

# Why there is no such thing as a motivating reason

Benjamin Kiesewetter, ENN Meeting in Oslo, 03.11.2016

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(ERS) *Explanatory reason statement*: R is the reason why p.

(NRS) *Normative reason statement*: R is a reason for A to  $\phi$ .

(MRS) *Motivating reason statements*: R is the reason for which A  $\phi$ -s / A's reason for  $\phi$ -ing.

Examples:

- That Alex forgot to cancel his attendance is the reason why he is going to Oslo.
- That it gives him the opportunity to present his research on normativity is a reason for Alex to go to Oslo.
- Alex's reason for going to Oslo is that he will meet a lot of nice people there.

*Note on terminology*: I use "motivating reason" equivalently with "reason for which someone  $\phi$ -s" or "someone's reason for  $\phi$ -ing"; see also Alvarez (2010, 36), Dancy (2000, 1), Schroeder (2007, 12). Scanlon (1998, 56) calls this the "person's operative reason". Enoch (2011, Ch. 9.1) calls it "the agent's reason" and reserves the term "motivating reason" for something else.

Many implicitly accept, and no one (that I know) explicitly denies that reason statements presuppose the existence of reasons:

- I. (ERS) entails: There exists some X, such that X is an (explanatory) reason.
- II. (NRS) entails: There exists some X, such that X is a (normative) reason.
- III. (MRS) entails: There exists some X, such that X is a (motivating) reason.

However, there is much disagreement about *what* reasons are, especially when it comes to motivating reasons. The views on the market seem to be:

- *Psychologism*: Motivating reasons are psychological states. (Davidson 1963, Smith 1994)
- *Factualism*: Motivating reasons are facts/ state of affairs. (Bittner 2001, Alvarez 2010)
- *Propositionalism*: Motivating reasons are (possibly false) propositions. (Scanlon 1998, Schroeder 2007)

*My thesis*: There is no plausible view about what motivating reasons are. Instead of accepting an implausible view, we should reject the assumption that MRS entail the existence of such reasons.

## 1. LINKS

*The normative/explanatory nexus*: "If that R is a reason to  $\phi$  then it must be possible that people  $\phi$  for the reason that R and when they do, that explains ... their action" (Raz 2011, 27; see also Williams 1979, 102).

*Potentiality claim*: All normative reasons are potential motivating reasons.

*Counterexample #1: "Wrong kind" of reasons for attitudes*

- Response: Such reasons are better understood as right kind of reasons for desiring that one has the attitude or practical reasons to try to bring the attitude about (see e.g. Gibbard 1990, 37; Parfit 2011, App. A; Skorupski 2007; Way 2012).

*Counterexample #2: Self-undermining reasons: that there is a surprise party waiting is a reason to go home (Schroeder 2007).*

- *Response 1:* The distinction between the deliberative and the evaluative motivates rejecting/re-describing such cases. That there is a surprise party waiting is not a reason, but that there is a surprise waiting might still be (Kiesewetter 2016, §3).
- *Response 2:* The existence of surprise party reasons is compatible with the potentiality claim, because the latter only requires a general ability to follow certain reasoning patterns, not the ability to reason specifically from the premise that there is a surprise party waiting (Way and Whiting 2016, §5).
  - W&W underpin their view by arguing that understanding the potentiality claim as requiring the specific ability to reason from any existing normative reason is too strong.
  - But: Who said that the potentiality claim is a claim about the agent's abilities?

Consider:

