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REASON VERSUS OUGHT

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1. Introduction

During the last half-century, a dogma has grown up in the philosophy of normativity. I call it the dogma of the primacy of reasons. One part of it is the view that reasons are the fundamental feature of normativity. Normativity is 'the domain of reasons', to use John Skorupski's illuminating phrase,[1] and 'the normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons', as Joseph Raz puts it.[2] This paper opposes this part of the dogma. I shall argue that reasons do not occupy a fundamental position in the ontology of normativity. Another part of the dogma is that reasons are also fundamental to rationality and to reasoning. I oppose this second part elsewhere.[3]

Much of this paper is taken up with clarifying the dogma and putting it into its most credible form. I shall set up an ontological structure for normativity that I call 'the reason ontology'. I take it to be the core of the dogma. I shall in parallel set up an alternative ontology that I call 'the ought ontology'. The parallel between reason and ought needs stressing because it is obscured by the unparallel grammars of 'ought' and 'reason' in English. I shall then compare the merits of the two ontologies. My conclusion will be that the reason ontology should be abandoned.

2. The Ought Property and the Reason Property

Suppose the lights ought to come on at dusk. (It is dangerous if they do not.) This to say that the state of affairs consisting in the lights' coming on at

dusk has a particular normative property, which I call 'the ought property'. I sometimes describe the obtaining of this property by means of artificial sentences having the form 'Ought (the lights come on at dusk)'.

Suppose there is reason for the lights to come on at dusk. This is to say that the state of affairs consisting in the lights' coming on at dusk has a different normative property, which I call 'the reason property'. I sometimes describe the obtaining of this property by means of artificial sentences having the form 'Reason (the lights come on at dusk)'.

English supplies names for some properties, such as 'redness' for the property of being red, but it does not supply names for either the ought property or the reason property. That is why I resort to the artificial names 'the ought property' and 'the reason property'.

Be warned: the reason property is not the property of being a reason. This is confusing, and I wondered whether to use a different name for the reason property. But I decided to stick with this one because the dogma of the primacy of reasons will finally boil down to the claim that the reason property—more exactly, the reason relation, which I shall define in section 3—is fundamental. It would be even more confusing if the word 'reason' did not appear in the name of this property.

When I wrote 'There is reason for the lights to come on at dusk', I used the mass noun 'reason' in the course of ascribing the reason property to a state of affairs. I could not avoid doing so. The canonical way of ascribing a property is by a subject-predicate sentence, but the only predicate English supplies for the reason property is 'is something there is reason for', which itself uses the mass noun. You might think the predicate 'is reasonable' describes the reason property, but it does not. Suppose there is reason for the lights to come on at dusk, but also much stronger reason for them not to. Then their coming on at dusk is not reasonable, but nevertheless it has the reason property.

So the reason property can be ascribed to something only by using the expression 'there is reason'. But this expression can be misleading. Read literally, the mass noun 'reason' should refer to stuff of some sort. Read literally, 'there is reason' asserts that this stuff exists, just as 'there is water in the lake' asserts that stuff of a particular sort exists in the lake. But the existence of the abstract stuff 'reason' is metaphysically dubious, and we need not be committed to it just by using the expression 'there is reason'.[4] This expression is merely the device we have in English of ascribing the reason property to something, in the absence of a satisfactory predicate for doing the job. It commits us to the existence of the property but not the stuff.

The artificial predicate 'reason ()' can be useful because of the lack of a satisfactory predicate in English, and because it does not misleadingly suggest the existence of reason stuff.

The ought property can be ascribed by subject-predicate sentences such as 'The lights' coming on at dusk ought to be the case' or (transformed) 'It

ought to be the case that the lights come on at dusk'. But these sentences are awkward, and the artificial predicate 'ought ()' can be a useful alternative.

The ought and reason properties are properties of states of affairs (which may be actual or merely possible). What about constructions such at 'There is reason to believe dinosaurs were warm-blooded'? Do these ascribe the reason property to whatever is denoted by the infinitive? They do not. I take them to be elliptical. I take the dinosaur sentence to mean 'There is reason for you to believe . . . ', or 'There is reason for everyone to believe . . . ', or 'There is reason for people to believe . . . ', or something similar.

3. The Reason Relation and the Ought Relation

Next suppose Caroline has reason to visit the bank. Then Caroline's visiting the bank stands in a particular normative relation to Caroline. I call it 'the reason relation'.[5] I describe the situation using the artificial sentence '(Caroline) reason (Caroline visits the bank)'. It is commonly said in a case like this that the reason is 'agent-relative' to Caroline. This is a useful term, but inaccurate in some applications. For example, Caroline might have reason to believe the bank is closed. Then (Caroline) reason (Caroline believes the bank is closed), but Caroline is not an agent of her beliefs, so it would be inaccurate to call the reason 'agent-relative'. Furthermore, to say the reason is agent-relative is too unspecific in a different respect. It gives no hint about the nature of the relationship that the reason bears to the agent. I prefer to say the reason is 'owned' by Caroline. We could also say it 'applies' to Caroline. These terms are metaphorical and not very clear, but they do at least provide hints.

