

CAN EPISTEMIC REASONS MOVE US?

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Poderao razoes epistemicas mover nos?

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1. *Introduction: two problems about practical and epistemic reasons*

There are two familiar problems with the idea of acting for a reason. One is the problem that Davidson made notorious in “Actions, reasons and causes” (Davidson 1963):

(i) When we say that a person did an action for a reason, how can we reconcile the fact that she acted *because* she had some pro-attitudes (paradigmatically beliefs and desires) with the fact that the pro-attitudes give her *a reason* for doing that action? For the beliefs and desires could give her a reason for doing what she did, although this reason might not be *the* reason why she did it (see Davidson’s famous example of the climber who wants to get rid of the weight and danger of her holding her partner on a rope, and who is so unnerved that she loosens grip and he falls). In other words how can the reason-giving relation (the relation “X has a reason to do X”) be also causally relevant?

Let us call this problem *the problem of the causal relevance of reasons for actions* or of practical reasons.

The second problem has several sources in contemporary philosophy, but has been formulated in his standard form in Bernard Williams’ well-known paper “Internal and external reasons” (Williams 1981):

(i) Given that a person has some *normative* reasons to do X (reasons about what it is rational to do, or reasons about what she ought to do), how can these reasons *motivate* her to do X? An *internalist* about normative reasons will say that the reasons should automatically motivate her, whereas an *externalist* about reasons denies this. The contrast is sometimes put as a distinction between *justifying* reasons and *motivating* ones, and the problem is that justifying reasons sometimes fail to be motivating ones (Dancy 1995)

Let us call this problem *the problem of the motivating force of normative reasons*.

The difference between the two problems is that (i) is about reasons in general, which can be good or bad ones, whereas (ii) is about good reasons alone, i.e. normative ones. But otherwise the two problems are very close, since motivating reasons are reasons which *explain* an action, or make it causally relevant to what an agent did. And the problem is: how can reasons *both* tell us what the agent *should* do and what he *actually* did?

My aim in this paper is not to examine these issues in the context of practical reasons, or reasons to act, but in the context of *epistemic reasons*, reasons to believe. *Prima facie*, there seems to be a parallel between the two problems in the action case and two similar problems in the belief case, for:

(iii) How can my reasons for believing that P be causally relevant for my believing that P? For the climber problem, or the problem of deviant causal chains can arise for beliefs too: for instance I can have a reason for believing that Berlusconi is going to be elected, but end up believing that he will not (the former belief unnerves me so much that I turn, by a piece of wishful thinking, to the contrary belief, or Berlusconi sends to all future voters a pill which makes them believe that he will be elected).

(iv) I can have a good, normative, rational, or justifying reason to believe that Q (say for instance because I believe that P, that if P then Q, and that the modus ponens rule is valid), but still be not motivated to believe that Q, perhaps because I have other reasons not to believe that Q.

But the parallel between the action case and the belief case is strained. For beliefs are not actions, and while we can want to act, it seems that we cannot want to believe. And the relationship between norms for beliefs, epistemic normative reasons and actual beliefs, does not seem to be the same as the relationship between practical norms and actions. Indeed it is precisely the very premiss of one familiar form of internalism about practical reasons, that is the so-called “Humean theory of motivation” – that only motivational states such as desires and wants can lead us to action – which prevents us from accepting the parallel between the action case and the belief case: beliefs, and reasons to believe are causally inert.

I intend, however, to explore the parallel here. I shall first describe one Humean internalist solution to the motivating problem and to the causal relevance problem, and a cognitivist internalist solution, and I shall criticise these solutions, especially in the case of logical norms, which form an important subset of the norms of theoretical reason. I shall then try to show that although both accept to some extent the parallel between the action case and the belief case, they do not go far enough. We cannot believe at will, but there is some truth in the rapprochement between epistemic reasons on the one hand and

practical reasons on the other, which helps us to understand their motivational power. So my solution, while granting some points to the Humean and to the cognitivist, will try to offer a better account of the motivational power of epistemic reasons.

