

*Is there reason? Are there reason-forces?*¹

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Abstract.

Much of our normative language implies there is stuff called 'reason'. When we say 'There is reason for Boris to go', literally we assert the existence of this stuff. Should we take this implication seriously? I argue we should not. This sentence says that Boris's going has a particular normative property. English has no simple name for this property; we can describe it only as the property of being something there is reason for. The mass noun 'reason' is part of an expression that refers to this property, but it does not itself refer to anything. I respond to arguments that defend the existence of reason-stuff, on the grounds that it contributes to explaining what one ought. Other, quite separate arguments claim that reasons give rise to normative forces that might be called 'reason-forces', which explain what one ought by combining and competing in ways that are analogous to the action of physical forces. I respond to these arguments too, and argue that there are no such reason-forces.

1. Introduction and preliminaries

We often say such things as ‘There is reason for Boris to go’, ‘There is reason to doubt what he says’, and ‘There is reason for hope’. The first aim of this paper is to analyse what ‘There is reason’ sentences mean. What, if anything, does ‘reason’ refer to, and how should we understand the existential quantifier ‘there is’? Really, is there reason?

Investigating these questions will lead me first to the idea of reason as stuff, and then to the idea of reason-forces. But in the end I shall reject both ideas. We should not accept the existence of reason-stuff or reason-forces. This is the conclusion of sections 2, 3 and 4.

My purpose is to contribute to our understanding of the structure of normativity and the place of reason in it. In the light of my conclusions about reason, Sections 5 and 6 move on to examine what reasons are and what is their place in normativity. Reasons are sometimes analysed in terms of reason: they are defined to be whatever explains reason. I shall argue in section 5 that they are better defined as whatever plays a particular sort of role in explaining ought. To adopt some philosophical terminology, I support ought-explanationism as opposed to reason-explanationism. Reason is not needed in my analysis of reasons.

Section 6 considers Derek Parfit’s understanding of reasons. I shall argue that he took reasons to be reason-forces, and that this was a mistake.

Reason and reasons

Many philosophers are careless with their indefinite articles, and slip incontinently between writing ‘there is a reason’ and ‘there is reason’. They muddle the mass noun with the count noun. They have some excuse because there is a reason for something if and only if there is reason for it. There is a reason for Boris to go if and only if there is reason for Boris to go. Nevertheless, ‘there is reason’ and ‘there is a reason’ have different meanings. The difference becomes apparent as soon as we add a qualifier to these phrases. ‘There is strong reason for Boris to go’ does not mean the same as ‘There is a strong reason for Boris to go’; there might be strong reason for Boris to go because there are several reasons for Boris to go, none of which is strong.

Nor does ‘there is reason’ mean the same as ‘there are reasons’, and again this becomes apparent as soon as we add a qualifier. ‘There is less reason for Boris to go than to stay’ does not mean the same as ‘There are fewer reasons for Boris to go than to stay’. There might be more reasons for Boris to go than to stay, but they might be outweighed by fewer, stronger, contrary reasons, with the result that there is less reason for Boris to go than to stay.

Quantifying reason is different from quantifying reasons. We must carefully distinguish the mass noun from the count noun.

Ownership

Besides ‘There is’ sentences, other ‘reason’ sentences are quantified implicitly. These include particularly sentences that ascribe ownership of reason. For example, ‘Boris has reason to go’ means that there is reason for Boris to go, and that this reason is Boris’s. I concentrate on overtly quantified sentence in this paper because the ownership of reason is not at issue here.

Even overtly quantified sentences such as ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ can be read as ascribing ownership. These sentences are ambiguous. ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ can be parsed (There is reason)(for)(Boris to go) or alternatively (There is reason for Boris)(to go). With the second parsing, this sentence ascribes ownership of the reason to Boris. It means the same as ‘Boris has reason to go’. ‘Boris’ does double duty; it is both the name of the owner of the reason, and the subject of the infinitive ‘to go’. ‘There is reason for Boris to go’, parsed this way, could be filled out as ‘There is reason for Boris for Boris to go’, parsed (There is

reason for Boris)(for)(Boris to go).

Under the first parsing, ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ does not ascribe ownership to Boris. In effect, the second parsing simply adds an ascription of ownership.

2. Reason and being reasoned

Like many other ‘There is’ sentences, ‘There is reason’ sentences ascribe a property to something. ‘There is life in the old dog yet’ ascribes to the old dog the property of still being alive. ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ ascribes a particular property to Boris’s going.

Unfortunately, this property has no simple name in English. It is the property of being something there is reason for. I call it the property of being ‘reasoned’. This an artificial usage, quite distinct from the ordinary meaning of ‘reasoned’. ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ says in my language that Boris’s going is reasoned.

You might think that ‘reasonable’ would serve instead of ‘reasoned’, but it would not. There might be reason for Boris to go, so his going is reasoned, but at the same time there might be more reason for him not to go, so his going would not be reasonable.

Although the word ‘reasoned’ is artificial, the property of being reasoned is familiar. It is a sort of normative attractiveness. In philosophy, ‘favoured’ and ‘supported’ are sometimes used with the meaning of ‘reasoned’. They are less satisfactory terms for this purpose because their meaning is not inherently normative; they have to be specially understood in a normative sense. ‘Reasoned’ is designed to be a more accurate term.

