1   Kinds of reasons

The word *reason* can be used in many different ways. To help get a grip on what it means to engage in the practice of giving and receiving reasons for our moral beliefs, let's examine some of the different kinds of reasons we might profer for a position.

1.1   Epistemic v. Pragmatic

Imagine that you are being chased through the woods by a bear. All of a sudden, you break into a clearing and approach the edge of a chasm. The chasm looks to be about 20ft wide. It occurs to you that if you try to change course, you will most certainly be devoured by the bear. But you also recall that the best long jumpers in the world rarely jump more than 25ft, and you are no world class athlete. You are in quite a predicament.

In this scenario, both of the following claims seem to be true.

(1)   You have reason to believe that you cannot make the jump.

  • All of your evidence suggests that the distance is too far for you to cross in a single leap.

(2)   You have reason to believe that you can make the jump.

  • If you don't jump, you're gonna get eaten. And maybe believing you can make it will give you a slightly better chance of doing so. So, you might as well believe it.

On their face, claims (1) and (2) are in direct contradition. The fact that they both seem true suggests that there is an ambiguity in our use of the word "reason".

Let's use the term **epistemic reason** to refer to the kind of reason mentioned in (1). Epistemic reasons appeal to our cognitive faculties and purport to support the **truth** of some claim. And let's call the kind of reason mentioned in (2) **pragmatic reason**. Pragmatic reasons appeal to our connative faculties (our senses of emotion and well-being) and purport to show that we **benefit** in some way from believing the claim.

1.2   Explanatory v. Justificatory

One role that reasons play is that they serve as answers to *Why?* questions. But *Why?* questions can be ambiguous. Consider:

(3)   Why did Frank take the marble rye home?
      a.   Because he paid for it.
      b.   Because he thought no one was looking.

Imagine that (3-a) is true. Then it provides a reason for why Frank took the beer, and supposing that having paid for something gives someone the right to do with it what they please, it is a reason that **justifies** Frank's behavior.

But now suppose that (3-b) is true (and (3-a) is false). Then, this also provides a reason for Frank's behavior, but it doesn't seem to justify that behavior. Instead, one might offer this reason as a way of **explaining** why Frank did it.

1.3   First blush v. All things considered

Holmes is investigating a crime scene. He first comes upon a blond hair. He knows that of his two suspects, only Sally has blond hair, whereas Dirk is a brunette. This leads Holmes to say:

(4)   I now have reason to believe that Sally is the culprit.

As he investigates further, he finds a solid fingerprint. His friend at the police station tells him that there is no strong correlation with the fingerprint of Sally's that they have on file. Since fingerprint evidence is more weighty than hair folicles,[1] Holmes now says:

(5)   Now the balance of reasons suggests that Sally did not do it.

More searching uncovers a bottle of brown hair dye in the trash and a man's footprint at the scene. Having completed a thorough search, Holme's exclaims:

(6)   Aha! It wasn't Sally at all, but Dirk!

In this example, **??** seems accurate at first blush. But two things happen as Holmes looks into the case in more detail. First he gets **rebutting evidence** against **??**. The fingerprint evidence stands in direct conflict with what the hair seems to show.

Then he gets **under cutting** evidence against **??**. When he discovers the hair dye, he realizes that a blond hair doesn't support Sally's guilt at all, since Dirk very well could have been blond, too.

Finally, having put all the pieces together, Holmes forms an **all things considered** opinion that Dirk is the criminal.

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[1]How much more weighty? It's not clear. Finger printing is less of a science than many people realize.