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DEGLI STUDI  
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# Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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*CFU 6 - A.A. 2022/23 – 9*

*Philosophy International Curriculum*



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Andrew Reisner, 'The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons for Belief and the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem', *Philosophical Studies* 145: 257-272, 2009.
- Many evidentialists (e.g. Kelly) start from the fact that we cannot arrive at a belief by contemplating non-epistemic reasons.
- Reisner links this argument to the debate on the wrong kind of reasons: if non-epistemic reasons cannot have an effect on belief, they cannot really be reasons.
- According to Reisner, arguments of this kind are based on the principle: ought implies can.
- His intention is to show that such arguments are ineffective.



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Two ways of understanding the thesis that non-epistemic reasons for belief are reasons of the wrong kind:
- Non-epistemic reasons are reasons in their own right, but they are not adequate reasons to support a belief;
- Non-epistemic reasons are not reasons.
  
- Kelly and Shah can be associated with the second position.
- Reisner calls this approach 'strict evidentialism'.
- The aim of the article is to reject 'strict evidentialism'.



## **Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons**

- ‘Here is a wager: If you believe Augustus’s tomb is in Stockholm, then an eccentric millionaire will give you half of his fortune. As it stands, you have recently visited Rome and seen Augustus's tomb there. You have no evidence suggesting that the tomb has been moved since your visit. Ought you to believe that Augustus's tomb is in Stockholm? If you believe that it is, you will get a large reward. Of course, it is very likely that you will be wrong, but the ill of being wrong about the location of Augustus's tomb seems like a small price to pay for great riches. Being right about the location of Augustus's tomb, at least under normal circumstances, seems like a poor trade-off against having enough money to do as you please.’ (259)



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Two ways to support strict evidentialism:
- Evidentialism follows from structural features of reasons for belief;
- Evidentialism follows from the impossibility of believing on the basis of practical reasons.
  
- Reisner: both strategies fail



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Evidentialism follows from structural features of reasons for belief.
- What is a reason?: ‘fact  $f$  is a reason for agent  $A$  to  $\phi$ . On this view, being a reason is a property of a fact, and it is the property of that fact’s standing in the reason relation to an agent and an action, belief, feeling, or anything else for which there can be a reason.’ (260)
- We can distinguish between 'types' of reasons according to the type of attitude for which a fact is a reason: a reason for belief will thus be identified by the attitude (the belief) for which a fact is a reason.



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- The same fact can simultaneously be a reason for belief and a reason for action.
- ‘You are on safari in Africa and are in rhino country. While idly lounging in the sun, you suddenly look up and see a rhino charging right at you. The fact that you see a rhino charging right at you is a reason for you to believe that the rhino is angry and means you harm. That you see a rhino charging at you is also a reason to act: namely it is a reason to dive behind your nearby Land Rover.’ (260)





# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- The question of the distinction between different types of reason must be distinguished from the question of the 'ground' of a reason: this means determining the basis of a reason relationship.
- To identify reasons for belief is to isolate a specific type of reason.
- To distinguish instead between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons is to identify different grounds for a reason relationship.
- Thesis: it cannot follow from the mere fact that reasons for belief are reasons of a specific type that they must be based on a specific type of ground.





## **Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons**

- ‘The distinction between the type of reason and its grounds is important, because it reveals why evidentialism cannot appeal directly to the structure of a reason for belief as a support for evidentialism. The question of whether or not something is a reason for belief is distinct from whether or not a reason is an evidential or non-evidential reason. The basic account of a reason for belief is that of a fact that stands in a reason relation to a belief. It would be a further property of that fact that it stood in an evidential or a non-evidential reason relation to the content of the belief.’ (264)



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Evidentialism follows from the impossibility of believing on the basis of practical reasons.
- Strategy linked to epistemic involuntarism: the thesis that we have no control over our beliefs.
- It is based on the principle 'ought implies can'. If I cannot form a belief on the basis of a non-epistemic reason, that reason cannot have any normative strength.



