

## *Giving reasons and given reasons*

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### *1. Introduction: giving reasons and given reasons*

Derek Parfit says that the concept of a reason is fundamental and indefinable (*On What Matters*, 31).<sup>1</sup> This chapter analyses Parfit's concept of a reason, and evaluates his claim.

His concept of a reason differs from most philosophers'. Most philosophers apply the concept of a reason to particular facts. For example, some of us think the fact that walnuts will kill you is a reason for you not to eat walnuts. But Parfit thinks differently. He says that the fact that eating walnuts will kill you *gives you* a reason not to eat walnuts (*OWM*, 32). He does not say it *is* a reason.

Parfit's use of 'gives' in this way is deliberate and explicit. He openly contrasts his practice with other authors': 'Rather than saying that certain facts *give* us reasons, some people say that these facts *are* reasons for us.' (*OWM*, 32). He sticks to his practice consistently throughout *On What Matters*. It is not a whim; it must be significant. This is why I say his concept of a reason differs from the prevalent one, and I take its implications seriously.<sup>2</sup>

Just after the sentence I quoted in the previous paragraph, Parfit says 'But these people's claims do not conflict with mine, since they are merely different ways of saying the same things.' At first, you might think Parfit is here asserting that his meaning of 'a reason' is the same as other people's. But actually he is asserting the opposite. He asserts that the phrase 'gives you a reason' means the same as 'is a reason for you'. But since 'gives you' has a different meaning from 'is . . . for you', this implies that 'a reason' has different meanings in the two phrases. Similarly 'Put the horse in the stable!' means the same as 'Stable the horse!', and this implies that 'stable' has different meanings in the two commands.

'Gives' is not a mere predicating word like 'is'. In this context, giving can only be understood as a sort of explaining or making the case. When Parfit says

The fact that eating walnuts will kill you gives you a reason not to eat walnuts  
he could have said, with much the same meaning, any of

The fact that eating walnuts will kill you makes it the case that you have a reason not to eat walnuts.

or The fact that eating walnuts will kill you explains why you have a reason not to eat walnuts.

or You have a reason not to eat walnuts because eating walnuts will kill you.

The giving relation holds between two different things: what gives and what is given. What gives in the example is the fact that eating walnuts will kill you. This is a reason in the common terminology of philosophy. Let us call it a 'giving reason'. What is given is a reason in Parfit's terminology. Let us call it a 'given reason'. Parfit's concept of a reason is the concept of a given reason rather than a giving reason.

### *2. Favouring and owning*

The two concepts share some features. Both are monadic in the sense that they apply to individual things. However, both are relational in the sense that they apply to something only because that thing stands in particular relations to other things. Compare the concept of being a sister. This is a monadic concept. It applies to individual things, in this case individual people. Only an individual person can be a sister. But the concept applies to someone only

because she stands in a particular relation to another thing, in this case another person. She is a sister of someone else.

From a monadic relational concept such as the concept of a sister, a narrower monadic concept can be constructed that embeds a relatum. An example is the concept of a sister of the president.

The concept of a reason, whether giving or given, is monadic, but it is doubly relational. The concept applies to something because of the relations that thing stands in to two other things: on the one hand to a state of affairs, and on the other hand to a person or other agent. It is a reason for some state of affairs and it is a reason for someone or some agent. Both relationships can be expressed by the same preposition 'for', but 'for' has different meanings in the two cases.

The relationship to the state of affairs may be called 'favouring', and 'in favour of' can replace 'for'. Suppose there is a reason for you not to eat walnuts. This reason is in favour of – for – the state of affairs of your not eating walnuts. In this chapter, I shall most often deal with concepts of a reason in which a favoured state of affairs is embedded, such as the concept of a reason for your not eating walnuts. That is, I shall most often deal with the narrower concept of a reason for *N*'s *F*ing or more colloquially a reason for *N* to *F*, rather than the broader concept of a reason. The narrower concept is monadic like the broader one.

I use schematic letters for the sake of generality. '*N*' denotes a person or other agent and '*F*' is a verb phrase that may describe acting, believing, hoping for or anything else. *N*'s *F*ing is a state of affairs.