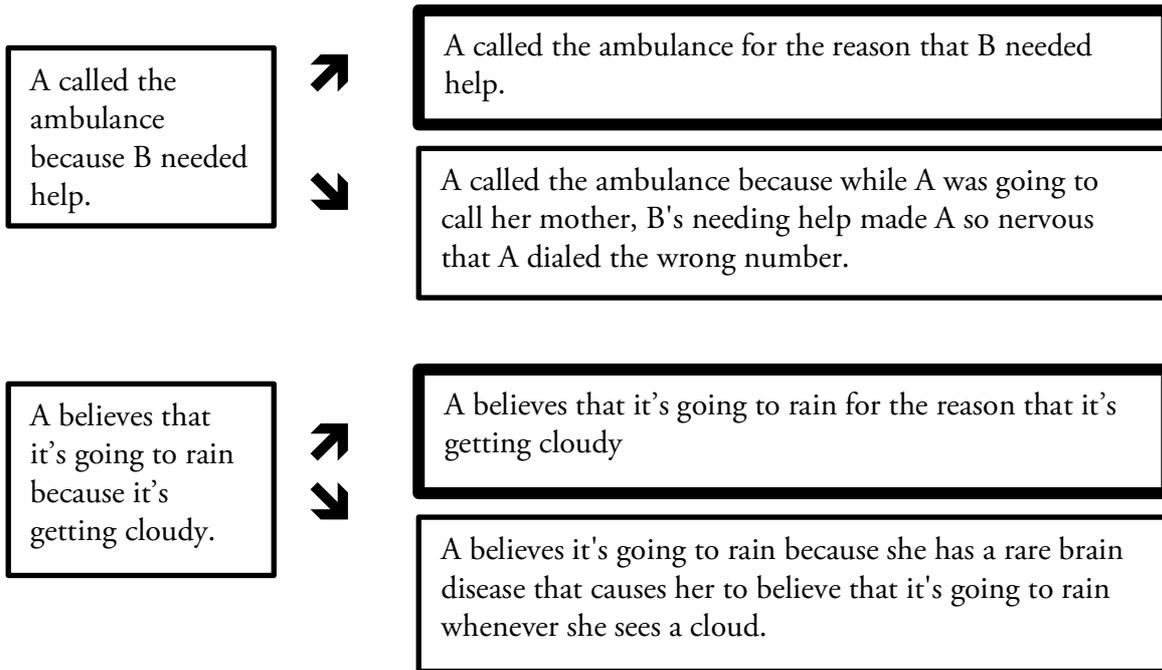
- (1) For any agent A, reason R and response type  $\phi$ , if it's conceptually impossible that [R is a reason for A to  $\phi$  & A  $\phi$ -s for the reason that R], then R is not a reason for A to  $\phi$ .
  - (2) For any agent A, it is conceptually impossible that [That there is a surprise party waiting is a reason for A to go home and A goes home for the reason that there is a surprise party waiting for A].
  - (3) So, that there is a surprise party waiting for A at home is not a reason for A to go home.
- (1) seems to me a pretty weak understanding of the potentiality claim and is in no way vulnerable to W&W's objection.

If you find the potentiality claim too strong, you might still agree that *some* normative reasons (e.g. right kind reasons) can be motivating reasons:

*Weak potentiality claim:* Some normative reasons are potential motivating reasons.

*Explanatory claim:* MRS are a certain form of explanation.

- *Intelligibility explanation:* An explanation of a reaction that makes it intelligible, shows it to be guided by rational capacities, and excludes deviant causal chains.



## II. MOTIVATING REASONS AS PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES?

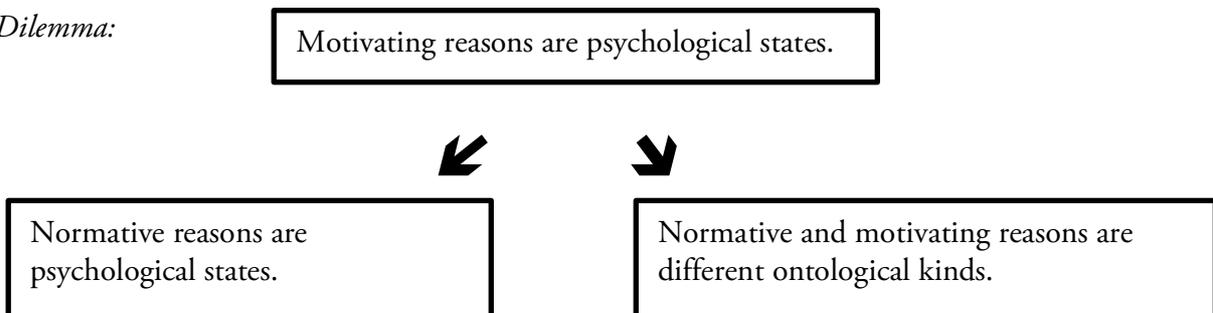
*Examples:* Davidson (1963) and Smith (1994, Ch. 4) take motivating reasons to be belief/desire-pairs.<sup>1</sup>

- *IF* this is a proposal about the reasons MRS are about, then many ordinary MRS are elliptical because they do not mention any psychological state.
- Redescription can independently motivated by the fact that in error cases, the MRS that mentions a belief is more natural than the one that does not.
- However, this is not a conclusive argument for redescription, since MRS can in error cases be naturally maintained by using the “as A believed” construction.