The previous paragraph contains my first use of the count noun 'reason'. 'The reason' in that paragraph refers to a particular obtaining of the reason relation—a trope, as philosophers call it. In 'The red in that photo is an artefact of the lens', 'the red' similarly refers to a trope. But the count noun 'reason' more commonly refers to something quite different, which I shall define in sections 5 and 7. To narrow the opportunities for confusion, from here on I shall not use the count noun for a trope. Instead, I shall use the ungainly term 'a reason-obtaining' for an obtaining of either the reason property or the reason relation.

Read literally, the expression 'has reason' is quantified. Read literally, 'Caroline has reason . . . ' implies there is some of the reason stuff that is owned by Caroline. But again, using this expression need not commit us to the existence of this stuff. It is simply our way of saying that the reason relation obtains between Caroline and a state of affairs. It commits us to the relation, not the stuff.

There is more than one way to report in English the obtaining of the reason relation. I used the sentence 'Caroline has reason to visit the bank',

which makes it very explicit that Caroline owns the reason-obtaining. But I could instead have said 'There is reason for Caroline to visit the bank'. This can have the same meaning. However, this latter sentence may alternatively mean simply that Caroline's visiting the bank has the monadic reason property. Fortunately, the two different meanings are registered in the sentence's deep grammar. When the sentence means that the reason relation obtains, it can be parsed {There is reason}{for Caroline}{to visit the bank}. When it means that the reason property obtains, it can be parsed {There is reason for}{Caroline to visit the bank}. The different parsings may be distinguished by a simple test. If the sentence has the former parsing, it can be rearranged to 'For Caroline, there is reason to visit the bank' without changing its meaning. If it has the latter parsing, it cannot.

Just as a reason relation may obtain between a state of affairs and a person, so may a corresponding ought relation. When it does, it might be said that the ought is agent-relative. I prefer to say it is owned by the person. 'The ought' refers to a trope: a particular obtaining of the ought relation. Since the count noun 'ought' is already artificial, and we have no other use for it, there is no risk of confusion in using it this way. I shall do so.

Reporting in English the obtaining of the ought relation is more tricky than reporting the obtaining of the reason relation. When the ought relation obtains between Caroline's visiting the bank and Caroline, so that (Caroline) ought (Caroline visits the bank), the situation can be reported with the sentence 'Caroline ought to visit the bank'. But this same sentence could alternatively report that Caroline's visiting the bank has the monadic ought property. Compare 'The lights ought to come on at dusk'. This latter sentence reports only that the lights' coming on at dusk has the monadic ought property, which is to say that ought (The lights come on at dusk). It does not imply that the ought is owned by the lights, which is to say that (the lights) ought (the lights come on at dusk). The grammar of English 'ought' sentences does not distinguish those that report the obtaining of the ought relation from those that report the obtaining of the ought property. Only the context does that.

When Caroline has reason to visit the bank, or ought to visit the bank, why do I take the reason or ought relation to obtain between Caroline and the state of affairs of her visiting the bank? Why not between Caroline and whatever is denoted by 'to visit the bank'—perhaps the act-type of visiting the bank? This is just my choice. When Caroline has reason to visit the bank, or when she ought to visit it, she does indeed stand in a normative relation to whatever is denoted by 'to visit the bank'. She also stands in a normative relation to her visiting the bank. It is this latter relation that I choose the call 'the reason relation' or 'the ought relation'. I find it most convenient to set up my terminology this way, and it allows for greater generality.

4. Reduction of the Properties to the Relations

For one thing, it allows an easy reduction of the reason property, which is a property of states of affairs, to the reason relation. When there is reason for something to be the case, I assume there is always someone who is responsible for its being the case. If there is reason for the lights to come on at dusk, someone owns this reason-obtaining. In general, I assume that for it to be the case that reason (p) is for it to be the case that, for some N, (N) reason (p).

Are there not some agent-neutral reason-obtainings, which resist reduction because no one owns them? I have explained elsewhere that most agent-neutral reason-obtainings belong to everyone rather than to no one.[6] However, I do not deny that there may indeed be some reason-obtainings that belong to no one. Suppose there is reason for the lights to come on at dusk. Suppose this reason-obtaining used to be owned by the manager, but she has retired and not been replaced. What then? The responsibility may now fall somewhere else, perhaps on the land-owner or the government, so that they now own the reason-obtaining. But perhaps not. Perhaps the entire lighting system has deliberately and rightly been abandoned to nature. If so, it is probably now false that there is reason for the lights to come on at night. But possibly there might be circumstances in which it remains true. There is a case for thinking that 'There is reason for the lights to come on at dusk' has a special meaning in this case. It might be evaluative rather than strictly normative. But I do not wish to take a stand on this, so I accept the possibility that there are genuine reason-obtainings that belong to no one.