‘There is life in the old dog yet’ means the same as ‘The old dog is still alive’, which explicitly ascribes a property to the old dog. ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ ascribes a property to Boris’s going, but we have no corresponding explicitly ascribing sentences in correct English. ‘Boris’s going is reasoned’ does the job, but it is not correct English. ‘Boris’s going is something there is reason for’ also does the job but it does not get away from the quantified expression ‘there is reason’. To ascribe the property of being reasoned to something, we have no correct, unartificial alternative to using this expression. We are stuck with it.

Nevertheless, we do not have to take the quantifier literally. We do not have to read ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ as asserting the existence of reason. We can take ‘there is reason’ to be a mere form of words used to ascribe the property of being reasoned. If we take it that way, ‘reason’ does not refer to anything.

Still, there is some temptation to take the quantifier literally, which implies that ‘reason’ refers to something. Since in this context ‘reason’ is a mass noun, it refers to stuff of some sort if it refers at all. This is only a grammatical remark. I use the category term ‘stuff’ for whatever is referred to by a mass noun or a mass expression. ‘Stuff’ could be given an alternative, narrower meaning restricted to concrete stuffs such as rice, masonry and electricity. My wider meaning allows for more abstract stuffs such as literature, information, pain and – potentially – reason.

The issue in this paper is whether ‘reason’ refers, not the nature of what it refers to if it refers. The question I am considering is ‘Is there reason?’ If there is reason, as a grammatical matter it is stuff. I shall often call it ‘reason-stuff’. My question can therefore be expressed as ‘Is there reason-stuff? A merit of the compound term ‘reason-stuff’ is to cut out a possible ambiguity. In some senses of ‘reason’, there unquestionably is reason. For example, ‘reason’ often refers to a faculty that people possess: the faculty of reason, which unquestionably exists. But in ‘There is reason for Boris to go’, ‘reason’ has a different, normative meaning equivalent to ‘reason-stuff’. There is a real question whether reason-stuff exists.

‘There is reason for Boris to go’ definitely ascribes the property of being reasoned to

Boris's going. If, also, it asserts the existence of reason-stuff, it implies that this property consists in the presence of reason-stuff. There is nothing uncommon about that; many properties consist in the presence of stuff. For instance, the property of being bloody consists in the presence of blood. The property of being hot consists in the presence of heat, and heat is taken as stuff within some divisions of physics. How seriously should we take the idea that the property of being reasoned consists in the presence of reason-stuff?

Graded properties

The first thing to notice is that this property is graded: some states of affairs are more reasoned than others. For instance, Boris's going may be more reasoned than Theresa's going. As we might put it in correct English: there is more reason for Boris to go than for Theresa to go.

Now we hit a grammatical problem. In English, the language of graded properties melds with the language of quantities. 'More' and 'most', 'less' and 'least', can be adverbs qualifying adjectives, in which case they describe the gradation of properties: 'Gruyere is more sharp than Emmental', for example. The same words can also be adjectives qualifying nouns, in which case they describe relative quantities: 'Lake Baikal holds more water than Lake Erie', for example. Since most properties have names (which are nouns), the quantitative vocabulary can also be applied to graded properties: 'There is more sharpness in Gruyere than in Emmental', for example. This feature of English gives it a strong tendency towards massifying graded properties. By this I mean it tends to treat them as stuff.² In 'There is more sharpness in Gruyere than in Emmental', 'sharpness' serves as a mass noun. Given my definition of stuff as whatever a mass noun refers to, it refers to stuff if it refers at all. The sentence apparently says this stuff is more abundant in one cheese than another.

Grammar, then, apparently implies that any graded property consists in the presence of stuff. If that were so, the question of whether there is reason-stuff would have to be answered 'Yes'. But this implication of grammar can be resisted. We do not have to take literally the quantifier 'There is' in 'There is more sharpness in Gruyere than in Emmental'. This sentence implies that Gruyere is sharper than Emmental, and we can take that to be its whole meaning. We do not have to read it as also affirming the existence of something. In that sentence, 'sharpness' need not refer to anything. 'Sharpness' is the name of a particular property; it often refers to that property. But in 'There is more sharpness in Gruyere than in Emmental', 'sharpness' serves as a mass noun, and in that service it may refer to nothing at all.

This treatment of graded properties makes it possible to accept my definition of stuff as whatever a mass noun or mass expression refers to, when it refers, and at the same time to apply metaphysical criteria to identify what is stuff. We can examine on metaphysical grounds whether or not sharpness is really stuff. If it is, well and good. If it is not, the conclusion is not that sharpness is something other than stuff. It is that 'sharpness' does not refer to anything.

This will be my approach to reason. If 'reason' refers, it refers to stuff. But stuff must meet criteria. If 'reason' does not refer to anything that meets the criteria, it does not refer at all.

