

What's Wrong With the Wrong Kind of Reasons?

Jan Gertken and Benjamin Kiesewetter

1. THE WRONG KIND OF REASONS AND THE WRONG KIND OF REASONS PROBLEM

What does it mean to speak of the WKR or a WKR Problem in the following fields?

- (1) Reasons for pro-attitudes (such as desires or admiration)
- (2) Reasons for other attitudes (such as beliefs or intentions)
- (3) Reasons for action

1.1 *Reasons for Pro-Attitudes*

Buck-Passing Account of Value (BPA): What it is for X to be good or valuable is to be explained in terms of reasons for pro-attitudes towards X.

Value-related reasons for pro-attitudes: Reasons that are provided by features that make the object of the pro-attitude valuable (e.g.: a reason for admiring a person that is provided by this person's generosity).

→ Value-related reasons are *the right kind of reasons* for the BPA.

But there is a tendency to think that there is also a second group of reasons for pro-attitudes:

Evil Demon: "Imagine that an evil demon will inflict severe pain on me unless I prefer this saucer of mud; that makes the saucer well worth preferring. But it would not be plausible to claim that the saucer of mud's existence is, in itself, valuable" (Crisp 2000, 459).

→ If the demon's threat provides a reason for preferring the saucer of mud, this reason is not value-related and thus *of the wrong kind* for the BPA.

WKR Problem: Insofar as there are non-value-related reasons for pro-attitudes, proponents of the BPA have to identify the value-related-reasons without recourse to evaluative notions.

Some suggested solutions to the WKR Problem:

- *Object-given vs. state-given reasons*: RKR are provided by properties of the attitude's object, WKR are provided by properties of the state of having the attitude (see e.g. Parfit 2001; Piller 2006).
- *Dual vs. single role reasons*: RKR also appear in the intentional content of the pro-attitude as features on account of which the object is favoured (discussed in Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).
- *Non-derivative vs. derivative reasons*: RKR are non-derivative or non-instrumental reasons for the attitude (Stratton-Lake 2005; Suikkanen 2009).
- *Content vs. holding reasons*: RKR are related to the attitude's correctness, while WKR aren't (Danielsson and Olson 2007).
- *Consequence-independent vs. consequence-dependent reasons*: RKR are provided by features that would also provide reasons in the absence of the benefits/consequences that the relevant attitudes have (cf. Lang 2008; Rowland 2013; Samuelsson 2013).
- *Shared vs. non-shared reasons*: RKR are the reasons necessarily shared by everyone engaged in the relevant activity because they are engaged in this activity (Schroeder 2007; 2010).

Suggestion for Dissolution of the WKR Problem:

- *WKR Scepticism*: All reasons for pro-attitudes are RKR. What appear to be WKR for pro-attitudes (to some) are really reasons for wanting to have these attitudes or to bring them about (see e.g. Gibbard 1990; Parfit 2001; Skorupski 2007; Way 2012).

1.2 Reasons for other Attitudes

- Relatively uncontroversial: there are *truth-related reasons for beliefs* (provided by evidence) and *action-related reasons for intentions* (provided by facts that also provide reasons for actions).
- But there is also a tendency to think that there are other kinds of reasons for these attitudes. Classical examples:

Pascal's wager: According to Pascal, believing in God has infinite expected utility. If this provides a reason for believing in God, it is not truth-related.

Kavka's toxin puzzle: An eccentric billionaire offers you a large award for intending to drink a glass of toxin, independently of whether you will actually drink it or not (Kavka 1983). If this provides a reason for intending to drink the toxin, it is not action-related.

- Such reasons bear an intuitive resemblance to non-value-related reasons for pro-attitudes. They have a “recognizable flavor” (Schroeder 2012) that holds them together.
- To give this idea of a common kind a name, call value-related reasons for pro-attitudes, truth-related reasons for belief, and action-related reasons for intentions *standard reasons*; and call the mentioned examples of non-value-related, non-truth-related and non-action-related reasons *non-standard reasons*.¹

Schroeder's (2012) earmarks for non-standard reasons:

- *Motivational asymmetry*: It is much more difficult, if not impossible, to give the response favoured by a non-standard reason on the basis of that reason.
 - *Rational asymmetry*: There is at least one important dimension of the rational assessment of a response that is unaffected by non-standard reasons.
 - *Correctness asymmetry*: Non-standard reasons do not bear on the correctness of the response.
- Neither of these earmarks is beyond dispute. But note that something has to be said about what holds non-standard reasons together if one wants to capture the intuitive idea of a common kind.