I am working towards a demonstration that the reason relation is the one fundamental element of the reason ontology. If there are indeed unowned reason-obtainings, my conclusion will have to be that the reason ontology also contains the reason property as a second fundamental element. That would make little difference to the conclusions of this paper. Given that it makes little difference, for convenience I shall continue to assume that the reason property is reducible to the reason relation.

The ought property can also be reduced to the ought relation, but the reduction is more complicated. It can happen that the ought relation obtains between one person and a state of affairs, and also obtains between a different person and the opposite state of affairs. For example, in a litter-collecting contest, it might be that Alf ought to collect more litter than Beth, and Beth ought to collect at least as much litter as Alf. Then (Alf) ought (Alf collects more litter than Beth) and (Beth) ought (Alf does not collect more litter than Beth). Some agent-neutral deontic theories would deny that this sort of deontic opposition is possible, but we should not adopt a normative ontology that commits us to such a strong first-order theory. So let us assume the example is possible. Then we would not say 'It ought to be the case that

Alf collects more litter than Beth' and also 'It ought to be the case that Alf does not collect more litter than Beth'. Those claims seem conceptually incompatible. Given that, it would be a mistake to accept an ontological theory that implies both that ought (Alf collects more litter than Beth) and that ought (Alf does not collect more litter than Beth). This would take the ought property too far from our ordinary concept of ought.

So its being the case that ought (*p*) is not the same as its being the case that, for some *N*, (*N*) ought (*p*). That does not stop ought (*p*) from being reducible. For example, it might be reducible to: for some *N*, (*N*) ought (*p*), and for no *M*, (*M*) ought (not *p*). Or a different reduction might be correct.[7]

I cannot rule out the possibility that some oughts are owned by no one. For example, it may be true that lightning ought not to kill so capriciously. There is a case for thinking this is really an evaluative rather than strictly normative claim. But I do not wish to take a stand on this, so I accept the possibility that there are genuine oughts that belong to no one. If there are, the ought ontology will contain two fundamental elements: the ought property and the ought relation. Again, this will make little difference to the conclusion of this paper. Given that it makes little difference, for convenience I shall continue to assume that the ought property is reducible to the ought relation. It will follow that the ought relation is the only fundamental element in the ought ontology.

5. Reasons Reduced to the Reason Relation

What is a reason? This is a question about the things that are referred to by the count noun 'a reason'. So far I have been considering the reason property and the reason relation, which I referred to in English using the mass noun 'reason'. Now I come to a new topic.

Thomas Nagel offers this definition of a reason:

> 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*.[8]

This definition may at first appear circular, because the word 'reason' appears in both the definiendum and the definiens. But the appearance is spurious, because 'reason' is a count noun in the definiendum and a mass noun in the definiens. The clause '*p* has prima facie reason to promote *A*' describes the obtaining of the reason relation between *p* and *p*'s promoting *A*. So Nagel defines a reason in terms of the reason relation.

I assume Nagel intends this to be a 'real definition'—to say what a reason is, rather than what 'a reason' means. More precisely, he is defining the property of being a reason, rather than a reason itself. He is saying that the property of being a reason is the property of being a predicate *R* such

that . . . '. This definition reduces the property of being a reason to something else, namely the reason relation.

We cannot adopt Nagel's definition as it stands. For one thing, Nagel designed it for his own purposes in *The Possibility of Altruism*, and some of its features are unsuitable for wider purposes. For example, Nagel implicitly assumes that the reason relation applies only to promoting an event, whereas actually it is much more widely applicable than that. The restriction to *prima facie* reason is also too narrow.

Moreover, the definition is incorrect in at least one respect: it is incorrect to say that a reason is a predicate. A predicate is a feature of language, whereas a reason is a feature of the world. We may take a reason to be a fact, as we do in saying that a reason to stay indoors is that it is raining hard, or we may take it to be the obtaining of a property, as we do in saying that the noisiness of a restaurant is a reason to eat elsewhere. But in any case, it is not a predicate.

We also need to pay attention to the conditional connection that is expressed by 'if . . . then' in the definition. Nagel cannot mean it to be mere implication. Suppose R is the predicate 'is an event that p has prima facie reason to promote'. If we interpret 'if . . . then' as mere implication, the conditional 'if R is true of A, then p has prima facie reason to promote A' is tautologously true. So under this interpretation, the definition tells us that this predicate is a reason. Nagel cannot mean that. He cannot think that the fact that p has prima facie reason to promote A is itself a reason for p to promote A.