So again, the question is whether there is reason, which is to say reason-stuff. In answering this question, we should be guided at a general level by Occam's razor. How useful is reason-stuff in explaining phenomena that need explaining? If it is not very useful, we should reject it, or at least be sceptical of it. Furthermore, we already have some recognized arguments against realism in the philosophy of normativity. They should perhaps give us some initial bias against the existence of reason-stuff, which will need to be overcome by good opposing arguments.

A good source of arguments is Fogal and Risberg (2021). These authors assume the existence of reason-stuff. In their paper, they freely refer to amounts of reason in a way that makes it clear they think of it as stuff. They generally use the term ‘normative support’ instead of ‘reason’, but they treat these terms as synonymous (Fogal and Risberg, 2021: 15). For example, they formulate the central claim of the paper, which they call support-explanationism’, like this:

(*) For r to be a normative reason of strength d for S to ϕ is for r to provide d amount of (pro tanto) normative support for S ’s ϕ -ing. (Fogal and Risberg, 2021: 13)

This clearly implies that normative support is stuff. Although they assume this rather than argue for it, in making extensive use of reason-stuff their paper shows its uses, and so provides implicit arguments for its existence.

3. Reason-stuff and reason-forces

Whereas Occam’s Razor should guide us at a general level, at a specific level we have intuitive criteria that help to identify stuff. The property of being reasoned has some features that make it stuff-like. By that I mean it has features that make it intuitively plausible that it consists in the presence of stuff. I shall mention three.

Actually, I have already mentioned the first. The property of being reasoned is graded. If reason were stuff it would come in varying quantities, and that would explain why this property is graded. This is an argument in favour of its being stuff.

But it is only a weak argument. It is true that being graded is a necessary condition for being stuff-like. Ungraded, on-off properties such as being married are not stuff-like; it does not seem plausible that there is marriage-stuff. But very many properties are graded, and many of them are not stuff-like. Indeed, some properties are graded in such a tight way as to be quantitative, but not even all those properties are stuff-like. Speed is an example. It is quantitative, but there does not seem intuitively to be speed-stuff present in speeding objects. So being graded is far from a sufficient condition for being stuff-like. The fact that being reasoned is a graded property therefore gives little support to its being stuff-like.

Transmission

A second feature of the property of being reasoned is that it is transmissible from one thing to another. For instance, plausibly it is transmitted from intending an end to intending means to that end. If intending an end is reasoned, that confers the property of being reasoned on intending a means to that end. Finding a precise formulation of an end-means transmission principle has proven difficult (see Kolodny, 2018), but nevertheless it is plausible that there is one. Most of us also think that, if there is reason to believe some proposition, this reason is transmitted to believing the proposition’s implications.

The fact that the property of being reasoned is transmissible suggests it is stuff-like. In contrast, the fact that speed is not transmissible is one reason speed is not stuff-like. The transmission of epistemological reason led Hartry Field (2018) to describes epistemological realism sarcastically as a theory of ‘justificatory fluid’ – justification in epistemology is roughly equivalent to reason.³

Another example of a transmissible property is heat. Heat can be transmitted from one thing to another. This is a strong reason to think that heat is stuff. When a property is transmissible, this suggests some stuff is transmitted. The stuff can be detached from its original possessor and attached elsewhere.

But the transmission of heat differs from the transmission of reason. Heat is conserved during transmission, so long as no external energy is added or subtracted in the process. Heat

moves from one place to another. This is a particularly stuff-like feature of heat. But when the property of being reasoned is transmitted, say from intending an end to intending a means, intending an end retains this property even as intending a means acquires it. This is not the most typical stuff-like behaviour. Still, we need not assume there is a law of conservation of stuff in general, so transmission of even this generous sort helps to make the property of being reasoned stuff-like. However, because reason is not conserved, transmission constitute a less strong argument for the claim that reason is stuff than for the claim that heat is stuff.

Combining and competing

A third feature of the property of being reasoned is that its degrees are plausibly determined in an aggregative way. Compare heat again. A house may have heat from the sun and heat from its own fireplace, and these portions of heat combine to make up the overall hotness of the house. This is a strong reason to think of heat as stuff. Similarly, if we suppose there is reason-stuff, we may suppose the reason for something is divisible into separate portions of reason. These portions combine to make up an overall or resultant amount of reason, which is the degree to which the thing is reasoned. There may be a portion of reason for Boris to go that stems from his incompetence, and a portion that stems from his dishonesty, and these combine together – perhaps with other portions – to make up an overall, resultant amount of reason for him to go. As Fogal and Risberg (2021) put it, portions of reason are ‘contributory’.

Fogal and Risberg use the word ‘amount’ rather than ‘portion’. But I need to avoid a particular ambiguity that ‘amount’ possesses. Suppose you have two bottles of wine, each containing one pint. In one sense of ‘amount’, they each contain the same amount of wine. In another sense, they contain two different amounts of wine. I use ‘amount’ only in the first sense, and I use ‘portion’ to mean the same as ‘amount’ in the second sense.

Portions of reason can combine, and Fogal and Risberg add that they can also compete. There can be a portion of reason for Boris to go, and also a portion for him not to go, and these portions compete. Their competition leads to a resultant amount of reason either for Boris to go or for him not to go.

