be added to P to fully ground Q would already contain a full ground of Q —then 'the fact that P is seen to be at best an *idle wheel* in any scenario fully grounding Q ' [Krämer and Roski 2017: 1195]. Notice that $Reward_{\phi}$ not only doesn't make a difference to whether *Ought* is true; it can't do so. If $Reward_{\phi}$ is true, there *must* already be a full ground for why *Ought* is true.

A proponent of EI could respond that $Reward_{\phi}$ can explain *Ought* even if it is necessarily an idle wheel in this sense. That view is hard to defend.⁷ Moreover, potential difference-making isn't the only plausible constraint on explanation that would bolster the intuition that $Reward_{\phi}$ doesn't explain *Ought*; the 'minimality constraint' is a nice alternative.⁸ It strikes me that it is a theoretical cost if one is forced to deny all such plausible constraints just to accommodate such counterexamples to EI. And the intuition that $Reward_{\phi}$ doesn't explain *Ought* is probative even if we reject these constraints on what grounds or explains what.

Second, $Reward_{\phi}$ is true in virtue of *Ought*. If there are divine beings who distribute divine rewards, They reward you for ϕ ing because ϕ ing is right. Consider the *Euthyphro* Dilemma: do the Gods approve of what is right because it's right, or is it right because they approve of it? Many, like Schaffer [2016], take this to be a paradigmatic case where 'because' invokes metaphysical explanation (or determination or grounding). And most take the first horn of the dilemma to be far more plausible: The Gods approve of what is right because it is right. Analogously, the plausible view should be that the Gods reward what is right because it is right: *Ought* explains $Reward_{\phi}$. But if *Ought* explains $Reward_{\phi}$, $Reward_{\phi}$ cannot then explain *Ought*. Metaphysical explanation is *asymmetric*: if p explains q , q does not explain p , lest we enter an explanatory circle.

⁷ Krämer and Roski present what at first glance appears to be a motivation for the view: 'if it is true that P , then P [grounds] $P \vee \neg P$. Still, it is not true that if P were false, it would be false that $P \vee \neg P$ '. [2017: 1199]. But this is a problem for a specific counterfactual test for difference-making, not a problem for the view that potential difference-making is a necessary condition for explanatory relevance. Imagine that $P \vee \neg P$ is false. What could make $P \vee \neg P$ true? Well, P could, and so could $\neg P$. Either disjunct can make a difference. In that sense, either disjunct is a potential difference-maker in a way that $Reward_{\phi}$ is not.

⁸ Audi explains it as follows: 'something is a ground of a given fact only if nothing could be subtracted from it without thereby losing the ability to ground the fact in question' ([2012: 699]; cf. [*ibid.*: 692–3] on overdetermination). For a recent discussion, see Werner [forthcoming].

Again, there are responses available to proponents of EI. They could deny that *Ought* explains $Reward_{\varphi}$, which commits them to denying common views about the *Euthyphro* Dilemma.⁹ Or they could follow Barnes [2018] by allowing metaphysical explanations to be symmetric. But, as she notes, this is a departure from a ‘metaphysical orthodoxy’. Proponents of EI should not be forced to accept such counter-orthodox commitments.

At this point, some might wish to respond by appealing to contextualism. For contextualists, the semantic value of ‘ought’ varies, depending on features of the context. The most influential contextualist is Kratzer [2012]. For her, the value of ‘ought’ is sensitive to *standards* and *information*: it can be true that you *morally* ought to φ but *prudentially* ought not φ ; and it can be true that you ought to φ relative to one set of evidence but you ought not φ relative to a richer set of evidence. Likewise, you might think, in *The Gods Reward the Rational*, there are two relevant ‘oughts’:

1. You ought_{ABC} to φ (ought for reasons A, B, and C).
2. You ought_{ABC+R} to φ (ought for reasons A, B, C, and $Reward_{\varphi}$).

If this move is well-motivated, it might help with the arguments so far. $Reward_{\varphi}$ can explain an ‘ought’ (it makes a difference to whether 2 is true). And this does not generate an explanatory circle (1 explains $Reward_{\varphi}$).