'If . . . then' sometimes express an explanatory connection. 'If X then Y' sometimes means that, if X, then X makes it the case that Y, or X explains why Y is so, or Y is so because X. (I take all these to be different ways of saying the same thing.) I think this is what Nagel has in mind. For example, suppose R is the property of being beneficial. If A is beneficial, that makes it the case that there is reason for p to promote A. And R is indeed a reason for p to promote A. So an explanatory connection fits the definition well. At any rate, whatever Nagel means, a correct definition of a reason must mention an explanatory connection.[9]

Taking all this into account, a definition in the spirit of Nagel's is:

> A reason is something that explains an obtaining of the reason property or the reason relation.

Remember this defines the property of being a reason. It means:

> The property of being a reason is the property of being something that explains an obtaining of the reason property or the reason relation.

The definition can be made more specific by identifying what the reason is a reason for. In general, reasons are reasons for states of affairs. From now

on in this paper, I shall concentrate on states of affairs of a particular type: those states of affairs that consist in someone's *F*ing. (*F*ing may be doing something, hoping for something and so on.) This simplification allows me to use formulations that respect English grammar. I deviate from English only in using schematic letters.

A definition of a more specific reason is:

> A reason for *N* to *F* is something that explains why there is reason for *N* to *F*.

This is actually two definitions in one. It defines two different sorts of reason: a property-reason, which explains an obtaining of the reason property, and a relation-reason, which explains an obtaining of the reason relation. It does so by exploiting the ambiguous parsing of the English. It can be read either as

> {A reason for}{*N* to *F*} is something that explains why {there is reason for}{*N* to *F*},

which define a property-reason, or as

> {A reason}{for *N*}{to *F*} is something that explains why {there is reason}{for *N*}{to *F*},

which defines a relation-reason. I shall make shameless us of this ambiguity in order to save space.

I give 'explain' a wide meaning. The explaining relation is simply the inverse of the because relation. So my definition of a reason for *N* to *F* is equivalent to

> A reason for *N* to *F* is something that makes it the case that there is reason for *N* to *F*

and to

> A reason for *N* to *F* is something that provides reason for *N* to *F*

For a relation-reason only, it is also equivalent to

> A reason for *N* to *F* is something that gives *N* reason to *F*.

I shall not try to analyse the explaining relation;[10] I take it as fundamental.

All the definitions I have given reduce the property of being a reason to two elements: the explaining relation and either the reason property or the reason relation. Since I assume the reason property can in turn be reduced to the reason relation, I have reduced the property of being a reason to the explaining relation and the reason relation. In his work, John Skorupski takes the property of being a reason as fundamental.[11] But it is not truly fundamental because it is complex. It can be factored the two more fundamental elements of explanation and the reason relation.

6. Apparent Disagreements

Following Nagel's lead, I have given a reductive definition of the property of being a reason. It is the property of explaining an obtaining of the reason property or relation. The concept of a reason can be defined in the same way: the concept of a reason is the concept of something that explains an obtaining of the reason property or the reason relation.

This puts me into apparent disagreement with some philosophers who appear to deny that the concept of a reason can be defined. Derek Parfit writes:

> Facts give us reasons, we might say, when they count in favour of our having some attitude, or our acting in some way. But 'counts in favour of' means roughly 'gives a reason for'. Like some other fundamental concepts . . . the concept of a reason is indefinable.[12]

T. M. Scanlon writes:

> I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. 'Counts in favor how?' one might ask. 'By providing a reason for it' seems to be the only answer.[13]

But I do not think these philosophers mean to deny what I have affirmed. I do not think they mean to say that the concept of a reason is indefinable. I think they mean to say that the reason property or the concept of the reason property is indefinable. The property of being a reason is completely different from the reason property. For one thing, these properties belong to completely different things. Suppose there is reason for Caroline to visit the bank, and this is because she needs a loan. Then the fact that Caroline needs a loan has the property of being a reason; specifically it is a reason for Caroline to visit the bank. But what has the reason property is the state of affairs of Caroline's visiting the bank. Caroline's needing a loan is completely different from Caroline's visiting the bank.

Still, the distinction between the reason property and the property of being a reason can get lost in English. A lot can depend on how we use the mass noun 'reason' and the count noun 'a reason', whose plural is 'reasons'.

Parfit and Scanlon both take the phrase 'counts in favour of' to mean the same as 'gives (or provides) a reason for'. What does 'a reason' mean in this phrase? It refers to something that is given or provided, not to what gives or provides—to what is explained rather than what explains. As a count noun, 'a reason' must denote some thing, but neither author tells us what sort of a thing that is. My interpretation is that in this phrase 'a reason' denotes the obtaining of the reason property—a trope, that is. This is a perfectly good

usage. I used it myself briefly in section 3, but subsequently avoided it for the sake of clarity.

