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BROOME ON REASONS TO ACT

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In *Rationality Through Reasoning*, John Broome explores the nature of reasons, rationality, and what he calls “the central ought.”¹ His discussion is rich in distinctions, arguments, and controversial claims. It is also dauntingly rigorous: I am sure I have not mastered Broome’s system. In what follows, I risk some tentative questions about its application to ethics, raising objections and offering an alternative view. There is a lot in Broome’s meticulous, wide-ranging book that I will not address.

The central ought is normative, owned, unqualified, and prospective. It is owned in that it is a relation between a subject and a proposition to which that subject should conform. It is unqualified in that it is an all-things-considered ought, and does not merely take in a limited perspective, like that of prudence or morality. It is prospective in that its application depends not on the facts but on the subject’s evidence; where the evidence has gaps, what count are her subjective probabilities. It is central in that, according to Broome, it is subject to the rational requirement of “Enkrasia”: roughly put, rationality requires of you that, if you believe that you yourself ought to *F* and that it is up to you whether or not to *F*, then you intend to *F*.

What about the normativity of the central ought? Broome thinks that this is indefinable, since he “could not explain the term ‘normative’ except in terms of ‘ought’” (10). But normativity has to do with reasons, at least in one sense of “reason”: the normative sense in which the fact

¹ Broome 2013; cited in the text below by page number alone.

that p may be a reason for N to F . Broome explains normative reasons in terms of the central ought. Although he intends his theory to apply more widely, I will focus on practical reasons, and in particular, on reasons to act. More narrowly, I will focus on what Broome regards as merely one species of reasons to act: *pro tanto* reasons, which count for or against a certain action, with a certain weight.

The appeal to “weight” is metaphorical, and the metaphor plays a crucial role in Broome’s account of such reasons. We are familiar with mechanical weighing, as when we explain why a balance tilts one way in terms of the cumulative relative weight of the objects on one side.

Suppose you ought to F . If there is a weighing explanation of why, it takes an analogous form. There is at least one reason for you to F , and there may be one or more reasons for you not to F . Each reason has a weight. The combined weights of the reasons for you to F exceeds the combined weights of the reasons for you not to F . That is why you ought to F .

(52)

This yields the following:

Definition. A *pro tanto* reason for N to F is something that plays the for- F role in a weighing explanation of why N ought to F , or in a weighing explanation of why N ought not to F , or in a weighing explanation of why it is not the case that N ought to F and not the case that N ought not to F . (53)

The “for- F ” role need not be explained in terms of reasons: it can be identified from the structure of a weighing explanation. Suppose that N ought to F because p and q together outweigh r and s . Then p and q are reasons for N to F , while r and s are reasons against. This method will not work when it is not the case that N ought to F and not the case that N ought not to F , but Broome thinks

it is sufficient to define the “for- F ” role that we can grasp its operation in other cases, and generalize from there (54-5).

I have a number of misgivings about the definition above. First, even if it is extensionally adequate, it gives an account of what feels like a relatively natural, joint-carving relation, *is a reason for N to F* , in terms of a relation that seems constructed and artificial, the relation whereby some facts together outweigh others. At the beginning of inquiry, we may be open to an account that defines *pro tanto* reasons in terms of *ought* and *because*. But I think we should hesitate when the other material required for the account cries out for explanation, as this relation does.

Presumably, that certain facts together outweigh others in explaining why N ought to F has something to do with the relative weight of individual reasons. It is in terms of these particular weights that the combined weight of the reasons on either side is to be explained. A second source of concern about Broome’s view is that he gives no account of this relation. Again, suppose that N ought to F because p and q together outweigh r and s . Although they are both reasons for N to F , p and q may differ in weight, p being a stronger reason. Maybe r is stronger than q but weaker than p . These facts go missing in Broome’s reconstruction. He does not tell us what it is for one reason to be stronger than another, and it is not clear how to do so in terms of *ought*, *because*, and the relation whereby some facts together outweigh others.²

A more natural approach would start with a “stronger-than” relation, R , between individual facts, subjects, and propositions, and explain what it is for some facts, plural, to outweigh others by asking whether R obtains between conjunctive facts of which the plural facts are conjuncts. But the order of explanation still seems wrong: if we appeal to R in our account of reasons, they are defined in terms of a relation that holds between them. What is more, *ought* and

² Broome might propose a counterfactual theory: r is stronger than q just in case it would be the case that N ought to F if they were the only reasons for or against. But this account is subject to the “conditional fallacy”: if they were the only reasons, their weights might differ. And it does not apply to the relative weight of reasons, like p and q , that fall on the same side.

because are now redundant: reasons for *N* to *F* are facts that figure in the right slot of relation *R*, no matter what *N* ought to do or why.

