

Against Second-Order Reasons*

Daniel Whiting

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Abstract

A normative reason for a person to ϕ is a consideration which favours ϕ ing. A motivating reason is a reason for which or on the basis of which a person ϕ s. This paper explores a connection between normative and motivating reasons. More specifically, it explores the idea that there are second-order normative reasons (not) to ϕ for or on the basis of certain first-order normative reasons. In this paper, I challenge the view that there are second-order reasons so understood. I then show that prominent views in contemporary epistemology are committed to the existence of second-order reasons, specifically, views about the epistemic norms governing practical reasoning and about the role of higher-order evidence. If there are no second-order reasons, those views are mistaken.

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1. Introduction

A normative reason for ϕ ing is a consideration which favours ϕ ing, perhaps by revealing ϕ ing to be good or right in some respect. For example, that *Harold and Maude* is showing is a reason in this sense for Kelly to go to the cinema.¹

A motivating reason is a reason for which or on the basis of which a person ϕ s. In some cases, a motivating reason is also a normative reason. If Kelly goes to the cinema for the reason that *Harold and Maude* is showing, the reason for which she goes favours going.²

This paper explores a connection between normative and motivating reasons. More specifically, it explores the idea that there are normative reasons (not) to ϕ for other normative reasons, that is, that there are *second-order* reasons (not) to ϕ on the basis of certain *first-order* reasons. The idea that there are second-order reasons of this sort is implicit in the work of a number of philosophers. It is explicit in the work of Raz, who unpacks and explores the idea in considerable detail (1990: §1.2 and Postscript; also 1999: 93). Accordingly, when introducing the notion of a second-order reason, I will draw heavily on Raz's discussion. However, the primary concern is not exegetical; whether there are second-order reasons of the sort considered here is an independently interesting question, one which has received relatively little critical attention.

¹ Cf. Alvarez 2010: 13; Dancy 2000: 1; Parfit 2011: 31; Raz 1999: 22; Scanlon 1998: 17. These remarks are not offered here as an analysis of the notion of a reason, or of that which it picks out, but simply as a way of pinpointing it.

Some hold that a consideration might provide a normative reason for a person to ϕ by revealing ϕ ing to satisfy some desire she has (for discussion, see Chang 2004). Some hold that normative reasons are attitudes, as opposed to considerations towards which one might adopt attitudes (see, e.g., Gibbons 2013). Allowing for such views would affect the presentation but not the substance of what follows.

² Some hold that motivating reasons are attitudes, rather than considerations towards which one might adopt attitudes (for discussion, see Alvarez 2010; Dancy 2000). Nothing in what follows turns on this. If it is not possible for a motivating reason to be a normative reason, it might nonetheless have a content which corresponds to a normative reason.

In what follows, I challenge the view that there are second-order reasons. This might seem a somewhat local issue – of concern only to the theory of practical reasons and rationality – but it is of wider interest and importance. As I will show, prominent views in contemporary epistemology are committed to the existence of second-order reasons. If there are no second-order reasons, those views are mistaken.³

The paper proceeds as follows. After outlining in more detail the view that there are second-order reasons (§2), I argue, first, that second-order reasons fail an intuitive motivational constraint on reasons (§§3-4) and, second, that second-order reasons are reasons of the wrong kind, in a sense to be explained (§5). Together, these points undermine the view that there are second-order reasons, or at least demonstrate that the appeal to second-order reasons cannot do the explanatory work it is supposed to do. I then show how the notion of a second-order reason figures (implicitly) in recent views concerning the epistemic norms for practical reasoning (§6) and over the role of higher-order evidence (§7).

2. Reasons and defeaters

A first-order reason is a reason for or against ϕ ing. A second-order reason is not supposed to be a reason for or against ϕ ing but, rather, a reason for or against ϕ ing on the basis of or for certain first-order reasons.