Many authors call non-standard reasons for beliefs and intention the *wrong kind of reasons* (Hieronymi 2005; Reisner 2009; Schroeder 2012; Way 2012). It is not always clear why. Non-standard reasons for pro-attitudes are of the *wrong kind* for the BPA, but this is not the case for non-standard reasons for beliefs or intentions.

In which sense are non-standard reasons for beliefs or intentions of the wrong kind?

- They are of the wrong kind to base the favoured attitude on them.
- They are of the wrong kind to make the favoured attitude rational.
- They are of the wrong kind to make the favoured attitude correct (or to indicate its correctness).

¹ Raz (2011) uses the term “standard reason” to refer to a reason that can be followed directly. Even though we think that this term has the same extension as ours, we are not using it in the same sense. We are merely using it as a placeholder for the idea that some reasons intuitively belong to the same kind. Note also that we do not assume that *all* non-value-related, non-truth-related, and non-action-related reasons belong to the kind that we here call “non-standard reasons”. What we say is thus compatible with Schroeder's (2012) view that some non-action-related and non-truth-related reasons are standard reasons.

- They are of the wrong kind to be reasons for the relevant attitude (they are “not really” reasons for that attitude, cf. Hieronymi 2005).
 - They are of the wrong kind for a buck-passing account of correctness, as suggested by Schroeder (2010).
 - They are of the same kind as those reasons for pro-attitudes that are of the wrong kind for the BPA.
- Note that the assumption that there is anything wrong with the “wrong kind of reasons” is potentially controversial if we are not discussing BPA.

Is there a WKR *Problem* with respect to reasons for beliefs or intentions (cf. Hieronymi 2005; Reisner 2009; Schroeder 2010 & 2012)?

- No problem for the BPA.
 - A problem for Schroeder’s buck-passing account of correctness, but this is not what the authors mentioned above have in mind.
- Not so much a particular problem, but rather the philosophical desideratum of a general account of the distinction between standard and non-standard reasons, or – from the perspective of the WKR sceptic – an account of the distinction between what are reasons for attitudes and what are really reasons for wanting these attitudes.

1.3 *Reasons for Action*

WKR for action?

- (i) Reasons for action that are of the wrong kind for a buck-passing account of value in terms of reasons for action (cf. Heuer 2011).
 - (ii) Reasons for action that are of the same kind as those reasons for pro-attitudes that are of the wrong kind for BPA.
 - (a) *Not related to the value of the object*: The WKR for actions are reasons provided by features that do not make good the state of affairs that an action brings about, but rather the bringing about itself (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2012).
 - (b) *Not related to correctness*: The WKR for actions are reasons not related to the standard of correctness that governs the action, e.g. a reason to set the table in an incorrect way (Schroeder 2010).
 - (c) *Impossible to (rationally) respond to*: The WKR for actions are reasons that one cannot (or cannot rationally) act on (cf. Raz 2011). Possible examples: reasons for spontaneous actions, reasons to go to a surprise party thrown in one’s own honor.
- (i) need not have to do anything with the idea of a common kind.
 - While (a)-(c) coincide in the case of pro-attitudes, they come apart in the case of reasons for action.
 - (a) is not the right feature insofar as we are looking for a general phenomenon that also comprises reasons for beliefs and intentions.
 - (b) might be questioned for the same reason, since it is unclear whether e.g. reasons for intention (and all reasons for action) are governed by standards of correctness.
- Insofar as we are looking for a common distinction for all kinds of reasons, (c) seems the right way to go.
- This makes global WKR scepticism viable: No one can plausibly deny that there are WKR for action in sense (b); and only hard-boiled act-consequentialists will deny that there are WKR for action in sense (a). But one can reasonably deny that there are reasons for action that one cannot rationally respond to.

2. THE GUIDANCE ARGUMENT FOR WKR SCEPTICISM

2.1 *The Argument*

WKR scepticism has been criticised as *ad hoc* or supported by merely idiosyncratic intuitions. Discussing the views of WKR sceptics, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen write:

- “As far as we can see, Gibbard and Parfit have no argument for their claim, apart from an appeal to intuitions that we do not share.” (2004: 412).
- They furthermore ask: “if we are supposed to have reasons for actions when the actions have useful effects or are valuable for their own sake, why shouldn’t we have reasons for attitudes in comparable circumstances?” (2004: 413)

These challenges can be met. In J. Raz’s words: “to say of a fact that it is a reason for action is not merely to say that it shows the action to have some good, some point to it. It is to say something like that it can rationally guide an agent towards that action.” (2011: 27)

This suggests the following argument:

- (P1) *Guidance Principle*: If p is a reason for S to F (and S can F), then it is possible for S to F for the reason that p (see e.g. Williams 1979; Darwall 1983; Dancy 2000; Raz 2011).
- (P2) One cannot have any reaction F for reasons that are of the wrong kind.
- (C) Thus: There are no reasons of the wrong kind.

