

§1 Introduction

I would like to present an argument for an interesting claim about reasons:

The Principle of Decisive Reasons (PDR): Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , then A has sufficient reason to believe that she has decisive reason to ϕ .

- PDR is about *normative* reasons. Normative reasons stand in a relation to an agent A and a response ϕ (intentional action, belief, or other judgment-sensitive attitude) that this agent can give.
- A has sufficient reason to $\phi \rightarrow$ A is normatively permitted to (or may) ϕ .
- A has decisive reason to $\phi \rightarrow$ A is normatively required (or ought) to ϕ .
- PDR thus states that you ought to ϕ only if you may believe that you ought to ϕ .

PDR has a number of interesting consequences for theories about reasons. For example, assuming the standard account of sufficient reasons for belief, PDR entails:

Evidence requirement: A has decisive reason to ϕ only if A has sufficient evidence that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ .

This is a significant constraint on reasons, which is in tension with much of the literature on this topic (see e.g. Broome 2007, 352).

Complication: Some use the expression “A has reason to ϕ ” to mean something like “There is a reason for A to ϕ and A is aware of, or has epistemic access to, this reason”, and others think that the term ‘reason’ is systematically ambiguous between different normative senses, one of which presupposes epistemic access, while the other one doesn’t.

- I take the expressions “A has a reason to ϕ ” and “There is a reason for A to ϕ ” to be synonymous, and my *use* of these expressions leaves open whether reasons have to satisfy some access constraint.
- PDR can be used in an argument to the effect that this is the case, but this is a (possible) conclusion, not an assumption of this paper.
- If you think that the expressions ‘decisive reason’ and ‘sufficient reason’ are ambiguous, you should still agree that only one of the different readings is relevant for concluding deliberation about what to do or believe. This is the notion I have in mind.

§2 The possibility of responding correctly to reasons

The crucial premise of the argument for PDR is as follows:

The Possibility of Responding Correctly to Reasons (PRR): Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ_1 , ..., and A has decisive reason to ϕ_n , then it is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ_1 , ..., A has decisive reason to ϕ_n , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons.

PRR can be understood as a version of the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. It is a weak version of this principle, insofar as it only requires *conceptual* possibility. It is a strong version of this principle, insofar as it requires the possibility not only of conforming to reasons, but of *responding*. What does “responding correctly to reasons” amount to?

The conformity condition: Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons, then A ϕ -s.

- Conformity can be merely accidental, and is thus not sufficient for a correct response. So what else does *responding* to reasons involve?
- Assume that (a) Huck believes he has decisive reason to tell on Jim, although (b) in fact Jim’s humanity is a decisive reason for Huck not to tell on Jim. Moreover, (c) Huck does not tell on Jim, thereby responding to Jim’s humanity. Does Huck respond correctly to his decisive reasons?
- Jones (2003, esp. 189–90) : “Tracking” reasons via reliable non-reflective mechanisms vs. “responding” to reasons via reflective assessment of reasons *as* reasons. → Huck tracks his reasons, but does not respond to them correctly.
- This is a terminological point: There is a weak notion of ‘responding’ which requires mere tracking, and a stronger notion which requires understanding reasons as reasons. I am using the stronger notion, which involves:

The normative belief condition: Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons, then A believes that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ .

- Note: You don’t have to make an explicit conscious judgment, the belief can be dispositional.
- Note: I haven’t said that you ought always respond correctly to your reasons in this sense, I only claim that it is always conceptually possible that you do this.

Why believe that PRR is true?

- A conceptual point about reasons: they are considerations in favour of a certain response, which can be carried out from an understanding of that consideration as counting in favour of that response. That is why there are reasons to have beliefs, but no reasons to have hiccups.
- Granted that it must be possible to respond to each particular reason, why should it also be possible to respond to all decisive reasons together? Why is it not enough that it is possible to *conform* to or *track* decisive reasons?
- Because it is implausible that our reasons put us under normative demands that we cannot at the same time satisfy and understand: If it were impossible for us to meet *both* the conformity *and* the normative belief condition in a particular case, then we could conform to or track our reasons *only if* we did not believe that they existed, and we could believe that they existed *only if* we did not conform to or track them.
- The ‘ought’ of deliberation and advice should be taken to imply the possibility of guidance by reflection, not only the possibility of blind conformity.