To make this more concrete, consider:⁴

Kelly is deliberating as to whether to send her daughter to a certain school. That the school is nearby, that it offers philosophy, and that having a child there

³ Another respect in which the issue is of wider significance is that the notion of a second-order reason plays a role in Raz's work in political and legal philosophy. I will not explore such connections here.

⁴ What follows is a revised version of an example Raz provides (1990: 39).

would further Kelly's career are first-order reasons for Kelly to send her daughter to that school. However, Kelly promised Dave that she will base decisions about their daughter's schooling on her educational needs, and not on what is best for their careers.

In this case, that Kelly made the promise does not seem to be a (first-order) reason for or against sending their child to that school – it is not a respect in which doing so is good or bad, right or wrong. Indeed, Kelly's promise tells us nothing about the merits or demerits of sending their child to any given school. That Kelly made the promise is, on the view under consideration, a second-order reason for her to act on the basis of certain first-order reasons, the education-related ones, and not on others, the career-related ones.⁵

One can distinguish *positive* second-order reasons – reasons for ϕ ing for a reason – and *negative* second-order reasons – reasons against ϕ ing for a reason – which, following Raz (1990: 39), I will call *exclusionary* reasons. Exclusionary reasons are supposed to defeat the relevant first-order reasons. But, importantly, this kind of defeat differs from two more familiar kinds.

One reason can defeat another by outweighing it.⁶ For example, that *Harold and Maude* is showing is a reason for Kelly to go to the cinema, while that she promised to meet Dave at the pub is a weightier reason for her not to do so, and to go the pub instead. The former reason outweighs the latter.

⁵ The preliminary support Raz offers for the view that there are second-order reasons rests on examples of this kind. It is then open to an opponent of this view to find other ways to capture what is going on in such cases (see Clarke 1977; Gert 2002; Piller 2006). I will return to this issue below.

⁶ This talk of weighing is figurative, of course, and should not be taken too literally. It is well established in the literature and well enough understood for present purposes.

Exclusionary reasons are not supposed to defeat first-order reasons by outweighing them (Raz 1990: 40). Reasons for ϕ ing can be weighed against reasons not to ϕ , or reasons to do things incompatible with ϕ ing. But a second-order reason is not a reason for or against ϕ ing, or for doing something incompatible with ϕ ing; it is a reason for or against ϕ ing *on a certain basis*. Hence, second-order reasons cannot be weighed against first-order reasons (although they can be weighed against other second-order reasons).⁷ Hence, they cannot outweigh first-order reasons.

Another way in which a reason can be defeated is by being undercut.⁸ For a reason to be undercut is for some other consideration to reduce its weight. In the limiting case of this, its weight is reduced to zero and the reason is disabled.⁹ Suppose that Kelly promised to meet Dave at the pub. If he releases her from this promise, that is not a reason against going to the pub or for doing anything else; it does not reveal going to the pub to be bad or wrong in some respect; by the same token, it does not reveal going elsewhere to be good or right in some respect. Rather, that Dave released Kelly from her promise makes it the case that that promise is no longer a reason for Kelly to go to the pub; it no longer speaks in favour of doing so and (so) has been disabled.

Suppose instead that Dave has not released Kelly from her promise and, moreover, he needlessly and knowingly insisted on a meeting place reaching which would cause Kelly considerable inconvenience. In that case, one might think, Kelly still

⁷ A complication here is that one and the same consideration might be a first-order reason to ϕ and a second-order reason to ϕ for that or some other reason. In such a case, one can distinguish the weight the consideration contributes as a first-order reason to the balance of first-order reasons for and against ϕ ing from the weight it contributes as a second-order reason to the balance of second-order reasons for and against ϕ ing for some first-order reason. These weights need not coincide: a consideration might be a weak first-order reason but a strong second-order reason, and vice versa. These complications do not matter for what follows, so I set them aside.

⁸ For an influential discussion in epistemology of the distinction between outweighing (or *rebutting*) defeat and undercutting defeat, see Pollock 1986.

⁹ Dancy (2004) introduces the idea of a disabling consideration, which he presents as an extreme case of an undercutting (or *attenuating*) consideration.

has a reason for going to the pub but it bears less weight; it is undercut, but not disabled.¹⁰

Exclusionary reasons are not supposed to disable first-order reasons (Raz 1990: 184). That sending their daughter to the local school would further Kelly's career is a reason for her to do so. That she promised Dave to make decisions about schooling only on educational grounds does not disable that reason. The promise notwithstanding, that it would further her career still favours sending their child to the school. By the same token, exclusionary reasons are not supposed to be undercutting considerations.¹¹ Kelly's promise does not make sending their child to the school any less favourable as far as her career is concerned.

That second-order reasons do not affect the weights of the first-order reasons they defeat is something which they are supposed to have in common with outweighing considerations, and which is supposed to distinguish both from undercutting (hence, disabling) considerations. Reflection on *regret* brings these similarities and differences into relief. Suppose that Kelly promised to meet Dave at the pub but has a weightier reason to go to the cinema instead. If Kelly goes to the cinema, she does what she has most reason to do, but she might regret breaking her promise (cf. Dancy 2004: 4-6). Consider now a similar case but in which, as Kelly is aware, Dave released her from the promise. If Kelly goes to the cinema, it would not make sense for her to regret not going to the pub, at least, not on the grounds that she promised to meet Dave there.¹² Finally,

¹⁰ The examples are, of course, underdescribed. Whether or not one agrees with my verdicts about them, the distinction between outweighing and undercutting defeat, which those examples are supposed to illustrate, is an established one which I take for granted in this paper.

¹¹ Horty (2007: 14-15) suggests that exclusionary reasons are undercutting considerations. As an interpretation of Raz, that is mistaken. Exegetical matters aside, Horty might be right that what Raz takes to be defeat by second-order reasons in the cases he considers is really a matter of undercutting defeat.

¹² In the version of the case in which Kelly's reason for going to the pub is undercut but not disabled – that is, in which its weight is reduced but not to zero – the level of regret Kelly feels in going to the cinema should be diminished to a corresponding degree.

consider a version of the earlier case in which Kelly promised to Dave to make a decision about their daughter's schooling only on educational grounds. The educational considerations support sending her to school A while weightier career-related considerations support sending her to school B. In accordance with her promise, Kelly makes her decision on the basis of educational considerations alone and sends their daughter to A. In this case, according to the proponent of the view that there are second-order reasons, Kelly might regret (feel sorry) that her action does not help her career. Indeed, if there are second-order reasons, the level of regret appropriate in this case is the same as it is in a case in which she made no such promise to Dave and the education-related reasons simply outweigh the career-related ones.¹³

So, thinking about regret highlights ways in which defeat by second-order reasons is supposed to be like defeat by outweighing and unlike defeat by undercutting.¹⁴ But, crucially, there is a respect in which outweighing defeat and undercutting defeat are alike, and which distinguishes both from exclusionary defeat. Suppose that the first-order reasons for Kelly to send her daughter to a given school are as weighty as the reasons not to do so. In that case, one might tip the balance against choosing that school either by adding another first-order reason not to send their daughter to the school, say, that it is on the other side of town, or a consideration which undercuts the weight of the reasons for sending her to the school, say, that it admits

¹³ Of course, there are competing views as to when regret is appropriate (for discussion, see Hurka 1996). The point for now is this: If a proponent of the view that there are second-order reasons accepts that regret is fitting in cases of outweighing defeat, but not in cases of disabling defeat, she should accept that it is fitting in cases of exclusionary defeat.