When Parfit writes that a fact gives a reason for our having some attitude or our acting in some way, I think he means that the fact makes it the case that our having the attitude or acting in that way has the reason property. It explains an obtaining of the reason property. As I prefer to put it, using the mass noun rather than the count noun, it gives reason for our having that attitude or acting in that way. When Parfit writes that the concept of a reason is fundamental and indefinable, I take him to mean that the reason property or the concept of this property is fundamental and indefinable.

Whereas Parfit uses 'a reason' for what is given, he recognizes that it could alternatively be used for what gives, which he takes to be a fact. He writes:

> Rather than saying that certain facts give us reasons, some people say that these facts are reasons for us. . . . But these people's claims do not conflict with mine, since these are merely different ways of saying the same things.[14]

Nevertheless, Parfit himself is consistent in using 'a reason' for what is given and not for what gives. He uses 'a reason' for a reason-obtaining rather than a reason in my terminology.

Scanlon is less consistent than Parfit. He uses 'a reason' both for what provides and for what is provided. In the paragraph I quoted, he says in effect: 'a reason for something is a consideration that provides a reason for it'. A reason provides a reason. This is definitely confusing.

Scanlon could have distinguished what provides from what is provided by using the mass noun 'reason' to refer to the latter, as I do. I doubt he meant to put weight on his use of the count noun in that place. Had he switched to the mass noun, he would have said in effect: 'a reason for something is a consideration that provides reason for it'. This makes good sense. Indeed it can serve as a definition of a reason. It is a version of my definition, which is a development of Nagel's. Scanlon narrowly misses this definition through using the count noun instead of the mass noun. This led him to think the definition is circular, when actually it is not. It is reductive. It reduces the property of being a reason to the reason property together with explanation. On my reading, Scanlon takes the reason property to be fundamental, not the property of being a reason.

In sum, I take it to be both Scanlon's and Parfit's view that the reason property is fundamental, and not the property of being a reason. This is perfectly consistent with what I have said so far, though I shall argue against it later. Neither author provides any significant argument for their shared view that the reason property is fundamental. They say that the idea of favouring cannot provide a reduction, but this does not mean that no other reduction is possible. I shall offer a reductive definition of the reason property in section 8.

When I introduced the dogma of the primacy of reasons in section 1, I described one part of it as the view that reasons are the fundamental features of normativity. It is often presented in that form, but it was never meant to be exactly that. Many reasons are natural facts such as the fact that it is raining. They are not features of normativity at all, so they cannot be fundamental features of it. It is not reasons but the property of being a reason that the dogmatists take to be fundamental. That also turns out to be false, since this property can be reduced to the reason relation. After these mistakes are corrected, this part of the dogma has come down to the claim that the reason relation is fundamental. I think this is Scanlon's and Parfit's view.

7. Reasons Reduced to the Ought Relation

I have described how the property of being a reason is reducible to the reason relation and the explanation relation. This reduction belongs to the reason ontology. I shall next present an alternative reduction that belongs to the ought ontology. The property of being a reason can be reduced to the ought relation and the explanation relation. This reduction is more complicated.[15]

It retains a central feature of the previous reduction, that a reason is something that has an explanatory connection to the obtaining of a normative property or relation. In the previous reduction, the connection was to an obtaining of the reason property or relation; in this one, it is to an obtaining of the ought property or relation—to an ought, as I called it in section 3. To be more exact, it is to the holding of an ought *fact*, where the fact that a particular ought property or relation does not obtain is included as an ought fact.[16]

A part of this alternative reduction of a reason is exactly parallel to the definition in terms of reason. Something that explains an ought is a reason, and something that explains specifically why *N* ought to *F* is a reason for *N* to *F*. But we have to recognize that there are also reasons for *N* to *F* that do not explain why *N* ought to *F*. Sometimes there is a reason for *N* to *F* but it is not the case that *N* ought to *F*. In a case like this, each reason plays some role in explaining the relevant ought fact, but does not itself explain it.

We need to categorize reasons. I use the term 'pro toto reason' for a reason that explains an ought. Other reasons may be called 'subsidiary' because they play only a part in explaining an ought fact. But not everything that plays a part in explaining an ought fact is a reason. For example, an explanation of why Caroline ought to visit the bank may depend on an arithmetical fact such as that $2000 is less than $2500. This fact might help to explain why she is in debt and so ought to visit the bank, but it might not qualify as a reason for Caroline to visit the bank.

To separate reasons from other thing that play a role in an explanation, we have to pay attention to the details of the explanation. Explanations of ought facts come in various different forms. Different normative theories explain ought facts in different ways, and some theories may allow for different forms of explanation. Not all forms of explanation have a role for subsidiary reasons, but some do. A subsidiary reason is defined by its role in one of the forms of explanation that do.

Compare the definition of a force in mechanics. Mechanics is concerned with explaining the movement or non-movement of bodies. In an explanation of why a body accelerates as it does, certain things play a particular role. Direction and strength are attributed to them. These things combine by the vector addition of directions and strengths, and the body's acceleration is given by their combined direction and their combined strength divided by the body's mass. That is the explanation of acceleration. Things that occupy the role I described are defined as forces.

