

Kvantifikator för en Dag

Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday



Reason-Based Value or Value-Based Reasons?¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss practical reasons and value, assuming a coexistence thesis according to which reasons and value always go together. I start by doing some taxonomy, distinguishing between three different ways of accounting for the relation between what is good and the reasons we have to want, or to try to achieve, it. I argue that, of these views, the most plausible one is that according to which something's being good just consists in how certain facts about it---other than that of how it is good---give us reasons to want this thing. This reason-based account of goodness has been claimed to be open to different kinds of counter-example, some of which I consider in this paper. I argue that none of these succeed.

When something is good, or valuable, then in what way is the goodness, or value, of this thing related to the reasons we have to respond in certain ways to it?²

In asking that question, I am assuming

the coexistence thesis about reasons and value: whenever things are good, or in other ways valuable, we have reason to respond in certain ways to them.

That seems to be correct: if some event, such as the ending of some war, would be good, then it also seems that there would be reason to want, or to try, to achieve it.

¹ In writing this paper, I have been much helped by comments from, conversations with, and/or suggestions made by, Ingmar Persson, Roger Crisp, and Derek Parfit. I also received many helpful criticisms at a seminar in practical philosophy at Gothenburg University where I presented a longer version of this paper.

² By 'reasons' I here mean *justifying*, or *normative*, reasons. We can have such reasons to respond to certain things in certain ways without being motivated by these reasons, either because we are ignorant as regards the facts which give us these reasons or because we are being irrational, immoral, or in some other way *unreasonable*. When we are in different ways responding to facts that give us certain reasons, then these normative reasons become *our* reasons for these responses.

This coexistence thesis is compatible with different views on *why* reasons and value always go together. In trying to decide which of these gives the best explanation, we can turn to our beliefs about reasons. Some writers, many of whom are influenced by G. E. Moore, propound

the value-based thesis: when something is good, or has some other kind of value, then that in itself is what gives us reason to respond in certain ways to this thing.

Others accept what we can call³,

the buck-passing thesis: when something is good, or has some other kind of value, then that in itself does *not* give us any reason to respond in any way to it. What gives us reason to respond in various ways to things that have some kind of value is whatever it is about them that *makes* these things good, or gives them their kind of value.⁴

This buck-passing thesis, in turn, is compatible with

separatism about goodness: when something is good, then this fact about this thing is distinct from that of how certain other facts about it give us reason to respond in certain ways to it.

But, if we accept the buck-passing thesis, it would be hard for us to defend this kind of separatism about goodness since it would then be left obscure what explanatory work would be done by our separately postulated, distinct property of goodness. If, instead, we combine belief in the buck-passing thesis with belief in

³ I get this name from Scanlon (1998)

⁴ If we take this view, then, as some writers put it, we pass the normative buck from facts about value to other facts instead.

the reason-based account of goodness: things are good, or have other kinds of value, just when and because there are facts about these things---other than that of how they have these kinds of value---which give us reasons to respond in certain ways to these things,

then we would only *need*, in explaining practical reason and value---and the truth of the coexistence thesis---to appeal to *one* distinct kind of property, or fact, namely that of being reason-giving.⁵

In contrast, on a view that combines the buck-passing thesis and separatism about goodness, *two* distinct properties would need to be postulated: besides that of being reason giving, we would also take that of being good to be a distinct, or substantive, kind of property.⁶ On such a view, it would be harder to see why the coexistence thesis would obtain.

Therefore, if we accept the buck-passing thesis, then---given the absence of some apparent need to postulate a distinct property of goodness---we do best in combining that belief with a reason-based account of goodness. As this argument appeals to considerations of ontological economy, we can call it *the simplicity argument*.

Of the possible claims stated above, it is only the value-based thesis about reasons and the reason-based account of goodness that could not be combined into a coherent theory. If something's being good just consists in how other facts about it give us reason to respond in certain ways to it, then it could not, at the same time, be that this thing's being good is what gives us reason to respond to it in the relevant ways.

So, given the assumed truth of the coexistence thesis, there are at least three possible views that we might take as regards the relation between goodness and reasons⁷. One of these is that which I have called the reason-based account of goodness. On a second view, which---as it is sometimes ascribed to Moore---we can call

⁵ Cf. Parfit (2001), p. 39

⁶ Cf. Crisp (work in progress)

⁷ There may be other logical possibilities, but I am content with only considering what I find to be the most plausible possibilities.

the Moorean view: if something has certain natural properties and these give it the further property of goodness, then this thing's being good gives us reason to respond in certain ways to it.

Thus those who accept this view could hold that, since the ending of our imagined war would mean that the lives of many innocent people would be spared and that their suffering would be relieved, this war's ending would be good.

That seems right, but, as T. M. Scanlon observes⁸, it seems to be a mistake to hold, as the Moorean would, that these facts that make the ending of this war good would not give us the reasons we have to want, or to try, to achieve this. For it seems that, when we are to explain the reasons there are to want this war to end, we need, in fully describing these reasons, only to appeal to the facts that lives would be saved and suffering relieved.