¹⁴ Consider also *positive* affective attitudes. That Kelly promised to meet Dave at the pub is a reason for her to do so *and* to be pleased about doing so. If Dave releases Kelly from her promise, that she made it is no longer a reason for her to go to the pub *or* to be pleased about doing so. In contrast, that she promised to make decisions about their daughter's schooling on educational grounds is, on the view under consideration, a reason for Kelly not to act on the career-related considerations but those considerations remain reasons for her to be pleased about sending her daughter to the relevant school. So, exclusionary defeat by second-order reasons is more localised, so to speak, than undercutting defeat.

only boys.¹⁵ In contrast, adding a second-order reason not to act on the first-order reasons for sending the daughter to the school is not supposed to tip the balance one way or another. Indeed, in some cases, a second-order reason is precisely a reason not to act on the balance of reasons. Hence, it is not itself a consideration which affects that balance (cf. Raz 1990: 41).

The difference between exclusionary defeat and undercutting defeat, and more generally between second-order reasons and considerations which affect the balance of first-order reasons, also shows up when thinking about what a person ought to do. The orthodox view of the relationship between what there is reason for a person to do and what she ought to do is as follows:

- (O) A person ought to φ if and only if the reasons she has to φ are weightier than the reasons she has not to φ .¹⁶

Alternatively: a person ought to φ just in case she has most reason to φ . A proponent of the view that there are second-order reasons will reject (O). Consider again a version of the case in which Kelly is deliberating as to where to send her daughter. Suppose that the educational considerations favour school A but the weightier career-related considerations favour school B. So, Kelly has most first-order reason to send her daughter to B. Given (O), it follows that Kelly ought to do so. But, given her promise, Kelly has most second-order reason to make her decision on educational grounds. Given (O), it follows that she ought to do so. From these claims, it follows that Kelly ought to

¹⁵ I suggest here that, when the balance is even, the addition of a first-order reason against sending the daughter to a certain school *might* tip the overall balance against sending her there, not that it *must* do so. As Dancy stresses (2004), the weights of reasons do not add up in any straightforward fashion.

¹⁶ See, among many others, Broome 2013; Gibbons 2013; Parfit 2011; Schroeder 2007; Skorupski 2010.

send her daughter to B on educational grounds. But, since those grounds speak against B, that would be irrational or senseless. More generally, the view that there are second-order reasons together with (O) seem to entail that there are cases in which subjects ought to perform acts on the basis of reasons against so acting, which is surely a problematic result.

I am not presenting this as an objection to the view that there are second-order reasons. The point is just that its proponent will need to offer a revised conception of what a person ought to do.¹⁷ In contrast, were second-order reasons merely undercutting considerations, this would not be necessary. If Kelly's promise were to disable the career-related considerations, she would have most reason to send her daughter to A. In that case, given (O), she ought to do so, and can do so for the reasons which support doing so, which seems the right result.¹⁸

In summary, to say that an exclusionary reason defeats a first-order reason for ϕ ing is not to say that it outweighs, undercuts, or disables that reason but only to say that it requires you not to ϕ for that reason; it excludes the reason as a permissible basis for ϕ ing. I have laboured this point because the view I want to challenge here is precisely the view that second-order reasons play a role which is *distinct from* and *additional to* that of first-order reasons or of considerations which undercut (hence, disable) them; it is the view that we need to enrich, by supplementing, the standard resources of the theory of reasons and rationality.

It should be clear now that a second-order reason of the sort considered here is not merely a reason the specification of which requires reference to further reasons (cf.

¹⁷ For Raz's alternative, see 1990: 40, 213.

¹⁸ If Kelly's promise were to undercut but not to disable the career-related considerations, then matters are more complex. Whether she has most reason to send her daughter to A or to B will depend on whether the result of her promise is that the career-related reasons are less weighty than the educational reasons. Whatever the upshot, it will not be problematic for (O).

Raz 2011: 184-185). Suppose that Dave offers Kelly £10 to write down five reasons for going to the cinema. Specifying this reason involves reference to further reasons, namely, those which pertain to cinema-going. But it is not a second-order reason in the relevant sense – it is a first-order reason for performing a certain act.

