



DISCUSSION NOTE

**CHECKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD:
A REPLY TO DiPAOLO AND BEHREND'S ON PROMOTION**

BY NATHANIEL SHARADIN

JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

DISCUSSION NOTE | FEBRUARY 2016

Checking the Neighborhood: A Reply to DiPaolo and Behrends on Promotion

Nathaniel Sharadin

ACCORDING TO SOME ACCOUNTS OF REASONS, there is a reason for an agent A to ϕ iff ϕ -ing promotes the satisfaction of one of A 's desires.¹ Such accounts of reasons need an account of promotion. According to *pure probabilistic* accounts of promotion, ϕ -ing promotes a desire D iff ϕ -ing increases the probability of D 's satisfaction relative to some baseline.² In previous work, I argued that pure probabilism is incapable of handling certain cases of promotion, regardless of the specific account of the relevant baseline. This is because it is sometimes possible to promote a desire but impossible to increase the probability of the desire's satisfaction. For example:

D: The desire that none of your desires is ever satisfied.

The probability of D 's satisfaction is always 0. According to pure probabilism, then, it is impossible to promote D . But it *is* possible to promote D . For example, suppose Agatha has D and is offered the opportunity to frustrate the satisfaction of some arbitrary number of her desires by ϕ -ing. Intuitively, there is a reason for Agatha to ϕ , and this is because ϕ -ing promotes D . So, pure probabilism about promotion is false. So I reasoned.³

My reasoning, as Joshua DiPaolo and Jeff Behrends explain in a recent note critical of my account, depended on a "reason-to-promotion" inference of this sort:

1. There is a reason for Agatha to ϕ .
2. ϕ -ing promotes some desire Agatha has.
3. The desire that is promoted by ϕ -ing is D .
4. So, ϕ -ing promotes D .

If 4 is true, then pure probabilism is false. DiPaolo and Behrends (henceforth DB) grant 1 and assume that 2 follows from 1.⁴ According to DB, the problem is with 3. They claim I failed to "check the neighborhood" for other de-

¹ See, for example, Schroeder (2007) and Finlay (2006). I will sometimes just say "promotes a desire" rather than "promotes the satisfaction of one of the agent's desires."

² For examples of such accounts, see Schroeder (2007); Finlay (2006, 2010, 2014); Coates (2014); Lin (unpublished).

³ I originally used a different desire to make this point. In order to avoid distracting complications involving the truth of "concurrentism" about desire satisfaction, I switch examples. On concurrentism, see Heathwood (2005).

⁴ I discuss the move from 1 to 2 in more detail, below, at the end of section 1.

sires: Agatha's having D is not the only possible explanation of why 1 is true.⁵ Hence, DB think my inference from the fact that ϕ -ing promotes *some* desire Agatha has to the fact that ϕ -ing promotes D is too quick. The upshot is that we should exercise caution in reason-to-promotion inferences. In particular, DB claim we should respect the methodological principle:

Check the Neighborhood: Before making a particular reason-to-promotion inference, consider neighborhood hypotheses. If a neighborhood hypothesis is as good an explanation of the reason as the initial hypothesis, do not make this inference.⁶

I am happy to accept this result. Can it save pure probabilism? Given some plausible assumptions about the rationality of desire – importantly, assumptions that DB accept – it cannot.

1. A Neighboring Argument Against Pure Probabilism

DB grant that Agatha has D, that there is a reason for Agatha to ϕ and that ϕ -ing therefore promotes one of Agatha's desires. Their point is not that Agatha lacks D, nor that there is no reason for Agatha to ϕ , nor even that the existence of this reason tells us nothing about whether ϕ -ing promotes one of Agatha's desires. Instead, DB's idea is that a desire in the neighborhood of D is a better explanation of why Agatha has a reason to ϕ . Suppose DB are right, and the desire that explains Agatha's reason is something like:

D₁: The desire that fewer of your desires are satisfied.⁷

D₁ is a desire it *is* possible to probabilistically promote, and so does not represent a counterexample to pure probabilism. So the original argument is no good. But there is an argument in the neighborhood of the original argument that will do the trick.

To begin, notice that we can ask the following: How is D₁ rationally related to D? One response is that D₁ and D are not rationally related in any way. In the present context, this response beggars belief.⁸ Even more importantly, and happily for my purposes, DB do not suggest that we should deny that D and its neighborhood desire D₁ are rationally related. In fact, it is a crucial part of their suggestion for identifying what counts as a “neighborhood desire.” They say that a sufficient condition for a desire's being in the neighborhood of another desire is that a rational agent has (a reason to have)

⁵ DiPaolo and Behrends (2015: 5).

⁶ Ibid.: 7.

⁷ Ibid.: 5.

