

The first normative 'reason'
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The notion of a normative reason is often said to be primitive and undefinable.¹ History suggests otherwise.

The first recorded occurrences of the word 'reason' in English appear in the *Ancrene Riwle*, a book whose earliest manuscript dates from about 1225.² 'Reason' appears many times in this book in various senses. Most often it is followed by 'why', and refers to an explanation of something. It usually refers to an explanation of a person's action, of the special sort that we nowadays call 'a motivating reason'. But the *Ancrene Riwle* also uses 'reason why' as a general term for the explanation of some fact, which need not be the fact that an action is done.

An example is:

Seint Cassiodore hit witneth: Omnis fortitudo ex humilitate. Auh Salomon seith the reisun hwei: Ubi humilitas ibi sapiencia. Ther ase edmodnesse is. Ther he seith is Jesu Crist. Thet is his feder wisdom & his feder strencthe.³

St Cassiodor shows this: All strength comes from humility. And Solomon gives the reason why: Where humility is, there is wisdom. Where there is humility, there, he says, is Jesus Christ; that is, his father's wisdom and his father's strength.

At one point, the *Ancrene Riwle* uses 'reason why' to refer to an explanation of why one ought to do something:

& efter the uorbisnes i hereth nu reisuns hwui me ouh for to fleon thene world: eihte reisuns et te leste.⁴

And after these examples, now hear reasons why one ought to flee the world: eight reasons at the least.

'Reason why' here has its general sense of 'explanation of why'. The author promises to present eight explanations of why one ought to flee the world. This sense of 'reason why' is not in itself normative, even though what is explained in this case is a normative fact.

Then the author enumerates the eight reasons why one ought to flee the world:

The uorme is . . .

The other reisun is thet . . .

The thridde reisun of the worldes fluhte is the biyeate of heouene. . . .

The ueorthe reisun is . . .

. . .⁵

The first is . . .

The second reason is that . . .

The third reason for fleeing the world is the gaining of heaven . . .

The fourth reason is . . .

. . .

and so on.

In this list, 'the third reason for fleeing the world' (or in a more literal translation 'the third reason of the world's flight') evidently means the same as 'the third reason why one ought to flee the world'. Since those two expressions as a whole have the same meaning, the word 'reason' within them must have different meanings. In 'the third reason why one ought to flee the world', 'reason' has its general sense of explanation, but in 'the third reason for fleeing the world', 'reason' refers to a normative reason. By 'a reason for *F*ing', the author of this book plainly means an explanation of why one ought to *F*. The implicit definition is clear.

This is the first recorded normative use of 'reason' in English, and the only one in the *Ancrene Riwle*.

In my book *Rationality Through Reasoning* I offered a definition of a normative reason, in

disagreement with those who say it is undefinable. I argued that a normative reason is an explanation, or a particular part of an explanation, of a fact about what one ought to do.⁶ I started by pointing out that the word ‘reason’ is often used non-normatively as a synonym for ‘explanation’. For example: the reason why the planets move in elliptical orbits is the inverse square law of gravity. Then I said:

In ‘*X* is a reason why you ought to *F*’, the ‘reason why’ is so closely attached to the normative ‘ought’ that the two tend to slide into each other. We slide from ‘*X* is the reason why you ought to *F*’ to ‘*X* is the reason for you to *F*’, meaning exactly the same thing by it. ‘The reason why’ (meaning explanation) bumps into the normative ‘ought’, yielding a normative sense of ‘a reason’ that combines the meaning of both.⁷

I called this a piece of ‘picturesque etymology’ and did not offer it as a significant part of my argument. I knew that in conversation we often slide from ‘the reason why you ought . . .’ to ‘the reason for you to . . .’, but I had no evidence that this was the origin of the normative sense of ‘reason’. However, it turns out that exactly this slide produced the very first normative use of ‘reason’ in English.

Notes

1. For example: Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Oxford University Press, 2011, vol. 1 p. 31 and T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 17.
2. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* under ‘reason’. The word also occurs once in *The Martyrdom of Sancte Katerine* from about the same date.
3. I use *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe* edited from Cotton MS Nero A XIV by Mabel Day, Oxford University Press, 1952. This passage is on p. 125, MS 280. My translation is based on <http://www.bsswebsite.me.uk/History/AncreneRiwle/AncreneRiwle2.html>.
4. P. 72, MS 164
5. P. 72–3. MS 164–6.
6. *Rationality Through Reasoning*, Wiley–Blackwell, 2013, chapter 4.
7. *Rationality Through Reasoning*, p. 50.