

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REASONS AND RATIONALITY?

Reasons are facts that determine how we ought to respond to our circumstances — what we ought to believe, what we ought to intend, how we ought to feel, how we ought to act, etc. They figure in both our theoretical and practical reasoning. *Rationality* tells us how to correctly respond to our appearances — to how the situation appears to us (as opposed to how it is, in cases where the two come apart). How are the two related? It is common to think that we ought to respond correctly to our appearances — that reasons and rationality determine equivalent responses. But this turns out to be rather difficult to defend: when we are epistemically compromised, we are not always able to respond as reasons tell us to. But we are in principle always able to respond as rationality tells us to. The two seem inevitably to come apart. So how are they related?

I will consider briefly one possible response to this quandary: reasons perspectivism¹. It holds that not all reasons can determine how we ought to respond. Only reasons that we “possess” can do the determining, and we need to know the reasons to possess them. This is nuts. In showing why it is nuts, I will gesture at an alternative relationship between reasons and rationality — one that does not fall prey to the nutty cases of reasons perspectivism. It is inspired by Schliwa’s account of moral responsibility, which I take to offer the requisite connective tissue between the two ideas in question. We ought to respond as reasons tell us to, but so long as we respond as rationality tells us to, we will not be blamed for failing to respond as we ought to respond.

The argument will be short due to space, but I believe it will offer strong reasons to favor my view over reasons perspectivism. Here is how it will proceed. First, I will argue that reasons determine how we ought to respond to the situations we face, once we hold the norms fixed. I will appeal to Williams’ example of George and the job to show this. Second, I will argue that appearances tell us how to correctly respond to the situations we face. I will use the example of the Hudson river emergency landing to make my point. Third, I will modify the previous example in light of a Kantian intuition: that ‘ought implies can’. I will try my best to demonstrate why some might think that this motivates the view that appearances determine how we ought to act. Fourth, I will show how reasons perspectivists have tried to latch onto this intuition to motivate their thesis. Fifth, I will

argue that the intuition is illusory. The modified example is a Kantian retreat, as I will call it — and it does not show what the reasons perspectivists want it to show. Once this is established, reasons perspectivism is absent its core motivation. Finally, the death blow will be served with a modified version of George and the job. This will show why reasons perspectivism is nuts, but at the same time why my preferred solution is a pretty good solution. Reasons perspectivism loses the ability to distinguish what we ought to do and what we ought to be blamed for, and that leads to craziness.

First, consider George²:

George, who has just taken his Pd.D. in chemistry, finds it extremely difficult to get a job. [...] An older chemist, who knows about this situation, says that he can get George a decently paid job in a certain laboratory, which pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George says that he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical and biological warfare. [...] George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, he happens to know that if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by any such scruples and is likely if appointed to push along the research with greater zeal than George would. [...] What should he do?

Williams uses George's predicament to argue against utilitarianism. He does so by giving us facts. He uses these as reasons that determine what George ought to do. The utilitarian, no doubt, will answer that Williams is going at it the wrong way. He infers how George ought to respond from a particular case. But how could he make such an inference without first establishing the general norms that would allow his inference from the facts ("is") to the oughts? This debate is interesting, but I will us side-step it by supposing that there exists some appropriate norm for George's predicament. It can be particular or general, utilitarian or not utilitarian, or relative to facts about George — the details are irrelevant. What matters is this: there is nothing more to be settled than the facts and the norms. Thus, if we hold the norms fixed, the facts determine how George ought to respond. But since reasons are facts, it trivially follows that reasons determine how we ought to respond.

Not all reasons matter of course. George is English. This essay is superb. Coffee is necessary for survival in the modern world. These are all (putative) facts, but they are obviously irrelevant in determining how George ought to respond. So

we ought to say: relevant reasons determine how we ought to respond.

Second, consider the case of Captain Sullenberger. He piloted a plane departing from La Guardia airport. Not long after take-off, over densely populated Manhattan, its engines lost power due to impact with geese. His instructions were to return to the runway. The computers said he would make it back, but it appeared to him as though he would not make it. So he responded by landing the plane on the Hudson river. We now know that he would not have made it back to the runway. The computers were not able to account for all of the relevant facts, such as those about Sullenberger's own reaction time. If he had tried to return, there would have been many fatalities. So Sullenberger responded as he ought to have responded. But he also responded *correctly*: he was rational in responding as he did to the way things appeared to him, to his appearances.

Suppose now that Sully, Sullenberger's epistemic counterpart, was in the same situation but happened to be wrong about his own reaction time. And, all else being equal, Sully could in fact have made it back. In this case, he destroyed a plane and vast amounts of luggage and saved no more people than he would by returning. The facts in this modified case seem to suggest that he ought to have returned to the runway. But since Sullenberger responded correctly to his appearances in the real case and Sully had the exact same appearances, Sully also responded correctly in the modified case. If Sullenberger was rational, so was Sully. So it seems that appearances determine how to respond correctly.