⁸ In some contexts, such a response does not beggar belief. For instance, it could be that an evil demon threatens to kill you if you satisfy any desires at all – but promises that the more desires you satisfy, the less painful the death will be. In such a scenario, it does not seem that D and D₁ are rationally related.

the neighborhood desire only if she has the desire it is in the neighborhood of.⁹ This seems to be precisely how D and D_1 stand, rationally, with respect to each other. Agatha's having D_1 is rationally explained, at least in part, by her having D . In particular, Agatha's having D makes it the case that she has reason to have D_1 . Notice that, though my argument does not depend on this being correct, it seems plausible to suppose that, if we asked Agatha to justify her having D_1 , she might respond by citing D . And I do not think we would be inclined to think that Agatha is dissembling or confused: her desire to have none of her desires satisfied is (part of) the rational explanation of her desire to have fewer of her desires satisfied. In any case, by DB's own lights, D and D_1 appear to be in the neighborhood of one another precisely because they are in the same *rational* neighborhood.

By now, attentive readers will see where this is headed. Even if it is true that D_1 is what explains why Agatha's ϕ -ing is something she has reason to do, we are entitled to ask why Agatha's having D_1 is something she has reason to do. And we already know the answer to this question: Agatha's having D_1 is something she has reason to do in part because she has D . That is what we noticed above when we noticed *why* D_1 is in the neighborhood of D : it is in the neighborhood of D because a rational agent who has D will, *ceteris paribus*, also have D_1 , i.e., will respond to the reason D gives her to have D_1 by actually having D_1 . But now we have the materials for an argument, in the neighborhood of the original argument, against pure probabilism. Here is how that goes: We know that there is a reason for Agatha to have D_1 , and that this reason is given by D_1 's relationship to D . If pure probabilism about promotion is correct, then this relationship will have to be one of probabilistic promotion: having D_1 probabilistically promotes D . But we already know that nothing at all can probabilistically promote D , since D is a desire it is impossible to satisfy. So pure probabilism is false. In parallel with my original argument:

- 1'. There is a reason for Agatha to have D_1 .
- 2'. Having D_1 promotes some desire Agatha has.
- 3'. The desire that is promoted by having D_1 is D .
- 4'. So, having D_1 promotes D .

If 4' is true, then pure probabilism is false, since by hypothesis D is a desire it is impossible to probabilistically promote. 1' is supported by the observation, above, that D_1 is not somehow rationally inexplicable: there is a reason for Agatha to have it. Moreover, 1' is what we relied on in making the case that D_1 is in the neighborhood of D . Assuming that 2' follows from 1' (more on

⁹ Ibid.: 6-7. I add the parenthetical "(a reason to have)." As DB state it, this condition is much too strong to be plausible. DB's other conditions (especially (f)) make it clear that they do not think two desires' being in the same neighborhood is a terribly difficult condition to satisfy.

this below), 3' is, again, a kind of inference to the best explanation: if it is not D that is promoted by D₁, then what is?

So: Thanks to DB's methodological suggestion to check the neighborhood, we have had to take a more roundabout route, but we have still arrived at the same result. There are sometimes desires that provide reasons to agents that it is impossible to probabilistically promote.¹⁰ In particular, desires with impossible contents sometimes give agents reasons to have *other* desires with non-impossible contents. This means that, though it is impossible to probabilistically promote those desires, it must be possible (assuming, as we are here, an account of reasons according to which all reasons are promotive) to promote them. This means we need a non- or at least not *purely* probabilistic account of promotion.

Let me emphasize the parenthetical remark just made. The inference from 1 to 2 in the original argument and from 1' to 2' in the revised argument depends on accepting the biconditional, noted in the introduction, connecting reasons and promotion. One way of resisting this argument (and my original argument) against pure probabilism about promotion is to reject the claim that all reasons involve promotion. The idea, then, would be that although D provides a reason for Agatha to have D₁, the inference from 1 to 2 (or 1' to 2') is invalid because the reason there is for Agatha to desire to have D₁ is not grounded in a fact about some desire of Agatha's that having this desire promotes. Instead, the thought continues, the reason there is for Agatha to have D₁ is a non-promotive reason, perhaps to do with a relation of "fittingness."¹¹ I am broadly sympathetic to this idea. In previous work, I have argued that the biconditional connecting reasons and promotion is false.¹² But in the present context, this response will not do, for two reasons. First, DB assume, as I have done in this paper, that the relevant biconditional is true. It is of course open to them to revise their original argument and claim that what is wrong with my argument against pure probabilism is that it assumes the biconditional connecting reasons and promotion and then to argue that the biconditional is false. But that is not what they have done. Second, and perhaps more importantly, extant accounts of promotion – in particular, those that endorse pure probabilism about promotion – all seem to accept the biconditional.¹³ At the very least, then, such accounts are under pressure *either* to give up the biconditional *or* to provide us with an alternative account of promotion.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that, even for someone who accepts the biconditional connecting reasons and promotion, it is possible to reject my

¹⁰ Notice that I have not said that it is impossible to promote those desires, only that it is impossible to probabilistically do so. In Sharadin (2015a) I offer an account of how such desires might be promoted non-probabilistically.