2. *A Humean solution*

A paradigm case of normative epistemic reasons are *logical* ones. If a certain logical rule, say *modus ponens* (MP) is valid, and if I believe it to be valid, then it certainly gives me a good reason, and a normative one, to infer a given conclusion from premises which entail it. But the celebrated Lewis Carroll's paradox (Carroll 1895) seems to show that the existence of this reason, and even our recognition of it, is not sufficient to motivate us to derive the conclusion, nor to move our mind towards drawing this conclusion. The Tortoise is given by Achilles two premises, which she accepts, of the form "P" and "If P then Q", but she refuses to draw the conclusion "Q". She is then presented with a further premiss which says that it is true that "If P, and if P then Q, then Q", and she accepts this further premiss. But she still refuses to accept the conclusion. This is paradoxical, for given that she accepts the rule MP she is motivated to accept the conclusion, and she should draw it. But she doesn't. Of course one could deny that this is possible, as Achilles seems to do. But this denial seems to be based on a particular view of normative and justifying reasons: that these reasons are automatically motivating ones, and are furthermore, causally active. But how can a mere truth, such as the conditional expressing MP, move our minds? Truths, including logical truths, say how things are: they cannot for one minute cause us to act. Moreover, how can the mere recognition of this truth move us towards the conclusion? This seems to presuppose an unduly Platonistic view of logical rules, some sort of "hardness of the logical must" as Wittgenstein would say. This is the intuition upon which a Humean relies. Mere beliefs are not enough to produce an action; there must be other states, such as desires, which move us. So the Humean agrees that the situation described by Carroll *is* possible. But he says that it is possible only if we mistakenly suppose that justifying or normative reasons – those which say when a belief is right - and motivating ones – those which explain causally our beliefs, can fall apart, which is the externalist option, or if we do not understand the way in which justifying reasons can be motivating ones. The wrong way to understand this relation between the two kinds of reasons consists in embracing a form of *cognitivism* about reasons and norms, by supposing that a mere belief that there is a norm, or that we have normative epistemic reasons is sufficient to *cause* the appropriate belief. But this is not the way we should understand the relation between the two kinds of reasons, according to the Humean. Normative reasons, according to him, can be operative, i.e not motivationally and causally inert, only if we suppose that there is some appropriate psychological state, such as a desire, which acts causally in

such a way that we infer, as a matter of psychological fact, the conclusion. If such a state is missing from the story, the Tortoise will never reach the conclusion.

There are, of course, other ways of understanding the Lewis Carroll story than this Humean one, but I am only concerned with this one at this stage.¹ An Humean interpretation of what is at stake is offered by Blackburn in his paper “Practical Tortoise Raising” (Blackburn 1995), which is mainly devoted to showing that what happens in the original case of a logical inference proposed by Carroll can happen in the case of a practical reasoning. For we can tell exactly the same story, if instead of a logical rule such as MP we take various sorts of normative practical reasons, such as moral ones, whether we take them to be hypothetical imperatives, or deontological ones. The point of the story, according to Blackburn is

“that there is always something else, something which not under the control of fact or reason, which has to be given as a brute extra, if deliberation is ever to end by determining the will. This is of course, a Humean conclusion...”(Blackburn 1995, 695)

The fact that Blackburn takes his point about practical reasoning to be an analogue of the Lewis Carroll point in the case of logical reasoning, shows that he is prepared to draw a parallel between the case of reasons for action and the case of reasons for belief: not only logical reasons for believing a conclusion, but also epistemic reasons in general. For instance, if one had instead of the MP an epistemic norm, such as the evidentialist norm that we should always believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, the story would be just the same.

The Humean solution therefore, is that we can bridge the apparent gap between justifying (practical and epistemic) or normative reasons and motivating reasons only identifying, at some point, the former to the latter. This what, in various ways, contemporary neo-Humeans such as Williams (1981), Smith (1984) and Blackburn himself (1998) do.

