

A Dilemma for Parfit's Conception of Normativity

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Abstract: In his discussion of normative concepts in the first part of *On What Matters* (2011), Parfit holds that apart from the ‘ought’ of decisive reason, there are other senses of ‘ought’ which do not imply any reasons. This claim poses a dilemma for his “reason-involving conception” of normativity: Either Parfit has to conclude that non-reason-implying ‘oughts’ are not normative. Or else he is forced to accept that normativity needs only to involve “apparent reasons” – a certain kind of hypothetical truths about reasons. I argue that both of these options are unacceptable. In the course of the discussion, I present a general objection to “apparent reason accounts” of the normativity of rationality as advocated not only by Parfit, but also by Schroeder (2009) and Way (2009).

1. Introduction

In the first part of *On What Matters* (2011a, b), Derek Parfit presents his general view about normative concepts, such as ‘reason’, ‘ought’, ‘rational’, ‘right’, and ‘wrong’. In accordance with many contemporary philosophers working in this field, among them Jonathan Dancy (2004), Joseph Raz (1999), T.M. Scanlon (1998), Mark Schroeder (2007) and John Skorupski (2010), Parfit maintains that normativity is essentially related to reasons. Parfit calls this the “reason-involving conception” of normativity, which he contrasts with other conceptions of normativity, such as a rule-involving, a motivational, an attitudinal and an imperativial conception (cf. 2011a: 144–48; 2011b: 267–69).

Parfit also defends a particular view about reasons, rationality and certain other concepts that are commonly assumed to be normative. According to this view,

besides what he calls the “decisive-reason-implying sense” of ‘ought’, there are other senses of ‘ought’ that do not imply any reasons. Most notably, there is an evidence-relative and a belief-relative ‘ought’, the latter of which Parfit also calls the “rational ‘ought’”. He illustrates this difference by way of an example, in which you falsely believe that you can save your life only if you run away from a poisonous snake, while in fact you can save your life only if you stand still:

Given your false belief, it would be irrational of you to stand still. You ought rationally to run away. But this is *not* what you ought to do in the decisive-reason-implying sense. You have no reason to run away, and a decisive reason *not* to run away. (2011a: 34)¹

Parfit thus holds that there are ‘oughts’ without reasons:

‘Oughts’ without reasons: There are true ought-claims which do not entail claims about reasons.

This claim, I shall argue, poses a dilemma for Parfit’s reason-involving conception of normativity. Parfit describes this conception in the following words:

Reasons are, I believe, fundamental. Something matters only if we or others have some reason to care about this thing. (2011a, 148) What is normative are certain truths about what we have reasons to want, or will, or do. (2011b: 424–25)

On a straightforward interpretation of these passages, Parfit holds:

¹ See also Parfit 2001 for an earlier statement of his view that reasons and rationality can come apart in this way.

The reason-involving conception of normativity: A claim is normative only if it is, or entails, a claim about reasons.

But this view implies that the ought-claims that according to Parfit do not entail any claims about reasons are not normative claims. As I shall argue in Section 2, this is an unacceptable conclusion. To avoid it, Parfit is forced to accept a broader conception of normativity, according to which, as he claims in other passages, “normativity involves reasons or apparent reasons” (see, e.g. 2011a: 144; 2011b: 268). Claims about apparent reasons are a certain subclass of hypothetical claims about reasons, according to which an agent *would* have reasons *if* her beliefs were true. But as I argue in Section 3, such hypothetical claims about reasons do not as such matter and are thus not relevantly normative. After rejecting a way out of this dilemma in Section 4, I conclude by pointing to some possible results of this discussion in Section 5.

2. First horn

On a natural interpretation of the reason-involving conception of normativity, a claim is normative only if it is, or entails, a claim about reasons. But if there are true ought-claims which do not entail claims about reasons, it follows that these ‘oughts’ are not normative. This is the first horn of the dilemma.

There is a general problem for the option considered here: If Parfit’s non-reason-implying ‘oughts’ are not supposed to be normative, why call them ‘oughts’ in the first place? In other words, the very idea of a non-normative ‘ought’ is questionable, for ‘ought’ seems an essentially normative concept.² But there is also a more particular reason why we have to conceive of at least some of Parfit’s non-reason-implying ‘oughts’ as normative – a reason that is rooted in the importance of these ‘oughts’ for deliberation and decision-making.