A third objection to Broome's view is that it cannot explain why the central *ought*, applied to action, implies the existence of reasons. Although he assumes that, when you ought to *F*, there is an explanation of why, there is nothing in Broome's account to guarantee that *oughts* have explanations of any kind (73). From his point of view, it is adventitious, a brute fact, that when I ought to *F*, there is a reason for me to *F*. But this is not a brute fact, since what I ought to do is what there is most reason to do. We should expect the entailment to be explained by an account of *ought*, *reason*, and the relative weight of reasons. Broome's view frustrates this expectation.

Finally, Broome's view obscures the close relationship between reasons and reasoning. Broome's book includes a detailed account of what it is to engage in reasoning and what makes reasoning correct. It is correct "if and only if you correctly follow a correct rule," where a correct rule is a "basing permission of rationality," according to which rationality does not require you not to hold a certain attitude on a certain basis (247). Rationality and its requirements are not explained in terms of reasons, nor the other way around. The upshot is that, when you reason correctly from true beliefs, Broome's principles leave it an open question whether the contents of those beliefs are reasons for the attitudes you form. I think that must be wrong. It follows from the fact that you are reasoning correctly from true beliefs that the contents of those beliefs are reasons.³ We should expect this to be explained by an account of reasons and reasoning. Again, Broome's view frustrates this expectation.

Perhaps we could learn to live with these frustrations. But I do not think we have to. There is a natural account of *pro tanto* reasons in terms of which they can be satisfied: the conception of reasons as premises of sound reasoning. This picture has been developed in different ways by

³ This is especially clear for non-normative beliefs, but it applies to "enkratic" reasoning, too: if you reason correctly from the true belief that you ought to *F* to a desire or intention to *F*, the fact that you ought to *F* is a reason for you to *F*.

different authors. For the sake of specificity, I will present my own approach. But there is room for debate about the details.⁴

Begin with practical thought in a broad sense that collects whatever is subject to assessments of practical rationality. This will include what Broome calls “passive reasoning” as well as “active” (206-8).⁵ If a good disposition of practical thought is one that is good, as such – a disposition to engage in good practical thought – the idea of a reason to act as a premise of sound reasoning comes to this:

Reasons: The fact that p is a reason for $[N]$ to $[F]$ just in case A has a collection of psychological states, C , such that the disposition to be moved to $[F]$ by C -and-the-belief-that- p is a good disposition of practical thought, and C contains no false beliefs. (Setiya 2007: 12)

Three notes of clarification. First, C typically will not include the whole array of N 's beliefs: if one has false beliefs, one can still have reasons, but the reasoning to which they correspond will be free from error. Second, good practical thought does not include redundant elements, one that make no difference to the case for doing F . If it did, irrelevant facts would count as reasons.

⁴ For one alternative, see Way forthcoming.

⁵ In a longer treatment of his book, I would take up Broome's account of active reasoning. This is conscious reasoning in which one actively forms an attitude, as opposed to passive, automatic processing. Broome thinks that philosophers have neglected active reasoning because they wrongly assume that a “higher-order” account must be correct, where instead it is viciously regressive (209-13). A better reason for neglect, I think, is that it is not clear that there is any such thing as reasoning “actively,” except as a special case of what Broome calls “passive reasoning.” The features Broome takes to be definitive of active reasoning are shared with passive: it is a rule-governed process that is sensitive to the contents of one's attitudes (231-2). Although one can intentionally prompt oneself to reason, the formation of the new attitude is not itself an intentional action. Insofar as there is active reasoning, it is the same process as passive reasoning, except that it operates on conscious attitudes, and, perhaps, that its conclusion involves not only having an attitude but having it for reasons, as when I believe that p on the ground that q . I give more sustained attention to these issues, without reference to Broome, in Setiya 2013.

Finally, the disposition in question is a disposition to be moved defeasibly, not decisively, since reasons can be outweighed.

