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Reasons and the Ambiguity of ‘Belief’

Abstract

Two conceptions of motivating reasons, i.e., the reasons for which we act, can be found in the literature: (i) the dominant ‘psychological conception’, which says that motivating reasons are *an agent’s believing* something; and (ii) the ‘non-psychological’ conception, the minority view, which says that they are *what* the agent believes – his beliefs. In this paper I outline and defend a version of the second conception of motivating reasons.

Similar conceptions of motivating reasons have been defended persuasively by a minority of philosophers recently. However, this minority position is still regarded as implausible or confused, mostly because it is not sufficiently well understood, or because it is thought to bring with it insuperable difficulties. Here I offer a detailed and distinctive version of that minority view – a version that, I think, overcomes the apparently insuperable difficulties associated with the minority view. I also offer an account of the relation between motivating reasons and the explanation of action.

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Reasons and the Ambiguity of ‘Belief’

Introduction

When discussing reasons in contexts of action, philosophers tend to distinguish between ‘normative’ reasons (also called ‘justifying’), and ‘motivating’ reasons (also called ‘operative’). Normative reasons are the reasons why we ought to act. Motivating reasons are the reasons we actually act for. Sometimes these coincide. That is, sometimes there is a reason why A ought to do something, and A does that thing, and does it for that reason. For example, suppose I ought to eat more spinach because I need iron; and suppose I do eat more spinach and my reason for doing so is that I need iron. Here, the reason for which I act (motivating) is also the reason why I ought to act (normative), namely, that I need iron.

There has been much discussion about normative reasons in the recent literature but I shall have little to say about them here.¹ My focus in this paper will be the second kind of reasons: *motivating* reasons – the reasons for which we act when we act for a reason. And my purpose is to clarify the nature of motivating reasons and of their relation to the explanation of action.

Two conceptions of motivating reasons are to be found in the literature. According to the dominant view, which I shall call ‘the psychological conception’,² motivating reasons are best articulated using a psychological verb: ‘his reason was *that he believed that p*’ (or ‘*his believing that p*’),³ and, it is often said, such reasons are mental states of the agent. The alternative, the non-psychological view, rejects the view that motivating reasons are mental states as it holds that motivating reasons are best articulated by stating what the agent

believes, i.e. 'his reason was that p'. Thus, if I run home because it's raining, according to the psychological conception my reason for running is *that I believe that it is raining* (or *my believing that it is raining*); while according to the non-psychological conception my reason is *that it is raining*.

The significance of this disagreement is often obscured, especially for those who hold the majority view, by the fact that the psychological conception is often articulated using an ambiguous formulation, namely, that my reason is 'my belief'. But the term 'my belief' can be used to mean either my believing something, or to mean what I believe. If we leave it unspecified which is meant, we seem to get both conceptions rolled into one, and the question of which conception is right seems to evaporate. But in fact the versatility of this formulation is only apparent, because my believing something and what I believe are not the same reason: 'He believes it is raining' and 'It is raining' are different reasons expressed in statements with different truth conditions. Thus, although the term 'my belief' can do duty for either notion, it cannot do duty for both at the same time, so the question indeed presses itself: which is the right conception, that which says that motivating reasons are our believing something, or that which says that they are what we believe? My answer will be that the second, the minority view, is right.

Conceptions of motivating reasons similar to the one I shall defend have been persuasively presented recently by a minority of philosophers.⁴ This minority view has thus been established as a serious contender in what is really a new debate about the nature of the reasons for which we act. However, the minority view is still regarded as implausible or confused, mostly because it is not sufficiently well understood, or because it is thought to bring with it insuperable difficulties. In this paper I offer a detailed and distinctive version of

that minority view. My account, I believe, overcomes the apparently insuperable difficulties associated with the minority view.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first section is devoted to preliminary matters. Then, I shall argue for the minority conception in section 2. In sections 3 to 5 I examine and provide solutions to the difficulties associated with the minority conception of motivating reasons, difficulties that concern 'error cases' – i.e., cases where an agent acts in the light of some false belief – and the explanation of action.

1. Preliminaries

Before spelling out my account of motivating reasons, a few preliminary clarifications are required.