The relationship of a reason to the person or agent may be called 'ownership'.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to describe. Various phrases express it. The reason is *for* you. You *have* the reason. The reason *applies to* you. It is *agent-relative* to you. It is your *responsibility*. It is best explained by means of an example. Suppose Alex has committed a crime. Then there is a reason for – in favour of – Alex's going to prison. But many of us think this reason is not owned by Alex: Alex does not have a reason to go to prison; it is not his responsibility to get himself to prison. Perhaps the judicial system owns the reason.

In *The Possibility of Altruism*,<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nagel argues that every reason is owned by everyone. If he is right, it follows that, if there is a reason for Alex's going to prison, Alex owns this reason just as everyone else does. Then Alex does have a reason to go to prison. I do not dispute Nagel's claim, but in the example I set it aside for the sake of illustrating the idea of ownership. Nagel recognizes ownership, and makes the particular claim about it that every reason is owned by everyone. If that is true, ownership exists but is harder to illustrate.

The sentence 'Alex has a reason to go to prison' makes it explicit that the reason is owned by Alex. In general, '*N* has a reason to *F*' says both that the reason is in favour of *N*'s *F*ing and that the reason is owned by *N*. Many philosophers use the sentence '*N* has a reason to *F*' to say that *N* stands in some epistemic relation to the reason – for instance, that *N* knows the reason obtains. This is not correct English. Even if Alex knows that he has committed a crime so there is a reason for him to go to prison, many of us still think that Alex does not have a reason to go to prison. It is unfortunate that philosophers misappropriate the expression 'has a reason', because in doing so they obscure the ownership of reasons. In English, 'has' expresses ownership.

On the other hand, the sentence 'There is a reason for Alex to go to prison' is ambiguous. In general, 'a reason for *N* to *F*' is ambiguous. This phrase may be parsed '(a reason for)(*N* to *F*)'. In that case 'for' has its favouring meaning and the phrase has the same meaning as 'a reason for *N*'s *F*ing'. Or the phrase may be parsed '(a reason for *N*)(to *F*)'. In that case 'for' has its ownership meaning and the phrase ascribes ownership of the reason to *N*. The reason's

favouring relation to  $N$ 's  $F$ ing is implicit in the grammar. So, in one of its meanings 'There is a reason for Alex to go to prison' ascribes ownership to Alex, and in another it does not.

However, from this point on I fix the meaning of 'a reason for  $N$  to  $F$ '. I use it always with the implication that  $N$  owns the reason. I do so because Parfit does the same.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. *Reasons primitivism*

When Parfit says that the concept of a reason is fundamental and indefinable, he is stating the doctrine I call *reasons primitivism*. This is the doctrine that the concept of a reason cannot be defined in terms of other concepts. It is one element of the *reasons first* movement, which has swept over the philosophy of normativity in recent decades. Parfit is a leader of this movement, and reasons primitivism lies at its core.

It is closely connected with another element of the reasons first movement: the metaphysical doctrine that may be called *reasons fundamentalism* or *reason fundamentalism*. This doctrine is about the property, rather than the concept, of being a reason. It claims that this property is an irreducible feature of normativity.<sup>6</sup> Parfit concentrates on the concept rather than the property, and for that reason I do the same.

Other philosophers besides Parfit are reasons primitivists,<sup>7</sup> but Parfit's version of the doctrine differs from most because he claims the concept of a given reason is primitive whereas they claim that the concept of a giving reason is primitive. I shall argue that his is the better version. I do not accept reasons primitivism myself,<sup>8</sup> but I think Parfit's is the best version of it. If the doctrine is to be refuted, it is important to identify its best version.

The fact that eating walnuts will kill you is a giving reason for you not to eat walnuts. It explains why you have a given reason not to eat walnuts. In general, a giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$  explains why  $N$  has a given reason to  $F$ . This is a conceptual connection between a giving reason and a given reason. It can be made into a definition of a giving reason in terms of a given reason:

A giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$  is something that explains why  $N$  has a given reason to  $F$ .  
More accurately:

The concept of a giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$  is the concept of something that explains why  $N$  has a given reason to  $F$ .

There is no reciprocal definition of a given reason in terms of a giving reason. You might think a given reason for  $N$  to  $F$  could be defined as something whose existence is explained by a giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$ . But that is not so. A giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$  can explain all sorts of things, and only one of them is the existence of a given reason for  $N$  to  $F$ . For instance, the fact that eating walnuts will kill you is a giving reason for you not to eat walnuts. It explains why you have a given reason not to eat walnuts. But it may also explain why you are frightened of eating walnuts, why you have a given reason to banish walnuts from your house, why you have taken out life insurance, and other things too.

