



DISCUSSION NOTE

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Dancy on Acting for the Right Reason*

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IT IS A TRUISM that agents can do the right action for the right reason. To put the point in terms more familiar to ethicists, it is a truism that one's motivating reason can be one's normative reason. In the spirit of these truisms, Dancy (2000) proposes two constraints that a theory of motivating and normative reasons must meet.¹ These are the Explanatory Constraint and the Normative Constraint:²

explanatory:	Necessarily, all normative reasons must be the sorts of things that are capable of being motivating reasons.
normative:	Necessarily, all motivating reasons must be the sorts of things that are capable of being normative reasons.

Dancy's arguments against views he does not accept rely heavily on these two constraints. In this note, I will not be questioning the plausibility of the constraints. Instead, I will argue that Dancy's preferred view faces a dilemma. In order for his view to account for the Explanatory and Normative constraints, he must either hold a view in the philosophy of mind that is outlandish by his own lights *or* he must give up a central tenet of his view of normative reasons.

1.1 The Content-Based Strategy

Dancy considers many different possible views of motivating and normative reasons. In each case, he examines whether they succeed in meeting the constraints. His goal is to show that no view but his own can plausibly fulfill the constraints.

One view that he considers, he calls the content-based strategy. The content-based strategy holds that motivating reasons are constituted by psychological states (like belief and, perhaps, desire) and normative reasons are constituted by the contents of those states. Dancy doubts whether this view can really meet the two constraints. Moreover, he thinks that the content-based strategy is doomed independently of the two constraints. This is because he thinks that if the content-based strategy is going to be coherent, it will be committed to "outlandish" views in the philosophy of mind.³

* I thank Cullen Gatten, Alex Gregory, Clayton Littlejohn, Tim Loughlin, Mark van Roojen, Mark Schroeder, Steve Swartzter and an anonymous referee for helpful comments and discussion.

¹ All quotes in the text are from Dancy (2000).

² See p. 103.

³ "I am going to suggest that the philosophy of mind that is needed to make it [the content-based strategy] work is going to have to be pretty outlandish....This [the fact that the content strategy must give a philosophy of mind that will do the work it needs it to do] really

The outlandish results can be seen if we examine what constitute the contents of beliefs. The standard view amongst philosophers is that propositions are the contents of beliefs. Dancy thinks that the content-based strategy cannot have it that propositions are the contents of beliefs. This is because he holds that propositions cannot be normative reasons. Since the content-based strategy holds that the contents of beliefs are normative reasons and normative reasons cannot be propositions, it follows that propositions cannot be the contents of beliefs.

Dancy's argument for why propositions cannot be normative reasons is little more than an appeal to intuition. He writes, "It seems just obvious that they [propositions] are not [normative reasons]. For a class of worlds [a common view about what propositions are] is hardly the right sort of thing to make an action sensible or right....They are the wrong sort of beast" (115).⁴ Thus, in order to fulfill its aim, the content-based strategy will have to provide an alternate theory of the contents of attitudes. One that "understand[s] contents as states of affairs, or at least capable of being states of affairs" (117). This "will require significant revisions in current views in the philosophy of mind" and will be "outlandish" (*ibid.*). For these reasons, Dancy rejects the content-based strategy.

1.2 Dancy's View

In Chapter Six, Dancy goes on to elucidate his preferred view. His view is that all intentional action can be explained in terms of the considerations "in light of which the agent saw the action as desirable, sensible, or required" (136). Dancy later describes the view in the following way: "it provides as reasons things that can be believed, things properly expressible using that-clauses" (121). In other words, Dancy holds that both motivating and normative reasons are the types of things that are the contents of beliefs.⁵ This feature allows Dancy to account for the Normative and Explanatory constraints. He explains this by writing, "If things were as the agent supposed, there is no bar against the agent's [motivating] reasons being among the reasons in favour [i.e. the normative reasons] of doing what he actually did" (*ibid.*).

Dancy's view is very similar to the content-based view, with one important improvement. Namely, Dancy's view holds that motivating reasons are

means that we must abandon the standard understanding of the contents of beliefs as propositions" (114).

⁴ One might read this argument not as an appeal to intuition, but instead as a version of the modal profile objection I consider in Section 2 – viz. that propositions cannot be normative reasons because propositions exist in the worlds where they are false. I think we can rule this reading out because Dancy writes later that "it [his argument why propositions cannot be normative reasons] was based, not on thoughts about truth and falsehood, but on metaphysical considerations" (116). I thank Mark van Roojen for pointing out this alternative reading to me.

⁵ Of course, not all motivating reasons are normative reasons, and vice versa. But they are of the same ontological type – viz. the type that are the contents of beliefs.

constituted by the contents of beliefs. This is different than the content-based view, which held that motivating reasons are constituted by psychological states. This allows Dancy to hold that one's motivating reasons can at the same time be one's normative reasons. This is because they are constituted by the same things – viz. the contents of beliefs. In this way, it is possible to do the right action for the right reason.

But even the most casual reader will immediately notice a major problem for Dancy's view. Namely, it looks as if he has committed himself to a philosophy of mind that is by his own lights outlandish.⁶ Because he is committed to the view that normative reasons are not propositions and to the view that normative reasons can be the contents of beliefs, he is committed to saying that propositions are not the contents of beliefs. But this is precisely the feature of the content-based strategy that Dancy found so unappealing.

Dancy only casually mentions this type of problem when he asks, "What are these 'things believed' that are supposed to be what explain intentional actions? Are they propositions? Are they states of affairs? Are they facts?" (147). Dancy quickly announces that they cannot be propositions, citing his earlier appeal to intuition. Later he admits "they need to be [states of affairs] if they are capable of being good [i.e. normative] reasons" (148). But, again, this is precisely the view that the content-based view is saddled with and, when discussing that view, Dancy rejected it out of hand for its outlandish philosophy of mind. Why he is not compelled to do the same with his own view is less than clear.

The next question is whether Dancy's view can somehow be reconciled with the bulk of philosophy of mind and epistemology. Clearly the only way to do that is by holding that the contents of beliefs are propositions. This would mean he would hold that motivating reasons are constituted by propositions. But now he is in a dilemma. He either has to abandon his view that normative reasons are states of affairs or his view cannot account for the Normative Constraint and the Explanatory Constraint. For if motivating reasons are propositions and normative reasons are states of affairs, normative reasons are not the types of things that can be motivating reasons, and vice versa. Once again, Dancy's view fails by his own lights.

To sum: Dancy faces a dilemma. If he wants to account for the Normative and Explanatory constraints, he must hold a view in the philosophy of mind that is "outlandish" by his own lights or he must give up one of his central tenets – viz. that normative reasons are constituted by states of affairs.

⁶ It almost goes without mention that Dancy is also committing himself to epistemological views that are also very unorthodox. Moreover, it is natural to think that the epistemological views Dancy is committing himself to are just as outlandish as the views in the philosophy of mind he is committing himself to.

2. Embracing the Second Horn

There is, it seems to me, an easy and compelling solution to this whole mess. We ought to happily embrace the second horn of Dancy's dilemma. That is, we should reject the view that normative reasons are constituted by states of affairs. In this view's stead, we should hold that *all* reasons are constituted by propositions. That is, both motivating and normative reasons are constituted by propositions. Once we hold this view, we simply hold Dancy's view of what motivating reasons are – viz. the contents of beliefs. Since motivating reasons are propositions, we do not have to revise much of the philosophy of mind and epistemology. Moreover, since normative reasons are also constituted by propositions, it is easy to see how one's motivating reasons could be one's normative reasons, and vice versa. Thus we can fulfill the Explanatory Constraint and the Normative Constraint without having to resort to an outlandish philosophy of mind.

There is, of course, work to be done to fully vindicate the propositional account.⁷ One issue has to do with what I will call the modal profile of propositions.⁸ Suppose that in the actual world, there is a patrol car one mile down the interstate in the direction I am currently driving. I am also currently driving 10 miles over the speed limit. On the propositional account, the proposition *that there is a police officer with a radar gun* is a reason for me to slow down. Similarly, the state of affairs constituted by *the police officer with the radar gun* is a reason to slow down on Dancy's view. The ostensible problem for the propositional view is that in worlds where the patrol car *is not* one mile down the interstate, the proposition *that there is a police officer with a radar gun* still exists, whereas the state of affairs *the police officer with the radar gun* (arguably) does not exist. Since there is not a reason (or rather, there is not that reason) for me to slow down in the world where the patrol car is not down the road, the propositional account incurs an extra explanatory burden: It must explain why the relevant proposition is a reason in the actual world but not in the world where the patrol car is not one mile down the road.