The reason why someone acted may be her reason for acting. Thus, if I eat spinach because I need iron then the reason why I eat spinach, *viz* that I need iron, is also my reason for eating spinach. But this need not be the case; sometimes the reason why someone acted may not be their reason for acting. For example, the reason why A gives a lot of money to charities is that A is an altruistic person. But that A is an altruistic person is not *A's reason* for donating money. The same is true of omissions. Thus suppose that I don't turn up to give a paper because I forgot I was meant to. Again, that I forgot was not *my reason* for not turning up. In this paper I am primarily concerned with *motivating* reasons: the reasons for which we act when we act for reasons.

I also want to disregard a possible complication – I'm thinking of those cases where what the agent claims was his reason for doing something was not *really* his reason. For example, Albert says he went to the library because he needs to borrow a book, but in fact he

went because Helen, on whom he has a crush, is at the library. His reason for going to the library was that Helen is there and not that he needs to borrow a book, as he claimed. (The discrepancy in such cases may be due either to dissimulation or to self-deception, which will depend on how good the agent is at identifying his own motives and how keen he is to conceal them.)⁵

Finally, in this paper I shall leave aside the role of desires in motivation. There has been much debate concerning the relation between desires and both normative and motivating reasons, focusing on questions such as whether an agent's desires provide him with reasons for acting; whether beliefs alone can be reasons or whether every reason must comprise a belief and a desire; whether reasons are dependent on the agent's desires (internal vs external reasons); and so on. But, whatever the answers to those questions concerning desires might be, it is true that the reason for which someone acts, is (at least partly) some belief of his. And my concern here is with understanding that – the nature of what might be called the 'cognitive' aspect of motivating reasons.⁶ So, for the moment, I put desires aside.⁷

2. Motivating Reasons

The question: 'What was the reason that motivated the agent?' is a question about what made the action right or appropriate in the agent's eyes. And this is what motivates him to act. And this question is closely connected to practical reasoning because answers to it are what could appear as premises in a reconstruction of the agent's (implicit or explicit) practical reasoning. These include statements such as: 'it's late', 'she's in danger', 'it's great fun', 'it may be dangerous', 'I need iron', 'the weather won't hold', etc.⁸ So, the question 'What motivated the agent to act?' can be answered by saying what it was that spoke to her in

favour of her so acting. And this very rarely takes the psychological form 'her believing that p'; rather, it normally takes the non-psychological form, 'that p': 'that it was very late', 'that her husband is arriving tomorrow', etc.⁹

To see why, consider the following example. Suppose I give my cousin some money because I believe what he tells me, namely, that he needs it to pay his rent. My reason for giving him the money is, then, that he is in need. It is *that* that I take to speak in favour of giving him money, and that is what motivates me to give it to him, not that *I believe* he is. For suppose he'd deceived me and he wasn't really in need. Discovering that he had deceived me would be discovering that I was motivated to lend him the money by something that was not the case. But what I would discover not to have been the case would be that he was in need and not that *I believed* he was in need – for that *was* the case: I did indeed believe he was in need. And this suggests that what motivated me was that which I took to be the case, namely that he was in need.¹⁰

Thus, a motivating reason, what made the action appropriate from the agent's perspective at the time, is, typically, what the agent believed and not the fact that he believed it (or his believing it). And this is what the non-psychological conception says motivating reasons are.

At this point, two considerations might appear to suggest that, after all, the psychological conception of motivating reasons must right.

The first is the thought that, unless the agent believes (or knows, suspects, etc.) that p, that p cannot be *her* reason (i.e., unless the agent believes that her cousin is in need, the latter cannot be her reason).¹¹ This is true, but in fact, the very way the objection is articulated supports the non-psychological conception. For the objection says that *for something to be a reason* the agent must believe it (or somehow be aware of it). But this suggests that the

reason is what she believes, not her believing it. Consider an analogy. Unless I have money, I cannot pay for my purchases with it. But if I do have money and pay for some purchase, I pay with the money I have, and not 'with my having the money'. Likewise, in order for p to motivate me to act, I must believe (or somehow be aware) that p; but it is a mistake to infer from this that therefore the reason that motivates me to act is my believing that p; rather the reason that motivates me is that p, which I believe.