¹¹ I make a proposal along these lines in Sharadin (2015b) and develop it in more detail in Sharadin (unpublished manuscript).

¹² See Sharadin (2015b).

¹³ See especially Schroeder (2007).

revised argument by insisting that the connection between D and D_1 is not a *rational* connection but instead a connection of a different sort: perhaps it is a (merely) *psychological* connection. Above, I tried to make it plausible that the connection between D and D_1 is a rational connection. Whether on further inspection this turns out to be so will depend, in part, on how, precisely, we understand the nature of desire. But investigating that topic would take me too far afield. Here, I note only that, again, DB seem to accept that D and D_1 are rationally related in the relevant sense. That is what made it so plausible, after all, that D and D_1 were in the same neighborhood: they were in the same *rational* neighborhood. If it turns out that D and D_1 are *not* rationally related, then we shall need some suitable story about desire – independently motivated – about why this is so.

2. Methodological Revenge?

I see one way out for DB. They might try a reapplication of the methodological principle *Check the Neighborhood*. The idea, then, would be that there is some *third* desire, D_2 , that provides as good an explanation of the reason Agatha has to have D_1 . There are two problems with this strategy.

The first is that there appears to be no motivation for looking for such a desire. We are assuming in the case at hand that Agatha has D and that she has D_1 . So there can be no question of whether D is *eligible* as a candidate desire that is promoted by D_1 . Moreover, D is, as I have explained, an *excellent* candidate for being the desire that is promoted by D_1 : it is, as we have seen, rationally related to D_1 in exactly the ways we would expect if it were the desire that was promoted by D_1 . So it is unclear what our motivation would be, besides bare resistance to the idea that some cases of promotion are not probabilistic, for checking the neighborhood to see whether some alternative to D , D_2 , exists. The response therefore looks unmotivated.

But there is a second, more serious problem: it is unclear what “as good” an explanation would amount to.¹⁴ D clearly counts, as we have already seen, as a good explanation of the reason there is to have D_1 . What about D_2 ? The desire to have at most three desires satisfied? Does this desire constitute “as good” an explanation of the reason for having D_1 ? I am not sure. It does not have the same results with respect to what the nature of the reason in question actually is. If the reason there is to have D_1 is explained by its relationship to D_2 , then the reason to have D_1 is extinguished once an agent gets to a condition where she has just two desires. But if the reason there is to have D_1 is instead explained by D , then the reason to have D_1 does not disappear when an agent has just two desires. In order to decide whether any neighborhood desires better explain the reason, we shall therefore need to first settle on the nature of that reason. But settling strictly on the nature of that

¹⁴ Worse, we shall need some independent reason for thinking that Agatha actually *has* this third desire. I cannot address this issue here, for reasons of space.

reason seems to amount to settling the question of which desire it is that best explains the reason. So I do not see how, in hard cases, to arbitrate between what are admittedly good explanations of the reason there is, such as D, and competing candidate neighborhood desires, such as whatever D_2 is meant to be.¹⁵

3. Concluding Remarks

DB's methodological principle is a good one. Its application to Agatha's case shows that my original inference from Agatha's reason to the promotion of D was too quick, given the availability of D_1 . But this just pushes the problem for pure probabilism back: we shall now want to know what reason Agatha has to have D_1 and why. D_1 's being rational depends on Agatha's having D in the sense that D helps explain, at least in part, the rationality of Agatha's desiring D_1 . This both accords with our intuitions about the case and, in effect, is suggested by DB's original objection to my view. Pure probabilism, however, cannot account for this rational connection between D_1 and D. That is the reason-to-promotion inference on which my revised argument depends.¹⁶

Nathaniel Sharadin
Syracuse University
Department of Philosophy
natesharadin@gmail.com

¹⁵ I am not claiming that I do not see how to arbitrate matters in easier cases, such as the one DB originally put to my argument. There, as I have said, I agree with them.

¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for thoughtful, helpful comments throughout the paper.

References

- Coates, D. J. (2014) "An Actual Sequence Theory of Promotion," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*: 1-7.
- DiPaolo, J. and Behrends, J. (2015) "Reason to Promotion Inferences," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*: 1-9.
- Finlay, S. (2014) *Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normative Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ____ (2010) "What 'Ought' Probably Means, and Why You Can't Detach It," *Synthese* 177(1): 67-89.
- ____ (2006) "The Reasons That Matter," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84(1): 1-20.
- Heathwood, C. (2005) "The Problem of Defective Desires," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83: 489-504.
- Lin, E. (unpublished manuscript) "Simple Probabilistic Promotion."
- Schroeder, M. (2007) *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharadin, N. (2015a) "Problems for Pure Probabilism about Promotion (and a Disjunctive Alternative)," *Philosophical Studies* 172(5): 1371-86.
- ____ (2015b) "Reasons and Promotion," *Philosophical Issues* 25(1): 98-122.
- ____ (unpublished manuscript) "Structuralism about Reasons."