But this contextualist manoeuvre isn’t well motivated in all of the relevant cases. Cases of redundant reasons need not involve any salient change of informational context that would invite us to distinguish 1 from 2: you can learn about A, B, C, and the reward for doing the right thing all at once. So, information-sensitivity need not cause us to disambiguate 1 from 2. And rewards for doing the right thing need not change the standard of the relevant ‘ought’. The Gods could offer you a *moral* reward for doing whatever you *morally* ought to do (they could reduce suffering in future generations if you keep a promise), just as they could offer you a *prudential* reward for doing whatever you *prudentially* ought to do (they could contribute to your retirement pension plan if you floss daily). When we consider the full gamut of cases like *The Gods Reward the Rational*, Kratzer’s contextualism does not offer proponents of EI a well-motivated way out.¹⁰

4.2 Are Redundant Reasons Really Reasons?

The second response is to deny P3: namely, deny that $Reward_{\varphi}$ is a reason to φ . This response faces a general obstacle. Redundant reasons like $Reward_{\varphi}$ bear important marks of being reasons to φ . I’ll mention three.

First, reasons are considerations that count in favour of actions and attitudes. (Proponents of EI did not say that this Scanlonian gloss was false. They said that it was insufficiently informative.) Intuitively, $Reward_{\varphi}$ counts in favour of φ ing even though it does not explain *Ought*, just as taking the magic herb makes T’Challa stronger

⁹ One option is to hold that ‘*Ought* because $Reward_{\varphi}$ ’ (and corresponding horn of the *Euthyphro*) invokes *basing*, not *grounding*. But note that even here, my argument could go through as long as a mixed asymmetry principle holds: roughly, if p is grounded in q , q cannot be based on p . Thanks to Selim Berker and Kelly Trogon for helpful discussion.

¹⁰ I’m extremely grateful to Stephen Finlay for discussion of this issue, and for an anonymous referee and editor for raising versions of this response in the first place. As I discuss below, Finlay’s *end*-relational contextualism might fare better here.

(than he was before) even though it does not make him the strongest. More generally, just as rewards can count in favour of actions, so can rewards for doing the right thing.

Can proponents of EI deny that $Reward_{\phi}$ counts in favour of ϕ ing? I doubt it. Consider a simple modification of the case: make the reward smaller. Perhaps if you do the right thing the Gods will give you a slice of cake. Intuitively, they've now given you a weaker reason to do the right thing: a slice of cake is worth less than an eternity of pleasure. If so, rewards for doing the right thing must be reasons to do the right thing—after all, they count in favour of actions to different degrees, which is what reasons do.

Some proponents of EI might insist that $Reward_{\phi}$ does not count in favour of ϕ ing 'in the right way': it is the 'wrong kind of reason' to do the right thing. But this is a mistake. EI is concerned with 'rightness' in a generic all-things-considered sense. An eternity of pleasure is relevant 'in the right way' to what you ought to do in this generic sense. Moreover, as we saw above, we can vary the 'flavour' of the reward: a moral saint might respond well to a moral reward for doing whatever is morally right.¹¹

The second mark of reasons to ϕ is that they are good bases for ϕ ing.¹² $Reward_{\phi}$ can be a good basis for ϕ ing. Imagine that, if you do what you ought to do—flossing daily—the Gods will alleviate considerable suffering in future generations. For a moral agent, this reward can be a good sole basis for action: that is, it can be a good sole motivating reason to floss daily.

And, finally, reasons can be premises in good reasoning about what to do.¹³ Plausibly, $Reward_{\phi}$ can be a premise in good reasoning about what to do. So $Reward_{\phi}$ is a reason to ϕ , and so too are redundant reasons in general.

