

# The wrong kind of reasons problem: its scope and significance

Jan Gertken, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

## 1. Introduction

It has become common in various philosophical contexts to distinguish between two kinds of normative reasons for reason-sensitive reactions: *the right kind of reasons* (RKR) and *the wrong kind of reasons* (WKR).

Philosophers also talk of a *wrong kind of reasons problem* in connection with attempts to explain the difference between reasons of the right and reasons of the wrong kind. There is little agreement on the scope, relevance and nature of the WKR/RKR distinction and the corresponding WKR problem.

In my talk, I will ...

- provide a survey of the ways in which the RKR/WKR distinction has been drawn with respect to different responses for which there can be normative reasons;
- examine how the distinction can be understood as uniform across these different contexts;
- discuss in what sense reasons of the wrong kind give rise to a corresponding WKR problem.

## 2. The classical buck-passing account of value

The distinction between reasons of the wrong kind and reasons of the right kind was introduced in discussions of *buck-passing accounts of value* (cf. Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).

Buck-passing accounts of value analyse values in terms of reasons. The *classical version* of the buck-passing approach focuses on reasons for *pro-attitudes* or *emotions* (cf. Scanlon 1998: 95-100, Skorupski 2007, and Suikkanen 2009). In its most general version:

(C-BPV): For it to be the case that X is valuable is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to value X.

Two more specific examples:

- For it to be the case that X is desirable is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to desire X.
- For it to be the case that X is admirable is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to admire X.

The classical buck-passing account of value is attractive for a number of reasons:

- It promises to explain values in terms of a familiar concept.
- It explains the close nexus between values and reasons for pro-attitudes and emotions.
- It fits in well with the “reasons first” approach to understanding normativity.

### 3. The WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value

Some reasons for pro-attitudes and emotions seem to be given by properties that do not make the attitude's or emotion's object valuable.

*Evil demon case:* Imagine that some evil demon is threatening to kill you unless you desire some worthless object (like a saucer of mud), or unless you admire the evil demon (cf. Crisp 2000 and Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).

It seems to many that you have a strong reason to desire the saucer of mud or a strong reason to admire the demon in this case. Such reasons are *of the wrong kind* for the classical buck-passing account of value to focus on, because they provide *counterexamples* to formulations of this view that refer to reasons for attitudes and emotions without further restrictions.

If there are WKR for pro-attitudes and emotions, then C-BPV needs to be modified:

(C-BPV\*): For it to be the case that X is valuable is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to value X – *putting aside reasons of the wrong kind*.

In order to avoid both counterexamples and circularity, buck-passers need to provide a criterion for distinguishing reasons of the wrong kind from reasons of the right kind that does not appeal to value concepts. This is *the wrong kind of reasons problem* for the classical buck-passing account of value.

In what follows, I will discuss whether there are more general *extensions* of the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value. A general extension is a structurally analogous problem such that any solution to the more general problem is also a solution to the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

### 4. Accounting for standard and non-standard reasons

*Truth-related* reasons for beliefs (*epistemic reasons*) are provided by evidence that the belief in question is true. Some philosophers believe that there are also *non-truth-related* reasons for beliefs (*pragmatic reasons*), which are provided e.g. by the benefits of having the belief (cf. Reisner 2009). A classical example for such a non-truth related reason is Pascal's Wager.

*Action-related* reasons for intentions are reasons for intentions that are provided by features of the intended action. Some philosophers believe that there are also *non-action-related* reasons for intention. A famous candidate occurs in Kavka's toxin puzzle (Kavka 1983).

Truth-related reasons for beliefs, action-related reasons for intentions, and RKR for the classical buck-passing account of value seem to form a common kind. I will call reasons of this kind *standard reasons*. Non-truth related reasons for beliefs, non-action related reasons for intentions, and WKR for the classical buck-passing account of value also seem to form a common kind. I will call reasons of this kind *non-standard reasons*.

There are certain *earmarks* that at least typical members of either kind have (cf. Schroeder 2012):

- (i) *Motivation*: it seems particularly difficult, if not impossible, to have a reaction favoured by a non-standard reason *on the basis of that reason*. Typical standard reasons are not subject to this difficulty.
- (ii) *Rationality*: there is at least one important specific dimension of rationality for each kind of reaction that is unaffected by non-standard reasons, but affected by standard reasons.
- (iii) *Correctness*: in contrast to standard reasons, non-standard reasons seem to be irrelevant to the correctness of those reactions that they favour.