A final point that will be important later is that second-order reasons are not (just) reasons to include or exclude certain considerations in or from one's reasoning, to attend to some reasons and ignore others, etc. (see Raz 1990: 184). In the above case, Kelly might consider the impact sending their daughter to a given school would have on her career, weigh that against the educational reasons for sending her elsewhere, and so on, if only to set career-related matters aside. What her promise requires is only that she not send their daughter to a school *on the basis of* the career-related considerations.

To appreciate this point, note, first, that not every premise of practical reasoning which concludes with an action is a reason for which that action is performed. Suppose that Kelly is deliberating as to what to do this evening. She starts from the premise that either she'll go to the cinema or she'll go to the pub, recalls her promise to meet Dave at the pub, rules out the first option, and concludes her reasoning by going to the pub. Here a disjunctive premise figured in Kelly's reasoning but it is not her reason for going to the pub (Neta 2009).

Second, a reason to consider certain matters or to set aside others is really a first-order reason, a reason to perform a mental act (cf. Raz 1990: 48)

Third, disabling conditions are reasons to exclude certain considerations from one's reasoning. For example, that Dave released Kelly from her promise to meet him at the pub is a reason for her to exclude the fact that she made it from her deliberation as to whether to go to the cinema. Again, second-order reasons are not supposed to be disabling conditions.

Having explained the notion of a second-order reason in more detail, and distinguished it from others in the vicinity, I will now proceed to raise some concerns about it.

Before doing so, I should note that the primary focus so far has been reasons for *action*. In places, it will help to make my point by focusing on reasons for *attitudes* (broadly construed), including intentions and decisions. The assumption here is that, if there are second-order reasons to φ for a first-order reason, there are second-order reasons to intend or decide to φ for a first-order reason.¹⁹ This seems plausible. In general, a reason to φ is a reason to decide or intend to φ .²⁰ For example, that *Harold and Maude* is showing is a reason for Kelly to go the cinema and to decide to do so.

3. Motivation

A familiar and attractive thought is that reasons are *guiding*. As Gibbons says, ‘Genuinely normative reasons [...] must be capable of guiding us in some important sense’ (2013: 132). Or Korsgaard: ‘A practical reason must function [...] as a guide’ (2008: 31). Or Raz: ‘Reasons are there to guide action’ (1990: 183). One way to develop that thought is to propose a *motivational constraint* on reasons:

(MC) If that p is a reason for you to φ , it is possible for you to φ for the reason that p .

¹⁹ If that assumption is false, it would complicate but not undermine what follows.

²⁰ An exception to this might be reasons to perform unintentional actions (cf. Raz 2011: 50n31). I set this aside as none of the cases I consider here involve such reasons.

A number of philosophers advance this principle, according to which normative reasons are possible motivating reasons (see, e.g., Gibbons 2013; Kelly 2002; Kolodny 2005; Lord 2015; Parfit 2011: 51; Raz 2011: 26ff; Shah 2006; Williams 1981).

Compare: If a compass is to guide you in your efforts to reach the North Pole, it is not enough that it point north, or even that you reach the North Pole; you must reach the North Pole on the basis of the compass reading. Likewise, if a reason is to guide you in acting, it is not enough that it favour some act, or even that you perform it; you must do so on the basis of that reason.

Of course, these remarks are merely suggestive. But I take (MC) to be intuitive enough.

To endorse (MC) is not to endorse the controversial 'internal' view of reasons, according to which that p is a reason for you to φ only if φ ing serves some motive (desire, end, etc.) of yours (cf. Williams 1981). To reach this, one has to make a further assumption that it is possible for you to φ for the reason that p only if φ ing serves some motive (etc.) of yours. I will not make that assumption here.

