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DEGLI STUDI
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Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- Pamela Hieronymi, 'The wrong kind of reason', *The Journal of Philosophy* 102:437-457, 2005.
- How can we effectively distinguish between reasons of the right kind and the wrong kind?
- To do so, we need to change the way we define what a 'reason' is.
- This problem is of interest to us because it attempts to explain why non-epistemic reasons are 'wrong' when it comes to defining what is rational to believe.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- Thomas Kelly, 'The rationality of belief and some other propositional attitudes'
- Practical reasons are not reasons to believe because beliefs cannot be based on them.
- Stating that practical reasons are not reasons of the right kind identifies a less radical position. They are at least identified as reasons.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- What is a 'reason'? The standard account:
- It is a consideration (propositions, facts, states of affairs, events, objects that may be the content of our state of mind) that counts in favour of an action or attitude.
- Problem: This description of reasons does not allow us to distinguish effectively between right and wrong kinds of reasons.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- The ‘wrong kind of reason problem’:
- ‘A consideration can count in favor of believing in two quite different ways: it can show the content of the belief true or it can show the belief, as an attitude, in some way good (useful, convenient, and so on) to have.’ (440)
- ‘The fact that the butler wanted revenge is a reason, of the first sort, for believing the butler is guilty; the fact that believing him guilty is the only way to save your life is a reason, of the second sort, for believing he is.’ (440)
- ‘Why would believing the butler did it save your life? Perhaps the mob has made credible threat to kill you if you do not give convincing testimony of his guilt, and perhaps you are a terrible liar.’ (440n7)



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- The ‘wrong kind of reason problem’:
- Derek Parfit: distinction between object-given and state-given reasons
- Christian Piller: distinction between content-related and attitude-related reasons
- Assumption: state-given or attitude-related reasons are reasons of the wrong kind



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘While it is obviously true that only certain reasons are the ‘real’ or ‘appropriate’ kind of reasons for believing, ...the problem lies in saying why the attitude-related reasons are not ‘really’ reasons for the attitude. Reasons, on the original formulation, are considerations that count in favor of an action or attitude. Considerations that show a belief good to have surely ‘count in favor of’ believing...’. (441-442)
- Both content-related and attitude-related reasons count in favour of a belief. Given the standard definition of reason, we cannot say why attitude-related reasons are of the wrong kind.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- It is not always true that 'attitude-related' reasons are wrong:
- '...for certain propositional attitudes, such as supposing, imagining, and remembering, the "real" reasons seem to be attitude-related, while reasons that bear on the content are reasons for a different attitude. Suppose, for example, that you are asked to imagine there's no heaven. ...Divine revelation or the human capacity for wishful thinking would bear on the content of the imagining - whether there is a heaven - while the fact that you have been asked to imagine it, or the fact that it's easy if you try, bear on whether to imagine. Here, the "real" reasons for the attitude seem to be the attitude-related reasons, while reasons that bear on the content seem to be the proper reasons for a different attitude-reasons to believe.' (442)



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- Hieronymi's proposal: Reasons are considerations that bear on a question.
- The 'correct' reasons for an attitude are those that bear on a question, the settling of which is equivalent to having the attitude at issue.
- In order to identify the question in relation to which we can identify the correct reasons for an attitude, we must therefore ask ourselves what is the question that a reason must answer in order for the attitude to be developed.
- Reasons that have this effect on an attitude are called constitutive. Reasons that do not have it are 'extrinsic'.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘we can, in general, distinguish the right kind of reason for an attitude from the wrong kind, not by appeal to whether the reason is content- or attitude-related..., but rather by considering how we form the attitude, when we do for reasons – that is, by considering our agency over that attitude. The ‘right kind of reasons’ (are taken to) bear on a question, the settling of which amounts to forming the attitude. The wrong kind of reasons do not bear, or are not taken to bear, on that question.’ (449)
- The example of belief: to produce a belief that p , the reasons for a belief must answer the question ‘whether p ’, not the question ‘whether it is beneficial to believe in p ’. The ‘correct’ reasons in this case are those of the first type.



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘Suppose that your life depends on your ability to give convincing testimony that the butler did it, but you do not believe he did, you are a terrible liar. Now, you might think that you have overwhelming reason showing it good to believe the butler did it - it would save your life. Yet, the fact that you take these reasons to be fully convincing does not itself show that you believe the butler did it - because it does not show that you have settled the question of whether he did. Rather, by finding these reasons convincing you have settled the question on which these reasons bear, namely, the question of whether it would be good to believe the butler did it. Thus, by finding these reasons convincing, you form a second-order belief about the belief that butler did it: you believe it would be good to believe he did it.’ (448)



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘Notice that, whenever one has an attitude that can be formed or revised simply by settling for oneself a question or set of questions ..., one is committed to an answer to the relevant question(s). One is committed in the sense that, if one has the attitude, one is answerable to certain questions and criticisms - namely, those questions or criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on the relevant question.’ (449-50)
- ‘I call such attitudes ‘commitment-constituted.’ The reasons that (are taken to) bear on the relevant question...are the ‘constitutive’ reasons for the attitude, not because the reasons themselves constitute the attitude...reasons), but because the reasons (are taken to) support the commitment that is constitutive of the attitude.’ (450)



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘The constitutive/extrinsic distinction can be drawn for any commitment-constituted attitude. For any such attitude there will be constitutive reasons, reasons which bear on the question, the answering of which amounts to forming the attitude.’ (450)
- However, the distinction does not apply to actions or to some attitudes (e.g. supposing, imagining)
- ‘...one does not perform an ordinary action simply by settling for oneself the question of whether so to act – by settling that question, one therein *intends* to act.’



Hieronymi, The wrong kind of reason

- ‘Thus, believing that the butler did it can be, in a sense, ‘justified’ by extrinsic reasons, in the same way that sleeping or stumbling or being angry or falling in love might be, in a sense, ‘justified’ by reasons that show it useful to sleep or stumble or be angry or fall in love. In such cases, you have reason to bring it about that you do something which is not itself the kind of thing that can be done by finding those reasons convincing.... Believing the butler did it is, in a sense, ‘justified’ by extrinsic reasons only because (or insofar as) *bringing it about that you believe* the butler did it is justified by those reasons in the ordinary way.’ (452-453)



Hieronymi's examples

- 'The fact that the butler wanted revenge is a reason, of the first sort, for believing the butler is guilty; the fact that believing him guilty is the only way to save your life is a reason, of the second sort, for believing he is.' (440)
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An example by Kelly

- ‘Imagine an agnostic who, having become convinced that the expected utility of being a religious believer is higher than the expected utility of not being a religious believer, undertakes a project designed to induce religious belief. ...In time, she genuinely becomes convinced that God exists. Suppose further that a tragic irony subsequently ensues: the expected utility of belief in God suddenly and dramatically changes. (A despot bent on persecuting religious believers unexpectedly seizes power.) Even if she recognizes that the expected utility of being a believer is now lower than the expected utility of being a non-believer, this recognition will typically not prompt the abandonment of the newly-acquired belief.’ (176)