There is an obvious objection to the Humean account, understood in this way as identifying justifying reasons with motivating ones. And this objection helps us to link the problem discussed so far with the theme of this conference, which is about the nature of interpretation. The objection is this: in so far as normative reasons are supposed to be rational ones, in the sense of reasons which, to take up Davidson’s phrase, “rationalise” our actions and beliefs, or explain it in a causally relevant way, we could not understand the case of actions or beliefs which would be done for the *wrong* sort of reasons. In such a case there would be a gap between what the agent or believer takes to be right and

¹ Stroud 1969 gives us an interesting analysis, but he seems to agree with the Humean that “for every proposition or set of propositions the belief or acceptance of which is involved in someone’s believing one proposition on the basis of another there must be something else, not simply a further proposition accepted, that is responsible for the one belief based on the other.”

what she actually does or believes. But wrong actions or false beliefs are as intelligible as right ones. Hence how could their reasons be both normative ones and reasons which causally explain the actions and beliefs? This is the parallel problem, for the theory of the explanation of beliefs and actions as an *interpretative* kind of explanation, of the problem of the gap between justifying and motivating reasons. Davidson argues that there is a parallel between the interpretation of actions and the interpretation of beliefs. He urges that in this interpretation we are bound to attribute true beliefs and reasonable desires to the agent and believers. Such beliefs and desires should count, therefore, as normative reasons, or beliefs and desires about what it is rational to do, according to norms of rationality. But when the beliefs and actions are not rational (as they are in the case of the Tortoise or its practical equivalent), what should we do? There would be a gap between what the agent should believe or do and what he does, hence an explanatory gap. In this respect, Davidson turns out to be sophisticated Humean, but he encounters the same problem as the other Humeans.²

Another familiar objection to Humeanism does not bear about the psychology of practical reasoning and epistemic or theoretical reasoning, but upon its ontology. As well known, the Humean is an anti-realist about norms and values, and his internalist account of motivation is designed to fit this his anti-realist account of norms as expressions of subjective attitudes. But in the case of logical norms at least, a parallel ontology would seem to imply that logical norms are in some sense the expression of psychological attitudes. But then it seems that this implies a form of psychologism about logical norms. How can logical rules be objective if they are mere projections of our attitudes? Here it seems that if they can be motivating (for they are the expressions of our preferences, it is at the price of the loss of their *justificatory* character.³ And similarly with other epistemic norms.

A similar objection is voiced thus by Frank Jackson:

“The problem for non cognitivism about normativity... is that if cognitivism about normativity is correct, there is no such thing as *satisfying* normative constraints...” (Jackson 2000).

But if there is no such thing as satisfying normative constraints, how can there be normative reasons in the first place? How could one *have* such reasons?

3. A cognitivist solution

² I have elaborated here some remarks by Dancy (1995) p.6, which are directed against Smith's version of Humeanism, but where Smith adduces considerations from Davidsonian interpretation theory in order to reconcile the Humean view with a form of cognitivism about reasons.

³ Blackburn 1998, p.167 notes the problem, but he does not say much to solve it.

These difficulties of the Humean solution suggest that we should adopt a cognitivist solution. There is one kind of solution of this type which accepts squarely the impossibility of reconciling normative reasons with motivating ones. It would simply register the possibility of epistemic *akrasia*, or doxastic incontinence (Heil 19XX): one can have the best possible reasons to believe that P, but still not believe that P, or believe the contrary. This would lead to a form of externalism, comparable, for instance with the one that Brink accepts for the ethical case (Brink 1989). But if we want to reconcile our talk of justifying or normative reasons with their motivational power, or simply the fact that they can be normative with the fact that they can be *causally explanatory*, we can't accept this form of externalism. We must make room for two claims:

- (a) an epistemic reason must be capable of explaining a belief or to motivate it;
- (b) justifying epistemic reasons are normative facts.

And the claim would be that justifying reasons can *by themselves* be motivationally powerful. But in the epistemic as well as in the moral case, this sounds implausible: how can norms, conceived as abstract entities or as registering normative facts have a sort of action at distance? In order for them to be motivationally potent, they must at least be recognised by the thinker, in other words:

- (c) normative epistemic reasons cannot motivate unless recognised by the thinker⁴

In other terms again, this means that we cannot sever the tie between *having a reason* (in Jackson's phrase "instantiating a normative constraint") and *believing that one has a reason*. The motivation then would come from a particular kind of *belief* about the reasons that one has.