The concept of a given reason is therefore more primitive than the concept of a giving reason. The latter can be defined in terms of the former, but not vice versa.

This may come as a surprise. We normally think that what explains is more fundamental than what is explained. I do not deny that. In the walnut example, what explains is a giving reason, which is the fact that eating walnuts will kill you. I am not saying that this fact is less fundamental than what is explained, namely the fact that you have a given reasons not to eat walnuts. I am talking about the primitiveness of concepts, not the primitiveness of things in the world such as facts. I am saying that the concept of a giving reason is less primitive than the concept of a given reason. Similarly, the fact that something is a magnet explains why ferrous objects are attracted to it. But the concept of a magnet is less fundamental than the

concept of attraction; the concept of a magnet can be defined as the concept of something that attracts ferrous objects.

Most philosophers use ‘a reason’ to refer to a giving reason. For them, reasons primitivism is the view that the concept of a giving reason is a primitive, undefinable concept. Reasons primitivism of this sort is easy to refute. I have just defined the concept of a giving reason in terms of the concept of a given reason, together with the concept of explaining.

Since Parfit uses ‘a reason’ to refer to a given reason, reasons primitivism for him is the view that the concept of a given reason is a primitive, undefinable concept. This is a better version of reasons primitivism; it is closer to the truth than the commoner one. The concept of a given reason is not so easily defined.

#### 4. *What is a given reason?*

The problem is that given reasons may not exist.

A giving reason is typically thought to be a fact. It may alternatively be something else such as a view – the view from the top of Everest is a reason to climb it. But at any rate, there are things that fall under the concept of a giving reason. On the other hand, Parfit does not tell us what a given reason is. It would be nice to know what sorts of thing fall under the concept of a given reason – what sorts of thing Parfit’s term ‘a reason’ refers to – but we are not told. We are told when a person has a reason, and we are told what reasons are given by or provided by, but we are never told what a reason is. *On What Matters* contains many examples of facts that give reasons, but no examples of the reasons that are given.

One thing is clear from the text: a given reason is not a giving reason. What is given is not the same as what gives. Whereas a giving reason is typically a fact, Parfit makes it perfectly clear that a given reason is not a fact.

It seems that a given reason, if it exists, would have to be some sort of normative force. Plausibly, the fact that eating walnuts will kill you creates a normative force or push towards your not eating walnuts. I do not reject this idea; it is a credible interpretation of Parfit’s concept of a given reason. However, it leaves us with the metaphysical task of making sense of normative forces. And it is easy to be sceptical about such things. You might find them such mysterious entities that you are unwilling to believe they exist. They would be roughly analogous to physical forces, and there are grounds for being sceptical about the existence even of physical forces as entities.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore unsafe simply to assume that given reasons are normative forces and leave it at that. For safety, from here on I shall take a sceptical stance towards them. I shall offer an alternative account of what Parfit refers to using the term ‘a reason’.

To understand this alternative, start by remembering that we sometimes say ‘You have reason not to eat walnuts’, using the mass noun ‘reason’ rather than the count noun ‘a reason’. This sentence raises the question of what the mass noun ‘reason’ refers to, which is parallel to the question of what Parfit’s term ‘a reason’ refers to. There is no temptation in this case to think ‘reason’ refers to a giving reason. A giving reason is a particular thing, and a mass noun cannot refer to a particular thing. The referent of a mass noun, if it has one, is not a particular but stuff of some sort. The mass noun ‘water’ refers to watery stuff.

Notice next that – whatever ‘reason’ refers to – the sentence ‘You have reason not to eat walnuts’ says that a particular normative relation holds between you and the state of affairs of your not eating walnuts. Let us call it the owning-reason relation. Compare this sentence with ‘You ought not to eat walnuts’. This also says that a particular normative relation holds between you and your not eating walnuts. Let us call it the ‘owning-ought’ relation. The two normative relations are closely parallel to each other. The owning-reason relation is parallel

to the owning-ought relation, but weaker.