This move might initially sound implausible, due to $Reward_{\phi}$'s redundancy: you would already have to have reasoned through sufficient considerations to determine that you ought to ϕ to know which act you need to perform to reap the divine rewards. To say that you should then use $Reward_{\phi}$ as a premise in reasoning about what to do might seem like saying that you should reason from 'If P, Q' and 'P' to 'Q', and then use the premise 'If Q, Q' to infer 'Q' once more: that last step is redundant.

However, the explanatory redundancy of redundant reasons does not automatically generate deliberative redundancy. To see why, consider some cases in which $Reward_{\phi}$ can be a premise in good reasoning about what to do. In one, you do not yet know which act is all-things-considered right (and hence which act you need to perform to be rewarded). Here it might not seem worth deliberating further: the stakes between ϕ ing and ψ ing might seem low, and deliberating always involves costs in time and cognition. Then you find out that the Gods will reward you for getting the right answer about whether to ϕ or to ψ . This makes it worth your while to deliberate further because it makes the stakes higher. If so, $Reward_{\phi}$ can be a premise in good reasoning about whether to deliberate further.¹⁴

The other case involves good reasoning to fend off *akrasia*:

¹¹ This generates a recipe for challenging Alvarez's view [2010: 15] that moral reasons explain must moral rightness (and prudential reasons explain prudential rightness, etc.).

¹² See Gregory [2016]. Note that intensifiers cannot be good sole bases for action, so these rewards are not mere intensifiers. Thanks to Daniel Whiting for helpful discussion here.

¹³ See Hieronymi [2005], Setiya [2014], McHugh and Way [2016], and Way [2017].

¹⁴ One might be tempted to say that this only shows $Reward_{\phi}$ to be a reason to engage in further reasoning, not a reason to ϕ . But if it's a reason to engage in further reasoning, that's because it changes the stakes between ϕ ing and ψ ing: it's a reason to engage in reasoning because it affects the degree to which the reasons to perform one choice outweigh the reasons to perform the other. So, it must be a reason to ϕ .

You face a choice between φ ing and ψ ing. All things considered, you ought to φ . And you know this. But you're fending off *akrasia*: ψ ing is what the cool kids are doing, and you're tired of being a lowly dweeb. The Gods appear before you and say that, if you do what you ought to do, They will reward your strength of will.

It seems reasonable for you to appeal to such a divine reward in reasoning to φ . This is plausible, even though you already know that you ought to φ in the absence of the reward (if you didn't, you wouldn't face a risk of *akrasia*). Why is this plausible? Because, while not doing what you know that you have most reason to do is irrational, it's more egregious when you know that the balance of reasons is more heavily tilted to one side. Since $Reward_{\varphi}$ helps to explain *how heavily* the scales tilt in one direction, it can be a premise in good reasoning to fend off *akrasia*.

4.3 Redundancy and Defeat

A final option is to modify EI. The goal here would be to find a well-motivated version of EI that accommodates redundant reasons.

The existing ways of modifying EI emerged to address *defeated* reasons. (As I mentioned above, I set this aside initially to simplify the dialectic.) The problem that defeated reasons pose for EI is simple. Explanations are *factive*: p cannot explain q if not- q . So, when p is a defeated reason—when p is a reason for A to φ , but countervailing reasons make it the case that A ought not to φ — p cannot explain why A ought to φ , because that's false.

The two existing ways of modifying EI in response to this problem do not help to accommodate redundant reasons. The first is that if p is a reason for A to φ , then p makes φ ing what you ought to do in 'in the absence of countervailing reasons' (as Hyman put it). Here's Alvarez [2010: 15]:

A reason for φ -ing may sometimes be defeated by a reason for not φ -ing. A reason for φ -ing that can be defeated is sometimes called a 'pro tanto reason' for φ -ing. A pro tanto reason for φ -ing that is undefeated may be called an 'all things considered' reason for φ -ing; and such a reason makes φ -ing right all things considered.

The problem that this view faces is that $Reward_{\varphi}$ is a reason to φ , and is undefeated, but it does not make φ -ing right or explain why it is. One might modify EI even further: perhaps if p is a reason for A to φ , then p makes φ ing what you ought to do in the absence of *all* other reasons.¹⁵ But it's unclear how to apply this to redundant reasons: if there were no other reasons to φ , why would the Gods reward you for φ ing? Moreover, this proposal faces simple counterexamples: that φ ing would display bravery could be a reason to φ , but φ ing can't display bravery unless there's some risk to φ ing, and hence some reasons against φ ing.¹⁶

The second modification of EI is from Broome, who distinguishes 'perfect reasons' (defined above) from a 'pro tanto reason'. The latter is [2004: 39]:

a fact that plays the for- φ role in a weighing explanation of why you ought to φ , or in a weighing explanation of why you ought not to φ , or in a weighing explanation of why it is not the case that you ought to φ and not the case that you ought not to φ .

¹⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this.

¹⁶ Thanks to John Brunero for suggesting this example.

The idea is that each individual reason partly metaphysically explains the all-told status of an action, but the all-told status of the action need not be *rightness*. The reasons to ϕ can be characterized in terms of their role in explaining why ϕ ing is right, wrong, or merely permissible.

Many find Broome's view unsatisfying. Here's Brunero [2013: 813]:

merely saying that reasons to ϕ are facts that play a for- ϕ role doesn't sound all that different from saying that reasons to ϕ are considerations that count in favor of ϕ -ing. And, more importantly, it doesn't seem to be *any more informative* than saying this.¹⁷

Some press this point further: we can only understand 'the for- ϕ role' in terms of 'the role of counting in favour of ϕ -ing', so Broome's account does not 'provide a non-circular, informative account of what it is for some fact to count in favour of, or be a reason for, ϕ ing' [Nebel [forthcoming](#)].

For our purposes, I can grant that Broome provides a satisfying response to the problem posed by defeated reasons, because it does not help us to accommodate redundant reasons. In *The Gods Reward the Rational*, ϕ ing is not wrong or merely permissible. It is the right thing to do. So, the only fact to be explained is that ϕ ing is the right thing to do. But *Reward $_{\phi}$* is not part of a 'weighing explanation' for why ϕ -ing is the right thing to do.

I've made this point already with regard to explanations, but it also applies to 'weighing explanations'. Here's how that idea is fleshed out [Brunero 2013: 814]:

Consider a two-pan beam balance weighing scale, like the one Lady Justice carries. If we want to explain why the right-side-pan is lower than the left-side-pan, we would point out that the objects on the right-side-pan have a combined weight greater than that of the objects on the left-side-pan. Similarly, if we want to explain why the right-side-pan is higher than the left-side-pan, we would point out that the objects on the right-side-pan have a combined weight less than that of the objects on the left-side-pan. And if the pans equal out, we would explain this by pointing out that the combined weight of the objects on the right-side-pan is equal to the combined weight of the objects on the left-side-pan. In the analogy, the relevant ought facts are analogous to the observations of which pan on the scale, if any, tilts higher, and *pro tanto* reasons are analogous to the objects on the pans.

It might be tempting to think that this analogy shows that *Reward $_{\phi}$* can explain *Ought*. A 'weighing explanation' of why the right-side-pan is lower than the left-side-pan would point out the combined weight of the objects on the right-side-pan; and *Reward $_{\phi}$* , in the analogy, is an object on the pan that contributes to its overall weight. But this is akin to saying that the magic herb is just one of the factors that makes T'Challa stronger than he was, so it must be one of the factors that makes him the *strongest*. Whether *Reward $_{\phi}$* goes on the right- or left-side-pan depends on which pan already has the greatest combined weight. So, *Reward $_{\phi}$* does make the weight of one side-pan greater; but, unlike the other objects on the side-pans, it does not explain why the weight of one

¹⁷ A similar point arguably applies to how Schroeter and Schroeter address the problem of defeated reasons [2009: 295n12]:

reasons for an action don't always succeed in making the action the all told right thing to do: the reasons against the action might outweigh them, or they might be equally balanced, resulting in an indeterminate all told normative status. Nonetheless, in such cases, reasons for the action make a contribution towards the rightness of the action.

