

## How Many Kinds of Reasons? (Pre-print November 2008)

### Introduction

My interest in the question that is the title of my paper is primarily as a means of preparing the ground, and the conceptual tools, for an exploration of issues such as the relation between reasons and actions, of how reasons motivate us to act, and of the explanation of action. But of course here I'll only do the preparatory work.

I should note that the title of my paper is 'How Many Kinds of *Reasons?*', in the plural, for my question is not about the faculty of reason but rather about the things that the count noun 'reasons' is used to denote. And my discussion will, for the most part, be concerned with reasons, even when I use the term in the singular.

Reasons can play a variety of roles in a variety of contexts. For instance, reasons can motivate and guide us in our actions (and omissions), in the sense that we often act in the light of reasons. And reasons can be grounds for beliefs, desires and emotions and can be used to evaluate, and sometimes to justify, all these: in fact, anything we 'do' that is susceptible to reasons. And, in addition, reasons are used in explanations: both in explanations of human actions, beliefs, desires, emotions, etc., and in explanations of a wide range of phenomena involving all sorts of animate and inanimate substances.

So reasons can play a variety of roles, viz. they can motivate, guide, justify or explain. And they can play those roles in characteristically human contexts of agency, as well as in contexts that are not related to agency, or not directly so. Moreover, reasons can be used to explain all sorts of occurrences, including a wide range of natural phenomena that do not involve human rationality.

This diversity has encouraged the thought that the term 'reason' is ambiguous or has different senses in different contexts.<sup>1</sup> So, a very widespread view is that there are essentially two different kinds of reasons: *normative* (or 'justifying') reasons, which are said to be

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Broome, 2004, 34. Something similar is sometimes said concerning the word 'ought'. Suppose that it is said: 'James ought to have arrived by now'. This can be read in two different ways. On the first reading, what is meant is that the right thing for John to have done is to have arrived by now. On the second reading what is meant is that given the circumstances, it is reasonable to believe that John should have arrived by now. And it is tempting to think that only the first reading is normative. However, I don't think that is right. What is right is that the first concerns the right thing for John *to do* (according to, let's assume, norms of etiquette, or to his duties) and the second the right thing for us *to believe* (according to the available evidence). Thus, unless the term 'normative' is restricted to what one ought to do, as opposed to what one ought to believe, feel, want, etc, both these readings are normative.

reasons with normative force and which can therefore play roles of evaluation and justification; and *motivating* (or ‘explanatory’) reasons, which do not have normative force, and play the roles of motivation and explanation.

This view often goes hand in hand with the claim that reasons of these different kinds belong to different ontological categories: to facts (or something similar) in the case of normative/justifying reasons, and to mental states in the case of motivating/explanatory reasons.

Both these views seem mistaken to me. First, in my view, the claim that there are different kinds of reasons is not to be construed as meaning that some reasons have special features, which other reasons lack, and that, on account of having those features, the former can play certain roles which the latter cannot play. Rather, the claim that there are different kinds of reasons is to be construed as meaning that reasons play different roles. Second, as I shall argue, it is a mistake to think that reasons of different kinds, i.e. reasons that play different roles, belong in different ontological categories.

In this paper I shall explore some of the main roles that reasons play and, on that basis, I shall offer a classification of kinds of reasons. As will become clear, my classification of reasons is at odds with much of the literature in several respects: firstly, because of my views about how we should understand the claim that reasons are classified into different kinds; second, because of the *kinds* into which I think reasons should be classified; and, finally, because of the consequences I think this view has for the ontology of reasons.

### 1. Reasons, normativity and explanation

I shall first begin by saying something about reasons in general

First, it seems clear that reasons can have normative force.<sup>2</sup> By that I mean that reasons can make something right - not necessarily morally right, but right in some respect. And I do not mean right all things considered but at least *pro tanto* right. So reasons can be invoked to support claims about what it would be right (for someone) to do, believe, want, feel, etc.<sup>3</sup> This feature of reasons underlies a wide variety of the roles that reasons can play,

---

<sup>2</sup> I take the word ‘normative’ to mean ‘prescriptive’ relative to some norm or value and, by implication, concerning correctness: what is right or wrong by reference to what is prescribed by the relevant norm, or what furthers the relevant value.

<sup>3</sup> - although I shall have more to say about this in what follows, I should remark that here ‘ought’ should not be construed as restricted to ‘morally ought’.

namely, to guide, motivate, evaluate, justify, etc.

I say that reasons *can* have normative force not because this is a feature that reasons can have or lack, or that some reasons have and others lack. Rather, they *can* have normative force in the sense that a particular reason *can* make it right to do, believe, want, etc. a particular thing.

In principle, any reason can have normative force; and *what* normative force a reason has in a particular context depends on several things: natural relations, conventions, rules and regulations, etc. For instance, the fact that the UK has the convention of driving on the left-hand-side of the road is a reason that makes it right to drive on the left-hand-side of the road, when in the UK: it is the fact that there is such a convention that makes it right (in this case, legally, and prudentially right) to drive on the left-hand-side in the UK. And so on.