But in order not to be a mere psychological state which would operate in a brute causal way – for this would lead us back to a version of the Humean view – such beliefs must have certain properties which make them both normative and causally operative. Examining cases of logical reasoning moving us from premises to conclusions, Bill Brewer suggests that :

“ There is more to grasping the laws of logic or mathematical argument than simply being disposed to have one's beliefs mirror the moves they prescribe. Epistemologically productive reasoning is not a merely mechanical manipulation of belief, but a compulsion in thought *by*

⁴ These three requirements are modelled after Dancy 1995: 13

reason, and as such involves conscious understanding of why one is right in one's conclusion. (Brewer 1995: 242)

A mere belief, or a disposition to believe, is not enough. The person must understand why the belief is correct. For that she must be aware of what she does. And Brewer talks here of "causation in virtue of rationalisation, or compulsion. A mere belief, or a disposition to believe, is not enough. The person must understand why the belief is correct. For that she must be aware of what she does. And Brewer talks here of "causation in virtue of rationalisation, or compulsion *by reason*" (*ibid.*244). So reason itself (epistemic reason) would *by itself* have a causally relevant power.

In "Reason and First Person" (1998) Tyler Burge elaborates further an account along similar lines. He argues that the very concept of reason requires the concept of a subject and the notion of the first person: "To understand fully the fundamental notions associated with reason, including the notion of reasoning, judgement, change of mind, propositional attitude, point of view, one must have an employ a first person concept." (p.249) He further argues that someone who is a subject, or a "critical reasoner" in this full sense not only must understand the evaluative norms that provide standards that count reasoning good or bad, but also that a subject who is able to understand these norms of reasons must "immediately be moved by reasons". To understand reasons one must understand their force and application. So to be aware of these norms involves a tendency to be immediately motivated by them. (*ibid.* 252). On other words one cannot have reasons for thinking that P, or doing that P, without being able to be moved by them, and to take oneself as responsive to them, as able to implement them in one's epistemic and practical decisions. And this also requires that one is able to ascribe these reasons to oneself, and have the concept of a first person. Hence the concepts of reason, of subjectivity and of agency are intrinsically interconnected.

Brewer and Burge's account of motivation by reason is cognitivist: they take epistemic reasons or norms to express truths or facts, although facts of a normative, non empirical kind. It is also internalist, for they suggest that these epistemic reasons compel us to have the appropriate beliefs. But it is not epistemic norms by themselves which can motivate us. Our motivation in this case must go through a *reflective* awareness of our reasons. We may extract their thesis in the following form (Owens 2000: 20) :

Reflective motivation : if R is a prima facie reason to believe that *p*, reflection on R provides the rational subject with a motive to believe that *p*

But how is this supposed to escape from the Humean objection? To repeat the point somewhat rhetorically, even if it is true that “one cannot think of oneself as powerless”, and if “to understand reasons, one must understand their force in application in one’s reasoning” (p.251), how is it that reasons *move* us? Burge’s description suggests that our very awareness of reasons as *our* reasons, and of the evaluative norms of beliefs and actions as being *ours* is *in itself* sufficient to lead us “immediately” to the appropriate beliefs and actions. But is it the case? Someone can certainly see that R is a good reason for doing A, and grant that it is *his* reason, and have the *I* concept, but still fail to be moved by it. This is, after all, the Tortoise’s predicament.

The cognitivist solution thus seems to give us no solution, for it makes motivation by reason mysterious. It just reinstates our original problem. The Humean can still ask two questions:

- 1) do we need reflective reasons, and the kind of self-knowledge Burge talks about? Couldn’t we believe without being critical reasoners in his sense? It seems that we can, for a number of our beliefs are non reflective, or dispositional.
- 2) if we need these reflective reasons, how can they move us? As Owens says

“If you already have a non reflective awareness of the reasons which ought to motivate you, how does the judgement that you ought to me moved by them help to ensure that your are so moved? Such judgements look an idle wheel in our motivational economy, whether we are perfectly rational or not.” (Owens 2000: 17-18)

4. Belief, the will and judgement

We face a dilemma: either we stand up for a Humean solution, and we can understand how our epistemic reasons can be causally explanatory (they are beliefs as psychological states), but we cannot understand how they can be normative or justifying; or we stand up for a cognitivist solution, and we can understand how our epistemic reasons are normative, but we cannot understand how they can be motivational and causally relevant.