§3 The Argument for PDR

- (1) If it is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ_1, \dots , and A has decisive reason to ϕ_n , then it is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ_1, \dots , A has decisive reason to ϕ_n , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons (*assumption entailed by PRR*).¹
- (2) Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons, then A ϕ -s (*true by definition*).
- (3) Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons, then A believes that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ (*true by definition*).
- (4) Necessarily, if A has no sufficient reason to believe that p, then A has decisive reason not to believe that p (*assumption*).
- (5) Assume for reductio: It is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ , but no sufficient reason to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ .
- (6) Hence, it is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ , and A has decisive reason not to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ (*from 4 and 5*).
- (7) Hence, it is possible that A has decisive reason to ϕ , A has decisive reason not to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons (*from 6 and 1*).
- (8) Hence, it is possible that A believes that she herself has decisive reasons to ϕ , A has decisive reason not to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons (*from 3 and 7*).
- (9) Hence, it is possible that A believes that she herself has decisive reasons to ϕ and A does not believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ , and A responds correctly to her decisive reasons (*from 2 and 8*).
- (10) It is impossible that A believes that she herself has decisive reasons to ϕ and A does not believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ (*logical truth*).
- (11) It is impossible that A has decisive reason to ϕ , but no sufficient reason to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ (*reductio of 5, from 9 and 10*).
- (12) Necessarily, if A has decisive reason to ϕ , then A has sufficient reason to believe that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ (*from 11*).²

¹ The logical form of PRR is $\Box(p \rightarrow \Diamond q)$, which contraposes to $\Box(\neg \Diamond q \rightarrow \neg p)$. By the K axiom, this entails $(\Box \neg \Diamond q) \rightarrow (\Box \neg p)$, which contraposes to $(\neg \Box \neg p) \rightarrow (\neg \Box \neg \Diamond q)$ and is thus equivalent to $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Diamond \Diamond q$. By the S4 axiom, which seems uncontroversial for conceptual necessity, we get $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Diamond q$, which is the logical form of premise (1).

² The following is a formal version of the argument. Let Ψ_i represent propositions of the form "A has decisive reason to ϕ_i ", $C = A$ responds correctly to her decisive reasons, $R\phi = A$ has decisive reason to ϕ , $r\phi = A$ has sufficient reason to ϕ , $\phi = A$ ϕ -s, $Bp = A$ believes that p.

- (1) $\Diamond(\Psi_1 \wedge \dots \wedge \Psi_n) \rightarrow \Diamond(\Psi_1 \wedge \dots \wedge \Psi_n \wedge C)$, *premise*
- (2) $\Box((R\phi \wedge C) \rightarrow \phi)$, *true by definition*
- (3) $\Box((R\phi \wedge C) \rightarrow BR\phi)$, *true by definition*
- (4) $\Box(\neg rBp \rightarrow R\neg Bp)$, *premise*
- (5) $\Diamond(R\phi \wedge \neg rBR\phi)$, *assumption for reductio*
- (6) $\Diamond(R\phi \wedge R\neg BR\phi)$, *from (4) and (5)*
- (7) $\Diamond(R\phi \wedge R\neg BR\phi \wedge C)$, *from (1) and (6)*
- (8) $\Diamond(BR\phi \wedge R\neg BR\phi \wedge C)$, *from (3) and (7)*
- (9) $\Diamond(BR\phi \wedge \neg BR\phi \wedge C)$, *from (2) and (8)*
- (10) $\neg \Diamond(BR\phi \wedge \neg BR\phi)$, *logical truth*
- (11) $\neg \Diamond(R\phi \wedge \neg rBR\phi)$, *reductio of (5), from (9) and (10)*
- (12) $\Box(R\phi \rightarrow rBR\phi)$, *from (11), q.e.d.*

- Premise (1) follows from PRR, (2) and (3) are true by definition.
- Premise (4) is fairly uncontroversial: We are not permitted to have beliefs for which we have insufficient reasons. Note that (4) is independent of evidentialism.