Subsidiary reasons of one category are defined in a roughly analogous way, by their role in explanations of a form that I call 'weighing explanations'. In a weighing explanation of why *N* ought to *F*, or of why it is not the case that *N* ought to *F*, certain things play a particular role. A weight is attributed to each of them and so is a 'direction'; some are for *F*ing and some are against *F*ing. Their weights combine in some way. If the combined weight of those that are for *F*ing is greater than the combined weight of those that are against *F*ing, then *N* ought to *F*; otherwise it is not the case that *N* ought to *F*. That is the explanation. Things that occupy the role I described are defined as 'pro tanto reasons'.

The analogy with forces may be useful but is not very tight. Pro tanto reasons are more analogous to force-givers in mechanics, such as magnetic poles, gravitational masses and weights on a pair of scales, than to forces themselves.

Weighing explanations call for a lot more explication. For one thing, we need a fuller account of the arithmetic of weights, which allows them to be combined. Among the difficulties is that weights are obviously vague and they obviously need not combine in anything resembling an additive fashion. I do not know whether a cogent account of weighing explanations can eventually be given. Nevertheless, it is commonly assumed in philosophy that ought facts are often explained in this way by pro tanto reasons. Whether or not this is a correct assumption, weighing explanations give us one category of subsidiary reasons—pro tanto reasons.

Weighing explanations are just one type of explanation of ought facts. Ought facts can be explained in different ways that give different roles to subsidiary reasons. An example is the account of reasons found in John Horty's *Reasons as Defaults*. Horty's reasons fall into a different category of subsidiary reasons. They may be others too.

But some explanations of ought facts give no role to subsidiary reasons. For example, some oughts may be explained simply by deontic rules. Take the deontic rule 'Do not have contradictory beliefs'. On some theories about what one ought to believe, this rule has to be set against other considerations, and might be outweighed. For example it would be outweighed if great good could be achieved by having contradictory beliefs. On these theories the rule constitutes a subsidiary reason. But some philosophers—evidentialists—think the rule against having contradictory beliefs is absolute. It cannot be outweighed. The rule itself is enough to determine that you ought not to have contradictory beliefs. The rule is then a pro toto reason for you not to have contradictory beliefs, but no sort of a subsidiary reason.

Another example is teleological explanation. A teleological explanation of what *N* ought to do assumes that there is a number of 'alternatives', each good or bad to some degree. If *F*ing is the best of the alternatives, that makes it the case that *N* ought to *F*. No subsidiary reasons are involved. True, the facts that contribute to the goodness of each of the alternatives can be interpreted as pro tanto reasons in favour of that alternative, but there is no need to treat them that way. In a teleological explanation, goods are weighed, not reasons.

All of this amounts to a reductive account of the property of being a reason. This property is reduced to the ought property or the ought relation, together with the explaining relation and whatever else is involved in particular patterns of explanation. Since I assume the ought property can in turn be reduced to the ought relation, we have a reduction of the property of being a reason to the ought relation, the explaining relation and whatever else is involved in particular patterns of explanation.

8. The Ought Ontology and the Reason Ontology

We now have the materials that can be used to set up the two alternative ontologies of normativity.

In the ought ontology, the ought relation is fundamental. I have assumed the ought property can be reduced to the ought relation, but if it cannot, it too is fundamental. The property of being a reason is an important part of the ontology, but it is not fundamental. It is reducible to the ought relation or the ought property, together with other elements that are not essentially normative, including particularly the explaining relation. All this is enough basic material for giving a full account of normativity.

The reason relation and the reason property are redundant in the ought ontology; this ontology has no substantive role for them.[17] However, the reason relation can easily be defined within the ought ontology on the basis of reasons, which are already included. We can say that for it to be the case that there is reason for *N* to *F* is simply for it to be the case that there is a

reason for *N* to *F*. For it to be the case that *N* has reason to *F* is simply for it to be the case that *N* has a reason to *F*. This is a reductive definition of the reason property.

That completes my description of the ought ontology.

In the reason ontology, the reason relation is fundamental. I have assumed the reason property can be reduced to the reason relation, but if it cannot, it too is fundamental. The property of being a reason is an important part of the ontology, but it is not fundamental. Reasons are defined on the basis of the reason relation or the reason property in the way I have defined them following Nagel.

Next, ought needs to be defined. We cannot do without oughts in an account of normativity; the whole point of normativity is to determine what we ought to do, ought to believe and so on. True, the word 'ought' is omitted from some recent works of normative philosophy, but other expressions stand in its place. Examples are 'has conclusive reason', 'has sufficient reason' or 'has most reason'. These terms are intended to be equivalent to 'ought'; indeed, they are supposed to express implicitly a reduction of the ought relation to other terms. How can this reduction be spelled out?