Consider another example. Some medical treatment would be good if it were safe and likely to succeed. What reasons would we have to prefer this treatment to other available treatments that we can assume to be less safe and less likely to succeed? These reasons seem to be precisely that, of the given alternatives, our preferred treatment is the safest one, and the treatment that is most likely to succeed. Once again, in fully describing the reasons we would have to prefer this medical treatment, we would not need to appeal to any facts about goodness or badness---such facts would be implied by our descriptions of the relevant reasons.

Arguing in this way, Scanlon claims that we ought to prefer a reason-based account of goodness to the Moorean view. In fact, in his discussion, Scanlon treats these views as if though they were the only two possibilities here. But, as we have seen, that is not so. We can combine the buck-passing thesis about reasons with separatism about goodness⁹. Such a view is 'Moorean' in how it takes the property of goodness to be a distinct property, which things have in virtue of their having certain natural properties. It is a 'buck-passing' view in virtue of it how it does not take facts about value to provide us with reasons.

Since Scanlon overlooks the possibility of combining the buck-passing thesis with separatism about goodness, he seems to think that, in order to establish a reason-based

⁸ Scanlon (1998) p. 97

⁹ Such a view seems to be embraced by Jonathan Dancy in Dancy (2000).

account of goodness, it suffices to defend the buck-passing thesis about reasons. That is not so. We would *also* need to provide some argument for rejecting separatism about goodness. What I have called the simplicity argument is, I believe, such an argument. If we accept the buck-passing thesis about reasons, then there seems to be no obvious need for us to postulate a *distinct* property of being valuable: such a property seems only to be a piece of ontological excess luggage not doing any explanatory work.

So, should we accept a reason-based account of goodness? According to some critics, we should not, since such accounts are open to different kinds of counter-example. I shall now consider some such examples, and these objections.

According to one such objection, there can be reason to want what is neutral with regards to value. A second kind of objection claims that there are instances where things have certain kinds of value, but where we do not have corresponding reasons to respond in any ways to them. In a quite different, third objection, it is claimed that are cases in which someone seems to have stronger reason to want one of two events to occur even though it does not seem as if more value would be involved if this particular event occurred rather than the other. And, a fourth kind of objection appeals to examples in which we are supposed to have reason to want what is obviously bad.

Turn now to the first kind of supposed counter-example. Jonathan Dancy imagines¹⁰ that he promises his children that, if they will do their chores, he will tie his left shoelaces before tying his right shoelaces when putting on his shoes. Having promised to do so, Dancy has a reason to tie his left shoelaces before tying his right shoelaces. So, given the reason-based account of goodness, it seems that Dancy's tying his left shoelaces before his right ones would be good. But, Dancy argues, such a trivial act seems to lack any kind of value, and yet the reason he has to tie his left shoelaces first is not trivial.

This objection conflates the value of a certain kind of act with the value of some token of this act-type. It might very well be that tying one's left shoelaces first is not a kind of act that has any kind of value. In that sense, this is a case where someone has reason to do a kind of act that is not in itself good. But, on this occasion, since Dancy's doing this would constitute the fulfilment of a promise, it doesn't seem to be a mistake to claim that, this time around, his tying his left shoelaces first *would* be good. His starting with his right shoelaces

¹⁰ In Dancy (2000), at p. 168

would be bad since it would mean that he would be breaking his promise. Under other circumstances, his doing so would not be in any way worse than his starting with his left shoelaces. But, in those circumstances, he would not have any apparent reason to go either way.

Dancy also tries to argue against the reason-based account of goodness by appealing to the second kind of intended counter-example, in which there is value, but supposedly no apparent reasons. In such an example of Dancy's, he imagines that, on some desert island, someone is alone and suffering. That is certainly a bad thing. But, as no one knows of, or has the opportunity to relieve, this poor person's suffering, there seems to be no one of whom it is true that he or she has reason to help this cast away.

This counter-example is not convincing. The suffering person on the desert island herself certainly has reason to lament her predicament. And, it seems to be enough for her suffering to be bad in the reason-based sense that anyone with an opportunity to help this person would have had reason to do so.

Similar claims apply to a similar kind of example involving animals of which it makes no sense to ask what they have reasons to want, or do. It would, it might now be suggested, also be bad if some such sentient being were to suffer in solitude. But, this non-rational animal would not, like the person we imagined to be suffering, have reason to lament its circumstances. But, again it seems that it is enough for the suffering of this helpless animal to be bad in the reason-based sense that, if someone were in a position where she would have been able to relieve this animal's suffering, she would have had reason to do so.¹¹

Turn now to the third kind of counter-example: where, supposedly, there is stronger reason for someone to desire that one of two events occur, but where there does not seem to be more value involved in the occurrence of this, rather than the other, event. Thus Roger Crisp imagines¹² that someone gets to choose whether she, or some stranger, will be the one that will be tortured tomorrow. This person, Crisp claims, has strong reason to prefer not being tortured, and to make a choice in her own favour. But, the torture of the stranger does not involve less badness than her torture.