There is more to say in defence of *Reasons*, some of which I have said elsewhere.⁶ The first point to make, here, is that it counts the premises of sound reasoning as reasons to act, in a way that Broome did not. The second point to make is that it extends smoothly to the relative weight of reasons, measured by the relative strength of motivation:

Reasons correspond to collections of psychological states that fuel good practical thought. One reason is *stronger* than another just in case it is a good disposition of practical thought to be *more strongly moved* by the collection of states that corresponds to it, than by the collection that corresponds to the other. (Setiya 2007: 13)

Two comments on this formula. First, when the fact that p is a reason for N to F , A has a collection of psychological states, C , such that the disposition to be moved to F by C -and-the-belief-that- p is a good disposition of practical thought. In comparing the weight of reasons, we focus on the most limited collection of states for which this condition holds, the minimal pattern of reasoning that takes us from the premise to the relevant motivation. If this collection contains beliefs besides the belief that p , their contents will also be reasons to F . Since they contribute to the same pattern of reasoning, however, and since this pattern is minimal, the conjunction of these reasons is no stronger than any of them alone. The collection of states that corresponds to each reason is the same as that which corresponds to their conjunction, so one cannot be more strongly moved by one collection than the other.

Second, in the principle above, “good disposition” must be read exclusively: of the conflicting dispositions we might have, only one can be good in the relevant sense. It is, in effect, the right disposition, while alternatives are wrong. We otherwise get the absurd result that two

⁶ In Setiya 2014.

reasons can be stronger than each other, since the corresponding dispositions are both equally and adequately good. The proper verdict here is that neither reason has more weight. At the same time, these reasons may not be equally strong, since it may be not be good, as practical reasoning, to treat them equally. (To say that reasons are of equal weight is to say that the right disposition is the disposition to be moved by each of them to the same degree.) In that case, the reasons will be incomparable: not equally strong, but also not such that one is stronger than the other. In the face of normative diversity, when different patterns of reasoning make sense (or are themselves incomparable), the reasons to which they correspond cannot be determinately compared.

With this account of the relative weight of reasons, *ought* can be explained. When the fact that p is a reason for N to F and the fact that q is a reason for N to F then the fact that $p \& q$ is a reason for N to F . Let the conjunction of all reasons for N to F be the *total reason* for N to F . N ought to F , all things considered, if the total reason for her to F is stronger than the total reason to do anything else. It may be that nothing meets this condition: there are several actions of which it can be said that there is no stronger reason to perform any other. In that case, N should perform one of the actions for which she has the strongest total reason.

The resulting view is free of the problems that applied to Broome. As well as finding the connection between reasons and reasoning, it explains why it cannot be true that N ought to F unless there is a reason for N to F . It allows for the case in which reasons all point one way. It does not posit needless ambiguity. And its order of explanation seems unobjectionable. Reasons and their weights are explained through good practical reasoning and the motivations to which it gives rise. What's not to like?

Though he never confronts this specific view, Broome does come close, when he contrasts being rational with responding correctly to reasons. Broome argues against this equivalence by appeal to ignorance, which prevents even fully rational agents from responding to reasons, and in a number of other ways (74ff.). I do not defend it. Broome is right about ignorance. And if practical rationality is good practical thought, it involves much more than responding to reasons, since it applies to reasoning from false beliefs, whose contents are not reasons to act. At the same

time, some of Broome's remarks apply to *Reasons* and may explain why he excludes it. In particular, Broome thinks of responding correctly to reasons, in the paradigm case, as a matter of doing what reasons require you to do. This leads him to deny that there is any such thing as responding correctly to *pro tanto* reasons (101-2, 106-7). After all, given a *pro tanto* reason to *F*, it is not irrational not to *F*, or to form the corresponding intention. Maybe you shouldn't *F* at all. What would it be to respond correctly to this reason?

The missing element here is motivation. According to *Reasons*, responding correctly to a *pro tanto* reason is being moved by one's belief in that reason, at least to some degree. The strength of the reason corresponds to the strength of motivation. If this is how we think about responding correctly to reasons, the idea is not threatened by any of the cases Broome considers. I infer that Broome is sceptical of motivation, so understood, as a basic ingredient in our account of reasons. I cannot explain it in other terms. But it does not strike me as a dubious phenomenon, or as more subject to suspicion, at the outset, than intention, desire, or relative confidence. It is in some way related to preference, and a deeper account of these matters would tell us how. Meanwhile, the fact that it is part of an otherwise compelling framework for interpreting reasons and the practical "ought" is itself a reason to make sense of motivation, if we can. Are there objections to the very idea?⁷

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⁷ Thanks to Jonathan Way for extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft.