

McDowell – Acting in the Light of a Fact

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McDowell's main task: convince Dancy that his theory of motivating reasons missing something important.

Acting for reasons is acting in light of a fact, at least when things are going well.

Others criticize Dancy for not requiring all reasons to be *facts*, as in the bad case, where Dancy allows them to be false propositions/non-obtaining states of affairs.

McDowell is worried that, even in the good case, Dancy's account doesn't require the agent to act *in light of* a fact. More below.

McDowell thinks Dancy gets some things right, e.g. his resistance to Psychological Factivism.

From Dancy handout:

Psychological Factivism: instead of acting in light of my belief that *p*, or acting in light of *p*, I act in light of the fact that I believe that *p*

Advantages:

- I can believe that *p* even when *p* is false. So, no problem acting in light of my reason (that I believe that *p*) even when *p* is false
 - NB this does not force us to abandon the factivity of reasons: my reason is the fact that I believe that *p*, and I really do believe that *p*
- the role of my belief here is obvious: that I believe that *p* can't be a fact unless I believe that *p*

Argument against Psychological Factivism:

1. Sometimes, facts about what we believe *really are* reasons for action
2. those cases are 'quite unusual, not at all the the normal case' (124).
Examples:

that I believe that the cliff is crumbling is my reason for avoiding climbing it, because having that belief I am more likely to fall off (I will get nervous). This is a case where that I believe what I do is genuinely my reason for action, in a way that is independent of whether the belief is actually true. As I might say, whether the cliff actually is crumbling or not doesn't matter. I believe that it is

crumbling, and this alone is sufficient to motivate me to stay away from it. I recognize that if the cliff were not crumbling, I would still have just the same reason not to climb it as if it were, so long as I continue to believe it to be crumbling. (124)

Someone who believes that there are pink rats living in his shoes may take that he believes this as a reason to go to the doctor or perhaps a psychoanalyst. This is quite different from the person who takes (his belief) that there are pink rats living in his shoes as a reason to call in the pest control officer. (125)

3. '[Because] the situations of which [the reason for action is a fact about what the agent believes] is most obviously true are very uncommon ones... so that the general thesis [that motivating reasons are facts about what the agent believes] must be false as a general thesis just because of the peculiar nature of the cases which it correctly characterizes.' (125)

So, Psychological Factivism is probably false.

BTM:¹

Are Dancy's descriptions of the Crumbly Cliff and Pink Rats cases really fair to the Psychological Factivist (hereafter: PF)? I would have thought that the PF would say:

- motivating reasons are beliefs (perhaps combined with desires)
- granted, when citing our own reasons for action we don't cite beliefs, we cite putative facts about the world (typically), but that's misleading: knowledgeable third-person observers cite beliefs^{2,3}
- Diagnosis of cases:

Crumbly Cliff 1 the cliff really is crumbly, and you don't climb it.
Motivating reason: that you believe it is crumbly.

Crumbly Cliff 2 you believe that the cliff is crumbly, and you're worried that this belief will make you so nervous that you'd fall.
Motivating reason: your belief that you believe that the cliff is crumbly

Pink Rats 1 you take it that there are pink rats in your shoes, and you call the exterminator.
Motivating reason: that you believe that there are pink rats in your shoes

Pink Rats 2 you believe that there are pink rats in your shoes, so you call the psychiatrist
Motivating reason: you believe that you believe that there are pink rats in your shoes

¹ Forgive the digression – this has been bothering me!

² Do they? Even in good cases?

³ NB this isn't all that different from Dancy's own position, on which we should treat 'p' and 'S believes that p' the same because they appear the same to S (to avoid Moore Paradoxicality).

Dancy thinks that paradigm cases where facts about beliefs – CC₂, PR₂ – are reasons are unusual, and for that reason we should reject PF.

But he only gets that result by assuming that the reasons in CC₁ and PR₁ are not facts about beliefs, but facts about the world.

