

Turri – The Ontology of Epistemic Reasons

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§1 – Introduction

Target is **epistemic reasons**: those reasons upon which our beliefs are based

Central Question: ontologically speaking, what are epistemic reasons?

- mental states (experiences, beliefs)?
- propositions?
- facts?
- other?

Theoretical options:

Psychologism: All reasons are psychological items

Statism: Reasons are the subject's mental states or events

Anti-psychologism: No reason is a psychological item

Abstractionism: Reasons are the propositional contents of the subject's mental states

Factualism: Reasons are non-mental facts or states of affairs.

Dualism: Some but not all reasons are psychological items

Clarifications about what these are theories of:

- not asking about *reasons that exist to believe*
 - not asking what reasons exist independent of what reasons I actually have
 - not assuming that all reasons are *good* reasons
- not asking for a psychological explanation of *why* you believe, or for the non-psychological causal relations that led to your belief

Constraints on an adequate theory of epistemic reasons:

1. reasons must *explain* beliefs held

2. respect [the internalist's] New Evil Demon intuitions
3. should generalize to reasons for disbelief, withholding of belief
4. should more or less accord with our judgments about the reasonability of beliefs in normal cases
5. **it should be possible to believe for bad reasons**^{1,2}

BTM:

Here are some other possible desiderata for a theory of epistemic reasons:

1. assuming that reasons = evidence (roughly at least), should play the central roles of evidence (Williamson)
2. reasons should be capable of standing in logical/ probabilistic relations to beliefs (similar to (1) - Sellars, Davidson, Williamson)
3. should be capable of playing those roles in social settings, e.g. science, where evidence/ reasons is public and shared (every philosopher of science ever)
4. shouldn't make it too hard to explain why it's valuable to have beliefs based on good reasons (epistemic externalists)
5. should be possible to both *believe* and *act* for the very same reason (Littlejohn)
6. others?

end BTM §2 – Applications

Point of this section: identify how decisions about ontology of reasons affect other debates in epistemology, particularly the internalism/ externalism debate

Two ways to understand epistemic internalism:

Mentalist Internalism: no contingent non-mental factor can help determine whether you are epistemically justified in holding any doxastic attitude

Observation: your reasons help determine whether your doxastic attitudes are epistemically justified, so if reasons are not mental states (i.e. if Psychologism if false), then mentalism is false

NB: it's not clear that Mentalism is the proper characterization of internalism. Williamson is no internalist, but he is a mentalist: he

¹ rather than saying that in such cases there is no reason to believe at all. Turri: 'I am more than comfortable letting my argument ultimately rest on this assumption, should it come to that point.' (493)

² I hope that everyone caught the *Crocodile Dundee* reference at the bottom of p. 493.

thinks that knowledge is a mental state, and your knowledge completely determines what you're justified in believing.

Similar problems arise once you

Access Internalism: 'the justifying reason for [any belief] . . . must somehow be cognitively available to the believer himself' (BonJour 495)³

Contra BonJour, access to reasons isn't the central issue between internalists and externalists:

Externalists can concede that all reasons are mental states, and also claim that inaccessible facts (causal facts, reliability facts, etc.) play a role in determining the quality of those reasons. That doesn't make them internalists.

What's inconsistent with Access Internalism is regarding facts (which are often inaccessible) as reasons

Background: types of contributions to the rightness of action (from Dancy)

reason favors/ disfavors an action. The fact (!)⁴ that I promised to come to the part is a *reason* to come to the party.

enabling/ disabling condition allows a reason to function a reason, but does not itself favor or disfavor an action. The fact (!) that I can keep my promise enables my promise to be a reason — were I injured in an accident on my way to the party my reason is *disabled*, and I'm off the hook (morally) for coming.

amplifying/ attenuating condition: increases/ decreases the weight of a reason. The fact (!) that I missed the last two parties after promising to come makes my promise especially morally weighty — it's an *amplifier*

Are there clear epistemic analogues to each of these categories?

§3 – Psychologism Refuted?