It is an interesting and worthwhile philosophical project to give a precise account of the nature of standard and non-standard reasons, and to explain why there are these two very different kinds of reasons.

Some philosophers call this a “wrong kind of reasons problem” as well, and they call standard reasons “reasons of the right kind” and non-standard reasons “reasons of the wrong kind” (cf. Hieronymi 2005, Reisner 2009, Schroeder 2012). Non-standard reasons can be said to be ...

- of the same kind as those reasons that are of the wrong kind for the classical buck-passing account of value;
- of the wrong kind to be capable of directly guiding the responses they are reasons for;
- of the wrong kind to matter to the specific rationality of what they are reasons for;
- of the wrong kind to be relevant to the correctness of what they are reasons for.

The task of giving an account of standard and non-standard reasons differs in at least two important ways from the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value:

- It is not a specific *problem* for some philosophical analysis. An account of standard and non-standard reasons is rather a *general philosophical desideratum*.
- It is subject to different adequacy conditions than the task of solving the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

The task of giving an account of standard and non-standard reasons is not an extension of the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

## 5. The buck-passing account of merit

The expressions “merit” and “being worthy of” seem to pick out the same relation, which I will call the *merit relation*. The merit relation relates objects and persons to pro-attitudes and emotions:

- X is valuable if, and only if, X merits being valued.
- X is desirable if, and only if, X is worthy of being desired.
- A person is admirable if, and only if, she is worthy of admiration.

The merit relation takes other reactions as relata as well, such as:

- *actions*: some questions merit discussion, some books are worth reading, a state of affairs can merit being brought about etc.
- *intentions*: some actions are worthy of being intended.

- *beliefs*: maybe some propositions also merit believing (e.g. those that are supported by sufficient evidence, or those that are true and relevant to a valuable enquiry).

The buck-passing account of merit:

(BPM): For it to be the case that X merits  $\phi$ -ing is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to  $\phi$  with regard to X.

The buck-passing account of merit is supported by considerations that are very similar to those that support the classical buck-passing account of value. This close connection is hardly surprising, if we assume that the merit relation just is the most general value relation in the following sense:

X has (some kind of) value if, and only if, and because, X merits some reaction  $\phi$ .

Whether this is true depends (among other things) on whether propositions can be worthy of belief.

## 6. The wrong kind of reasons problem for the buck-passing account of merit

The buck-passing account of merit is subject to a WKR problem. This includes:

- *reasons for pro-attitudes and emotions* (i.e. all reasons that are of the wrong kind for the classical buck-passing account of value);
- *non-standard reasons for intentions* (imagine an evil demon threatens to kill you unless you intend to sing a terribly boring and offensive song);
- *reasons for actions* (imagine an evil demon threatens to kill you unless you discuss whether or not the number of your hairs is even);
- maybe *non-standard reasons for beliefs* (imagine an evil demon threatens to kill you unless you believe that  $2+2=5$ ).

The WKR problem for the buck-passing account of merit is a more general extension of the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

## 7. The buck-passing account of correctness

Some philosophers who discuss a more general WKR problem focus on the notion of *correctness* (cf. Schroeder 2010) or the notion of *fittingness* (cf. McHugh & Way 2012). Both notions are taken to apply whenever an attitude's or activity's *internal standard* is satisfied.

An internal standard for an attitude or action's correctness is a standard for assessing that attitude's or action's correctness that applies to it in virtue of the fact that it is the kind of attitude or action that it is (e.g. truth for beliefs). Internal standards for correctness can also be thought of as being partly constitutive of the reactions that are subject to that standard for assessment.

Schroeder has suggested to analyse this notion of correctness in terms of reasons (cf. 2007: 133-136). A simple version of this buck-passing account of correctness:

(BPC) For it to be the case that it is correct to  $\phi$  with regard to X is for it to be the case that there are sufficient reasons to  $\phi$  with regard to X.