The other objection is more complex and has been thought to be decisive in showing that motivating reasons must be my believing something rather than what I believe. The objection centres on error cases, where what the agent believes is false. In the example above, I initially said that the reason that motivated me was the fact that he needed the money to pay his rent. But if we suppose that he did not need it, my reason cannot be that fact, for there was no such fact; it turns out he just wanted the money to buy a plasma TV. But if my reason was not the fact that he needed the money, what was it then?

The problem here is that I cannot, without an air of paradox, say something like: 'My reason for giving him the money is that he needs it, although he doesn't'; or 'I'm giving him the money because he needs it, although he doesn't'. These statements are reminiscent of Moore's paradoxes of belief. However, unlike Moore's paradoxes, these statements remain paradoxical when turned into the third-person: 'Her reason for giving him the money is that he needs it, although he doesn't'; or 'She's giving him the money because he needs it, although he doesn't'.¹² And again, unlike Moore's cases, these remain paradoxical, although perhaps to a lesser extent, when they are put in the past tense. Thus compare 'I gave him the money because he needed it, although he didn't need it' and 'I believed that he was ill, although he wasn't'.

The problem with these expressions is not that it is impossible to think of a context where they might be appropriately used, but that their use would always involve a note of irony that subverts the claim about the alleged reason. And if we want to avoid the air of paradox or irony, we tend to specify what motivated the agent by using a different form of words; typically, we use a locution involving psychological verbs such as 'believe'. That is, we tend say something like 'What motivated her was her belief that he needed the money (though he didn't need it)', 'Her reason was that she believed he needed the money (although he didn't)'; or 'I gave him the money because I believed he needed money (although he didn't)', etc.

But now it seems that, after all, the psychological conception of motivating reasons is right; or, at any rate, right for error cases. This is the claim I examine in the next section.

3. Beliefs as Motivating Reasons

In this section I shall focus on statements of reason that appear to support the psychological conception such as 'What motivated her was *her belief* that p', or 'Her reason is *her belief* that p', and will leave expressions such as 'She did it because *she believed* that p' for the next section. Here I shall argue that the fact that in some cases we resort to locutions such as 'Her reason was *her belief* that p' in order to avoid the air of paradox, does not show that the psychological conception is right, not even for error cases. Let me explain why not.

Earlier in the paper, in the Introduction, I drew attention to the distinction between two uses of the term 'belief', namely, to denote my believing something and to denote what I believe. I return to that distinction now to show that it is only the conflation of those two uses that might make the claim that motivating reasons are our beliefs seem a vindication of the psychological view. For such a vindication would require that we use 'her belief' in the

first sense noted above (her believing). However, when we say that an agent's motivating reason was her belief, it is the second use (what she believes) that is at issue. Indeed, my discussion of the example of my cousin and the money above shows precisely that *only* if we construe 'my belief' thus, is it possible to make sense of the claim that the reasons that motivate us are our beliefs. For only if we construe 'her belief' to refer to what she believed (e.g. that her cousin was in need), can we make sense of the subsequent discovery that I was motivated by something that turned out to be false. So, even if the term 'my belief' is sometimes used to denote my believing something, this is not the use at issue in these error cases. And therefore, to say that the reason that motivated her was 'her belief that p' is not to embrace the psychological conception for 'her belief' is being used to denote what is believed.

Thus, talk of reasons as 'beliefs' does not lend support to the psychological conception because it is plausible to conceive of reasons as beliefs only if what is meant is what is believed and this is what the minority view says motivating reasons are.

To some, the view that motivating reasons are beliefs, in the sense of 'what is believed', might seem initially plausible; and yet, they may feel unable to embrace it because of some lingering worries that appear to undermine it. Let me examine those worries and show that they are not real obstacles for the minority view.

A first worry might come in the form of this objection. A motivating reason cannot be what is believed because what is believed can be true or false, whereas reasons cannot be true or false. The objection, however, is misguided because, if it were right, we would have to conclude that what is believed cannot be a fact, and indeed that what is believed cannot also be known. For what is believed can be true or false but neither facts nor knowledge can be true or false. However, we know that, if it is a fact that p, and John believes that p, then

what John believes is a fact, even though what John believes is also true. Similarly, if John believes that p and Mary knows that p , then what Mary knows is what John believes, even though what John believes and Mary knows is true. Thus although reasons cannot be true or false this does not imply that what is believed, which can, cannot be a reason.

What is believed can also be doubted, suspected, etc., and it is called 'a belief' or 'a doubt' on account of its being something that can be believed or doubted respectively – that is, of its being a 'believable' or a 'doubtable'. More generally, what is believed is a 'thinkable' (or a proposition – as far as I can see nothing hangs on using either term. I prefer 'thinkable' because it retains the link with the fact that these are things that can be believed, doubted, known, etc.). A thinkable is something that can be the object of the attitudes, something that can replace p in 'John believes that p ', 'Mary doubts that p ', 'Angelina knows that p ', etc. (though in the last one, the thinkable that replaces p must be true).

And if John believes that p , then the thinkable that p can therefore be called *John's* belief that p . And John's belief that p (i.e., the thinkable that p *qua* believed by John) can also be something that motivates John to act. And if the belief that motivates John to act is true, then that belief is a reason that motivated John to act.

Now, the fact that there are things that it makes sense to say of these thinkables, e.g. that they are true or false, only *qua* believables but not, say, *qua* what motivates, does not show that the same thing cannot be what is believed *and* what motivates. Consider an analogy. A particular object, for instance, a particular bicycle, may be given as a present. Now, presents, but not bicycles, can be generous. But if Amy's bicycle was a generous present, the fact that bicycles cannot be generous does not show that Amy's bicycles was not a present, or that bicycles cannot, after all, be presents.¹³

Thus what is believed, if true, can be a reason. What is believed and is false cannot be a reason, but it can still be what motivates someone to act. A motivating belief that is false is not a reason, though the agent takes it to be – so a false belief that motivates is what we might call 'an apparent reason'. An apparent reason is not a reason any more than a fake Vermeer is a Vermeer – it just seems to be one; but just as a fake Vermeer and a genuine one are both paintings, an apparent reason and a genuine reason are both beliefs, only one is false and the other true.

This brings us to another difficulty that one might think afflicts the minority conception of motivating reasons. According to the view I am proposing, when an agent is motivated by a true belief, since what he believes is something that is the case, i.e. a fact, the agent is motivated by a fact – by the way things are. But when the agent is motivated by a false belief, what he believes is not the case and hence not a fact. But isn't there a problem with the idea that what is not the case can *motivate* someone?

The thought that there is a problem here must arise from a peculiar conception of what it is for something someone believes to motivate them. In order to motivate someone, a thinkable must be believed and it must appear to the agent to speak in favour of acting in a certain way. Thus, in order to motivate me to take my umbrella, the thinkable 'It is raining' must be something that I believe and that I take to speak in favour of taking an umbrella. A false belief is a false thinkable that the agent believes to be true. The fact that the agent takes it to be true explains why a false belief can still motivate him to act: if I falsely believe that is true, my false belief might well make taking my umbrella seem the right thing to do. The fact that my belief is false does not deprive it of its capacity to motivate.

It is true that a belief that motivates someone to act can only *justify* his so acting if the belief is true – that is, if the agent is motivated by a reason.¹⁴ And it is true that, therefore,

false motivating beliefs cannot justify an action. But this does not mean that they cannot motivate an agent to act.

In the following section I explore the relation between motivating reasons and explanations of action. In it, I shall explain why and when we use psychological locutions of the second kind mentioned above, i.e. 'He did it because he *believed* that p'. And, in the process of doing that, I shall show why the use of these locutions does not support the psychological conception of motivating reasons either.

4. Motivating Reasons and the Explanation of Action

It is possible to explain an action by indicating what it was that motivated the agent to act. And this is explanatory because, as has often been pointed out, in knowing what motivated the agent, we come to see what it was that (from his perspective) made the action appropriate, appealing or right for him to do. And this makes the action intelligible from a third-person perspective. Thus, any specification of what motivated the agent provides enough information to construct an explanation of the action.

Now, if what motivated the agent was a reason then it is possible to construct a *reason* explanation, that is, an explanation whose *explanans* is precisely the reason that motivated the agent to act. For instance, if her reason for leaving was that the concert had finished then 'She left because the concert had finished', is a reason explanation. Such explanations specify the belief that motivated the agent to act but they also tell us that it was true, i.e. that she was motivated by a reason.

On the other hand, if what motivated the agent was a false belief, then it is not possible to construct a proper reason explanation. Instead, we must resort to what I shall call

'psychological explanations',¹⁵ whose *explanantia* are statements to the effect that the agent believed that p'.¹⁶ For instance, 'She left her job because she believed that she had a fatal disease'. These psychological explanations explain by citing what motivated the agent, prefixed by the phrase 'she believed that', but without implying either that it was a reason or that it wasn't (though they carry a suggestion that it wasn't.) Indeed, since it is possible to construct psychological explanations both in veridical and in error cases, we could say that there are psychological-reason explanations and psychological apparent-reason explanations. In the first, what follows the 'she believed that' is true and hence a reason, in the second it is false.

It should be noted that while it is possible to construct psychological explanations both in veridical and in error cases, proper *reasons* explanations are available only in veridical cases. And it is precisely the fact that in error cases we *have* to use these psychological explanations that has proved one of the most resilient grounds of support for the psychological conception of motivating reasons. But, as I shall show, this support for the psychological conception is actually rather shaky.

These explanations are taken to support the psychological conception of motivating reasons because it is believed that the *explanans* of a psychological explanation (namely, 'she believed that p') is also the reason that motivated the agent. But this is wrong on two counts. First, in error cases, there is *no* reason that motivated the agent, and hence the *explanans* of a psychological explanation of his action cannot be the reason that motivated the agent, since there was no such reason. Secondly, although they are often called that, psychological explanations are not really reason explanations because the *explanans* of a psychological explanation is not what motivated the agent (although what motivated the agent is contained in the *explanans*). As we have seen, what motivates an agent is what he believes, whether

true or false. But the *explanans* of a psychological explanation is a statement that says that the agent believed that which motivated him.

Thus, in error cases, these psychological explanations do not cite a motivating reason (for there was none) and *a fortiori* they do not show that the motivating reason was *that the agent believed that p*.

However, although these psychological explanations are not reason explanations, they are useful in explaining actions and, once their use is understood, it becomes even clearer that the fact that we often, and indeed sometimes must, use them does not vindicate the psychological conception of *motivating reasons*.

Psychological explanations of the kind mentioned have a three-fold use: (i) to identify the belief that motivated the agent, whether true or not; (ii) to convey, directly or indirectly, the speaker's own view about the truth or otherwise of what motivated the agent; and (iii) to specify the kind of epistemic relation the agent had to what motivated her.

The first aspect of the use of psychological explanations we have seen already: an explanation such as 'She lent him the money because she believed he was in need' identifies the motivating belief. This is something that a reason explanation can also do but, as we have seen, when the belief was false, we need to resort to some kind of psychological locution.

Moreover, and relatedly, these psychological explanations can be used by the speaker providing the explanation to control the strict implications or the conversational implicatures of the explanation and, in doing so, the speaker can also convey his or her own views about the status of what motivated the agent. Let me explain what this means.

As we saw above, the reason explanation 'She left because the concert had finished' implies that the concert had finished. On the other hand, 'She took a taxi because she believed that there was a public transport strike' explains why she took a taxi by saying what

motivated her without implying that things were as she believed, i.e., without implying that there was a strike - indeed it has the conversational implicature that there was no strike. Thus, the psychological locutions under discussion can be used when the speaker wants, for whatever reason, to distance himself from the truth of what the agent believed and was motivated by. This may be because he *knows* that what the agent believed is false, or he wishes to suggest that it is, or wants to leave it open whether it is; which in turn may be because what the agent believes is something that is disputed or controversial, such as, e.g. whether giving money to drunken beggars is the right thing to do.

It must be noted, however, that some psychological locutions, far from suggesting that what motivated the speaker may be false, *imply* that it was true. 'She left because she knew the concert had finished' implies that the concert had finished, that the agent knew it, and that the concert's having finished was her reason for leaving. Whether a psychological explanation implies the truth of what motivated the agent, then, depends on whether the cognitive verb is factive, i.e. whether 'A Vs that p' (knows, believes, suspects, etc.), implies that p.

And this brings out the third feature of the role of these psychological explanations, which is that they allow the speaker to specify the precise epistemic attitude of the agent towards what motivated her (see note 6). Thus, whereas the reason explanation 'She left because the concert had finished' implies that the agent was, in one way or another, epistemically related to the fact that the concert had finished, the psychological locution permits the speaker to specify precisely what this epistemic relation was: 'She left because she knew / believed / suspected / deduced / etc... , that the concert had finished'.

We have seen, then, the role that psychological explanations can play. And the question of *when* we use them has been implicitly answered: this is a matter of the pragmatics

of explanation, of what is appropriate in the context, given the logical implications and the conversational implicatures that explanations of each kind have. Thus, depending on whether the speaker wishes to (or can, epistemically speaking) endorse or not the statement that captures the motivating belief, and depending on how much detail is appropriate, he'll use a reason explanation or a psychological explanation.¹⁷ But whichever form is used, it is still the case that what motivates agents is what they believe, not the fact that they believe it, or their believing it. In short, the fact that we may and sometimes must use these psychological locutions does not support the psychological conception of *motivating* reasons.

Before finishing this paper I should like to make a point of clarification about the character of explanations of action, and in particular about the 'facticity' of explanations. This is the topic of the following section.

5. The Facticity of Explanations of Action

The conception of motivating reasons I have defended here is similar to one that has been defended by Jonathan Dancy among others – although Dancy might regard my view that reasons are beliefs as a version of 'the content-based view' which he classes as a form of 'psychologism' (Dancy, 2000, 112); a classification that is, in my opinion and for the reasons given in the previous sections, mistaken. Be that as it may, what I wish to emphasise here is an element of Dancy's account that I reject, namely the view that some reason explanations are not factive, i.e. that a true reason explanation may have a false *explanans*.¹⁸

Like Dancy, I think that whichever form of explanation we use, what motivates the agent is what he believed and not his believing it, regardless of whether what he believes is true or false. But, unlike him, I don't think the same is true of the *explanans* of an

explanation of action. In my view, the idea that an explanation may have a false *explanans* is untenable but, fortunately, not implied or even suggested by the conception of motivating reasons I am defending.

The reason why the minority view does not have that implication is that it is possible to specify what motivated an agent without, on the one hand, commitment to its truth, and on the other, without commitment to the view that what motivated the agent is what explains her action. This can be done by using any of the locutions involving psychological terms mentioned above. For instance, the locution 'Her reason was her false belief that her car had been stolen' specifies what motivated her without committing the speaker to its truth – in fact it says it is false – nor does this commit us to the view that what motivated her is what explains her action.

Thus, as I said above, it is possible to explain an action by citing the belief that motivated the agent directly: 'She left because the concert had finished', or by citing it in the psychologized form: 'She left because she thought that the concert had finished'. In the first case, the *explanans* is 'the concert had finished'; while in the second, it is 'she thought that the concert had finished'.

A proper understanding of the relation between motivating reasons and the explanation of action allows us to walk a line between two easy mistakes that are the mirror image of each other. One is to think that the *explanans* of any action explanation that cites the belief that motivated the agent must also be *the reason* that motivated the agent (this leads to the psychological conception of motivating reasons). But if the cited belief was false, then the *explanans* cannot be the agent's reason, for the agent was not motivated by a reason. It is only when the explanation is a reason explanation that the *explanans* and the motivating reason are one and the same. The other mistake is to think that whatever motivated an agent

can be the *explanans* of an explanation of her action (which leads to the view that some reason explanations are not factive).

It follows from the discussion so far, then, that explanations of action where the agent was motivated by a false belief are also factive: the truth of the explanation implies (and requires) the truth of its *explanans*, viz. that she believed that p; what it does not require, however, is the truth of what she believed, that p, which is what motivated her. Thus, endorsing the non-psychological conception of motivating reasons does not commit one to a non-factive view of explanations of action. Let me finish with a point about the form of explanations of action.

Many philosophers believe that what I have called reason explanations are actually ellipses for psychological explanations, and that therefore the *explanans* of any reason explanation, when made explicit, is not 'p' but rather 'she believed that p'. Whether they are right that all explicit explanations of action fit this psychologized model, is something I should like to leave open here because I think there are compelling reasons for and against this view.

On the one hand, it is clear that what I called proper reason explanations do explain actions, and it is not clear that they do so only if we read them as ellipses. On the other hand, it is true that it is possible to construct psychological explanations also in veridical cases – as we saw above, we have psychological-reason explanations as well as psychological apparent-reason explanations. Moreover, it is also plausible that the reason why psychological-reason explanations are shortened into reason explanations proper is that the former, as I pointed out above, have the conversational implicature that what the agent believed is false or doubtful – an implicature which we may often want to cancel.¹⁹ (And although this implicature could be cancelled by using the verb 'to know' in the relevant psychological explanation (i.e.

'because she knew that p'), it is also true that sometimes one may not want to commit oneself to that knowledge claim about the agent: the agent's reason may have been that p without what she had quite amounting to knowledge that p.)

I am inclined to think that there is no reason to insist on *one* form, and that the different kinds of explanation fulfil different roles, along the lines spelled out in the previous section. What seems true is that all these forms of explanation are factive as their *explanantia* are always true; and also that, whatever form of explanation we provide, what motivated the agent is always what the agent believed, true or false, as the non-psychological conception says.

To conclude. I have argued that motivating reasons are what agents believe rather than the fact that they believe it. I have also explained why, although we sometimes use expressions that appear to vindicate the psychological conception of motivating reasons, this is not so, as we can explain the use of those expressions and the roles they play without commitment to the psychological conception.

One of the questions that occupied philosophers of action in the second half of the twentieth century was whether the reason for which someone acts is the cause of her action, as well as the related but distinct question whether explanations of action that cite an agent's reason are causal explanations. It is probably true to say that the majority of philosophers today believe that the answer to those questions is yes – although it is also true that the number of the dissenting minority has been growing in recent years. However, that debate was mostly conducted on the assumption that the psychological conception of motivating reasons is right. Therefore it would seem that, if the minority view of motivating reasons that I have defended in this paper is right, the causalist debate in the theory of action needs to be thought afresh.²⁰

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NOTES

¹ Some of the most influential recent contributions are: C. Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996) ‘The Normativity of Instrumental Reason’ in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, G. Cullity and B. Gaut (eds.), (Oxford University Press, 1997); W. Quinn ‘Putting Rationality in its Place’ in *Value, Welfare and Morality*, R.G. Frey, (Oxford University Press, 1993); T. Scanlon, *What we Owe to Each Other*, (Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. Part 1; M. Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994); J. Raz *Engaging Reason: On The Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford University Press, 1999), which builds on his influential *Practical Reason and Norms* (Hutchinson, 1975).

² I borrow the labels for each account from Parfit, ‘Reasons and Motivation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 71 (1997), pp.99-130, n.28.

³ In this paper, I shall take ‘his believing that p’ as an expression that can be used to denote the fact that he believes that p. And I shall use either ‘my believing that p’ or ‘that I believe that p’ as variant ways of expressing what the psychological conception says are motivating reasons, according to what seems more idiomatic in the context. Some people think that nominal constructions such as ‘his believing that p’ can be used to refer to mental states of the agent. But even if that is right, it is clear that these nominal constructions can also be used to refer to facts. (See Strawson, ‘Causation and Explanation’ in his *Analysis and Metaphysics*, OUP, 1992, p. 110, where he explains that ‘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 refer either to events (and, some would add, states), which stand in the natural relation of causation; and to refer to facts, which stand in the intensional, non-natural relation of explanation, respectively.)

⁴ Among those who have explicitly defended the minority view, on a variety of grounds, are R. Bittner, *Doing Things for Reasons* (Oxford University Press, 2001); J. Dancy *Practical Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2000); R. Stout *Things That Happen Because They Should* (Oxford University Press, 1996); F. Stoutland, ‘The Real Reasons’ in J. Bransen, and S.E. Cuypers (eds.), *Human Action, Deliberation and Causation* (Kluwer, 1998), and ‘Responsive Action and the Belief-Desire Model’ *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 61 (2001), pp. 83–106. Related conceptions, articulated in terms of the first-person perspective, can also found in J. Kim, ‘Reasons and the First-Person’ in J. Bransen, and S.E. Cuypers (eds.), *Op.cit.*; and in N.C. Manson, ‘Reason Explanation: A First-order Rationalizing Account’, *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol.7 No2, 2004, pp.113-129. The minority view about motivating reasons is sometimes called the ‘externalist’ view. For reasons I cannot go into here I think the label is not very helpful in this context and I shan’t be using it.

⁵ Of course it is also possible to do something, e.g. go to the library, for more than one reason but that need not detain us here.

⁶ I should also note that in my discussion of motivating reasons the term ‘belief’ is used as a generic term for a range of epistemic concepts such as suspicions, things known, deductions, suppositions, etc. This is common practice in the literature and I shall follow that practice for ease of exposition.