That's tantamount to assuming that PF is false! So, Dancy's argument is question-begging (at least against the version of PF that I'm imagining).

Where does that leave us?

- Dancy's actual argument has no dialectical force against the PF
- All the work here is being done by the bare intuition that the motivating reason in CC₁ and PR₁ is a fact about the world, not a fact about belief.⁴

End: BTM

⁴ Which might be the correct intuition to have! But the argument is useless.

Back to McDowell's criticism of Dancy

For Dancy, reasons explanations always take the form:

He did such-and-such because, as he supposed, p

This does not imply that p is actually true, so reasons-explanations are not factive

Nonetheless, in cases where p happens to be true, the motivating reason is a fact; this is *sufficient* for the agent to act in light of a *fact*

McDowell's big objection to Dancy:

That implies that S acts in light of fact p even if the truth of p is a 'happy accident in relation to the person's cognitive position.' But that's wrong:

So,

If, but only if, the obtaining of the fact by virtue of whose obtaining the relevant belief is true is not a happy accident in relation to the agent's cognitive position, we can say that the fact itself is exerting a rational influence on the agent's will; we can say that in doing what she is doing the agent is responding rationally to the fact itself. If the truth of the relevant belief is merely good luck, cognitively speaking, on the agent's part, the agent's reason for acting is the relevant fact, in the sense Dancy makes room for. But in such a case it would be absurd to say the agent is rationally responding to the fact itself. To be responding to the fact itself, she would need to have the fact itself in her sights, in a sense that is excluded if it is only by luck that her

belief is true. Responding to a fact – acting in the light of a fact, on the natural interpretation that, as I said, is missing from Dancy’s thinking – requires not just believing, truly of course (since we are presupposing that it is a fact), that the fact obtains, but knowing that it does, being non-accidentally correct in one’s belief that it does. (16-7)

Hornsby makes the same point with an example:

The example concerns Edmund who believes that the ice in the middle of the pond is dangerously thin, having been told so by a normally reliable friend, and who accordingly keeps to the edge. But Edmund’s friend didn’t want Edmund to skate in the middle of the pond (never mind why), so that he told Edmund that the ice there was thin despite having no view about whether or not it actually was thin.⁵ Edmund, then, did not keep to the edge because the ice in the middle was thin. Suppose, now, that as it happened, the ice in the middle of the pond was thin. This makes no difference. Edmund still didn’t keep to the edge because the ice was thin. The fact that the ice was thin does not explain Edmund’s acting, even though Edmund did believe that it was thin, and even though the fact that it was thin actually was a reason for him to stay at the edge. (17)

⁵ This is an unfortunate example – it’s controversial whether testimony from a defective source can produce knowledge in its recipient; see Lackey’s case of the fundamentalist teacher.

To which Dancy responds:

Hornsby’s point...is that action on a true belief in a reason-giving fact is not enough for it to be the case that one is acting for that fact as a reason. It is only if one knows that fact that one can be said to be acting for it as a reason. But this seems to me to involve an invalid inference. One cannot argue that Edmund is not keeping to the edge for the reason that the ice is thin from the premise that he is not skating there because the ice is thin. In fact, I would say of both scenarios above (the one where the friend is right and the one where he is wrong) that in them Edmund is skating on the edge for the reason that the ice is thin, or that Edmund’s reason for skating there is that the ice is thin, or that the reason for which he is skating there is that the ice is thin. I don’t see that Hornsby’s two scenarios do anything to upset that entirely natural position. (18)

It’s not clear exactly what the invalid inference is supposed to be, but in any event that misses the point.

Hornsby seems first to be making a judgment about the case: that even if the ice is thin, the thinness of the ice is a good (normative) reason to stay away from the middle, Edmund believes that it’s thin, and Edmund does in fact skate around the edges, the thinness of the ice might still not explain his action. Example: when his belief is a ‘happy accident’

Then she posits an explanation for what’s missing: *knowledge* that the ice is thin. Knowledge that p is what’s required in order for

good normative reason *p* to be *my* reason, to be the reason in light of which I act.