¹¹ For a different take on such examples, see Persson (2005), p. 99, footnote 1

¹² Crisp (work in progress)

This objection fails to distinguish between two different points of view from which we can assess value and the strength of reasons; it fails to recognize what Thomas Nagel calls *the duality of standpoints*¹³. From both of these person's perspectives, there is one sense in which it would be much worse if they turned out to be the one who will be tortured: it would be much worse *for them* if, as it turns out, they are tortured. But, if they were to take an impartial perspective on these two possible events---if they were to compare the impartial badness of their being tortured and the other person's being tortured---neither of them could plausibly claim that it would be worse if they, rather than the other person, were to be tortured.

In the same way, when assessing the strength of their reasons, they can do this from two different standpoints: the personal and the impartial. Both have strong personal reasons to prefer not being tortured: the suffering of a stranger, though something which can be very distressing, would be less real to them than their own suffering. But, if they were to assess the reasons from an impartial point of view, neither would have any reason to prefer that the other be the one who is chosen to be tortured. Crisp's objection fails because it compares the impartial value of some event with the strength of someone's personal reasons for preferring this event to some other event.

Consider lastly the fourth kind of counter-example, and objection, to the reason-based account of value, and goodness. In this kind of example, we imagine that, if I want something bad to happen, then this will have certain desirable effects. For instance, some evil despot might pose the threat that, unless I want some innocent person to suffer, then I shall be forced to suffer, and in this way punished. Here, it is claimed, I would have reason to want this person to suffer. But, that someone suffers is clearly bad.

This objection overlooks the difference between reasons for first-order attitudes and reasons for second-order attitudes: reasons for having some desire and reasons for wanting to have some desire. It also ignores the difference between the value of what we want and the potential benefits, or goodness, of our having some desire, or other attitude. When our being in some state such as that of our having some desire, or belief, would be good, or somehow beneficial to us or others, then what we have reasons *for* is, not to *be* in this state, but to want to be in it or, if possible, to cause ourselves to be in this state.

¹³ Nagel (1986)

In these cases, our being in some state is, in one way, just like the obtaining of any other possible state of affairs, or the occurrence of any kind of event. Thus if it is, or would be, good that some state of affairs obtains, or that some event occurs, then that is *not* because there is reason for this state of affairs to obtain, or this event to occur. For example, it would be good if our imagined war ended, or if somebody's suffering were to end. But, wars and sufferings cannot have reasons to go away, to end, or to do any other thing. These events are good in the reason-based way by being things we have reason to want to happen.

In the same way, if we realise that things would go in certain ways if, but only if, we had some particular desire, or attitude, and facts about these ways in which things could go gave us reasons to want these events to occur, then that implies that we have reason to want to have the desire in question. Since our having this desire is *part* of these ways in which things could go, and we have reason to want things to go in *these* ways, what we have reason for is, not to have that desire, but to want to have it. And things do not have reason to go in these ways. But, *we* can have reason to want them to.

It might now be objected that we can have reason to act in some way if our doing so would be good, and that this would be analogous to cases where our having some desire would be good.¹⁴ That is, if its being good that we act in some way implies that there is reason to act in this way, then why doesn't its being good that we are in the state of having some desire imply that we have reason to have this desire, or to be in this state?

This objection misunderstands the way in which reasons to act and reasons to desire are analogous. Some reason to act in some way *is*, strictly speaking, a reason to *want*, or to intend, to act in this way. To see this we can consider cases in which, due to external forces beyond our control, we can only intend to do some action, but not carry out this intention. Thus if I knew that the only way to save your life would be to pull some lever and in this way redirect some train, I might respond to my awareness of this reason to pull this lever by intending to do so. When I am just about to do this, the outlaw, who tied you to the tracks, appears from nowhere and wrestles me to the ground, thus hindering me from carrying out my intention. Under such circumstances, I would not have failed to respond to any reasons at hand as long as I had been intending, or wanting, to pull the lever.

¹⁴ Cf. Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004)

Since reasons to act, as this shows, just are reasons to want, or to intend, to act, it follows that, if our acting in some way is part of the best way in which things could go, then what that implies that we have reason for is to want to act in this given way. It is in this respect that cases in which our acting in some way would be good are analogous to cases where our having some desire would be good.

Like the other supposed counter-examples I have considered, this last kind does not properly distinguish between different kinds of reason, and misunderstands the relation between these reasons and the things that, in these examples, can be said to be what has some kind of value. I conclude that, of the counter-examples I've considered, none pose the kinds of threat to the reason-based account of goodness, or value, that they are supposed to. Therefore, in the absence of other, better objections to this account, we can conclude that it provides the best explanation of what I have called the coexistence thesis about reasons and value.

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