² This is not to deny that in ordinary talk, we sometimes use the word ‘ought’ in non-normative ways, but there seems to be good reason to suppose that this usage is not to be taken literally and better to be avoided in philosophical discussion.

We need to start with Parfit's conception of reasons. According to Parfit, reasons are provided by facts independently of whether we are aware of these facts (2011a: 31) and, I take it, independently of whether we have some other access to these facts, e.g. by having evidence for them. Accordingly, what we have decisive reason to do is identical with what we would do if we were fully informed and substantively rational (cf. 2011a: 62–63). Parfit's decisive-reason-implying sense of 'ought' is thus *fact-relative* only; it contrasts with the evidence-relative and the belief-relative 'ought':

This fact-relative sense of 'ought' is what I am calling the *decisive-reason-implying* sense. When we are considering cases in which people know all of the relevant, reason-giving facts, it may be enough to use this sense of 'ought'. In many cases, however, people do not know, or have false beliefs about, these relevant facts. (2011a: 162–63)

Parfit describes one such case in his much discussed mineshafts example: we know that 100 miners are trapped either in shaft A or in shaft B, but we do not know in which. Since floodwaters are rising, we have to decide whether to flood A, B, or both shafts. If we flood A or B, we have a 50% chance of saving all the miners, but we also take a 50% risk to kill all the miners. If we flood both shafts, we will certainly save 90 miners (cf. 2011a: 159). After fully informed and substantively rational deliberation, we would choose to flood the shaft where in fact no miners are trapped, namely A or B. This is thus what, according to Parfit, we ought to do in the fact-relative or decisive-reason-implying sense.* In the absence of such knowledge,

* [This footnote was too long to appear in the published version of the article. I have kept it for this pre-print version because I hope it clarifies an exegetical problem.] Interestingly, Parfit claims that flooding both shafts "is clearly what we ought to do", and he states that in making this claim, he is "using 'ought' in the ordinary sense" (2011a: 159). But he has not previously mentioned this "ordinary sense" of 'ought', nor does he say how it relates to the various other senses of 'ought' he introduces. Nine pages before, however, he introduces an "ordinary sense" of 'wrong', which we use, he claims, "when we are considering the acts of people who know all of the morally relevant facts" (2011a: 150). Since this ordinary sense of 'wrong' seems only applicable in cases where the belief-, evidence-, and fact-relative senses of 'wrong' coincide, one may be led to conclude that, according to

however, it seems that the only responsible decision would be to flood both shafts, and make sure that 90 miners survive. As Parfit observes:

When we are deciding what to do, and we don't know all of the relevant facts, we must base our decision on what we believe, and on the available evidence. In such cases, we can ask what we [...] ought to do in what we can call the evidence-relative senses. (2011a: 36–37) When we are trying to decide what to do, we can ignore the fact-relative sense [...] of 'ought'. (2011a: 161)

Recall that the belief- and the evidence-relative 'oughts' do not necessarily involve any reasons on Parfit's account: These senses of 'ought' are provided by our (possibly false) beliefs or the (possibly false) beliefs we would have if we believed in accordance with our evidence, while reasons are, according to Parfit, provided by the facts alone.³ If Parfit were to accept the first horn of the dilemma, he would therefore have to say that the belief- and evidence-relative senses of 'ought' are not normative at all. But as he claims, these are the *only* 'oughts' that matter in decision-making.

Parfit, we ought to flood both shafts in the fact-relative (or decisive-reason-implying) sense from his remark that we ought to flood both shafts in the ordinary sense. But this would be a mistake. First, it is the very point of the mineshafts example that we do *not* know all the relevant facts, so the ordinary sense of 'ought' cannot be equivalent to the ordinary sense of 'wrong', at least if we understand the latter sense as one that is only applicable when we *do* know all of the relevant facts. Second, to say that we ought in the fact-relative or decisive-reason-implying sense to flood both shafts would be inconsistent with the claim that what we ought to do in this sense is what we would do after fully informed and substantively rational deliberation (*op cit.*). Third, Parfit introduces the mineshafts case explicitly to *reject* the claim that "we ought to try to act in the way that would be right in the fact-relative sense" (2011a: 159). However, if this 'ought' were identical or coincidental with the fact-relative 'ought', then the claim that Parfit rejects would be very close to a tautology. Finally, Parfit goes on to argue that there are other reasons "why, when we are trying to decide what to do, we can ignore the fact-relative senses of 'ought', 'right', and 'wrong'" (2011a: 161). To sum up, when Parfit claims that we ought in the ordinary sense to flood both shafts, he cannot mean this to imply that we ought in the fact-relative or decisive-reason-implying sense to flood both shafts; he is clearly committed to the claim that we either ought to flood A or ought to flood B in this latter sense. I take him to claim that our intuitive or pretheoretical judgment, which is not yet informed by different senses of 'ought', would be that we ought to flood both shafts.

³ More precisely, the evidence-relative sense of 'ought' does not necessarily involve any *practical* reasons according to Parfit, but it may involve epistemic reasons because it is related to evidence. I ignore this point here, because it is clear that the way this 'ought' matters in decision-making must be practical, and not merely epistemic.

And if something matters, it clearly must be normative according to Parfit. I conclude that Parfit cannot accept this horn of the dilemma.

3. Second horn

If there are ought-claims, which are normative even though they do not entail reasons, then there are normative claims that do not entail reasons. Consequently, Parfit cannot really hold a reason-involving conception of normativity. Instead, he often takes a broader view, holding that “normativity involves reasons or apparent reasons” (2011a: 144; 2011b: 268). To say that someone has an apparent reason is to make a hypothetical statement about the reasons this person *would* have if her beliefs (or, as we can add, the beliefs this person would have if she believed in accordance with her evidence) were true. An account of normativity that includes merely apparent reasons would allow Parfit to understand the belief- and the evidence-relative senses of ‘ought’ as normative, for he defines those senses exactly in terms of the reasons that one would have if one’s beliefs, or the beliefs one would have if one believed in accordance with one’s evidence, were true (cf. 2011a: 163).

Parfit’s general strategy to resolve the tension between a reason-involving conception of normativity and his claim that there are ‘oughts’ without reasons seems thus to consist in the following two steps: first, he defines the ‘oughts’ which do not imply actual reasons in terms of apparent reasons. Second, he understands normativity as including not only actual, but also apparent reasons. Similarly, Mark Schroeder (2009) seems to hold that what he calls the “subjective ‘ought’”, which also does not imply any objective reasons, is nevertheless normative, because it can be analysed in terms of the reasons we would have if our beliefs were true. And Jonathan Way (2009) champions Parfit’s and Schroeder’s conception as an account of rationality that preserves the plausible idea that rationality is normative.

The first step of such an “apparent reasons account” – namely the analysis of belief- or evidence-relative ‘oughts’ in terms of apparent reasons – already faces

considerable problems.⁴ For the sake of the argument, however, I will suppose that it can be made to work. Instead, I will call into question the thesis that claims about apparent reasons are in the relevant sense normative claims. My question is simple: why should merely *apparent* reasons be normative rather than merely *apparently* normative?

Note that Parfit himself maintains that apparent reasons have no normative force:

[...] if we say that false beliefs can give people reasons, we would need to add that these reasons do not have any *normative force*, in the sense that they do not count in favour of any act. [...] It is better to describe such cases in a different way. When we have beliefs whose truth would give us a reason to act in some way, we have what I shall call an *apparent* reason to act in this way. [...] If these beliefs are false, we have what *merely* appears to be a reason. [...] We can now claim that all reasons have normative force. (2011a: 34–35)

Only reasons, then, have normative force, while merely apparent reasons lack such force. So how can Parfit claim that “normativity involves reasons or apparent reasons”, thereby insinuating that merely apparent reasons suffice for normativity? Is this not a contradiction?

⁴ See Ross 2006: ch. 7.3–7.4, for a number of pressing objections to the analysis. [The rest of this note is omitted from the published version of this article and appears only in this preprint version: Parfit’s own mineshafts example provides the best counterexample to the analysis. According to Parfit, we ought – in the belief- and evidence relative senses – to flood both shafts and save the 90 miners. But it is not true that we would be required by the fact-relative or decisive-reason-implying ‘ought’ to flood both shafts if our beliefs (or the beliefs we would have if we believed in accordance with our evidence) were true. Quite the contrary, if our beliefs were true (as we assume they are), we would be required by the fact-relative ought *not* to flood both shafts. In other words, an analysis of the perspectival ‘ought’ in terms of what would be the fact-relative ‘ought’ if our beliefs were true seems to presuppose that these ‘oughts’ cannot come apart in the first-personal perspective, but the mineshafts example shows this to be false. See Ross 2006: ch. 7.3–7.4, for this and other problems with the analysis, and Schroeder 2009 for a suggestion of how to solve it. Whether Schroeder’s solution is effective or not, it does not address the problem I raise in the main text.]

In defence of an apparent reasons account of the normativity of rationality, Way argues that hypothetical claims about reasons such as “If A’s beliefs were true, A would have reason to ϕ ” are “genuinely normative” (2009: 4). His argument is that an error theorist about normativity is committed to denying such claims. If Way is right, perhaps we could save Parfit and say something like this: even though apparent reasons have no normative force, claims about apparent reasons are yet normative on a reason-involving conception of normativity, because they have to be denied by anyone who denies that there are truths about reasons.

I agree with Way that there is a technical sense in which hypothetical claims about reasons are normative on the reason-involving conception of normativity. We can put his point as follows. Given that there are no deductive inferences from non-normative premisses to normative conclusions, every claim that together with a non-normative claim entails a normative claim, must itself be a normative claim. This is true for all hypothetical claims of the form “If some non-normative claim were true, then A would have reason to ϕ ”. Apparent reason claims such as “If A’s beliefs were true, A would have reason to ϕ ” are a subclass of such claims, at least if we suppose that the relevant beliefs are non-normative beliefs (which they are in the cases that Parfit focuses on, cf. 2011a: 119).⁵ An apparent reason claim together with the non-normative claim that A’s non-normative beliefs are true, entails a normative claim, and must therefore itself be normative.

We need, however, to distinguish two ways in which we refer to a claim as “normative”. In the narrow sense, a claim is normative when it is about what matters, what is important, what is right or wrong, advisable, criticizable, what we ought or have reason to do, etc. In a wider and rather technical sense, a claim is already normative whenever together with a non-normative claim it entails a normative claim in the narrow sense. But this technical sense is simply not an issue here. Trivially, if reason claims are normative in the narrow sense, then all kinds of

⁵ Note, however, that this is a problem for apparent reasons accounts of “enkrasia” (which seems to be the standard case for Schroeder’s account) and other cases that involve *normative* beliefs: A normative error theorist can accept claims of the form “If A’s *normative* beliefs were true, A would have reason to ϕ ” – those claims are thus not even normative in the technical sense I am discussing here.

hypothetical claims about reasons, including apparent reason claims, are normative in the technical sense. But this is not the kind of normativity that is needed to substantiate an ‘ought’. Hypothetical truths about reasons do not, as such, matter. They are truths about what *would* matter under certain conditions. But Parfit, correctly, as I believe, wants to say that the belief- or evidence-relative sense of ‘ought’ *actually* matters for decision-making.

Note that in Way’s technical sense the fact that you would have reason to ϕ if *your* beliefs were true is just as normative as the fact that you would have reason to ϕ if *anyone else*’s beliefs were true. But certainly you can well ignore in your deliberation (and elsewhere) truths about what you would have reason to do if some random person’s beliefs were true. Those truths are in a technical sense normative and would have to be denied by a normative error theorist, but they do not as such matter. If you have to decide whether to save the 90 miners, however, you cannot ignore what you ought in the belief- or evidence-relative sense to do – this truth actually matters in your deliberation about what to do. Consequently, the normativity of this ‘ought’ cannot be traced back to the fact that it is a hypothetical statement about your reasons.

So even if Parfit’s non-reason-implying ‘oughts’ can be defined in terms of hypothetical reasons, this does not show that they are normative in the relevant sense – a sense in which normative truths matter –, for there are various hypothetical truths about reasons which clearly do not matter at all. Consequently, Parfit and other proponents of this view owe us an explanation of why some hypothetical truths about reasons matter and some do not. They have to tell us why it matters that a person would have reasons to ϕ if her (justified) beliefs were true, but does not matter that a person would have reasons to ϕ if some arbitrary other condition is fulfilled. But how could this difference possibly be spelled out other than in terms of *actual* reasons? As long as we keep up to the spirit of a reason-involving conception of normativity, I cannot conceive of a good answer to this question. We are thus back to the view that normativity, in the sense of “what matters”, involves reasons.

Parfit cannot accept the second horn of the dilemma either, for merely apparent reasons are not normative in the relevant sense.