## 8. The wrong kind of reasons problem for the buck-passing account of correctness

The buck-passing account of correctness is subject to a WKR problem. This includes:

- *reasons for pro-attitudes and emotions*: internal standards for attitudes and emotions are formulated in evaluative terms. Hence, reasons that are of the wrong kind with regard to the classical buck-passing account of value are of the wrong kind for the buck-passing account of correctness as well.
- *non-standard reasons for beliefs*: these can be reasons for incorrect beliefs.
- *reasons for intentions*: intentions are correct only if they are directed at actions for which one has sufficient reasons. Non-standard reasons for intentions are hence potential counterexamples to BPC.
- *reasons for actions*: incentives to play a certain chess endgame in an incorrect way, or to set the table at a White House state dinner in the wrong way, are irrelevant to the correctness of what they are reasons for. Hence, they are of the wrong kind for the buck-passing account of correctness (cf. Schroeder 2010: 33-36).

The WKR problem for the buck-passing account of correctness also seems to be an extension of the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

## 9. How are the two extensions of the original WKR problem related?

The class of WKR with regard to the buck-passing account of merit and the class of WKR with regard to the buck-passing account of correctness merely overlap.

*Example #1*: a wrong note in a song can be worth playing due to aesthetic considerations, which provide right kind reasons for the purpose of analysing merit, but reasons of the wrong kind with regard to understanding the correctness of playing the song.

It is possible for X to merit  $\phi$ -ing and for  $\phi$ -ing to be an incorrect way of  $\psi$ -ing. Therefore, some reasons for  $\phi$ -ing that are of the right kind with regard to the buck-passing account of merit will be of the wrong kind with regard to the buck-passing account of correctness.

*Example #2*: reasons that are of the right kind with regard to understanding the correctness of a certain way of supporting Donald Trump (such as donating money to his campaign) will be of the wrong kind with regard to analysing the property of being worthy of that sort of support.

It is possible for  $\phi$ -ing to be both a correct way of  $\psi$ -ing and for  $\phi$ -ing to be directed towards some X that does not merit  $\phi$ -ing. Therefore, reasons for  $\phi$ -ing that are of the right kind with regard to the buck-passing account of correctness can be of the wrong kind with regard to the buck-passing account of merit.

Two results:

- The general WKR problem for the buck-passing account of merit and the general WKR problem for the buck-passing account of correctness are not the same problem.
- Neither of these more general problems is an extension of the other, although both are extensions of the WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value.

A suspicion: if we distinguish between  $\phi$ 's being correct and  $\phi$ 's being directed toward an object that merits  $\phi$ -ing, the buck-passing account of correctness seems less attractive than the buck-passing accounts of value and merit.

## 10. Conclusion

Over and above the specific WKR problem for the classical buck-passing account of value, there are two more general extensions of this problem: the WKR problem for the buck-passing account of merit, and the WKR problem for the buck-passing account of correctness. These two general WKR problems are different problems.

All three WKR problems point to potentially serious objections to different proposals for analysing certain concepts or properties in terms of reasons, not to general puzzles that every philosophical view needs to address.

The distinction between standard and non-standard reasons raises a general philosophical puzzle that is independent of whether the WKR problems for buck-passing analyses can be solved.

Department of Philosophy, Lund University, 26 October 2016  
jan.gertken@hu-berlin.de

## References

- Crisp, Roger. 2000. "Review of 'Value ... And What Follows' By Joel Kupperman". *Philosophy* 03: 452–62.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. 2005. "The Wrong Kind of Reason". *The Journal of Philosophy* 102 (9): 437–57.
- Kavka, Gregory S. 1983. "The Toxin Puzzle". *Analysis* 43 (1): 33–36.
- McHugh, Conor and Way, Jonathan. 2016. "Fittingness First". *Ethics* 126 (3): 575–606.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Rønnow-Rasmussen, Toni. 2004. "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value". *Ethics* 114 (3): 391–423.
- Reisner, Andrew. 2009. "The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons for Belief and the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem". *Philosophical Studies* 145 (2): 257–72.
- Scanlon, Thomas M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schroeder, Mark. 2007. *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2010. "Value and the Right Kind of Reason". *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 5: 25–55.
- . 2012. "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons". *Ethics* 122 (3): 457–88.
- Skorupski, John. 2007. "Buck-Passing about Goodness". In *Hommage à Wlodek: Philosophical Papers Dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz*, edited by Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen et al. URL: <http://www.fil.lu.se/hommageawlodek>.
- Suikkanen, Jussi. 2009. "Buck-Passing Accounts of Value". *Philosophy Compass* 4 (5): 768–79.