Third, let us look more closely at Sully. I made a move suspicious move in the above by transitioning from how we ought to respond, to how we respond correctly. Reasons perspectivists would not accept this, because they would claim that there is no distinction to be made between the two. They hold that we ought to respond correctly. Here is one way to motivate that view.³

Kant famously asserted that "ought implies can": that we can only be normatively required (ought) to do those things that we are (in principle) able to do (can). Requirements that go beyond this limit would be nonsensical in virtue of being unachievable. And since we cannot tell the good case (appearances that give us reasons) from the bad (appearances that don't give us reasons), we cannot be required to act differently due to differences that are inaccessible to us.

And so it seems that appearances determine how we ought to respond. But while the reasons perspectivists accept this intuition, they want a little bit more: they want to say that appearances and reasons determine the same responses. On the face of it, this is implausible, because appearances are non-factive and reason (being facts) are factive. Thus, they inevitably come apart: reasons determine that Sully, in the modified case, ought to return to the runway, even though appearances determine that he ought to land in the river.

But the reasons perspectivists have a trick up their sleeve. They think that they can latch onto a trivial point made at the outset: that only certain reasons are relevant to how we ought to respond. By imposing an epistemic filter that narrows down relevance, they think they can manufacture an equivalent verdict in both the real and the modified case. The filter is, roughly speaking, that only reasons we possess are relevant in determining how we ought to respond. Possession is, most naturally, to be cashed out in terms of knowledge: we possess a reason just in case we know it. Thus, reasons we know determine how we ought to respond.

Fourth (and penultimately), this view is untenable. I will restrain myself to three grounds for this conclusion. First, its initial plausibility is illusory: the modified case of Sully is of no help to the reasons perspectivist. Second, for the same reason the view lacks plausibility, it fails to give a good account of moral responsibility. Third, in presenting the objection I will gesture towards a view that solves the same issues better than reasons perspectivists could hope to.

First, notice that the modified case is what I will term a Kantian retreat: it recognizes that Sully is out of touch with crucial facts about his situation, and infers on the basis of “ought implies can” that we are not failing to respond how we ought to respond – we are doing the best that we can. But whereas the former recognition is spot on, the inference goes too far. While “ought implies can” is a principle I take to be inviolable, it does not show what is claimed. For while it might be the case the Sully in the modified case did not know (or otherwise possess) reasons that determined that he ought to return to the airport, it is not clear that this makes him unable to return to the airport. His piloting skills are excellent. By assumption, the plane could have made it. So he has the ability, in any ordinary sense, to return. And yet the reasons perspectivists must say that it is not only correct for him not to return, he also ought not return. This seems questionable to me.

Nevertheless, it might be said that he could not have returned *for the relevant reasons*, given that he did not possess them. And so the reason Sully ought not return to the runway is that he could not have done so for the right reasons. But this move diminishes a crucial distinction between what we ought to do and what we are morally responsible for doing.⁴

Consider George, again. Suppose he takes the job and that it leads to the death of billions, in part at his hands due to his work. While I would not blame George for not possessing this crucial reason not to take the job, I would also like to say that he ought not to have taken it, all things considered. But this distinction is lost on the reasons perspectivist. If rationality and reasons determine the same responses, there is no natural standard by which we can measure moral responsibility. Reasons perspectivists are committed to two claims about George, only the first of which is plausible. If George knew it would lead to this amount of deaths, then he would not be rational to take it and he ought not take it. And if George did not know this, then he would be rational to take it and he ought to take it. Hence, there is no way to say about George that he was rational to take the job given how things appeared to him, but he ought not to have taken it given the facts. The facts that would enable us to say such a thing are filtered out by the possession requirement. But this is nuts.

Finally, I propose that we view rationality as the mark of responsibility and reasons as the mark of normativity. We ought to do what we ought to do, given the facts, but we will be forgiven for failing to do what we ought to do so long as we respond correctly to our appearances. This enables me to say exactly what I want to say about George and Sully, and no more. And it shows why the reasons perspectivists have no hope of giving a plausible relationship between reasons and rationality: this relationship is given by the very relation excluded by their theory.

References.

1. Lord, Errol. "What you're rationally required to do and what you ought to do (are the same thing!)." *Mind* (2017): fzw023.
2. Sliwa, Paulina. "On Knowing What's Right and Being Responsible for It." *Responsibility: The Epistemic Condition* (2017).
3. Williams, Bernard. "Consequentialism and Integrity" (pp.33-34), in Scheffler, Samuel, ed. *Consequentialism and its Critics*. Oxford University Press on De-

mand, 1988.

1. Lord 2017.
2. Williams 1988.
3. I think that the idea of guidance effectively reduces to “ought implies can”, so I will not spend any time on that.
4. Inspired by Sliwa 2017.