B did not need any help, but

- a) “A called the ambulance for the reason that B needed help”
- b) “A called the ambulance for the reason that she believed that B needed help”
- c) “A called the ambulance for the reason that, as she believed, B needed help”

*Dilemma:*



<sup>1</sup> Although Davidson does not use the term “motivating reason” but only “the agent’s reason” (1963, 3), and Smith is not explicit that what he calls motivating reasons are the reasons mentioned in MRS. It is thus possible that Smith has a different notion of a motivating reason.

*First horn: Normative reasons as psychological states*

1. Deliberation is concerned with weighing reasons. But psychological states are the medium, not the object of deliberation.
2. It's possible to detect a reason one was not aware of before (and not only because one was not aware of one's own psychological states).
3. It's possible for others to reveal a reason that one was not aware of before (and not only because one was not aware of one's own psychological states).
4. One cannot just bootstrap a reason into existence by adopting a (possibly unjustified) belief.

*Second horn: Normative and motivating reasons are different ontological kinds*

- This rules out even the weak potentiality claim (see more below).

### III. MOTIVATING REASONS AS FACTS/STATE OF AFFAIRS?

*Examples:* Bittner (2001), Alvarez (2010)

- Fits well with the plausible idea that normative reasons are facts, and that normative reasons can be motivating reasons.

*Objection 1:* If MRS are factive, then intelligibility explanations are disjunctive.

- This violates Williams' constraint: "The difference between false and true beliefs on the agent's part cannot alter the *form* of the explanation which will be appropriate to his action." (Williams 1979, 102)
- Even if disjunctive explanation is okay, factivity would significantly reduce the relevance of MRS to intelligibility explanations.

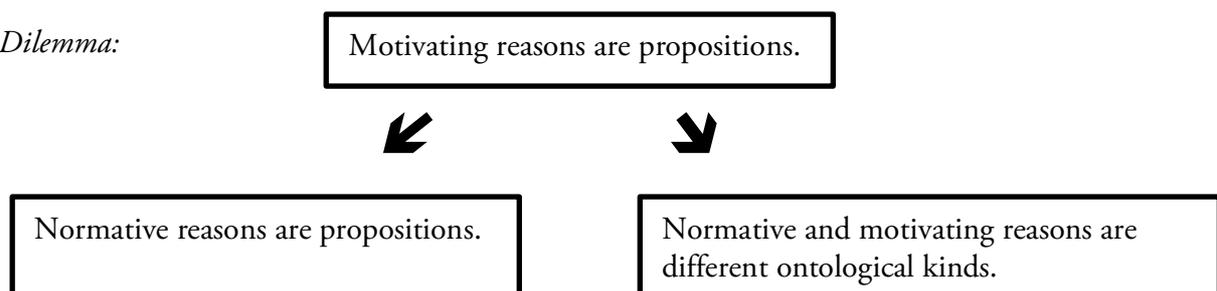
*Objection 2:* Factualism entails that people in error case do not act for reasons at all.

- Despite Bittner's (2001, Ch. 7) and Alvarez's (2010, Ch. 5.3) contention, this seems highly implausible.

### IV. MOTIVATING REASONS AS PROPOSITIONS?

*Examples:* Schroeder claims that motivating reasons are a subclass of "subjective normative reasons" (2007, 14), which are in turn contents of beliefs (2008, 65). See also Scanlon (1998, 58).

*Dilemma:*



*First horn:* Normative reasons as propositions?

- Alvarez and Schroeder both hold that normative reasons are facts, and that facts are just true propositions.

*Objection:* Normative reasons are individuated more coarse-grainedly than – and must therefore be different from – propositions (Mantel 2015, §3).

- Necessarily, that there is water in Chris' lungs is a normative reason to give him the medicine iff that there is H<sub>2</sub>O in Chris' lungs is a normative reason to give him the medicine.
  1. The best explanation for the necessary connection is that both propositions refer to the same reason.
  2. It is intuitively clear that these propositions refer to one rather than two normative reasons: one does not reveal a *further* reason by using a different description for one and the same state of affairs.

*Second horn:* Normative and motivating reasons are different ontological kinds

It follows that a normative reason can never be a motivating reason.

- Mantel (2014) *appears* to embrace this conclusion, but actually she does not.
- Mantel accepts that a reason that is acted upon can be identical with a normative reason.
- As I use the term 'motivating reason' (and as I take many others to be using this term), a reason that is acted upon is, *by definition*, a motivating reason.