There certainly is not space here to fully discharge this purported extra burden. But there is room for me to make a conjecture. Namely, Background:

background: For any proposition P , P is a normative reason only if P is true.

The important thing to note is that everything after “only if” is a background condition on P being a reason.⁹ In other words, in order for some

⁷ I try to do some of this work in my (unpublished-a) and (unpublished-b).

⁸ I thank Clayton Littlejohn and an anonymous referee for raising this issue. I thank Clayton for the term “modal profile.”

⁹ Dancy is familiar with appealing to background conditions (he calls them enabling conditions). He uses this type of move to show how his view of motivating reasons can accom-

proposition to be a normative reason, necessarily it must be true. But this additional property has nothing to do with what *constitutes* the reason.¹⁰ Obviously this conjecture needs to be defended.¹¹ I raise it to show that there is a natural response for a defender of the propositional view to make.

It also should be pointed out that these types of concerns can be raised against Dancy's view of motivating reasons. Suppose John believes that his house is on fire, and because of this he calls the fire department. Both Dancy and I agree that the content of John's belief is his motivating reason. As we have seen, Dancy is committed to saying that the content of John's belief is constituted by some state of affairs – in this case *the fire at John's house*. But suppose that John's house really is not on fire. Intuitively, the relevant state of affairs does not exist in the actual world. But what, then, is the content of John's belief?¹² Dancy recognizes this worry, but does little to explain it away. After a brief discussion, he concludes by writing, "Perhaps the only answer is that it [the content of a false belief] is something that may or may not be the case. But I don't pretend that this is very enlightening" (147).¹³ This is no more than a restatement of what his view is, and thus the question remains: What constitutes the content of John's belief? The propositional account, of course, avoids this difficulty because propositions can exist even if the facts they represent do not obtain.

This raises a further dilemma for the defender of Dancy's view. Either she can press the "extra-burden" argument on the propositional account and thus hold that the state of affairs *the police officer with the radar gun* does not exist in the world where the police officer is not one mile down the road, or she can hold that states of affairs do exist in worlds where they do not obtain and thus provide an answer to what the content of John's belief is. If she opts for the first horn, then it is unclear how to plausibly account for what John's mo-

modate the necessary condition that the relevant content is believed by the agent who has the motivating reason in question. See also Miller (2008) p. 226. Schroeder (2007) does a very nice job explaining the intuitive difference between background and foreground conditions and showing why it matters for metaethicists to pay attention to background conditions. See especially chapter 2.

¹⁰ Here is a more mundane example of a background condition (taken from Schroeder (2007) p. 24): In order for the vegetables in the back of the Maizingly Sweet pickup at the farmer's market to be pieces of corn, they must have come from a maize plant. But the fact that those particular pieces of corn came from a maize plant is not part of those pieces of corn.

¹¹ I defend Background in (unpublished-b).

¹² An obvious candidate view that differs from both Dancy's view and my view is some type of disjunctive view. Dancy considers such a view in chapter 7 and rejects it. See pps. 138-145.

¹³ I should note that Dancy thinks the work of Alan White can help here (see White (1972)). The point of White's that Dancy wants to lean on is that the "intentional-accusative" (e.g. believe that *p*) is not "in the business of picking out objects" (148). Dancy (seemingly?) concludes from this that the thing believed is not an object at all. He goes on to doubt this solution, though, because it seems to entail that the contents of true beliefs are not objects, either. It is not clear whether Dancy ends up endorsing White's position or not. See p. 148.

tivating reason is. If she opts for the second horn, then it seems as if there is not an extra explanatory burden for the propositional account. The proponent of Dancy's view will also have to explain why only states of affairs that obtain can be normative reasons.

What of Dancy's arguments for why normative reasons cannot be constituted by propositions? As I said above, Dancy's arguments are little more than an appeal to intuition. Although intuition constitutes some evidence against a claim, it certainly is not always decisive. Especially in cases, such as this one, where many people do not find the propositional view counterintuitive.¹⁴ Moreover, sometimes philosophical problems get messy and we must reject intuitive views. In this case, it seems as if we have the choice between rejecting any non-propositional view of normative reasons or rejecting very intuitive views in the philosophy of mind and epistemology. I think that it is clear that when given that choice we ought to reject non-propositional views of normative reasons.

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¹⁴ I do not, for one. But also see Scanlon (1998) and Schroeder (2007). Parfit (forthcoming) seems ambivalent on the matter. But he does not seem opposed to propositional view for intuitive reasons.