The point of the combining and competing of portions of reason is ultimately to determine what people ought – what they ought to do, to believe and so on. The balance of reason determines whether or not Boris ought to go, and in general whether or not N ought to F . At least sometimes, when N ought to F , the explanation of why is that there are one or more portions of reason for N to F , and there may also be one or more portions of reason for N not to F , and the resultant is for N to F . I call this a ‘weighing explanation’ of why N ought to F .

There may be a different sort of weighing explanation of why N ought to F .⁴ It may be that there are one or more portions of reason for N to F , one or more for N to G , one or more for N to H , and so on, where N 's G ing, H ing and so on are all the alternatives to N 's F ing, and the resultant is for N to F . This more complicated sort of weighing explanation depends on having a prior account of what constitutes an alternative to N 's F ing, other than N 's not F ing. For simplicity I shall generally stick to the simpler sort. It will make no difference to the argument.

The upshot is that the combining and competing of portions of reason provides a plausible account of the degree to which a state of affairs is reasoned, and furthermore a plausible account of how it is determined what people ought. It therefore provides a reason for thinking there really are portions of reason. If there are, reason is stuff. This argument for the stuff-like nature of the property of being reasoned is stronger than the two I previously mentioned. One

implication of it is to associate the conclusion that reason is stuff with weighing explanations of ought. The existence of weighing explanations supports the idea that reason is stuff.

Reason-forces

However, the support given by weighing explanations to the existence of reason-stuff is indirect. The basis of a weighing explanation is separate portions of reason. Each portion is a thing – a particular. It is made up of stuff but it is not itself stuff. In a weighing explanation of ought, the make-up of a portion of reason is not crucial. It is the particulars – portions – that participate in combining and competing, and their participation does not require them to be made up of stuff. The theory would work just as well so long as they are things of some sort or other, and so long as they possess properties that regulate their combining and competing. They can be conceived as normative forces,⁵ which have strengths and directions that explain their combining and competing in a way that is roughly analogous to vector addition. Let us call them ‘reason-forces’. Weighing explanations in the first instance support the existence of reason-forces, however those forces are made up.

The analogy to mechanical forces is degenerate. When the issue is whether or not *N* ought to *F*, there are only two directions a reason-force might have. It might be for *N*'s *F*ing, or it might be against *N*'s *F*ing, which is to say it is for *N*'s not *F*ing. For this reason, normative forces are more analogous to weights, which are forces of a particular sort, than to forces in general. The weights on a pair of scales can push in either of only two directions: left or right. This is why I call this sort of explanation of ought a ‘weighing explanation’.

In the more complicated sort of weighing explanation where there are several options, we might say that reason-forces can have several directions – one towards each option. But these reason-forces do not combine by vector addition as mechanical forces do. Instead, the strongest one wins. This is still more like weighing than like the combining of mechanical forces in general.

Another flaw in the analogy is that, whereas the strengths of mechanical forces can be measured as numbers, the strengths of reason-forces are normally hazy things. They are much less definite than numbers. One consequence is that when normative forces conflict, it often happens that neither defeats the other. Then it is not the case that *N* ought to *F*, and not the case that *N* ought not to *F*.

Reason-stuff figures in weighing explanations by providing a particular account of what these normative forces are: they are portions of reason. As Fogal and Risberg (2021: 19) say, according to their theory support-explanationism, ‘the competing forces that determine what we ought to do [are] understood as competing amounts of normative support’. This contributes to the theory by explaining what it is for a reason-force to have strength. Its strength is the amount of reason in the portion of reason that is the force.

Weighing explanation supports the existence of reason-stuff in so far as this is a good account of strength. Sadly, I do not think it is a good account. It tends to make strength too sharply quantitative. The amount of reason in a portion seems too much like an arithmetic quantity. It seems to imply that, when two portions of reason compete, one must have a greater amount than the other, except in the rare cases when their amounts are equal. But actually, when normative forces conflict, it is common for neither to defeat the other. If this is to be explained by reason-stuff, it must be hazy stuff, whose portions are indeterminate in amount.

No doubt there is hazy stuff. Haze in the atmosphere is plausibly an example of it. But haze in the atmosphere has the advantage of rather obviously existing: we can see it. Normative stuff is invisible, and we have to decide whether it exists by theoretical means of

the sort I have been deploying. Do these means show it provides a good explanation of recognizable phenomena? The phenomenon we have focussed on is the determination of what people ought to do, to believe and so on, through weighing explanations. The evidence we have for the existence of reason-stuff therefore depends on how successfully it contributes to explanations of this sort. Its contribution is to explain the strengths of forces as portions of reason-stuff. The more these strengths are like quantities, the more successful is this contribution. But strengths are not quantities of a familiar sort. Familiar quantities are totally ordered, and are amenable to arithmetic operations. To make the explanation work, we would have to recognize indeterminate quantities, which are not familiar. This weakens the explanation, and weakens the evidence it provides for the existence of reason-stuff.

By contrast, portions of heat contribute to explanations of phenomena, and their amounts are of a familiar, arithmetic sort. This provides strong evidence for the existence of heat-stuff.