Distinction from practical philosophy:

Normative reasons: the reasons for which an agent *ought* to act or believe; a 'consideration that counts in favor of' acting or believing a certain way (Scanlon)

Motivating reasons: the reasons for which an agent actually does act or believe

³ To be fair to BonJour here, it's not clear that he's using the word 'reason' in Turri's technical sense. If he means something more like 'factor that contributes to the justification of the belief' (in Dancy's sense, below), then Turri's objection is misguided.

⁴ Dancy thinks that reasons are facts, and I'm following him here. How important is that assumption in motivating his taxonomy?

Psychologism is the thesis that all reasons are psychological items (e.g. perceptual states, beliefs)

Anti-psychologism is the thesis that no reasons are psychological items (rather propositions, facts, etc)

A complete theory of reasons would characterize the nature of both normative and motivating reasons. But they don't need to be characterized the same way.

Possibilities:

Theory	Normative reasons	Motivating Reasons
(PP)	Psychological	Psychological
(PA)	Psychological	Anti-psychological
(AP)	Anti-psychological	Psychological
(AA)	Anti- psychological	Anti-psychological

Turri's opponents reject (PP) and (PA), claiming that Psychologism about normative reasons is wildly implausible (let's grant this for a moment).

They argue that the mixed nature of (AP) leads to unacceptable consequences:

1. If psychologism [about motivating reasons] is true, then it is impossible to **act/ believe** for a good reason.
2. But it is possible to **act/ believe** for a good reason.
3. Therefore psychologism is not true.⁵

⁵ This is Turri's reconstruction of Dancy's argument.

But why accept (1)?

Dancy: because good reasons = normative reasons

Turri: lots of possible epistemic accounts on which good reasons \neq normative reasons.

Dancy's thought: 'anti-psychologism holds an advantage because it respects the idea "that good reasons can be, or be grounded in, considerations other than those concerning the psychology of the agent," in particular "features of our surroundings".'(497)

Turri: that's an advantage of *externalism*, not Anti-psychologism as such.

Example: Simple externalists claim that: if your mental state M reliably indicates that Q, then M is a good reason for you to believe Q.

Reliability enables M to be a reason for believing that Q. Since reliability is understood in non-psychological terms, this allows ‘features of our surroundings’ to partially ground our beliefs, when those beliefs are justified.

Upshot for Turri: it’s possible to believe for good reasons which are themselves psychological items. Premise (1) of Dancy’s argument is false.

BTM:

So what’s Turri’s actual position? Presumably it’s:

Motivating reasons: Psychologism

Good reasons: Psychologism (with externalist features)

Normative reasons: ?

NB: he’s very unclear here. He says:

[Dancy’s] mistake derives from conflating “normative reasons” (or “normative states of affairs”) with “good reasons”. (496)

Is he here conceding that normative reasons are *not* psychological entities? Or is he merely denying that good reasons need be states of affairs (or facts or true propositions...) and leaving open the relationship between normative reasons and good reasons?

Suppose normative reasons \neq good reasons.

Q1: I’m tempted to identify good reasons with evidence. If so, then what are normative *epistemic* reasons?

Q2: what’s the relationship between good reasons and normative reasons? good reasons \subseteq normative reasons? Then if good reasons are mental states then at least some normative reasons are mental states.

Q3: If this is the correct picture of theoretical reasons, is the correct picture of practical reasons similarly structured? If so, then what’s the practical analogue of good reasons? Are they just: reasons that you have?

Most charitable interpretation:

- good reasons = normative reasons
- Dancy’s mistake isn’t identifying good and normative reasons, it identifying good reasons with *states of affairs*
- Dancy’s motivation for doing so is to tie normativity to facts about the world, avoid constructivism

- Psychologism about good reasons (= normative reasons) *with an externalist component* provides that same benefit

§4: Two Problems for Abstractionism

Advantage of Abstractionism: if evidential relations are determined by logical relations, then it's natural to think of reasons as the sorts of things that stand in logical relations, i.e. as *propositions*.⁶ In that case the theories of evidential support and of the ontology of reasons cohere nicely.

⁶ Why isn't Williamson cited here, or elsewhere in the paper?

First problem: circularity

Suppose I have a perceptual experience with content Q, and I come to believe that Q.