2.2 *Clarifying the Premises*

Different types of reasons-explanations: There are different ways in which a normative reason can figure in an explanation. Premise (P2) concerns the idea that p must be able to explain why S F -s in a way that allows us to conclude that S F -s *for the reason that p* . Let us call such explanations of why S F -s *rationalising explanations*. Premise (P2) does not rule out that WKR can play a part in non-rationalising explanations.

Modality: The sense of “It is not possible for S to F for the reason that p ” that is relevant for the premises of the guidance argument is the sense in which it is true to say that it is not possible to have headaches for reasons.

2.3 *In Defence of (P2)*

An objection: WKR satisfy the condition specified by the guidance principle.

If situations are possible in which someone believes p for the reason that this belief is beneficial, we should be able to come up with a coherent description of such a case that also allows us to conclude that this person had that particular belief for the specified reason.

We can think of two strategies that friends of WKR for beliefs might employ here.

- i) One believes that p for a reason of the wrong kind if that belief results from a stable disposition to have such beliefs in accordance with reasons:

Disposition Belief: Max has a complex and stable disposition to (a) recognise beliefs that would benefit him, (b) think of these facts as giving him reasons to have the respective beliefs, and (c) have the belief that he considers to be beneficial whenever he believes that nothing more important defeats this fact.

But consider:

Disposition Headache: Harry has a complex and stable disposition to (a) recognise when having a headache would be good for him, (b) to think of these facts as giving him reasons for having a headache, and (c) to have a headache whenever he believes that this reason is not defeated by more important considerations.

→ Since Harry does not have a headache for the reason that having the headache is good for him, Max also does not believe that p for the reason that having that belief is good for him.

ii) One can believe that p for a WKR by bringing it about that one has this belief:

Bringing about beliefs: Anna recognises that having the belief that p would benefit her, thinks of this fact as a reason to have the belief in question, believes that this reason is not defeated by other reasons and, knowing how to induce beliefs in herself by self-hypnosis, decides to do so and ends up believing p as a result.

Although Anna brings-it-about-that-she-believes-p and does this for the reason that believing p is beneficial, she does not *believe that p* for the reason that this belief is beneficial.

Bringing about headaches: Katie recognises that having a headache would benefit her, thinks of this fact as a reason to have a headache, believes that this reason is not defeated by other reasons and, knowing the consequences of hitting oneself hard on the head, takes a hammer, hits herself and gains the benefits.

→ Since Katie does not have a headache for the reason that having the headache is good for her, Anna also does not believe that p for the reason that having that belief is good for her.

2.4 In Defence of (P1)

- *Intuitive appeal:* The principle spells out an intuitively plausible connection between normative reasons and motivating reasons.
- *Explanatory benefits:* We need an explanation of why there can be reasons for beliefs, intentions, pro-attitudes and actions, but no reasons for headaches, spasms, states of shock or allergic reactions. The guidance principle easily explains why there are no such reasons. The guidance principle is thus supported by independently plausible considerations that are not already biased against WKR scepticism.

These considerations only give defeasible support to the guidance principle, since there might be an alternative that provides us with an equally good explanation of why there are no reasons for headaches etc. One possibility is to appeal to:

(P1*) If p is a reason for S to F (and S can F), then there is some q such that q is a reason for S to F and it is possible for S to F for the reason that q.

(P1*) explains why there are no reasons for headaches. But it does not provide an explanation that is at least as good as the explanation given by the unmodified guidance principle (P1).

- (P1) is the most natural explanation of (P1*), so unless there is an independent reason against (P1), (P1*) also supports (P1).
- If p's potential to serve as S' reason for F-ing is not part of what makes p a reason for S to F, then why is the possible existence of *some other fact* that has this potential a

constitutive factor for p's status as a reason for S to F? This is hard to understand and itself needs explaining.

- It is hard to see why the explanation provided by (P1*) should be at least as good as the explanation provided by (P1). (P1*) seems just an *ad hoc* modification of (P1).

3. CONCLUSION

- Outside the context of discussing buck-passing accounts of value, it is unclear what, if anything, is wrong with wrong kind reasons. Such talk stands in need of clarification.
- Reasons that are of the same kind as wrong kind reasons for buck-passing accounts are also reasons of a wrong kind in another sense. Since such reasons would be reasons that are of the wrong kind to provide rational guidance with regard to some reaction F, they are also of the wrong kind to be reasons for F at all.

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