In sum, I conclude that the evidence for the existence of reason-stuff is not strong. It mainly stems from weighing explanations of ought, which (in so far as ought is indeed explained by weighing) are good evidence for the existence of reason-forces. But they are less good evidence for the existence of reason-stuff. Given the recognized arguments against realism in normativity, we should avoid a commitment to reason-stuff.

4. Reasons and reason-forces

The sentence ‘There is a reason for Boris to go’ has very different implications from ‘There is reason for Boris to go’. Whereas in ‘there is reason’ the quantifier does not have to be taken literally, in ‘there is a reason’ the literal meaning of the quantifier is inescapable. The count noun enforces it. ‘There is a reason for Boris to go’ inescapably asserts the existence of something.

This is because, since reasons can be counted, it has to be possible to individuate them separately. Suppose Boris is incompetent and this is a reason for Boris to go. And suppose Boris is dishonest and this is a reason for Boris to go. That makes two different reasons for Boris to go. We cannot make sense of this without supposing that the reasons exist.

In terms of reasons, we can give a different account of weighing explanations of ought – for instance of why N ought to F . In section 3, I took strength and direction to be properties of reason-forces. I took it that, in a weighing explanation, reason-forces combine and compete in a way that is regulated by their strength and direction. But we can now take strength and direction to be features of the property of being a reason. A reason is something – perhaps a natural fact or something else – that has the normative property of being a reason. It may also have the more specific normative property of being a reason of a particular strength for N to F . Then it has a strength and the fact that it is a reason for N to F gives it a sort of F ward direction. Reasons themselves can now be weighed together – combining and competing in a way that is regulated by their strength and direction.

In more detail, a weighing explanation among reasons has this structure. There is a reason of a particular strength, or several reasons of particular strengths, for N to F , and there may be a reason of a particular strength or several reasons of particular strengths for N not to F . The strengths of all these reasons imply through combining and competing that there is a balance of reasons for N to F , which implies that N ought to F , or a balance of reasons for N not to F , which implies that N ought not to F , or that neither of these things is so, which implies it is not the case that N ought to F , and not the case that N ought not to F . As Mark Schroeder (2021: 25 and elsewhere) and many other philosophers frequently put it: what one ought to do is determined by the balance of reasons.

This account of weighing explanations is simpler than the one set out in section 3 and it

does not depend on the existence of reason-forces. There is no need for separate entities – separate from the reasons themselves – to possess the properties of strength and direction. In section 3 it was weighing explanations that gave support to the idea that there are reason-forces. This new account undercuts that support.

What is strength?

There may yet be support in the form of another role for reason-forces to play in explanation. They may figure in an account of what it is for a reason to have a particular strength, or even of what a reason is. In section 2, I quoted Fogal and Risberg's (2021: 13) account of these things,

(*) For r to be a normative reason of strength d for S to φ is for r to provide d amount of (pro tanto) normative support for S 's φ -ing.

Remember that 'normative support' for them means the same as 'reason'. This definition identifies the strength of a reason as an amount of reason-stuff. But I have already rejected reason-stuff in section 3. I said there that we should replace portions of reason ('amounts of normative support') with reason-forces, which imply no commitment to reason-stuff. Doing so would give us:

For r to be a normative reason of strength d for S to φ is for r to provide a reason-force of strength d for S 's φ -ing.

This is to define the strength of a reason in terms of the strength of a reason-force. A reason-force could be identified with a portion of reason, but it need not be.

But this moves us no further forward in accounting for strength. If there were reason-stuff, the amount of reason-stuff would provide an independent notion of strength, but without reason-stuff we have none. We have no better primitive understanding of the strength of a reason-force than of the strength of a reason.

Without reason-stuff, the strength of a reason-force can be defined only in terms of the role this strength plays in a weighing explanation of ought. Its role is to regulate the combining and competing of reason-forces in the way I have described. But now we know that a weighing explanation can be understood as the combining and competing of reasons themselves. The strength of a reason can be explained in terms of the role this strength plays in regulating the combining and competing of reasons. Reason-forces add nothing.⁶

How can the strength of reasons be defined this way? The weight of physical objects provides a simple model. For one object A to be weightier than another B is for A to outweigh B on an accurate pair of scales. More exactly, it is for A and B to be such that if they were set against each other on accurate scales in normal conditions, A would go down. There are some technical problems over the subjunctive conditional in this definition and so-called 'finkish' dispositions. It might be that if A were set against B on accurate scales, this would happen in a way that altered the relative weights of A and B. These problems have to be circumvented, and they can be. Once they are, we have objects ordered by the comparative relation weightier than. The whole precise scale of weights can be built on the basis of this comparative; it emerges as a ratio scale.

In this way, weights are defined by their consequences. It is a matter of definition that a heavier object outweighs a less heavy object on an accurate pair of scales. There remains the substantive question of what explains the weight of an object. Put another way, this is the question of what explains which way accurate scales tip when objects are put on them. As it happens, an answer to this question is simple: an object's weight is given by its mass together with the gravitational field it is in. Weights are proportional to masses. This did not have to be so. For example, if physics had been different, the weight of an object could have

depended on its chemical make-up as well as its mass.