⁷ For more detailed discussion of whether an agent’s wants provide reasons for action and whether motivating reasons require desires as components see Anscombe, *Intention* 1957, esp. §35ff.; Quinn, 1993; Raz, 1999, ch.3; Scanlon, 1998, ch.1; Dancy, 2000, 35ff.

⁸ My claim is that the agent’s reason is something she believes; something which she also believes to make her action appropriate. Her reason is *not* her believing that thing, or her believing that such a thing makes her action appropriate.

⁹ Although, as some authors have pointed out, it may, occasionally, take the psychological form; see J. Hyman, 'How Knowledge Works', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 49, 1999, p.444, and Dancy, 2000, 125. For instance, my reason for visiting a psychiatrist might be that I believe that I'm being persecuted by the security services.

¹⁰ Stout (1996, ch.2) makes a similar point.

¹¹ For further discussion of this point see Dancy, 2000, 127ff.

¹² Compare these with Moore's paradox: 'I believe that p, although not p' and 'She believes that p, although not p', where only the first person statement is paradoxical. The reason why in our examples of reasons both first and third person statements have the air of paradox is that 'because' is 'factive': a 'because' statement implies the truth of both the statements linked by the word 'because'. And this, unlike cases of Moore's paradox, holds even when we put the statements in the past tense: 'My reason was that he was in need, although he wasn't' has an air of paradox that 'I believed that p, though not p' doesn't.

¹³ This point also helps to see that the claim 'His reason was his false belief that p' does not imply that a false belief is a reason (as opposed to an apparent reason), just as 'His Vermeer was a fake' does not imply that a fake Vermeer is still a Vermeer.

¹⁴ This is a necessary and not a sufficient condition for a motivating belief to justify the action it motivates. And it should also be noted that although a false belief cannot justify an agent's action, something else might even when he acts on a false belief. Thus, what motivates me to take my umbrella might be my false belief that it is raining. This false belief does not justify my taking the umbrella. But if someone had played a practical joke on me and made it look as though it was raining, then, since I was justified in believing that it was raining, I might also be justified in having taken my umbrella – though not by my false belief, but by the fact that someone made it look as though it was raining.

¹⁵ These psychological explanations are often called Humean explanations. Or, to be precise, Humean explanations are thought to have the form 'He did it because he believed that ... and wanted to ...', however, I am here only concerned with the belief part of explanations.

¹⁶ Note that other explanations explain also by reference to some psychological feature of the agent, e.g. 'He ran because he was a coward'. However, unlike the psychological explanations under discussion, these do not mention the belief that motivated the agent.

¹⁷ Note that to endorse the truth of a reason statement is not to endorse the reason as a good reason for that agent to do what he did, i.e. to judge that the agent did what he did for a good reason.

¹⁸ See Dancy, (2000), pp. 131-7 & 146-7. I agree with much of what Dancy says there. For instance, it is not, I take it, controversial that there is 'a way of explaining an action by laying out the considerations in the light of which an agent acted without committing ourselves to things being as the agent acted' (*ibid.*, p.132). But this is a very different claim from the idea that 'a thing believed that is not the case can still explain an action' (*ibid.*, p.134); when the thing believed is false, what explains the action is, rather, that the agent believed that falsehood.

¹⁹ One may wonder whether the distinction between 'He ran because he was late' and 'He ran because he thought he was late' should be thought of in terms of the difference between *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua*. One reason to think that it shouldn't is that both *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* reports of what someone said may be true regardless of the truth of their subclauses. Thus 'He said: 'It is a beautiful day' and 'He said that it was a beautiful day', which are *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* reports of what he said respectively, can both be true regardless of whether what he said was true. However, 'He ran because he was late' or 'His reason for running was that he was late' can be true *only if* he was late, as both imply that he was late, and that suggests that this is not a form of

oratio obliqua. If he wasn't late, we need to resort to 'His reason for running was that he thought he was late' or 'He ran because he thought he was late'.

²⁰ Earlier versions of this paper were read by a number of friends and colleagues and presented at several conferences and research seminars. It would be impossible to thank all those who contributed to making this version better than its predecessors but I should like to thank in particular Aaron Ridley. I should like to thank also the AHRC for a research-leave award during which I wrote the first draft of this paper.