To endorse (MC) is not to endorse the controversial view that there is an 'epistemic filter' on reasons, according to which a consideration gives you a reason only if you stand in a suitable epistemic relation to it, say, knowledge (cf. Dancy 2000; Gibbons 2013; Lord 2015; Raz 2011: 109-111). To reach this, we have to make a further assumption that it is possible for you to φ for the reason that p only if you stand in the relevant epistemic relation to that p . I will not make that assumption here.

(MC) rules out the possibility of second-order reasons. To satisfy the constraint, it must be possible to do that which the second-order reason is a reason for on the basis of that second-order reason. A second-order reason is a reason, not for φ ing, but for φ ing on the basis of certain first-order reasons. So, to satisfy (MC), it must be possible to

φ on the basis of a first-order reason on the basis of that second-order reason. For example, if that Kelly promised Dave to decide to send their daughter to a school for educational reasons is a second-reason for her to do so, it must be possible for Kelly to decide to send her daughter to a school on the basis of her educational needs on the basis that she promised Dave to do so. But that does not seem to be possible. So, given (MC), there are no second-order reasons.

In general, you can do something *for a reason* but you cannot do something *for a reason for a reason*. Again: you can do something *on a certain basis* but you cannot do something *on a certain basis on a certain basis*.²¹

It is helpful here to introduce the notion of an *explanatory* reason – a reason *why* such-and-such is the case. That she received a decent upbringing might be a reason *why* Kelly keeps her promise to Dave to meet him at the pub but it is neither a reason for which she does so, a motivating reason, nor a reason which favours doing so, a normative reason; it is, rather, an explanatory reason.²² To bring this to bear on the issue at hand, it is no doubt possible for Kelly to go to the pub for the reason that she promised to do so for the reason that she received a decent upbringing. But this does not count against the claim that second-order reasons fail to satisfy (MC). That she received a decent upbringing is a reason *why* Kelly goes to the pub for the reason that

²¹ One might think that a mainstream account of acting for a reason – the causal account – suggests otherwise. On that account, very roughly, to φ for the reason that p is for the belief that p together with a suitable desire to cause you to φ . A belief-desire pair, the thought continues, can surely cause a belief-desire pair to cause you to φ . So, it is possible to φ for a reason for a reason.

It is widely recognised, however, that not just any case in which a belief-desire pair causes you to φ counts as φ ing for a reason. The belief-desire pair must cause the action in the right kind of way (that is, non-deviantly). At the very least, then, to show that the causal account supports the view that second-order reasons satisfy (MC) one must show that belief-desire pairs of the appropriate sort can cause *in the right kind of way* belief-desire pairs of an appropriate sort to cause *in the right kind of way* a person to φ .

²² For a recent discussion of these distinctions, see Alvarez 2010. Arguably, a motivating reason – a reason for which a person φ s – is a sort of explanatory reason – a reason *why* she φ s, According to Broome (2013), a normative reason – a reason which favours a person's φ ing – is also a sort of explanatory reason – a reason *why* she ought to φ . The point for present purposes is that some explanatory reasons are neither motivating reasons nor normative reasons.

she promised to do so, but it is not a reason for which she does so. When I claim that you cannot do something for a reason for a reason, 'for a reason' should be understood as concerning a motivating reason, which might also be a normative reason, in each of its occurrences.

So far, the claim that second-order reasons fail (MC) might appear to rest on an appeal to (so-called) intuition. Experience suggests that that intuition is widely shared. But it also suggests that it is not universally shared. Fortunately, I need not rely on it here. In the next section, I will present an argument for the view that it is not possible for a person to do something for a reason for a reason and, in the following section, I will present an additional route to that conclusion. In the remainder of this section, I will consider some cases which might seem to involve a person's responding to second-order reasons in the relevant fashion. I will suggest that that is not what they involve, or at least that there are other ways to understand what is going on in those cases. The aim in doing so is not to argue against the view that subjects are responsive to second-order reasons – that comes later – but to show that certain cases which might seem to support that view either fail to do so or can be accommodated by a proponent of the opposing view.