Question: why *knowledge*? Why not something else to ensure that the fact in question really is what one acts in light of?

Note the parallel to Gettier cases in epistemology: true belief on the basis of a fact that is in fact good evidence for *p* – JTB – is insufficient for knowledge, when the belief is a merely a happy accident. That's what's happening when one believes that Smith will get the job, or that Brown is in Barcelona. Parallel closer to McDowell's heart: veridical hallucination.

So knowledge is the thing that rules out happy accidents in theoretic rationality, maybe knowledge can serve the same function in practical rationality.

Upshot, according to McDowell:

There is no need to deny that an explanation in one of the forms Dancy countenances can provide some understanding of an action. But if we have only that understanding, we do not yet know the answer to a question that should concern us if we are interested in how the action manifests the agent's practical rationality at work. We do not yet know, and we ought to want to know, whether the action can be understood as a rational response to the fact in question. If it can, we can have an understanding of the action to which its being a fact that the agent is acting in the light of is integral. That is the idea of acting in the light of a fact that is missing from Dancy's thinking. (19)

What I am urging is this: there is a difference, which matters for the rational intelligibility of actions, between, on the one hand, acting in the light of a fact, in the sense of responding rationally to the fact, having the fact weigh with one, and, on the other hand, acting in the light of something one takes to be so without knowing it to be so; and there is still that difference even if what one takes to be so without knowing it to be so is in fact so. (20)

Important clarifications:

- the problem is not with the non-factivity of Dancy's account: the putative problem arises when the reason in question really is a fact, not just a false proposition (or non-obtaining state of affairs)
- the problem is specifically that: even in the good case, the explanation fails to explain action *in the light of* a fact
- so, Hornsby's claim is consistent with Dancy's non-factivism about reasons⁶

McDowell's disjunctivist picture:

⁶ Though Hornsby herself prefers a mixed view, on which reasons are either known facts about the world (the good case) or facts about beliefs that do not amount to knowledge (that's the bad case, bad either because the proposition believed isn't true, or because only accidentally true.

*****let's put of this discussion until we get to our readings on disjunctivism*****

General disjunctivist picture of *perception*:

1. there are two types of perceptual experiences: those that provide knowledge, and those that do not. Instances of different types might be subjectively indistinguishable.
2. these two types of experiences are dissimilar in other ways, with varieties of disjunctivism distinguished by the way they make this second condition precise

McDowell's preferred way to make (2) precise:

...members of such a pair are [not] alike in relevance to the rational warrant for experience-based beliefs about the environment. (21)

In other words, there's an epistemic difference between the two kinds of experiences *right there in the experience*, not just in some feature that goes beyond the experience (e.g. safety, truth, etc).

If that's wrong, then the epistemic contribution of any subjectively indistinguishable pair of experiences could be reduce to their *highest common factor* of the contributions of both

Problem with highest common factor accounts: why is it that this highest common factor leads to knowledge in the good case, but not in the bad case? In particular, why doesn't veridical hallucination lead to knowledge?

Parallels to McDowell's disjunctivist picture of motivating reasons

Similarities between accounts of perception and of action:

1. worse disjunct of each – merely experiencing (without thereby knowing), acting in light of something one merely takes to be true (but doesn't know) – is intelligible in a way, and good disjunct incorporates that way
2. better disjunct – really perceiving, acting on the basis of how you know things to be – goes beyond that kind of intelligibility
3. Another way to put (1) and (2): the highest common factor analysis is rejected, so no need to say that the explanatory resources are the same in good and bad cases. No, the good case has all the explanatory resources available in the bad case, and more.
4. bad cases are understood in terms of good cases; the latter have explanatory priority

Dissimilarities:

1. motivations for (mistakenly) accepting the highest common factor account are different:
 - for experience, motivation is subjective indistinguishability
 - for action, motivation is possibility of acting on the basis of a false proposition