The expression 'you ought' is not quantified, so it does not imply the existence of anything. On the other hand, grammatically, the expression 'you have reason' is implicitly quantified. It is equivalent to 'there is some stuff that is reason, and it belongs to you'. So it implies the existence of reason-stuff. But we do not have to accept this implication of grammar. We can instead think that the expression 'you have reason' is simply the means we have in English of saying that the owning-reason relation holds between you and a state of affairs. We can deny the existence of reason-stuff and deny that the mass noun 'reason' refers to anything. We could even assert the existence of an owning-reason relation by means of a sentence that is not implicitly quantified. Using an artificial terminology, we could say 'You pro tanto ought not to eat walnuts', meaning exactly the same as 'You have reason not to eat walnuts'. The artificial sentence does not even suggest there is reason-stuff. So the mass noun 'reason' need not have a referent. The answer to the question of what it refers to may be 'nothing'.

Now back to Parfit's count noun 'a reason'. My alternative interpretation of this term is that he uses it to mean exactly what we mean by the mass noun 'reason'. Parfit's 'You have a reason not to eat walnuts' means the same as 'You have reason not to eat walnuts'. It says that the owning-reason relation holds between you and your not eating walnuts.

Using a count noun in this way is grammatically defensible. For instance, we might say 'She has sharp intelligence' or 'She has a sharp intelligence', meaning the same thing either way. We might say 'The message gave her hope of success' or 'The message gave her a hope of success'. How come? I think the explanation is that a count noun can refer to a piece or parcel of what is referred to by the corresponding mass noun, and a mass noun itself usually refers only to a piece or parcel. If you buy beer at the bar, you do not buy all beer, but only some beer, which may be referred to as a beer or several beers. The message did not give her all of hope, but only some hope, and this piece of hope may be called 'a hope'. Likewise, you have reason not to eat walnuts, but you do not have the whole of reason not to eat them. You have only a part, and that part may be called 'a reason'. True, there may be metaphysical doubt about what reason is, but this usage is impervious to metaphysical doubt.

Parfit himself sometimes reverts to the mass noun in quantified expressions such as 'more reason' and 'most reason', (*OWM*, 32). One example is:

If we see dark grey clouds that gives us some reason to believe that it will soon rain. If we know that gold weighs more than lead, which weighs more than iron, these facts give us a decisive reason to believe that gold weighs more than iron. (*OWM*, 47).

Here, the quantified mass noun 'some reason' in the first sentence is matched with the qualified count noun 'a decisive reason' in the second. So Parfit is not distinguishing the count noun from the mass noun in this context. This adds evidence to my suggestion that Parfit uses 'a reason' in place of 'reason'.

My interpretation does encounter a further problem. Suppose you have two giving reasons not to eat walnuts. Let one be that eating walnuts will kill you and the other that you hate the taste of walnuts. In Parfit's terminology, the fact that eating walnuts will kill you gives you a reason not to eat walnuts, and the fact that you hate the taste of walnuts gives you a reason not to eat walnuts. He could say these are different reasons, so you have two given reasons. Because he uses the count noun, he could make this claim. But all we can say with the mass noun is that each giving reason gives you reason not to eat walnuts. We cannot distinguish two given reasons.

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.

For safety, I adopted the sceptical stance and I am now following up its consequences. So I shall continue to assume that Parfit uses 'a reason' in place of 'reason', which means I have to assume that separate individuation is not essential. If my interpretation is correct, just as we can deny that the mass noun 'reason' has reference, we can deny that the count noun as Parfit uses it has reference. 'You have a reason' is simply Parfit's way of saying that you stand in the owning-reason relation to a state of affairs.

On my interpretation, when Parfit writes of 'the concept of a reason', he means to refer to the concept of having a given reason for. This is the same as the concept of having reason for. It is a dyadic concept that corresponds to the owning-reason relation, and it applies to whatever satisfies this relation. Like any dyadic relation, the owning-reason relation is satisfied by pairs. Specifically, it is satisfied by any pair consisting of a person and a state of affairs when the person has reason for the state of affairs. The concept of having a given reason for applies to just these pairs.

This is the way a sceptic about normative forces can treat the concept of a given reason. She can replace it with the concept of having a given reason for. This is a perfectly good dyadic concept that has application; it is not subject to the sceptical doubt that afflicts the concept of a given reason.