## **Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons**

- ‘For example, I might realise that there is a reason for me to believe that I am 6'0" tall, because I would have more self-confidence if I believed that. However, because all the evidence available to me suggests otherwise, I cannot choose to believe that I am 6'0" tall. I see that there is a reason for me to believe it, but it is not a reason that I can make good on. My beliefs are not, at least in general, subject to my direct control; they instead respond spontaneously to (what I take to be) evidence. Taking 'ought' to imply 'can', at least initially, appears to affect my reasons for belief in a way that does affect my actions. The thought is that because I cannot choose to have beliefs for certain reasons, then it is not the case that I ought to have them.’ (266)



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- But in which sense can't we 'believe' on the basis of non-epistemic reasons?
- Two options:
  - possibility understood in a psychological sense;
  - possibility understood in a physical sense.



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- If possibility is understood in a psychological sense, the evidentialist's argument implies unfortunate consequences.
- Example: 'Conspiratorist' who is psychologically incapable of taking into account the evidence offered in favor of a given belief.
- We can say that it is psychologically impossible for him to adjust his belief to the evidence.
- From this it follows that we cannot say that he should?



## **Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons**

- ‘Jim is kidnapped by a cult. There he is indoctrinated to believe that all scientists are liars. He believes that if they say something is the case, that is evidence against its being the case. After ten years in the cult, Jim is brainwashed on this matter beyond recovery, although he is perfectly rational in other respects. Jim reads in the newspaper that a distinguished zoologist claims to have discovered a new species of mammal—the first such discovery in many years—and this discovery has been scientifically documented with the greatest care by other zoologists. The fact that a distinguished zoologist claims to have discovered a new species of mammal and has documented it carefully is taken by Jim to be a reason for him to believe that no such new species has been discovered.’ (267)



## Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- If possibility is understood in the physical sense, the evidentialist cannot exclude non-epistemic reasons.
- Example: 'Consider some future neurologist who...operates on Jim, giving him the belief that Japan is actually located next to Ghana. He also rewires Jim's brain such that when Jim tries to reason out why he believes that Japan is next to Ghana, he becomes distracted and fails to get anywhere with his introspection. ...The example with Jim shows that it is physically possible to have beliefs that are formed and maintained on non-evidential grounds....' (267-8)





## **Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons**

- ‘Where does this leave the evidentialist? She is left with an unappealing pair of interpretations of 'ought' implies 'can'. If she takes 'can' to require psychological possibility, then doxastic involuntarism rules out too much. There are a great many things that there is apparently even evidential reason to believe that individual people, on account of one consideration or another, cannot believe. So, a number of putatively good evidential reasons will be excluded. If physical possibility is the criterion, then doxastic involuntarism rules out very little. There are quite a number of things that it is physically possible to believe, without having evidence for one's beliefs and having acquired one's beliefs because of having had evidence for them.’ (268)



## Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Against the 'causing-yourself' account: non-epistemic reasons do not make a belief rational, but can make attempts to cause a belief rational.
- 'Geff [a wealthy excentric] has offered Joe half of his fortune if Joe believes next Tuesday that it is Wednesday. There now seems to be an excellent reason for Joe to believe something for which there is no evidential reason. ...Evidentialists argue that Joe does not really have a reason to believe that it is Wednesday on the coming Tuesday; he just has a reason to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday.' (267-8)



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Two arguments against the 'causing-yourself' account:
- The argument based on the unity of normativity: 'If we accept that Joe ought on next Tuesday to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday (because it is good for him to do so), and if we also accept that he ought to believe that it is not Wednesday (because of the evidence), then normativity makes a demand of him that he cannot satisfy.' (269)



# Reisner and the wrong kind of reasons

- Two arguments against the 'causing-yourself' account:
- The argument based on the transmission of normativity from ends to means: 'Jill has tickets to a concert. The venue has a rule that no latecomers will be admitted. The fact that no latecomers will be admitted is a reason for Jill to arrive at the concert hall on time. One might also think that there is a reason for Jill to cause herself to arrive on time, because if she arrives on time, she will not miss the concert.'
- 'This is an instance of the normativity of the end, Jill's arriving on time, being transmitted to the means, Jill's causing herself to arrive on time.'
- Why can't we say the same in the case of Geff and Joe?



# Reisner's examples

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(269-70)