If this is compatible with redundant reasons being reasons, I suspect that's because 'contributing towards the rightness of ϕ ing' is no more informative than the glosses with which we started ('counting in favour of ϕ ing').

side-pan is the greatest. That is, $Reward_{\varphi}$ can make the right-side-pan weightier than it was before, but it cannot make the right-side-pan weightier than the left-side-pan. So, Broome's view provides no way of accommodating redundant reasons.

5. Generalizing: Reasons as Evidence

Redundant reasons—facts like rewards for doing the right thing—can be reasons to do the right thing, but cannot explain why it is the right thing to do. This poses a challenge to EI. There may be further ways of modifying EI, but it is incumbent on proponents of the view to deliver them. And such modifications must not only accommodate redundant reasons, but must do so in a way that preserves the original motivations for—and the dialectical significance of—this characterization of reasons.

Before concluding, let's ask whether this challenge generalizes to some other attempts to offer true, informative, characterizations of reasons.

Yes, it does. But some views are better equipped to address the challenge than others are. To show why, I'll briefly discuss three views, then focus on a fourth—namely, that reasons are evidence of what we ought to do.

The first view looks to be the closest to EI. Nebel [[forthcoming](#)] holds that reasons to φ are reasons why we ought to φ . You might think that this just *is* EI, but Nebel holds that the reasons-why relation is not factive, so 'philosophers have been wrong to assume that explanatory reasons just are explanations.' Unfortunately, Nebel says little about what explanatory reasons are if they aren't explanations; this makes it hard to adjudicate how redundant reasons pose a challenge to this view. He suggests that reasons why p are 'potential partial explainers' for p .¹⁸ This doesn't seem promising: $Reward_{\varphi}$ does not seem to potentially partially explain *Ought*. But Nebel can also take the reason-why relation as primitive, and can say that $Reward_{\varphi}$ is a reason why *Ought* is true (despite my earlier arguments about difference-making and asymmetry).¹⁹ Put simply, reasons to φ might be reasons why we ought to φ , but only if the reason-why relation turns out to allow a remarkable degree of redundancy.

A second view—which, unlike Nebel's, vindicates the 'perennially popular' hypothesis that 'normative reasons can be analyzed in terms of explanations' [Finlay 2014: 88]—is that reasons explain *value*. Intuitively, rewards for φ ing if φ ing is valuable do not make φ ing valuable (or explain why it is), just as rewards for φ ing if it is right don't make φ ing right. With that said, some proponents of this view might have responses up their sleeves. Finlay can say that such rewards make φ ing good *in a way* that it wouldn't otherwise be: that is, they make it good for getting a reward [2014: ch. 6]. This response seems promising, although I'm not sure whether similar responses are available to others who hold that reasons explain value.

A third view is expressivist treatments of reasons-talk. For Ridge, reasons-talk is understood in terms of a functional role: 'determining which option has the highest score, and then selecting that option' ([2014: 38]; cf. [ibid. 121–3]). The problem is that, in at least some of the relevant cases, one must have determined that φ ing is the best option and then selected that option in order to determine that one will be rewarded for φ ing. So, the judgment that one will be rewarded for φ ing does not play the requisite functional role, despite intuitively being a further

¹⁸ Nebel [[forthcoming](#): n12], quoting Ian Wilson.

¹⁹ Nebel is 'somewhat inclined' towards this view (personal communication). My thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this issue.

reason to φ . This is a problem for Ridge—and perhaps for Gibbard’s view [2003: 190], which is similar. With that said, it’s open to the expressivist to offer a broader specification of the relevant functional role: perhaps reasons to φ can play a functional role in settling whether, for example, to deliberate further about φ ing.²⁰

The challenge that redundant reasons pose to these three views is murky. But they pose a clearer and deeper challenge to another view, which is prominently defended by Thomson [2008] and Kearns and Star [2008, 2009, 2011, 2013]. A modest version of it is Evidence of Ought:

EO. The fact that p is a reason for A to φ only if p is evidence that A ought to φ .