In order to get out of this quandary, we should think more about the parallel between practical reasons and epistemic reasons from which we started. Our problem was that epistemic reasons (for instance logical rules) fail to fulfill both roles: being normative and being explanatory. They cannot fulfill both roles because a norm in itself is inert, and does not have a motivational nor causal power. We have also rejected the cognitivist account which says that norms can have such a power, or that a reflective awareness of a norm can have such a power. And there is a simple Humean reason why this is so. For a belief, and a *fortiori* a belief about a norm, is not a causally active mental state, unlike a desire. According to the Humean theory of motivation, only desires can make us act.

There is categorical difference between beliefs and desires, which are, in Hume's phrase "distinct existences", or which have, in Anscombe's phrase different "directions of fit". This categorical difference thus could explain why beliefs about epistemic reasons are inert, but it could also explain why the parallel between epistemic reasons - reasons to believe - and practical reason - reasons to act, cannot hold fully. But suppose that we take the parallel more seriously, and that we agree that beliefs can be in some sense actions. Then we would not have explained the causal inertia of epistemic norms, but it seems that we would have an explanation of why *beliefs* about epistemic norms can be causally operative. This would lead us to a *quasi*-Humean solution to our problem: Humean because it would try to locate the motivational force of beliefs about norms in their intrinsic connection with motivational states - desires, will or intentions, but only *quasi*- , because the Humean denies that beliefs can be motivational states. Let us explore this suggestion.

On the face of it the suggestion seems absurd, for familiar reasons (Williams 1970). Normally our beliefs are not under the direct control of our will. Of course it is in general admitted that they can *indirectly* be under such control. Through hypnosis, auto-suggestion, through the formation of habits, or other stratagems, we can produce in us the state of believing. But these are all forms of *mediated* belief productions. What does seem impossible is the formation of a conscious intention to believe that *p* which would result in the act of believing that *p* in the same sense as that in which a conscious intention to act directly produces the act in question. We can call this the *uncontrollability* feature of belief (Noordhof 2001). Familiar explanations of this feature include psychological ones and constitutive or conceptual ones. A psychological explanation can appeal either to the ordinary phenomenology of belief or to the functionalist thesis that beliefs are normally caused by environment inputs and result in outputs in behaviour. If beliefs could be caused by intention and be actions, this would run counter to this normal role. A conceptual explanation consists in saying that the very nature of belief is to "aim at truth", and that it is constitutively governed by the norm of truth. One can also combine the two sorts of explanations, by saying that we could not, in full consciousness, acquire a belief irrespective of its truth *and* think of it as something purporting to represent reality, for I could not think of this belief as mine, since I would mean that I could both believe that not *p* (since I have no evidence for its truth, or disregard this evidence) and believe that *p* (if my action of getting this belief is successful) (Williams: 148, Engel 1999). So here again we hit upon the fundamental categorical difference between beliefs on the one hand, and desires, intentions and motivational states on the other.

But, as Noordhof (*ibid.*) has recently argued, these explanations of the uncontrollability thesis are not satisfactory. For the psychological argument do not rule out the psychological possibility of creatures who would, unlike us, not aim at truth or the possibility that the normal function of belief might disfunction. And the conceptual argument does not undermine the possibility

that after our forming the conscious intention to believe p irrespective of its truth, there might be later evidence for its truth.

That beliefs are essentially aimed at truth, or that truth is the constitutive norm for belief seems to me to be a non negotiable feature of *belief* (Engel, to appear). But it does not tell us why, psychologically speaking, beliefs are not under the control of the will. And it does not tell us why aiming at truth can nevertheless have a motivational role. Here again we face the dilemma which has occupied us from the start: how can a constitutive feature or a norm of belief *also* give us an explanation of its motivational role?