First we must elaborate the reason ontology. We take the reason relation to be gradable—as having degrees. We assume that, when *N* has reason to *F*, so *N* stands in the reason relation to her *F*ing, this relation may obtain more or less strongly. For example, *N* may have more reason to *F* than she has to *G*.

The modifiers 'more' and 'less' are here attached to the mass noun 'reason'. Read literally, they refer to greater or lesser quantities of the reason stuff. But they should not be read literally. We use the mass noun 'reason' only as a means of referring to the reason property or relation, and using it does not commit us to there being such a stuff as reason. Adding the modifiers commits us to different degrees of the relation, but not to the stuff.

Once we have degrees of reason, we may define the ought relation by specifying particular degrees of reason. They are specified by adding modifiers to 'reason'. Two that appear in the literature are 'conclusive reason' and 'sufficient reason'. I start with those.

The modifiers 'conclusive' and 'sufficient' have an implicit argument place for some objective—something that they are conclusive or sufficient for. For example, there is no such thing as conclusive evidence considered on its own. Evidence may be conclusive for one conclusion but not conclusive for another. It may be conclusive for manslaughter, say, but not for murder. What is conclusive reason supposed to be conclusive for? It can only be for ought. For *N* to have conclusive reason to *F* is for her to have reason to *F* that is strong enough to make it the case that she ought to *F*.

The modifier 'sufficient' is instructive, because different authors give different meanings to 'sufficient reason'. This makes the implicit argument place conspicuous. Take a case where *N* must either *F* or *G*, and where she

has no more reason to *F* than to *G*, and no more reason to *G* than to *F*. As Parfit uses the term 'sufficient reason', *N* has sufficient reason to *F* and sufficient reason to *G*.[18] As Skorupski uses the term, *N* has neither sufficient reason to *F* nor sufficient reason to *G*.[19] The difference is that these authors are relating 'sufficient' to different objectives. By 'sufficient reason for *N* to *F*', Skorupski means: sufficient to make it the case that *N* ought to *F*. Parfit means by this phrase: sufficient to make it the case that it is permissible for *N* to *F*. In other words: sufficient to make it not the case than *N* ought not to *F*. Skorupski's is the meaning that makes 'has sufficient reason' a potential analysis of 'ought'.

For *N* to have sufficient reason in this sense to *F* or for *N* to have conclusive reason to *F* is for her to have reason to *F* that is strong enough to make it the case that she ought to *F*. This defines sufficient reason or conclusive reason in terms of reason and ought. The modifiers 'sufficient' and 'conclusive' therefore cannot serve the purpose of reducing ought to reason.

'Most' does better. Once we have degrees of reason, we may say *N* has most reason to *F* when *N* has more reason to *F* than she has to *G*, to *H* and so on, when *G*ing, *H*ing and so on are all the alternatives to *F*ing. Then we can say that for it to be the case that *N* ought to *F* is for it to be the case that *N* has most reason to *F*. That is to say, for it to be the case that *N* stands in the ought relation to *N*'s *F*ing is for it to be the case that *N* stands in the reason relation to *N*'s *F*ing more strongly than *N* stands in the reason relation to *N*'s *G*ing, or to *N*'s *H*ing ..., where these are all the alternatives to *N*'s *F*ing. This reduces the ought relation to the gradable reason relation.

That completes my description of the reason ontology.

9. The Unfaithfulness of the Reason Ontology

The reason ontology is not faithful to our ordinary concepts of ought and reason. Our ordinary concept of ought is not our concept of most reason. It is not the concept of the superlative of a gradable property.

One feature of our ordinary concepts is that sometimes the fact that *N* ought to *F* is explained by the balance of pro tanto reasons. In a case like this, there is most reason for *N* to *F*, and this fact is part of the explanation of why *N* ought to *F*. The connection between our ordinary concept of most reason and our ordinary concept of ought is an explanatory one. That there is most reason for *N* to *F* *makes it the case* that *N* ought to *F*. Not: that there is most reason for *N* to *F* *is* that *N* ought to *F*.

Do our ordinary concepts of ought and most reason have the same extension? Are there some things that you ought to do but do not have most reason to do, or some things you have most reason to do when it is not the case that you ought to do them? This is most likely to happen in cases where

what you ought to do is not determined by the balance of pro tanto reasons. So let us investigate a case of that sort.

Not everyone agrees there are such cases, but some first-order normative theories imply there are. In section 7 I described the evidentialist view that the deontic rule 'Do not have contradictory beliefs' determines by itself that you ought not to have contradictory beliefs. It is absolute and does not need to be weighed against any contrary reasons. Let us use that example.

Suppose you can either have a particular pair of contradictory beliefs, thereby achieving great good, or not have this pair of beliefs. The evidentialist view is that you ought not to have them. Is it also the evidentialist view that you have most reason not to have them?