1. If abstractionism is true, then to heed the call of experience is to believe Q directly on the basis of Q itself.
2. To believe Q directly on the basis of Q itself is to move in a circle.
3. Therefore if abstractionism is true, then to heed the call of experience is to move in a circle. (From 1 and 2)
4. But it is not the case that to heed the call of experience is to move in a circle.
5. Therefore, abstractionism is not true. (From 3 and 4)

BTM: this argument relates to Williamson's observation in KAIL §9.2 that, if e is evidence, and if raising probability of h makes e evidence for h, then e is evidence for itself.

Williamson responded that this is circular but not viscosly circular. Viscousness comes from making it too easy to know that e. But since it might be hard to get e as evidence in the first place, it might be hard to get e as evidence for e.

This is a contentious topic, but Williamson doesn't think it's a problem at all. For him, epistemology starts with knowledge, and $e=k$, so it's to be expected that nothing independent of e is evidence for e (in cases of knowing e via perceiving it).

Question: which premise is Williamson rejecting?

end BTM

Second problem: Withholding

Problem is illustrated with a 2-stage example.

First stage: Nevil withholds on the question whether there is unnecessary suffering in the world. He also believes that God exists only if it is false that there is unnecessary suffering in the world. The withholding and belief together prompt Nevil to withhold on whether God exists.

What are Nevil's reasons for *withholding belief* on whether God exists?

Statist answer: his withholding on whether there is unnecessary suffering in the world [where that withholding is understood as a mental state], and his belief that God exists only if it is false that there is unnecessary suffering in the world.

Abstractionist answer: the propositional contents of the mental states cited by the statist: <God exists only if it is false that there is unnecessary suffering in the world>, <there is unnecessary suffering in the world>

Problem for the Abstractionist: given those propositions as reasons, Nevil should *disbelieve* that God exists

Second stage: Now Nevil gets hit on the head, which simultaneously knocks him unconscious and causes him to believe that there is unnecessary suffering in the world. (Note: Nevil does not think he has been hit on the head and reason from there to the conclusion that there is unnecessary suffering in the world; rather, the hit simply causes the belief through some non-rational process.) Upon waking, Nevil updates his other attitudes accordingly. Now he disbelieves that God exists.

What are his reasons for *disbelieving* that God exists?

Statist answer: his belief that there is unnecessary suffering in the world, and his belief that God exists only if it is false that there is unnecessary suffering in the world.

Abstractionist answer: the proposition <God exists only if it is false that there is unnecessary suffering in the world> and the proposition <there is unnecessary suffering in the world>.

The problem for Abstractionists: same evidence, different belief.

BTM:

Problem for the problem: why does the abstractionist have to say that *those* propositions are among Nevil's evidence? Recall our two questions:

1. what is evidence, ontologically speaking?
2. what does it take for a piece of evidence to be part of *my* evidence?

Abstractionism is an answer to (1), but it's consistent with lots of different answers to (2).

Turri seems to attribute the following to the abstractionist: if you withhold belief in p , then p is part of your evidence

I don't know of anyone who thinks that. Some do think that: if you *believe* that p , then p is part of your evidence. But even that is no commitment of Abstractionism. Example: Williamson, an abstractionist who holds $e=k$.

What is Turri doing here?

end BTM

§5 – Two problems for Factualism

Two motivations for Factualism

Ordinary language motivation: we often cite facts as reasons

Then again, we also cite mental states, so apparently ordinary language supports reasons Dualism

Response to skepticism: if reasons are facts, and p is one of my reasons, then if I believe that p on the basis of my reasons then my belief is guaranteed to be true

Then again, statists can constrain *which* mental states count as evidence (a la Reliabilism), so they have this benefit as well.

BTM: Turri's is a weak way of making the point. Better: if reasons are facts (understood as true propositions), and evidential support tracks logical or probabilistic relationships, then other beliefs supported by those reasons are more likely to be true. As Descartes argued, it's easy to imagine how our non-factive mental states could be completely unreliable indicators what's true.

New Evil Demon problem: factualism fails to respect the intuition that you and your mental duplicate who happens to be a BIV have the same reasons, and that your beliefs are rational to the same degree. You both believe that you're in the seminar room.

Statist: you have the same mental states (by stipulation), so you have the same reasons. Both of you believe rationally.