### 5. Reasons primitivism again

Given scepticism about normative forces, we need to reinterpret the doctrine of reasons primitivism as Parfit sees it. When Parfit says the concept of a reason is undefinable, we must interpret him as saying that the concept of having a given reason for is undefinable.

The conclusions I reached about reasons primitivism in section 3 are unaltered. The concept of a giving reason can be defined as before:

The concept of a giving reason for  $N$  to  $F$  is the concept of something that explains why  $N$  has a given reason to  $F$ .

As I explained in section 3, there is no reciprocal definition of the concept of having a given reason for in terms of the concept of a giving reason. The concept of having a given reason for is therefore more primitive than the concept of a giving reason. The latter can be defined in terms of the former, but not vice versa.

Thomas Nagel's definition of a giving reason in *The Possibility of Altruism* is a precedent for the one I have just provided. Nagel defines a giving reason in terms of having reason as follows:

Every reason is a predicate  $R$  such that for all persons  $p$  and events  $A$ , if  $R$  is true of  $A$ , then  $p$  has prima facie reason to promote  $A$ .<sup>10</sup>

This definition has some features that are peculiar to Nagel's own thinking: for instance, he assumes reasons are predicates and he inserts the qualification 'prima facie' for his own purposes. He also does not recognize that a giving reason *explains* why  $p$  has reason to promote  $A$ . But the bones of the definition are the same. Remember that having reason for is the same as having a given reason for.

### 6. Conclusion

The common version of reasons primitivism – the doctrine that the concept of a giving reason is undefinable – is plainly false. A giving reason can easily be defined.

Parfit uses ‘a reason’ to refer to a given reason. For him, reasons primitivism is the view that the concept of a given reason is undefinable. I have explained that there may be a metaphysical doubt about the existence of given reasons. It is safer to replace the concept of a given reason with the concept of having a given reason for. Then reasons primitivism is the view that the concept of having a given reason for is undefinable. This is the best interpretation of Parfit’s view. It is also the best version of reasons primitivism. It is closer to the truth than the common version. The concept of having a given reason for is not so easily defined.

As it happens, I think it can be defined – though not so easily – in terms of the concept of ought. So even this version of reasons primitivism can be refuted. But that is another story altogether.<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

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1. *On What Matters*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 31. Henceforth ‘*OWM*’.

2. Ruth Chang tells me I should attach no particular significance to Parfit’s usage: I should assume he means the same by ‘a reason’ as most people. She reports that this conclusion emerges from discussions she had with Parfit about his usage. It puts me in a quandary. Chang’s report is authoritative. But the text is also authoritative, and what Parfit says in the text is clear, deliberate and consistent. I have chosen to take the text at face value. This is the choice that gives Parfit the greater credit, since this chapter argues that Parfit did well to shift attention from giving reasons to given reasons.

3. Ownership of reasons is investigated in my *Rationality Through Reasoning*, pp. 65–9.

4. Oxford University Press, 1970, particularly Chapter 10. On p. 91, Nagel declines to distinguish the claim that all reasons are owned by everyone from the claim that no reason is owned by anyone. But I explain in my *Rationality Through Reasoning*, pp. 66–8, that his argument supports the former claim and not the latter one.

5. I also assume that every reason has an owner. At the beginning of this section, I said this is a feature of the concept of a reason. That is debatable; possibly there are unowned reasons. In ‘*Ought and moral obligation*’, in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 114–23, Bernard Williams claims there are unowned oughts – at least according to his own interpretation of that paper in a later lecture. See my ‘*Williams on ought*’, in *Luck, Value and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, edited by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 247–65. If there are unowned oughts there must be unowned reasons. However, since Parfit assumes every reason has an owner, I need not engage in the debate about whether there are unowned reasons.

6. See my ‘*Reason fundamentalism and what is wrong with it*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, edited by Daniel Star, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 297–318.

7. For example, T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 17.

8. See my ‘*Reason fundamentalism and what is wrong with it*’.

9. See Bigelow, John, Brian Ellis and Robert Pargetter, ‘*Forces*’, *Philosophy of Science*, 55 (1988), pp. 614–30.

10. *The Possibility of Altruism*, p. 47. On p. 48 this is explicitly said to be a definition.

11. See my ‘*Reasons fundamentalism and what is wrong with it*’.