4. A way out?

In the light of this, Parfit could respond that while the ‘oughts’ in question do not imply any reasons to *do* what they require, they might nevertheless imply other kinds of reasons and thus be normative in a different way. While maintaining that a person could be required to ϕ by a belief- or evidence-relative ‘ought’ without its being the case that this person has reason to ϕ , he could claim that these ‘oughts’ imply reasons for this and other persons to have certain evaluative attitudes of appraisal or criticism towards this person’s ϕ -ing. More generally, Parfit could claim that we necessarily have reasons to *care* about what we (and others) ought in the belief- or evidence-relative sense to do, even if we do not necessarily have reasons to *act* in accordance with it.

This response would also provide an answer to the above-raised question of why some hypothetical truths about reasons matter and others do not. Conceding that normativity must involve *actual* reasons, Parfit could claim that we have actual reasons to care about those hypothetical claims about our reasons for action that are provided by our own beliefs or evidence, but not about just any such hypothetical claims.

Such an approach, however, would have to answer some pressing questions: why is it that these ‘oughts’ require ϕ -ing rather than ψ -ing, although they do not imply reasons to ϕ , but only reasons to ψ ? What gives one reason to *care* about these ‘oughts’, or to have attitudes of appraisal or criticism towards a person’s complying with it, given that this person may have *no reason* to comply with it?

Whether or not these general questions can be given a satisfactory answer (which I doubt), it seems clear that the imagined reply would misunderstand the normativity of the belief- or evidence relative ‘ought’ anyway. In the mineshafts example and other cases of uncertainty we are concerned with the practical question of what to do, not primarily with our evaluative attitudes. As Parfit rightly claims, an

epistemically constrained sense of ‘ought’ becomes indispensable exactly when it comes to practical guidance for decision-making. The normativity of this ‘ought’ must therefore be action-guiding; the way it matters cannot be explained by reasons for evaluative attitudes alone.⁶

5. Conclusion

Let me recapitulate. Parfit’s view that there are ‘oughts’ without reasons poses a dilemma for his reason-involving conception of normativity: Either Parfit has to say that non-reason-implying ‘oughts’ are not normative. As I have argued, this is an unacceptable conclusion for at least some of these ‘oughts’, for according to Parfit, these are the only ‘oughts’ that matter in deliberation. Otherwise, Parfit has to claim that normativity needs only to involve apparent reasons. But apparent reasons are normative only in the technical sense in which all kinds of irrelevant hypothetical truths about reasons are normative, too; they are not normative in the relevant sense, in which normative truths matter. Finally, I have argued that this problem cannot be solved by explaining the normativity of the ‘oughts’ in question by appealing to reasons for evaluative attitudes rather than reasons for action.

To avoid this dilemma, Parfit has to give up either the reason-involving conception of normativity or the claim that there are ‘oughts’ without reasons. In my view, he should give up the latter claim. I think it is a mistake to think of the ‘ought’ that matters in deliberation and decision-making as distinct from the ‘ought’ of decisive reasons. Since the deliberative ‘ought’ must be sensitive to the agent’s epistemic perspective, what we have decisive reason to do must also be sensitive to it. In other words, not only ought we to save the 90 miners, we also have decisive reason to do so. And given that we do not have sufficient evidence for the fact that running away from the poisonous snake is lethal, the evidence that we have might provide us with decisive reasons to run away.⁷

⁶ As Parfit agreed in personal correspondence.

⁷ I give an independent argument for the claim that the ‘ought’ of decisive reason is constrained by the agent’s evidence in Kiesewetter (unpublished), and explore in more detail *how* this ‘ought’ is

There are different ways to reach this conclusion. Some accounts sacrifice the factuality of reasons.⁸ Though this is not the place to argue this point, I think it is best to understand the deliberative ‘ought’ as relating not to the possibly false beliefs a person would have if she believed in accordance with her evidence, but to this evidence itself, which can be understood as consisting of facts that also provide the decisive reasons to act as the ‘ought’ requires. This would preserve the factuality of reasons. We could either take *all* of an agent’s reasons to be constrained by an epistemic filter, as Jonathan Dancy (2000: ch. 3) suggests, or say that reasons become decisive (and thus require us to act) only if they pass this filter. Whatever the details of this story, we would not be left with a puzzling conflict between an ‘ought’ of decisive reasons and a different ‘ought’ that matters in deliberation. We would then, at least potentially, be in the position to tell a unified story about normativity, according to which all normativity involves reasons.⁹

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constrained by evidence, and how it can be used not only in deliberation but also in advice, in Kiesewetter (2011).

⁸ See Henning (unpublished) and Kolodny (unpublished) for two such views.

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