Factivists: your reasons include the fact that you're in the seminar room, your duplicate's reasons do not include that fact. Your belief is rational, your duplicate's belief is not.

§6 – An Argument for Statism

Turri's 'Master Argument for Statism' is an argument by IBE:

Explanandum: 'having the relevant mental states in place and appropriately related is *necessary and sufficient* for us to understand your reasons'

Best explanation: Statism: your reasons *just are* you mental states

Not the best explanation: any view on which reasons are not mental states (e.g. Factualism, Abstractionism)

Unpacking this 'Master Argument for Statism'

We're seeking an explanation for this fact: mental states are necessary and sufficient for understanding *your reasons*

Which reasons are we trying to understand? Presumably he means your *motivating* reasons.

Why think the 'fact' is true?

First, having the relevant mental states is *necessary* to explain our reasons:

For it to be even remotely plausible that [a fact or proposition] is your reason for believing Q, some mental state of yours must take it as an object or depict it. (504)

Second, having the relevant mental states is *sufficient* to explain our reasons:

[no real argument from Turri - supports the claim by restating it, giving an example]

So, having the relevant mental states is *necessary and sufficient* to explain our reasons.

Question: why believe that statism best explains the biconditional?

If your reasons just are your mental states, then obviously having the relevant mental states in place and related in the right way is both necessary and sufficient for a reasons-explanation. By contrast statism's competitors claim that some other items are your reasons. But it is superfluous to introduce further items into the reasons-explanation, given that the mental states are themselves both necessary and sufficient. (504)

What would the factivist/ abstractivist say in response?

§7 – Response to Common Concerns

First challenge: mental states are necessary to the explanation of belief not because they're reasons, but because they're enabling conditions.

Response:

Conversation 1

A: Why were all Belle's belongings destroyed?

B: Because a fire broke out in her apartment.

A: Why was there oxygen in her apartment?

The presence of oxygen is a paradigmatic enabling condition for the fire. A's second question sounds odd. It wouldn't sound odd to ask about the actual cause instead, e.g. 'why was there a fire?'

Conversation 2

A: Why did the vase break?

B: Because it fell from the window.

A: Why was there a window?

The presence of the window is a paradigmatic enabling condition for the vase's break. A's second question sounds odd. It wouldn't sound odd to ask about the actual cause instead, e.g. 'why did the vase fall?'

Turri's diagnosis: in general, it sounds odd to ask about an enabling condition, but it doesn't sound weird to ask about the cause.

Conversation 3

A: Why do you believe that Woods will sink the putt?

B: Because (of the fact that) Woods excels at putting.

A: Why do you believe that he excels at putting?

A's second question sounds natural. So, the belief is a **reason**.⁷

BTM: Turri considers denying the existence of enabling conditions outright, but rejects that approach. He really has to do that: otherwise how can he account for the non-psychological components of his externalist story of good reasons? In other words, if he's a reliabilist, the fact that the belief is the product of a reliable belief forming process is a *fact* rather than another mental state. Hence as a Psychologist he can't say that it's a reason. But clearly it's relevant to what counts as a good reason, so he can't ignore it altogether. Solution: the fact of reliability is an enabling condition for his mental state to function as a good/ normative reason.

⁷ Note the shift from 'cause' talk to 'reason' talk. Is that a problem?

Second challenge:

[dumb]

Third Challenge:

Reasons are shared: you and I can believe something for the same reason. But mental states are not shared: I can't have your experiences and you can't have mine.

Response:

We can and often do share our thoughts and experiences with one another. You ask me what it was like growing up in Detroit in the 1980s, and I share some of my experiences with you. I ask you whether the Democrats will regain at least one house of Congress in 2006, and you share some of your hopes and expectations with me. We share our mental states with one another by expressing or depicting them. (506)

Is that convincing?

Fourth Challenge:

Observation: we deliberate from 'outward facts and objects' (e.g. 'here's a hand'), not beliefs (e.g. 'here's a belief that here's a hand'). Can statisticians say that?

Response: in saying 'here's a hand', Moore expresses his reasons for belief. 'And of course, he expresses his belief, not his hands.' (507)