This is a modest version of the view because, as with EI, it is only a necessary condition for being a reason; Thomson and Kearns and Star offer a biconditional, and claim to be conceptually or metaphysically analysing reasons in terms of evidence of what we ought to do. Like $R = MR$, their view thereby faces the objection that enabling conditions can be evidence that A ought to φ without being reasons for A ought to φ [Brunero 2009; Fletcher 2013]. Such objections don’t afflict the modest view that a reason must be a fact that is evidence of what you ought to do.

However, redundant reasons pose a threat even to the necessary condition in EO. In many cases, a reward for doing the right thing can be a reason to do the right thing without being evidence that it is the right thing to do. Indeed, we already saw the basic problem above: you have to determine which act you ought to do, in order to know which act will be rewarded. This makes the fact that you will be rewarded for φ ing *epistemically redundant* in relation to whether you ought to φ , such that it isn’t evidence.

One way to cash out epistemic redundancy uses Kearns and Star’s probabilistic framework: ‘The strength of a reason to F is the degree to which this reason increases the probability that one ought to F ’ [2008: 45]; ‘evidence increases the probability of a proposition relative to some salient relevant subset of one’s total body of evidence’ [2009: 232n10]. The problem here is two-fold. To have *Reward* as evidence for *Ought*, you need to stand in a positive epistemic relation to *Reward*; but the only way to stand in such a relation, in this case, is to reason from *Ought* to *Reward*. (You have no independent access to which act will be rewarded.) So, any subset of the evidence that you have either doesn’t include *Reward*, or does include *Reward* but this doesn’t increase the odds that *Ought* is true. We could also cash out epistemic redundancy differently: perhaps it is epistemically inappropriate to treat *Reward* as evidence of *Ought*, because it is ‘disqualified’ from playing a role as evidence (see Muñoz [forthcoming]).

As before, there will be responses on behalf of EO. They can deny that such ‘redundant reasons’ are evidentially redundant. Or they can deny that these are reasons. I think that these responses will face similar obstacles to before. Proponents of EO should seek to remain ecumenical about evidence, and this gives them little room to accommodate redundant reasons as evidence. And denying that redundant reasons are reasons is hard to square with the observation that they bear the marks of reasons.

²⁰ Michael Ridge suggested this response to me (personal communication).

6. Conclusion

If reasons can be redundant as explanations *or* as evidence of what we ought to do, then the space for characterizations of reasons that are more informative than Scanlon's gloss is considerably smaller. The problem with Scanlon's gloss, as Schroeter and Schroeter put it, was not that it is false, but rather that it doesn't say enough. Not saying enough is, at very least, a lesser theoretical vice than saying something that turns out to be false—namely, that rewards for doing the right thing cannot be reasons for action.

Some might be tempted to think that this is a bullet that one can bite. If one can't accommodate redundant reasons, who cares? If they arise only in cases like the ones above, perhaps they aren't worth worrying about.

I want to close by saying why it is important that we can accommodate redundant reasons. While some might think that the cases above are fanciful, they are toy versions of common religious views. It would be odd if the common conception of divine justice had no reason-giving force. And, even on secular worldviews, rewards for doing the right thing play a similarly important role in normative thought. As Aristotle famously noted in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2.1 1103a34-b2), we need to habituate ourselves to virtue, which requires that we start to do the right thing before we are fully virtuous. Habituation to virtue isn't always easy, especially in the face of temptations like those discussed above. So, rewards for doing the right thing are important. Such rewards needn't *explain why* the act is right: the act is already right, which is the whole point of rewarding someone for performing it. Nor must such rewards provide *evidence* that the act is right: the point of the reward can be to provide incentives to help someone overcome weakness of will and to do what they already know to be the right act. If we fail to accommodate such cases of redundant reasons, we risk failing to explain crucial and common-sense aspects of habituation to virtue. And that makes this a bullet that metaethicists of all stripes should be reluctant to bite.²¹

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