We could have had a different concept of weight, defined by its origin rather than its consequences. We could have defined the weight of an object to be its mass times the gravitational field it is in. Then it would have been a substantive matter whether a heavier object always outweighs a less heavy object on an accurate pair of scales. Had physics been different in the way I described, this would not have been so.

Similarly, the strength of reasons can be defined by their consequences, on the basis of which reasons outweigh which in weighing explanations of ought. In a simple case, for a reason for N to F to be stronger than a reason for N not to F is for it to be the case that N ought to F when these are the only two relevant reasons. But reality is much more complicated. It rarely happens that single reasons can be set against each other like this; finkishness is very common with the strength of reasons; vagueness and indeterminacy are rife; and so on. There is certainly not a complete ordering of reasons by their strength. Still, the results of weighing explanations do give us a basis for defining the strength of reasons. What will emerge will not be a ratio scale of strengths, like the scale of weights of physical objects. It will be a much more vague and indeterminate structure.

It is then a definitional matter that N ought to F if the reasons for N to F are stronger than the reasons for her not to F . There remains the substantive question of what determines the strengths of reasons, which is to say what determines substantively whether or not N ought to F . If there were reason-stuff, the answer to this question could be that the strength of a reason is determined by the amount of reason-stuff it provides. This answer would be parallel to the substantive truth that the weight of a physical object is determined by its mass.

Fogal and Risberg's account of strengths is different. It does not follow the model of physical weight in defining strengths by their consequences. Instead, it defines them by their origin. It takes the strength of a reason to be the amount of reason-stuff it provides. With strengths defined this way, it is a substantive claim that N ought to F if the reasons for N to F are stronger than the reasons for her not to F .

I argued in section 3 that this route to defining strengths fails because there is no reason-stuff. We have no real alternative to defining the strength of reasons by their consequences. Reason-forces add nothing to this definition. So we should not accept the existence of reason-forces.

5. Explanationism

I have rejected reason-stuff in section 3 and reason-forces in section 4. I now turn to two implications of these rejections.

The first is their implication for the definition of what a reason is, or more precisely the definition of what the property of being a reason is. Fogal and Risberg's (2021: 13) definition is reason-explanationism. Once again, as they present it, it is:

(*) For r to be a normative reason of strength d for S to φ is for r to provide d amount of (pro tanto) normative support for S 's φ -ing.

I have given sufficient reason to reject this formula. But I think nevertheless that it is on the right track. I think explanationism in general is correct.

Explanationism is the view that the property of being a reason is explanatory. More exactly, it is the property of playing a particular role in explaining a normative fact. Each particular version of explanationism specifies the particular sort of normative fact a reason plays a role in explaining, and the particular role it plays in explaining it. Reason-explanationism defines a reason by its role in explaining a fact about reason; ought-explanationism by its role in explaining a fact about ought.

Fogal and Risberg's is one sub-version of reason-explanationism. It defines a reason as something that explains the existence of a portion of reason – an amount of normative support, in their terms. As Fogal (2016) explains, this definition makes a reason conform to a common feature of English. Often, when a noun serves as both a count noun and a mass noun, the count noun denotes a source or explanation of what the mass noun denotes. He mentions 'light' as another example. 'A light' denotes something that explains – gives rise to or is a source of – light.

I opposed reason-explanationism in (Broome, 2018) and recommended ought-explanationism instead. But in that paper I did not pay enough attention to defining the strength of a reason. In section 4 of this present paper I have rectified that mistake, and argued that the strength of a reason must be defined by its consequences rather than by its origin. It must be defined on the basis of the role the reason plays in explaining ought. This gives further support to ought-explanationism.

In any case, ought-explanationism has the great advantage that it does not depend on the existence of reason, which is at best dubious as I have argued.

Sorts of reasons

According to ought-explanationism, a reason is defined by its role in explaining an ought-fact, which is the fact of whether or not N ought to F for some N and F . Not all reasons necessarily play the same role. Different roles give us different sorts of reasons.⁷

For example, there is the role of simply explaining why N ought to F . An explanation of why N ought to F is a *pro toto* reason for N to F . Other reasons I distinguish as *subsidiary* reasons because they contribute to an explanation without being the whole explanation.

An example of a subsidiary reason is something that plays the role of a reason in a weighing explanation of ought. This is a *pro tanto* reason.

There may also be other sorts of subsidiary reason. Oughts can certainly be explained in other ways than by weighing. Suppose you ought to leave home by 8.20, and suppose the explanation of why is that you ought to be at work by 9.00, and you will not be at work by 9.00 unless you leave home by 8.20. This is not a weighing explanation. It is an inference based on a transmission principle of deontic logic. It could not be outweighed. The transmission principle might be invalid, and in that case the explanation would fail, but not because any part of it has been outweighed.

The fact that you will not be at work by 9.00 unless you leave home by 8.20 might be considered a reason for you to leave home by 8.20, and that might be because of the role it plays in the explanation I gave of why you ought to leave home by 8.20. If so, it is an example of a subsidiary reason that is not a *pro tanto* reason. Some philosophers (for instance, Jonathan Way (2017)) think that the property of being a reason is the property of serving as a premise in good reasoning, and this could be an example.