Given their normative force, reasons sometimes play a guiding role in reasoning about whether someone (oneself or someone else) ought to  $\phi$ , e.g. whether you ought to reject an offer, believe that I have been betrayed, aspire to become a pop singer, etc. In these contexts, we appeal to the normative force of a reason to guide us. For instance, I may advise you to reject a job offer by pointing out that the prospects for promotion are very poor. Here, the fact that the promotion prospects are poor makes it right, at least *pro tanto*, to reject the offer and I appeal to that when I advise you to reject the offer.

The normative force of reasons is also appealed to when evaluating someone's  $\phi$ -ing, when assessing whether it is or was right for them to  $\phi$  or to have  $\phi$ -ed, e.g. to believe that he has been betrayed, or to have revealed a secret. In such contexts, we often seek to justify someone's  $\phi$ -ing; that is, to show that it is or was right for her to  $\phi$ .

These remarks highlight two principal roles that reasons can play: they can motivate (sometimes through a process of deliberation, whether theoretical or practical), and they can justify our actions, beliefs, wants, etc.

The fact that the normative force of reasons is being appealed to is often marked in language by talk of 'a reason *for*  $\phi$ -ing' (or 'a reason *to*  $\phi$ '), where ' $\phi$ ' stands for any appropriate infinitival phrase. So there are reasons for acting (e.g. for going on a holiday or for rejecting an offer),<sup>4</sup> for believing something (e.g. for believing that he is telling the truth),<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> I use 'acting' loosely to mean behaviour susceptible to being explained by reference to the agent's reason for so behaving, including both someone's doing and their not doing certain things, as well as related concepts such as deciding, intending, trying – though through this usage I do not mean to commit myself to the view that forming an intention, choosing or deciding something are themselves actions.

for wanting something (e.g. for wanting to improve one's serve at tennis),<sup>6</sup> for feeling an emotion (e.g. for feeling anger or fear), and so on. There are also reasons for not  $\phi$ -ing, that is, reasons for not doing or for not believing something, for not feeling something, etc. In short, there are reasons for the variety of things where we are, typically, responsive to reasons.<sup>7</sup>

Another very important role that reasons play is that of explaining. Reasons are used to explain all sorts of things: the occurrence (or non-occurrence) of an event; the obtaining (or non-obtaining) of a state of affairs; someone's or something's  $\phi$ -ing (or not  $\phi$ -ing); etc.

Because reasons can be answers to 'Why?' questions, and such answers typically constitute explanations, a reason that explains something is often called 'the reason why p' - where 'p' stands for a sentence that expresses a proposition. This is a non-technical sense of 'explanation'<sup>8</sup> and, in this sense, explanations are multifarious and highly context-sensitive.

So there are reasons why things happen (why she lost so much blood), why things are as they are (why the economy is in recession), why someone  $\phi$ -ed (why he visited his uncle), etc. And, just as there are reasons for not  $\phi$ -ing, there are also reasons why not-p, that is, reasons why things do not happen, why they are not as they are not, why someone didn't do something, etc.<sup>9</sup>

Before I move on, I need to make some points of clarification concerning this explanatory role of reasons.

---

<sup>5</sup> And here, as for the most part in this book, I use 'to believe' as a generic term for a range of epistemic verbs such as suppose, suspect, presume, etc. There are reasons for supposing and suspecting as well as for believing. However, we do not talk about reasons for knowing something – which suggests that there are important differences between knowing and these other epistemic notions.

<sup>6</sup> Also, except where otherwise indicated, I use 'to want' as a generic term for a range of related psychological attitudes, and use it as a variant for to desire.

<sup>7</sup> Raz suggests that the notion of the active is roughly coincidental with the range of things where we are responsive to reasons (see Raz, 1999b).

<sup>8</sup> A technical sense of the word has been associated with the view that all 'genuine' explanations have a determinate logical form. This view once was (and perhaps still is) popular among philosophers, especially philosophers of science. These philosophers argued that all explanations are arguments that ineliminably involve (empirical, universal, exceptionless) laws as one of their premises. See, for example, Hempel and Oppenheim, 1948, and Hempel, 1962. See also Davidson 1980b.

<sup>9</sup> There are also reasons that explain why *A ought to  $\phi$* . For instance, if Sam ought to exercise because he's overweight, then the fact that he's overweight explains why Sam ought to exercise. And it is important to note that a reason that explains *why A ought to  $\phi$*  does so precisely because it is a reason *for A to  $\phi$* : the fact that Sam is overweight explains why he ought to exercise precisely because the fact that he's overweight is a reason for him to exercise.<sup>9</sup> This shows that, sometimes, reasons play an explanatory role because of their normative force: they explain why someone ought to  $\phi$  because they make it right for that person to  $\phi$ .

First, when an explanation is given in answer to a ‘Why?’ question, the *explanans* of such an explanation can be called ‘*the* reason why’. There is, however, something a little misleading in talking about *the* reason why. For a ‘Why?’ question can have many answers, and *which* answer (i.e. which reason) is explanatory and appropriate depends, among other things, on the context in which the question is asked, and in particular on the background of explicit or implicit assumptions against which the question is asked. These factors provide the constraints for what is called ‘the pragmatics of explanation’. Thus, given different background conditions for a ‘Why?’ question, different answers might be appropriate as ‘the reason why’. For example, if you ask me why my tulips died this April, I could say that the reason is that it was an unusually cold spring – and leave it implicit that I failed to bring them in then. But I could also say that the reason why they died is that I didn’t bring them in, on the assumption that you know that the weather was unusually cold and that bringing them in may have saved them.

Second, as I just said, answers to ‘Why?’ questions are ‘reasons why’ and they are, therefore, reasons. This use of ‘reason’ to designate answers to ‘Why?’ questions is a perfectly ordinary and legitimate use of the word. Thus if the explanation of why there was an explosion is that there was a rise in pressure, the rise in pressure was the reason why there was an explosion. Likewise, if the explanation of why Mary cannot (legally) marry is that she is a minor, that she is a minor is the reason why Mary cannot marry. And, if the explanation of why you broke the Ming vase is that you didn’t like it, that you didn’t like the vase is the reason why you broke it.

Some philosophers have claimed that there is an important difference between the first case, on the one hand, and the remaining two, on the other. In the last two cases, they would say, what explains is indeed a reason; but, in the first case, what explains is a *cause*. However, to say that is, as Strawson argues in his paper ‘Causation and Explanation’, (Strawson, 1992, 109-31) to conflate two levels of relationship: that of causation and that of explanation. As Strawson argues, we must distinguish between causation which, in his characteristically cautious manner, he says is a relation that ‘we perhaps think of’ as a ‘natural relation’; and explanation, which is an intensional relation ‘that holds between facts or truths’ (Strawson, 1992, 109). And this means that we must distinguish between causes and reasons (and consequently between causes and causal explanations). Thus, if the rise in pressure caused the explosion, then the rise in pressure was the cause of the explosion. If so, though, *the fact* that there was a rise in pressure (causally) explains the fact that there was an explosion. That is to say, if the rise in pressure was the cause of the explosion, it does not follow that *the fact that*

*there was a rise in pressure* is not a *reason* – on the contrary, it follows that it is, since it is precisely because the rise in pressure caused the explosion that we can explain the fact that there was an explosion by citing the fact that there was a rise in temperature, which is therefore a *reason* that explains why there was an explosion.

It is true that in explanations of natural phenomena, such as the explanation of why the explosion occurred, the reason that explains is not *also* the phenomenon's reason (e.g. the explosion's reason) *for* occurring. And it is true that in explanations of why someone  $\phi$ -ed the reason why someone did something can also be *their* reason *for* doing it. For instance, in the third example above the reason that explains why you broke the Ming vase, that you didn't like it, was also your reason for breaking it.<sup>10</sup> But this doesn't show that the first reason why is not a genuine reason: it only shows that it is a reason why something occurred that is not also that thing's reason for occurring.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Davidson writes:

the justifying role of a reason (...) depends on its explanatory role. But the converse does not hold. (Davidson 1980, 8).

In my view, the opposite is true: the explanatory role of a reason in reason explanations depends on its justificatory role: it is only because the agent's reason rationalises (and, in the anaemic sense, justifies) his action, that it explains it. For it is only because the fact that it is raining *is a reason that justifies* taking one's umbrella (given certain background assumptions) that the fact that someone believed that it was raining *explains* his taking his umbrella.

Davidson supports his claim to the contrary with an example I quoted above:

Your stepping on my toes neither explains nor justifies my stepping on your toes

unless I believe you stepped on my toes, but *the belief alone, true or false*, explains my action  
(ibid.)

As I said above, what Davidson must mean here is that the agent's believing that you stepped on his toes explains his stepping on yours, regardless of whether what he believes is true or false. Nonetheless, his believing that you did explains his action *only because*, in his eyes, the fact that you step on his toes is a reason that justifies his stepping on yours.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, not all explanations are causal explanations and an issue that exercised philosophers of action in the 1960s and beyond was precisely whether an explanation of action whose *explanans* is the

So I have outlined three roles that reasons can play: they can motivate someone's  $\phi$ -ing, they can justify their  $\phi$ -ing, and they can explain it. I shall now explore whether this means that there are different kinds of reason.

## 2. Any reason can play any role

As I said earlier, the thought that reasons can play such various roles may encourage the idea that each of those roles is played by reasons of different kinds, with their own peculiar features on account of which they can play those roles. So, on this view, there are normative reasons which, given their character, can play the role of justifying; and they are different from explanatory reasons, which can play an explanatory role.

However, I think this is mistaken.

First there is a sense in which *all* reasons, considered in the abstract, are justifying and explanatory, if by that is meant that a reason *can* have normative or explanatory force, respectively, because, as I explained above, any reason can have normative force and any reason can explain.

In other words, any reason may be invoked to support claims about what someone ought to do, believe, say, feel, want, etc.; just as any reason could, in principle, be invoked in an explanation. I don't of course mean that *any* reason could be used to support *any* ought claim, nor that *any* reason could explain *anything*, e.g. that any reason could be cited to justify why Anne ought to move house, or to explain why, for birds, the male tends to be more brightly coloured than the female of the species. Rather, what I mean is that any reason, regarded in the abstract, can in principle support a relevant 'ought' claim, or appear in a relevant explanation. There is nothing about any particular reason that, considered independently of a particular context, makes it better suited to play a justifying or an explanatory role respectively.

Second, and relatedly, classification of reasons into kinds only makes sense in relation to the role(s) that a reason plays in any particular context. Or to put the same point differently, a reason is not a justifying, motivating or explanatory reason, *tout court* but rather relative to a

---

agent's reason for acting is a causal explanation, and the related question whether the reason for which an agent acts is a cause of his action. I shall not discuss that issue here. For the moment, the point that matters is that reasons why are genuine reasons, regardless of whether they explain a natural occurrence or someone's rational action, and regardless of whether the explanations in which they feature are causal or not.

role it plays in some particular case. For example, suppose that the nurse tells Jess that she ought to fast for the next 24 hours because she's having an operation in 24 hours. The nurse cites the fact that she is having an operation in 24 hours as a (justifying) reason for Jess to fast for the next 24 hours. And suppose that when a friend invites Jess to meet her for dinner she explains that she's fasting because she has an operation the following day: now the same reason is used by Jess to explain why she's fasting.

Here we see that the same reason plays different roles: it is used by the nurse to tell Jess that she ought to fast (justifying role); and it is used by Jess to explain her action to her friend, and we can think of it as justifying or explanatory, etc. depending on the different role that the reason plays on which we choose to focus.

So, one and the same reason can play a variety of roles - the same reason can justify in one context and explain in another, without becoming a different reason, or acquiring any special feature. And it is only on account of the role a reason plays in any particular context that it makes sense to think of it as 'justifying', or 'explanatory'. So classification of reasons into kinds is role-dependent. With this proviso about what I mean by kinds of reason, I now turn to examine the question about how many kinds of reasons.

### 3. There are three and not two (main) roles that reasons play

Now, as I mentioned above, the most common classification of reasons to be found in the literature is that there are two basic kinds of reason: the reasons that there are for us to act, which are called 'justifying' or 'normative' reasons; and the reasons for which we act, which are called 'motivating' or 'explanatory' reasons. In my view this way of classifying reasons is in need of some refinement.

I have argued that the classification of reasons into different kinds is purely role-dependent. If that is right, I think that, since the role of *motivating* an agent to act and the role of *explaining* her action are different roles that reasons can play, we should not assimilate 'motivating' and 'explanatory' reasons but ought to draw a distinction between them. For a reason is labelled as either 'motivating' or 'explanatory' on very different grounds. A reason is called a 'motivating reason' because it is something that motivates an agent, i.e. what he took to speak in favour of his  $\phi$ -ing, and which played a role in his deciding to  $\phi$ .<sup>12</sup> On the other

---

<sup>12</sup> As with explanations, which reason is given prominence and presented as *the* agent's reason for  $\phi$ -ing, or as the reason that motivated the agent to  $\phi$ , is a matter of pragmatics: of what is required or

hand, a reason is called ‘explanatory’ because it explains why an agent  $\phi$ -ed: it makes the agent’s action intelligible.<sup>13</sup>

So a reason is a motivating or an explanatory reason on account of its playing quite different roles; a motivating reason is a reason in light of which an agent acts, and it plays the role of a premise in the agent’s (implicit or explicit) reasoning about  $\phi$ -ing, if there was such reasoning. An explanatory reason, by contrast, plays the role of being (part of) the *explanans* in an explanation of the agent’s  $\phi$ -ing. Hence, the labels ‘explanatory’ and ‘motivating’, as applied to reasons, are not synonymous because each is applied to a reason on the grounds of its playing importantly different roles.

Moreover, given the difference between these roles, it is not right to assume that, for any particular  $\phi$ -ing, the two roles will always be played by the same reason - even though sometimes that is the case. So, the reason that motivated Mike to sell his car – that he needed cash – may also be the reason that explains why he did so. But, this need not be so. For often, the reason that explains why someone  $\phi$ -ed is not the reason that motivated her to  $\phi$ , i.e. the reason in the light of which she  $\phi$ -ed. The reason that explains why Fred gives a lot of money to charities may be that he’s a generous man; but that he’s a generous man is not the reason that motivates Fred to give money to charities (it is not what he takes to make his action of giving money good or right). And, a different kind of example, the reason that explains why Sarah bought a new mobile phone is *that she thought* that her phone had been stolen but the reason that motivated her was not that *she thought* that her phone had been stolen. And yet a different kind of case, the reason why Angie didn’t go the party may be that she forgot, but that she forgot is not a reason that motivated her not to go to the party. So in these cases, the reasons that explain why Fred, Sarah, and Angie  $\phi$ -ed (gives money to charity; bought a new mobile phone; didn’t go to the party), respectively, are not the reasons that motivated them, and therefore they are not *motivating* reasons.<sup>14</sup>

And so, if we classify reasons according to the roles they play, we should distinguish among, first, reasons that make  $\phi$ -ing at least *pro tanto* right (i.e. what are called ‘justifying ‘

---

appropriate in a given situation. Because of this, it seems right to regard all of the reasons that enter an agent’s reasoning about whether to  $\phi$ , even if they do so only implicitly, as reasons for which the agent  $\phi$ -ed.

<sup>13</sup> Schueler, 2003, 58 makes a similar point.

<sup>14</sup> In Angie’s case there was no motivating reason and she did not think there was. In Sarah’s case the suggestion is that she thought there was a reason for her to act but there wasn’t; while in Fred’s case there was but we have not been told it.

or ‘normative reasons’); second, reasons that motivate someone to  $\phi$  (which are what we call ‘motivating reasons’); and third, reasons that explain why someone  $\phi$ -s or  $\phi$ -ed (i.e., explanatory reasons).<sup>15</sup> In the first two, the reason’s playing that role depends on its capacity to have normative force (to be a reason for  $\phi$ -ing) as discussed above. And although, as we saw, the same reason can play all three roles (justifying, motivating and explanatory), the conceptual differences between them remain.

One and the same reason can play all three roles: it can be the reason that there is for a person to  $\phi$ , it can be the reason for which a person  $\phi$ -ed, and it can explain her  $\phi$ -ing (and indeed explain other things). For example, that there has been a drop in temperature can be a reason for me to bring my tulips in (justifying), it can be the reason for which Mrs B brought in her tulips (motivating), and it can also be the reason that explains why, since I didn’t bring them in, my tulips died (explanatory). So, in itself, the reason (that there has been a drop in temperature) is not any of these things (justifying, motivating or explanatory) to the exclusion of the others.

Thus, whether we call a reason justifying, motivating, or explanatory depends on whether we invoke it to justify an action, whether it is a reason that motivates someone to act, or whether it is used to explain something. But this does not undermine the conceptual difference between the motivating and explanatory roles of reasons and hence between motivating and explanatory reasons. Thus, when an agent acts for a reason, he often takes that reason to justify his action: in his eyes, the action is made right or appropriate (though not necessarily morally so) by that reason. Thus, the concept of a motivating reason brings with it the normative force of reasons, even if, in particular cases, the reasons that motivate an agent fall short of justifying his action.

So, contrary to what is widely held, there are no good grounds for grouping motivating and explanatory reasons together as if they were the same. Indeed, there are better grounds for grouping motivating reasons with justifying reasons than there are to group them with explanatory reasons, for both justifying and motivating reasons are *reasons for  $\phi$ -ing*. When a reason motivates an agent, it is because the agent takes that reason to be a reason for him to  $\phi$ :

---

<sup>15</sup> Audi distinguishes five types of reasons, three of which might seem to correspond to mine (see Audi, 2001, p.119). However, there are very substantial differences between Audi’s and my conception of reasons in general and also of what reasons of each of the relevant kinds are. For instance, Audi thinks that justifying reasons are propositions, though when ‘possessed’ by someone they are (or ‘are expressed by’) psychological states; explanatory reasons are, he says, facts, ‘explaining’ facts; and motivating reasons are ‘explanatory, possessed’ and have ‘minimal prima facie justifying power’ (*ibid.*, pp. 119-120).

i.e. to have normative force for him – to make his  $\phi$ -ing, at least *pro tanto* right: in his eyes, the action is made right or appropriate (though not necessarily morally so) by that reason. Thus, the concept of a motivating reason brings with it the normative force of reasons, even if, in particular cases, the reasons that motivate an agent fall short of justifying his action.

So I have argued that we should distinguish three types of reason but have emphasised that these different kinds of reasons are differences of role, rather than a difference in the reason's ontological character. This latter claim flies in the face of the commonly held view that, while justifying reasons are perhaps facts, motivating and explanatory reasons must be mental states of the agent whose reasons they are. I shall finish the paper by exploring that issue.

## 5 The ontology of reasons: reasons and facts

When we turn to the question of the ontology of reasons, the first thing that strikes one is that things of many different kinds are said to be reasons. For example, facts, propositions, goals, events, things, states of things (including states of minds), features or aspects of the world, considerations (moral, aesthetic, legal, etc.), states of affairs, absences, etc., are all said to be reasons. So it seems that, despite the familiarity of the concept, reasons, whether inside philosophy or out of it, are not clearly assigned to any particular ontological category.

I cannot go into the details of this argument here but I believe that, in spite of the *prima facie* variety, there are good arguments for thinking that reasons are facts - or, what I take to be the same, true propositions. Or, as we might put it: what is the case

Nonetheless, some philosophers have denied that reasons are facts, or at least denied that *all* reasons are facts. This is denied, among others, by some who believe that there are different kinds of reason and hold that reasons of different kinds belong to different ontological categories, and in particular that our reasons for acting are mental states. I shall examine that view next.

### 5.1 Reasons and mental states

One important motivation for the view that different reasons belong to different ontological categories is connected to the popular view that some reasons are mental states of agents.

Many philosophers argue that the reasons for which we act, and indeed the reasons that explain our actions – what I have called ‘motivating’ and ‘explanatory reasons’ respectively – are desires and beliefs, which in turn they conceive of as mental states. So they think that different reasons are ontologically different. They argue that, while all justifying reasons are, or may be, facts (if only in the minimal sense of being true propositions), motivating or explanatory reasons are not: they are mental states.

Let me briefly outline some of the grounds for questioning this view.

First, not all reasons that explain why someone  $\phi$ -ed, even when  $\phi$ -ing is an action, make reference to the agent’s believing or wanting something (or to his hoping, suspecting, etc.). There are many different possible explanations of why someone  $\phi$ -ed (such as that his mother asked him to do it, that he forgot, that he is too young, etc.) that do not make reference to the agent’s wanting or believing anything.

Second, the claim that the reasons that motivate or explain someone’s  $\phi$ -ing are his beliefs and desires is ambiguous. There is an act/object ambiguity in the term ‘belief’, for this term can be used to refer to my believing something, or to what I believe (what is often called ‘the content’ of a belief). If ‘a belief’ is given the second use (i.e. to refer to what is believed), then to say that reasons are beliefs is not to say that they are mental states, because, even if believing that  $p$  is a mental state, what is believed (that  $p$ ) is not itself a mental state. (And the same is true of the term ‘desire’, which may refer to what I desire: money, to save the world, an ice-cream; or to my desiring it. I have much more to say about desires and reasons but cannot do so here.) So reasons might be beliefs and desires and yet not be ‘believings’ and ‘desirings’ and therefore not mental states.

Thus, though popular, the doctrine that some reasons are mental states is not obviously true and it is therefore not clear that it gives us grounds for accepting the view that different reasons belong to different ontological categories.

In fact, I think we have reason for rejecting that conclusion. For, as we saw above, one and the same reason can play different roles. And this makes the suggestion that different reasons belong to different ontological categories rather implausible. In other words, it is implausible to suggest that if the fact that there has been a drop in temperature can be a reason to believe that my tulips will die (justifying), it can be Mrs B’s reason for bringing in her tulips (a motivating reason), and also the reason why my tulips died and why Mrs B brought her tulips in (explanatory), the ontological character of that reason changes depending on which of these roles we focus on.

This response may not satisfy those who are committed to the view that at least

motivating and explanatory reasons must be mental states and hence ontologically different from justifying reasons (which they may be prepared to regard as facts). And they may say that, if the argument in the previous paragraphs appears to succeed, this is because I have misidentified the relevant motivating and explanatory reasons in the examples above. For, they may say, the reason that motivated Mrs B to bring in her tulips cannot be just that there was a drop in temperature but rather it must be *her believing* that there had been a drop in temperature, and that is also what explains her action of bringing in her tulips. And her believing that *is* a mental state. And this, the objection concludes, shows that motivating and explanatory reasons are mental states. But this argument fails.

First, the view that motivating reasons are mental states depends on the view that what motivates agents to act is their believing and wanting certain things. But this view has been disputed, and I have argued elsewhere that it is mistaken.

Moreover, the fact that there was a drop in temperature is a reason that explains why my tulips died – and that is surely an explanatory reason that is not a mental state, which implies that not all explanatory reasons are mental states. And it won't do here to say, as one might be tempted to, that since the death of my tulips is not an action, the fact that there has been a drop in temperature is not a reason but a *cause*. As I explained above, this would be to conflate two levels of relationship: that of causation and that of explanation.

It may be objected that that is true of the explanation of 'mere' events but that actions can only be explained by reasons such as that A believes that p, and these are not facts but are rather mental states.

I do not think that it is true that actions can only be explained by reasons of that kind, for it is possible to explain actions by citing the reason that motivated an agent, which might be simply that the temperature has dropped, or that her sister is ill. Nevertheless, it is true that sometimes we explain actions by saying things of the kind 'A  $\phi$ -ed because A believed that p', or 'because A wanted to  $\psi$ '. And this means that 'A believed that p' or 'A wanted to  $\psi$ ' are explanatory reasons. However, that A believed that p, or that A wanted to  $\psi$  are facts, we might say 'psychological' facts, and not mental states.

But my opponents will say that I am mischaracterising what they claim is an explanatory reason here which is not (the fact) that I believe that p but rather *my believing* that p. And, they will add, my believing that p *is* a mental state, so some reasons are mental states.