So we can run the following argument:

- (1) It is possible to act for a normative reason.
- (2) If normative and motivating reasons were ontologically different kinds, then this would not be possible.
- (3) So normative and motivating reasons are not ontologically different kinds.

- Mantel would reject (2). She argues that there is no sound argument for what she calls the "identity thesis":

(IT) When an agent acts for a normative reason N, there is a motivating reason M of that agent such that N is identical with M. (Cf. Mantel 2014, 51)

But (IT) seems to follow from trivial conceptual truths:

- (1) If A acts for a normative reason R, then there is a reason R that A acted for (such that R is identical with R).
  - (2) If R is a reason that A acted for, then R is a motivating reason.
- Perhaps there is a notion of 'motivating reason' that does not validate (2), but there clearly is a legitimate notion of the term that incorporates (2) as a conceptual truth. This is the notion that I am concerned with (as, I think, many others are as well).

## IV. A NON-ONTOLOGICAL VIEW ABOUT MOTIVATING REASON STATEMENTS

Motivating reasons are neither facts, nor psychological states, nor propositions. But what are they then?

- There may be further options. Dancy seems to think that in error cases, reasons are *non-obtaining state of affairs*.
- When an agent runs for the reason that Godzilla is after him, this view commits one to the existence of non-obtaining states of affairs that consist partly in non-existing objects (Mantel 2015, §2).

*Hypothesis:* The question “What are motivating reasons?” relies on the false presupposition that MRS entail the existence of reasons.

- *Alternative view:* MRS entail no more than that A’s  $\phi$ -ing can be explained, in a certain way, by reference to (i) A’s believing that R, and (ii) A’s taking R to be a (normative) reason to  $\phi$ .
- The *notion* of ‘reason’ in MRS is the notion of a *normative reason*. But since MRS only entail that agents *take themselves* to have a normative reason, they do not presuppose the existence of reasons.

[Thomson’s (2008, 161) and Enoch’s (2011, 225) accounts of acting for a reason also assumes that MRS are statements about how (i) and (ii) explain an action. But neither Enoch nor Thomson affirm that MRS do not entail the existence of reasons, and both can be understood as variants of the view that motivating reasons are propositions.]

Against condition (ii):

1. *Malevolence:* A torments B for the reason that it will inflict B’s pain – yet A is fully aware that the fact that it will inflict B’s pain is not a reason in favour of tormenting B.
  - This might show that *taking* need not amount to *believing*.
  - But as you can represent a stick immersed in water as bent even if you do not believe it to be bent, you might represent the prospect of pain as a reason in favour of an action even though you do not believe it to be such a reason.
  - If we do not assume something like that representation, the action does not seem to be intelligible.
2. *Intellectualism:* A walks into the kitchen for the reason that she will get milk in the kitchen. But A is a cat, or a small child, who lacks the concept of a normative reason.

MRS is false		MRS is true	
No need for intelligibility explanation	There are less ambitious intelligibility explanations	Cats have the concept of a reason	One can take R to be a reason without having the concept of a reason

Against the claim that MRS have no existential presuppositions:

*Objection #1:* MRS seems to entail existence statements. “A acted for a reason” seems to entail “There was a reason for which A acted”, which in turn suggests that a reason must have existed.

- Compare: “Conor admires Sherlock Holmes, so there is someone who Conor admires” or “Felix believes that he saw a unicorn, so there is something that Felix believes he saw”.
- The truth of these statements does not seem to entail the existence of Sherlock Holmes or unicorns.
- Similarly, “there was a reason for which A acted” need not be taken to entail the existence of a reason.

*Objection #2:* Motivating reasons are a special class of explanatory reasons. But in order for a reason to be explanatory, it needs to exist.

- MRS might entail the existence of an explanatory reason, but this reason need not be identical with the motivating reason.
- This follows from the fact that MRS are not factive (against Alvarez and Bittner), while ERS are (against Dancy’s “non-factive explanation”).
- MRS are a certain kind of explanation. Normative reasons can thus figure in this kind of explanation. In the good case, we might cite the normative reason as the explanatory reason. But MRS do not depend on this possibility because they work in the error case as well.

## V. CONCLUSION

*Potentiality claim:* Normative reasons are potential motivating reasons.

- This should be understood as saying: Normative reasons are potentially figuring in MRS, i.e. in (certain kinds of) intelligibility explanations.
- To make sense of this idea, or MRS in general, we need not (and should not) assume that there really are any reasons beside normative and explanatory reasons.

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