Myself, I am not sure about it. I offer it as only a tentative example of a second sort of subsidiary reason. I find it plausible that this fact is indeed a reason, but that need not be because of its role in the explanation I described. It could be a reason for other reasons.

I can think of two alternative possibilities, each arising from an alternative explanation of the same fact that you ought to leave home by 8.20. First, the fact that you will not be at work by 9.00 unless you leave home by 8.20 could serve as a *pro toto* reason for you to leave home by 8.20. In a context where it is settled and known that you ought to be at work by 9.00, the fact that you will not be at work by 9.00 unless you leave home by 8.20 could serve as an explanation of why you ought to leave home by 8.20. Then it would be a *pro toto* reason.

Or suppose the context is this. Your boss is likely to cancel your rise if you are not at work

by 9.00. Then a *pro tanto* reason for leaving home by 8.20 is that you will not be at work by 9.00 unless you leave by 8.20. An opposing *pro tanto* reason might be that leaving home by 8.20 would mean missing your second cup of coffee.

So, despite this example, it may be that *pro toto* and *pro tanto* reasons are the only sorts of reasons there are. I do not insist that there is this second sort of subsidiary reason. But I do claim it is an advantage of ought-explanationism that it can allow for various sorts of reasons, and various patterns of explanation for ought-facts.

On the other hand, reason-explanationism accounts only for *pro tanto* and *pro toto* reasons, and only for weighing explanations. This is made clear by the formula (*). It is a weakness of reason-explanationism. I suspect that weighing explanations get more attention than they deserve in the philosophy of normativity. Philosophers are naturally interested in difficult questions, including difficult questions about what people ought. These will be questions where there are considerations on each side, weighing again each other. Mark Schroeder (2021: 3) opens his book *Reasons First* with an example of this sort. But in the vast majority of cases it is not difficult to know what one ought, and no weighing is involved. You ought to believe that $7 \times 8 = 56$, and you ought to believe that Paris is in France. You ought to write English sentences from left to right. And so on.

Explanations of these truths are such things as: it is elementary arithmetic; that is how English is written; and so on. It may be possible to cast them as weighing explanations by adding that there is no contrary reason. Most explanations could be cast as weighing explanations by this means. Suppose you trip because of a ruck in the carpet. We could say you tripped because, on the one hand, there is a ruck in the carpet and, on the other hand, there was nothing holding you up. Treating every reason as *pro tanto* suggests that every reason comes with a weight that participates in determining what one ought. This is misleading. It is decidedly misleading in my tentative example of a subsidiary reason for leaving home by 8.20. That reason works by inference rather than by weight. It is misleading in other cases too.

6. Parfit and given reasons.

Derek Parfit (2011) adopts a definitely anti-explanationist position on reasons. Given the conclusions of this paper, what should we make of it?

The meaning Parfit gives to ‘a reason’ is different from most philosophers’ and different from reason-explanationism’s. According to most philosophers, the fact that eating walnuts will kill you is a reason for you not to eat walnuts. But Parfit (2011: vol 1, p. 32) does not say it is a reason. Instead he says the fact that eating walnuts will kill you *gives you* a reason not to eat walnuts.

This is no accident. Parfit sticks to using ‘gives’ or ‘provides’ consistently throughout *On What Matters*.⁸ He explicitly contrasts his practice with other authors’. He says (Parfit, 2011: vol 1, p. 32) ‘Rather than saying that certain facts *give* us reasons, some people say that these facts *are* reasons for us.’ There are two sides to the giving relation: what gives and what is given. Or to use the word that appears in Fogal and Risberg’s reason-explanationism: what provides and what is provided. According to explanationism, a reason is what gives. According to Parfit a reason is what is given. These two things must not be confused.

The locution ‘gives a reason’ is common in ordinary discourse. Parfit may be the only philosopher of normativity who has adopted it formally, but we should not think his usage is idiosyncratic. It captures a common sense of the term ‘a reason’.

Since we have two senses of ‘a reason’ in use, I shall use the two terms ‘a giving reason’ and ‘a given reason’ to distinguish them. ‘A reason’ as an explanationist means it denotes a

giving reason. ‘A reason’ as Parfit means it denotes a given reason.

Parfit does not say what a reason, in his sense, is – what category of thing it belongs to. But we need to consider this question. What sort of a thing is a given reason?

I once gave the answer ‘Nothing’. Suppose eating walnuts will kill you. This fact gives you a given reason not to eat walnuts. So you have a given reason not to eat walnuts. That is to say, there is a given reason for you not to eat walnuts and this reason belongs to you. Parfit is therefore claiming that there is a given reason for you not to eat walnuts. But perhaps we do not have to take the existential form of this claim seriously. The sentence ‘there is a given reason not to eat walnuts’ ascribes a property to your not eating walnuts, and this might be all it does. It might not really assert the existence of something. This is how I interpreted Parfit in (Broome, 2021). I now think I was mistaken.