But, in fact, the claim that my believing that p is a mental state needs careful scrutiny. The expression 'my believing that p' is a nominalization of the sentence 'I believe that p'.

Some people think that the nominalised form can be used to refer to a mental state of mine.<sup>16</sup> But even if there are such mental entities and even if these nominalisations *can* be used to refer to them, these nominalisations have other uses. For instance, they can also be used to refer to facts, as in ‘The fact of his leaving so early was rather disconcerting’. Thus, the expression ‘my believing that she is ill’ can be used to refer to the fact that I believe that she is ill. Consider what Strawson says in that same paper cited above about the expressions we use to refer to events and facts respectively:

We use nominal constructions of the same general kinds –nouns derived from other parts of speech, noun clauses, gerundial constructions– to refer both to terms of the natural and to terms of the non-natural relation [i.e. to events as the terms of the natural relation (causation), and facts as the terms of the non-natural relation (explanation) respectively] (Strawson, 1992, p. 110).

And he goes on to say that in the sentence ‘His death’s coming when it did was responsible for the breakdown of the negotiations’, the expression ‘his death’s coming when it did’ does not refer to an event in nature, i.e. to his death. Rather, it refers to *the fact* that his death came when it did. For, as Strawson says, his death coming when it did, unlike his death, ‘did not come at any time. It is not an event in nature. It is *the fact* that a certain event occurred in nature at a certain time’ (*ibid*).

So, although a nominal expression can be used to refer to an event (or, according to the objector, to a mental state) it can also be used to refer to a fact. And, in ‘Her believing that p explains her  $\phi$ -ing’, the nominalisation ‘her believing that p’ refers, not to a mental state, but to the fact that she believes that p. And, more generally, when we say that the reason that motivated an agent and that explains her action is her believing that p, this gerundial construction is a nominalisation that must be construed as referring to *the fact* that she believes that p.

To see why, consider the following example. Suppose that I believe (falsely, and as a result of my suffering from paranoid delusions) that I am being followed by MI5. My believing that I am being followed by MI5 may explain why I go about incognito, so we can think of it as an explanatory reason.<sup>17</sup> And so, according to my opponents, my believing that is a mental state.

---

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of these issues see J. Lowe, 2000, esp. chs. 10-11. For arguments that we ought to be cautious about the claim that ‘my believing that p’ expresses a (mental) state, see Steward, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> See Raz 1999, Dancy, 2000, p. and especially Hyman, 1999, 444, from whom I have borrowed and adapted the example. I discuss this kind of case further in chapters 4 and 5.

However, since I am not being followed, my believing that I am being followed is actually also a reason for me to visit a psychiatrist. And this is a justifying reason: it is a reason *for* me to visit the psychiatrist, i.e. a reason that can be invoked for its normative force about what I ought to do. But if it is a justifying reason, then it must be a fact, and not a mental state because it is wholly implausible to say that mental states have normative force – i.e. that they make it the case that anyone ought to  $\phi$ , or make  $\phi$ -ing right or appropriate. So the justifying reason is, then, the fact that I believe that I am being followed by MI5.

However, as we just saw, my believing that I am being followed is also a reason that explains why I go about incognito. And it is also implausible to say that a reason changes ontology depending on the role it plays. Thus, if my believing that I am being followed is a fact when it plays a justifying role, it must also be a fact when it plays the role of explaining why I go about incognito.<sup>18</sup> And if that is right, then the explanatory and the justifying reasons here belong to the same ontological category, namely that of facts – and the expression ‘My believing that p’ in an explanation ‘My believing that p explains why I  $\phi$ ’ refers to a reason: to the fact that I believe that p.

So it is true that sometimes we explain actions by citing psychological facts about an agent: that they believe that p, that they are shy, etc. But what this suggests is that, in so far as it makes sense to say that a reason is a mental state what this means is not that this reason belongs in a peculiar ontological category (e.g., that of ‘psychological entities’, whether events or states), but rather that this is a reason that concerns a mental state of the agent: a fact about how things are, psychologically speaking, with him. And we can call these ‘mental’ or ‘psychological’ reasons. But then, all sorts of facts can be reasons, that is, facts about all sorts of things. Some reasons concern the fact that the person believed and wanted certain things while others concern the fact that they are blond, rich, or diabetic. We can call these psychological, physical, financial and medical (physiological?) reasons respectively, but in doing so, we are not allocating each of those reasons to different ontological categories: they are all facts.