A more plausible line of argument, in order to solve this problem, is to focus upon psychological states which are not beliefs, but which share a sufficient number of features with it to render intelligible the fact that epistemic or cognitive states can have a motivational role. And here we can turn rather to states such as *assents* and *judgements*.

A judgement that p is not any more an action, or under the control of the will than a belief is: for we do not have more any more control over its content and the evidential reasons which make it true or false, or supported or unsupported, than we have control over our beliefs. But we can nevertheless *suspend* our judgements, or *refrain* to make them, or *decide* to issue them (most of the time verbally, but not necessarily so). Such talk bespeaks a certain kind of *activity*. The same could be said about other states upon which a number of philosophers have recently concentrated their attention: *acceptances*, the making of *hypotheses*, or things that we take for granted. So even if we cannot control our beliefs, we have control over certain sorts of activities which help to fix our beliefs, or which accompany them. That these are actions in a way in which a belief is not an action can be seen from the fact that such activities can have other aims than truth: for instance one may *accept*, for the sake of a practical deliberation, certain propositions which one believes to be false.⁵ Thus such epistemic states such as judging, accepting, hypothesising and the like can be taken as actions which have most of the time truth as their aim, but which can also fail to be aimed at truth. And we could imagine creatures who would not, in their judgements and other judgemental activities, have truth as their primary aim.

In spite of the fact that a judgement is an action which might to be directed at truth, it seems impossible to issue a judgement consciously without attending to its truth. For suppose that I set out to form a judgement in the course of a practical deliberation. It seems impossible to act upon this judgement without taking it as representing reality at the time at which I act. As Paul Noordhof says,

“It is part of the nature of conscious attention that it gives determinate weight to the norm of truth. It makes truth-likelihood the deciding factor in the formation of a certain kind of motivational state.” (Noordhof 2001: 260)

⁵ On all this, there is a vast literature. see in particular Cohen (1992), Bratman (1993) and Engel (2000)

Thus Noordhof proposes that the norm of truth can be taken to be a practical, rather than a purely epistemic norm. As he says, in so far as our judgements can be taken to be actions, “it is part of practical reason that our beliefs should be true”. On such a view, we cannot control our beliefs directly, and we cannot control the orientation of our judgements towards truth. But our reflective awareness of our beliefs and our judgements provides us with considerations for such activities as accepting, hypothesising, inquiring and indeed gathering evidence.

This proposal has, one will have noted, one point in common with the cognitivist accounts examined in section 3 above. It gives to conscious awareness of our epistemic normative reasons a major role in determining the motivational factor of these reasons. But unlike Burge or Brewer’s cognitivist account, it does not invoke any mysterious “compulsion by reason” which would by itself motivate us to have certain beliefs or be moved by them. Still, our normative reasons have a motivational role because they are part of a piece of practical reasoning which is governed by the norm of truth.

5. Conclusion

If a view along the lines given in this paper is correct, then, I think that we can reconcile the normative character of justifying epistemic reasons with their motivational and explanatory role. Epistemic norms (and in particular logical norms, as it is illustrated by the Lewis Carroll story) do not by themselves have motivational power. On this point I agree with the Humean, against the cognitivist. Beliefs themselves are not actions, and they are governed by evidential norms and by the norm of truth (they aim at truth). They are involuntary. On this point too I agree with the Humean. But it does not follow that when we engage in judgements, and in general in the various activities which are involved in inquiry, we are not setting ourselves certain goals, and are performing a certain kind of activity. In this pursuit, reflective awareness and consciousness of our reasons plays a major motivational role. On this point I agree with the cognitivist. But is not as if norms could have , as he suggests, some sort of action at distance. It is because the norms are taken by us as goals in a form of practical deliberation. In this respect, theoretical deliberation has many points in common with practical deliberation, and parallell between practical reasoning and epistemic reasoning is thus justified. These features have often been noticed by writers of a pragmatist persuasion.⁶ But this does not imply a form of pragmatism, in the sense of a *reduction* of the norms and goals of theoretical reason to the norms of goals of practical reason, nor like the radical Humean move, a reduction of justifying reasons to motivational reasons.

⁶ On this , see in particular Hookway 2000.

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