In section 2 above, I said that the mass-noun sentence ‘There is reason for Boris to go’ might not really assert the existence of something. But I now see that the same cannot be said about the count-noun sentence ‘There is a reason for Boris to go’. As I explained in section 4, the count noun enforces the literal meaning of the quantifier. Reasons have to be individuable. The fact that eating walnuts will kill you gives you one given reason not to eat walnuts. If, also, you do not like the taste of walnuts, that gives you a second given reason not to eat walnuts. There are then two given reasons. This makes no sense unless the reasons exist. So I withdraw the suggestion I made in (Broome, 2021). We cannot answer ‘Nothing’ to the question of what a given reason is.

So what is a given reason? It has to be a thing, not stuff, because it is denoted by a count noun. But if reason is stuff, a given reason could be a portion of reason-stuff. This would conform nicely to a typical feature of English – different from the one I mentioned in section 5. Often, when a noun serves both as a count noun and as a mass noun, the count noun denotes a particular portion or packet of what the mass noun denotes (Fogal, 2016). For example, ‘a beer’ denotes a particular portion of beer. On this account, ‘a reason’ denotes a particular portion of reason. That would be convenient.

But a given reason can be understood as a portion of reason only if reason is stuff, and I explained in section 3 that we should eschew a commitment to the existence of reason as stuff. Instead, we can take a given reason simply to be a normative force, or a reason-force to use the term I introduced earlier. As I explained, a reason-force could be a portion of reason-stuff, but we do not have to understand it that way.

I think this is the best way to interpret Parfit. Parfit uses ‘a reason’ to refer to a normative force. Since ‘gives a reason’ is also common usage, many speakers of common English do the same. But then again, I have also argued that we should reject the existence of normative forces. I conclude that Parfit is wrong to say that the fact that eating walnuts will kill you gives you a reason not to eat walnuts. It gives you no such thing because there is no such thing.

In (Broome, 2021) I commended Parfit for adopting the best form of reason primitivism – the view that the property of being a reason is primitive and indefinable. That was because, when Parfit wrote ‘You have a reason not to eat walnuts’, I did not take seriously his use of the count noun. I took him to mean the same as ‘You have reason not to eat walnuts’. So I took him to mean that your not eating walnuts is reasoned. When he said (Parfit, 2011: vol 1, p, 31) ‘the concept of a reason is indefinable’, I took him to mean that the property of being reasoned is indefinable, which is to say fundamental. I took this view to be defensible, though ultimately incorrect.

I did say (Broome, 2021: 306):

If the separate individuation of given reasons plays an essential role in Parfit’s account

of reasons, my interpretation will therefore fail. I do not know whether separate individuation is essential; I have not gone through all Parfit's arguments to check whether or not they can be formulated without individuation. If some of them cannot, Parfit's account is still up against the metaphysical problem of making sense of given reasons. They would have to be normative forces, which are subject to scepticism.

But now I realize it is obvious that separate individuation of reasons is essential for Parfit. He thinks reasons can combine together and compete with each other, and that requires them to be separately individuated. He thinks they are indeed what I have called in this paper 'reason-forces'. I am sorry to say this is a mistake, because there are no such things.

7. Summary

In section 3 I concluded that we should reject the existence of reason-stuff. There is no reason. The sentence 'There is reason for Boris to go' seems at first to assert the existence of reason-stuff, but we should read it simply as ascribing a property to Boris's going. I call it the property of being reasoned.

The combining and competing of reasons is regulated by the strengths and directions of reasons. This can make it tempting to suppose reasons generate normative forces, which give a normative push in one direction or another. But in section 4 I argued that we have no need to postulate such forces, and we should eschew them.

In section 5 I drew the conclusion that we should prefer ought-explanationism to reason-explanationism as an account of the property of being a reason. In section 6 I argued that Derek Parfit assumes there are reason-forces, and that this is a mistake.

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Quarterly, 98: 251–70.

Notes

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2. My thanks to Philip Pettit for the excellent word ‘massify’.
3. I am grateful to Olle Risberg for this reference.
4. Thanks to Ole Risberg for reminding me of this point.
5. Fogal and Risberg (2021) use the metaphor of force. So does Mark Schroeder (2021: 25). He takes his lead from W. D. Ross (2020: 28–9). Ross does not use the metaphor, but he does treat gravitational forces as analogous to what he calls ‘prima facie duties’. Ross’s analogy is more fully developed by Paul Pietroski (1993: particularly 491–2).
6. Similar arguments can be deployed against the existence of forces in physics. See John Bigelow, Brian Ellis and Robert Pargetter (1988). These authors also provide contrary arguments.
7. This is set out in more detail in (Broome, 2018).
8. More information about his usage appears in Broome (2021). Jesse Hambly pointed out to me that in one passage Parfit (2011: vol. 2, p. 280) says ‘If we say that natural facts of certain kinds *are* reasons to act in certain ways, we may be led to assume that, to defend the view that there are normative reasons, it is enough to defend the claim that there are natural facts of these kinds. That is not so. We must also defend the claim that these natural facts each have the normative property of *being a reason*.’ Parfit points out that ‘saying that certain natural facts *give* us reasons’ would steer us away from this mistake. But I do not think this can be his only motivation for adopting the ‘gives’ language. The mistake is a foolish one, and Parfit easily identifies it in the last sentence I have just quoted. He would not have adopted the strong metaphysical commitment implied by the ‘gives’ language simply in order to steer people away from such a foolish mistake.