On the evidentialist theory, the deontic rule makes it the case that you ought not to have these beliefs. That means it is a pro toto reason not to have them, as I defined a pro toto reason in section 8. The property of being a pro toto reason is not gradable. Nor does it have a weight in the way pro tanto reasons have. Given this, should we say that the rule gives you most reason not to have the contradictory beliefs? Does it give you more reason not to have them than you have to have them? Since it is not gradable and has no weight, it seems strange to say that it endows the state of affairs of your not having the beliefs with a gradable property, but one that automatically has a higher degree than any alternative. Moreover, the direction of explanation seems strange. The deontic rule seems most naturally to make it the case directly that you ought not to have these beliefs. If, as well, you have most reason not to have them, it seems this can only be because you ought not to have them. But most reason should explain ought rather than the other way round. The strangeness of applying the concept of most reason in this case shows that this concept is best suited to cases where what you ought to do is determined by the weighing of pro tanto reasons.

Still, although it seems strange to apply these concepts to the case of an absolute deontic rule, doing so does not seem to me entirely unacceptable. I conclude that our ordinary concepts of ought and most reason do not naturally have the same extension, but they can be stretched to make them do so.

So the sharpest mismatch between the reason ontology and our ordinary concepts is over the matter of explanation. According to our ordinary concepts, most reason explains ought; according to the reason ontology, most reason is ought.

How far is it an objection to the reason ontology that it is unfaithful to our ordinary concepts? It means that either 'ought' or 'most reason' or both are technical terms in the ontology, with meanings different from their ordinary ones. We sometimes need to use technical terms in philosophy for the sake of precision, so this in itself is no objection. But in the philosophy of normativity especially, we should not stray unnecessarily from our ordinary concepts, because our philosophy has ultimately to stay in contact with real

life. Our ordinary concepts at least provide us with default criteria for a philosophical ontology, and we should have some reason before we depart from them.

In the ontology of normativity, I see no reason to depart from the ordinary concepts. So far in this paper, the ought relation and the reason relation have floated more or less free. I have reduced other things to them, and demonstrated a formal parallel between them, but so far I have said little substantive about what these two relations actually are, except that they are both normative. In particular, I have said nothing about the connection between them. There may be quite a range of normative properties that we could arbitrarily identify with either of them, consistently with everything I have said so far. Now we come to filling in more concrete details, we should match these relations as well as we can to our ordinary concepts. We have nothing else to guide us.

10. Conclusion in Favour of the Ought Ontology

If there were no alternative, the reason ontology might be acceptable. But the ought ontology is a better alternative. It sticks close to our ordinary concepts. It has the merit of allowing naturally for different patterns of explanation in explaining oughts, whereas the reason ontology is most naturally suited to the weighing of pro tanto reasons. It is economical in that it has no need for the reason relation, whereas the reason ontology does need the reason relation along with the ought relation.

We should therefore accept the ought ontology in preference to the reason ontology. This means abandoning the primacy of reasons. Reasons, the property of being a reason, the reason property and the reason relation are none of them fundamental features of normativity.[20]

Notes

1. *The Domain of Reasons*.
2. Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason*, p. 67.
3. In *Rationality Through Reasoning*.
4. Here I am withdrawing some of what I said in section 4.4 of *Rationality Through Reasoning*. I am also now disagreeing with some of Daniel Fogal's 'Reasons and reason'. Nevertheless, this paper has benefited greatly from that paper and from my discussions with Fogal.
5. This is not John Skorupski's use of the term 'reason relation' in *The Domain of Reasons*, p. 36.
6. *Rationality Through Reasoning*, section 4.5.
7. In '*Ought* and moral obligation', Bernard Williams made the opposite claim that the ought relation can be reduced to the ought property. I responded to Williams in my paper 'Williams on *ought*'.

8. The *Possibility of Altruism*, p. 47. On p. 48 Nagel says explicitly that this is a definition.
9. Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star deny this point in their paper 'Reasons'. My response is in my 'Replies'.
10. There is more discussion of it in my *Rationality Through Reasoning*, pp. 47–9.
11. *The Domain of Reasons*, pp. 35–41.
12. *On What Matters*, Vol 1, p. 31.
13. *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 17.
14. *On What Matters*, Vol 1, p. 32.
15. It is set out in more detail in my *Rationality Through Reasoning*, section 4.3.
16. Thanks here to Susan Wolf.
17. They are not mentioned in my *Rationality Through Reasoning* except in section 4.4, where I mentioned them only to set them aside.
18. *On What Matters*, Vol 1, p. 33. Parfit actually uses the phrase 'sufficient reasons' rather than 'sufficient reason'.
19. *The Domain of Reasons*, p. 38.
20. Research for the paper was supported by ARC Discovery Grant DP140102468.

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