§4 Implications

While the argument for PDR is independent of evidentialism or any substantial account of reasons for belief, what conclusions to draw from PDR essentially depends on what having sufficient reason to believe amounts to.

The standard account: A has sufficient reason to believe that p iff A has sufficient evidence that p.

- *Assumption 1:* Reasons for beliefs are provided by evidence for their contents (evidentialism).
- This is supported by the phenomenology of deliberation. Deliberation about whether to believe p is “transparent” on deliberation about whether p (Moran 1988).
- Allegedly non-evidential reasons for belief are better understood as reasons to bring about beliefs (if one can) or reasons to wish that one believed (Parfit 2011, App. A).
- *Assumption 2:* The relevant evidence is the body of evidence available to the agent.
- If the available evidence neither supports p nor not-p, then it is correct to conclude in deliberation that one ought to withhold belief with respect to p.
- If one ought to withhold belief with respect to p, then it is not the case that one may believe that p, and it is not the case that one may believe that not-p.
- The notion of ‘sufficient reason’ relevant for deliberation is thus determined only by the available evidence.

Evidence and justification requirements

Assuming the standard account of reasons for belief, PDR entails:

- *Evidence requirement:* A has decisive reason to ϕ only if A has sufficient evidence that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ .

According to the standard account of justification, A is in a position to be justified in believing that p iff A has sufficient evidence that p. On this assumption, PDR entails:

- *Justification requirement:* A has decisive reason to ϕ , only if A is in a position to be justified in believing that she herself has decisive reason to ϕ .

Objective vs. subjective reasons and ‘oughts’

- Does what we have decisive reason (or ought) to do depend on our epistemic perspective (our beliefs, evidence, knowledge) or on the totality of objective fact? (See e.g. Graham 2010; Kiesewetter 2011; Zimmerman 2014)
- Most philosophers think that reasons for belief are perspective-dependent. Many, however, resist the idea that practical reasons are perspective-dependent as well.

- According to PDR, such a disanalogy does not stand scrutiny: if all decisive reasons depend on reasons for belief, and reasons for belief depend on perspective, then *all* decisive reasons depend on perspective.

Normative risk

- Is there an interesting sense in which agents with epistemically justified beliefs face normative risks, or can sensibly ask the question: “What ought I to do if I don’t know what I ought to do?” (yes: Graham 2010; no: Zimmerman 2008)
- PDR entails: If an agent conforms to all her sufficient reasons for belief, she cannot face a normative risk in this sense.

Internal vs. external reasons

- Williams (1979): Having a reason to ϕ implies having an element in one’s motivational set appropriately related to ϕ -ing.
- Williams’ own argument has been contested by many. PDR may shed a new light on the issue.
- Williams allows dispositions of evaluation as part of the motivational set.
- Internalists may argue: having sufficient evidence that one has decisive reason to ϕ involves having some dispositions of evaluation.
- Externalists have to deny this, because together with PDR (and the standard account), this entails Williams’ internalism.

The normativity of rationality

- *The normativity of rationality (NR)*: If A is rationally required to ϕ , then A has decisive reason to ϕ .
- NR seems plausible, since irrationality ascriptions involve criticism. But it also leads to difficulties. Consider two views about the rational connection between ‘believing you have decisive reason to ϕ ’ and ‘intending to ϕ ’.
- *Narrow scope view*: If you believe you have decisive reason to ϕ , then rationality requires you to intend to ϕ (together with NR, this licenses unacceptable bootstrapping).
- *Wide scope view*: You are rationally required to either not believe you have decisive reason to ϕ or intend to ϕ (is implausibly symmetric, cannot guide, and also licenses bootstrapping in special cases when combined with NR).
- *Alternative view*: If you *rationally* believe you ought to ϕ , then rationality requires you to intend to ϕ .
- Does this license unacceptable bootstrapping when combined with NR? Suppose the widely shared view that rationality requires you to believe in accordance with your evidence. Together with the evidence requirement, this entails that you cannot rationally believe a false statement about what you have decisive reason to do.
- Hence, if you rationally believe you have decisive reason to ϕ , then you really have decisive reason to intend to ϕ . The alternative view does not license unacceptable bootstrapping when combined with NR.
- PDR thus provides a promising starting point for explaining the normativity of rationality.

References

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