[The idea that reasons are mental states seems, then, encouraged by a confusion concerning the use of imperfect nominal expressions such as ‘his believing that p’. This is how the confusion arises. Explanations of an agent’s  $\phi$ -ing often cite the fact that the agent

---

<sup>18</sup> This is not that say that the reason that motivates me to go about incognito is also that I believe that I’m being followed. If asked what my reason was, I’d say that it was that I was being followed by MI5 though, if I am not, then although that is what motivated me, it is not a *reason* but only an apparent reason.

believed that p: ‘He abandoned the game because he believed that she had cheated’; or ‘The fact that he believed that she had cheated explains why he abandoned the game’. Explanations of this kind can be given in a variant form involving the corresponding gerundial nominal: ‘His believing that she had cheated explains why he left the game’. Here, this gerundial nominal clearly refers to the corresponding fact that he believed that she had cheated. However, since, according to some, this nominal can also be used to refer to an entity (a mental state), then it is easy to reach the conclusion that these explanatory reasons are mental states. But, to repeat, the grounds for saying that ‘his believing that p’ is an explanatory reason are also grounds for saying that this expression here refers to a fact and not to a mental state.

As I say, the idea that reasons are mental states is encouraged by this confusion. But it is motivated by something different, namely, a commitment to the doctrine, made popular by Davidson among others, that the reasons for which we act are the causes of our actions. This doctrine is widely, though not universally, accepted in contemporary philosophy.<sup>19</sup> I think that there are good reasons why, despite its popularity, we need not accept that doctrine. And in the absence of commitment to the doctrine, and given what we have seen about the different roles that the same reason can play, there seem to be no grounds for accepting the view that some reasons are mental states.

## 5.2 Motivation in error cases

I now turn to the second route that might lead one to the conclusion that reasons belong to different ontological categories, a route that is related to error cases: when an agent acts of a false belief.

---

<sup>19</sup> Apart from the Wittgenstein-inspired anti-causalists that Davidson took himself to be arguing against (Anscombe, Kenny, Taylor, etc.) there are some contemporary non-causalists, e.g., R. Bittner, *Doing Things for Reasons* (Oxford University Press, 2001); C. Ginet, *Actions*, Oxford University Press, 1993; J. Haldane, ‘Some Metaphysical Presuppositions of Agency’ *Heythrop Journal*, 35 (1994), pp. 296–303; B. Rundle, *Mind in Action*, (Oxford University Press, 1997); D. Hutto, ‘A Cause for Concern: Reasons, Causes and Explanations’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59 (1999), pp. 381–401; G.F. Schueler, *Reasons and Purposes*, Oxford University Press, 2003; S. Sehon’s ‘Teleology and the Nature of Mental States’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1994), pp. 63–72; ‘Deviant Causal Chains and the Irreducibility of Teleological Explanation’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 78 (1997), pp. 195–213; and ‘An Argument against the Causal Theory of Action’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60 (2000), pp. 67–85; F. Stoutland, ‘Intentionalists and Davidson on Rational Explanation’, in *Actions, Norms and Values: Discussions with Georg Henrik von Wright*, 1998; G. Wilson, *The Intentionality of Human Action*, (Stanford University Press, 1989).

The thought is the following. Sometimes an agent can be motivated to act by something that is not the case (which would be captured in a false proposition).<sup>20</sup> But, the thought goes, what motivates someone to act is a motivating reason. Therefore some motivating reasons are something that is not the case and are, therefore, not facts. Thus, the conclusion would go, although all justifying reasons are facts, some motivating reasons are not, and therefore not all reasons belong to the same ontological category.

Now, it is true that what motivates someone to  $\phi$ , whether  $\phi$ -ing is acting, believing, deciding, wanting, etc., may be something that is not the case – something that is in fact false, e.g. that it is raining when it isn't. But this does not licence the conclusion that some motivating reasons are not facts. As I said above, a motivating reason can be characterised as something in the light of which one acts. But it does not follow that *anything* in the light of which one acts is a motivating *reason*. Sometimes people are motivated to act by something that is only an apparent fact, and hence only an apparent reason. Therefore, the fact that people act motivated by apparent reasons, or endorse beliefs on the basis of grounds that turn out to be false, does not show that some reasons are not facts because these motivating considerations are not reasons. And hence it does not support the view that there is ontological variety among different kinds of reason.

So we have seen that neither of the routes examined leads to the conclusion that reasons belong to different ontological categories.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have distinguished three roles that reasons can play: a justifying, a motivational and an explanatory role. The first two are directly related the normative force of reasons. I have claimed that reasons can consequently be classified as justifying, motivating and explanatory, depending on what role they play in a particular context.

I argued that, since this classification is role-dependent, and since one and the same reason can play all of these roles in relation to a particular action, the classification of reasons into those three kinds does not correspond to any ontological difference between them. I have also examined and rejected two routes that seem to lead to the conclusion that different

---

<sup>20</sup> And this in turn might lead one to think that the statement 'His reason for  $\phi$ -ing was that  $p$ ' is 'non-factive', i.e. that the statement may be true while  $p$  is false (Dancy, for example, says some things about reason explanations that appear to commit him to this view. See his 2000, pp. pp. 131-7 & 146-7).

reasons belong to different ontological categories. This leaves many questions open, e.g. about how reasons motivate actions and how they explain them. But those are questions I leave for another time.

Maria Alvarez,  
University of Southampton, UK  
November 2008