Suppose that Kelly is deliberating as to where to send her daughter. She is aware that sending her daughter to the local school would further her career. But then she remembers her promise to Dave to make such decisions on educational grounds. So, Kelly sets aside the career-related considerations, puts them out of mind, and focuses her attention on whatever education-related considerations favour sending their child to that school. On the basis of those considerations, she chooses the local school. Isn't Kelly acting for a first-order reason for a second-order reason?

In this case, Kelly excludes from and includes in her reasoning certain considerations, and does so for a reason. But to allow this is not to allow that a person can respond to second-order reasons. As stressed above, second-order reasons are not reasons for excluding or including reasons when deliberating. That would make them first-order reasons for performing mental acts, and it would conflate second-order reasons with disabling/enabling conditions.

One might defend the claim that second-order reasons satisfy (MC) as follows. Suppose that Dave keeps his daughter home from school for the reason that she is covered in spots. Kelly might ask Dave why he did that on those grounds. Dave might reply: Because those spots mean measles. In this case, one might ask, isn't Dave doing something – keeping their daughter at home – on a certain basis – that she is covered in spots – on a certain basis – that those spots are a symptom of measles? So, doesn't this case show that it *is* possible to ϕ for a reason for a reason?

It does not. First, in this case the relevant considerations together provide a first-order reason for the relevant action. That is, that their daughter is covered in spots *and* those spots mean measles is itself a reason for Dave to keep the child at home. A second-order reason is not supposed to work in this way. As discussed above, it is not a reason, or part of a reason, for ϕ ing but only for ϕ ing on the basis of certain first-order reasons.

Second, were the additional consideration Dave cites not to obtain, that is, were spots not a symptom of measles, the original consideration, that their daughter is covered in spots, would be disabled or undercut as a reason for keeping her home. Again, a second-order reasons is not supposed to work in this way. As discussed above, second-order reasons are not enabling/disabling considerations.

So, the above case does not involve considerations which fit the template for second-order reasons. I suggest that what is going on there is that Dave, in response to

Kelly's queries, is providing a fuller or more revealing specification of the first-order reason for his action.

One might wonder, however, whether this diagnosis generalises. Suppose that Kelly decides to send her daughter to a certain school. A friend asks her why. Kelly cites the educational reasons for which she made that decision. Her friend asks her why she made her decision on those grounds. Kelly says: Because I promised Dave I would do so. In this case, Kelly does not seem to be providing a more complete statement of the first-order reasons for her decision. Insofar as this exchange seems felicitous, doesn't it suggest that it's possible for a person to respond to a second-order reason?

In answering her friend, I suggest, Kelly is citing an explanatory reason, not a motivating reason. That she promised Dave is a reason *why* she made her decision on educational grounds, not a reason *for which* she did so. Of course, that explanatory reason might also be a motivating reason, but for something else; it might be a reason for which Kelly focused her attention on educational matters and away from career-related concerns, which might in turn have resulted in her making the decision on educational grounds alone. I am not claiming that this is the only way to make sense of this exchange. The point is rather that there is a way to do justice to it without granting that second-order reasons can be motivating reasons.

So far, I have focused on defending the claim that it is not possible to respond to second-order reasons. In the next section, I will present a principled argument for that claim.

4. Credit

A plausible view is that, if you ϕ for a good reason, that is, for an undefeated reason which favours ϕ ing, you are creditworthy (Arpaly 2002; Arpaly and Schroeder 2013;

Markovits 2010).²³ Suppose that Kelly decides to go to the pub for the reason that she promised Dave to meet him there (despite, perhaps, the fact that *Harold and Maude* is showing at the cinema). Here, Kelly does what she ought to do and deserves credit for this.

Now suppose that Kelly decides to go to the pub for the reason that she promised Dave to meet him there for the reason that she will get a reward if she acts in a creditworthy fashion. That Kelly will be rewarded is a second-order reason – a reason for her to act for certain first-order reasons. However, in this case Kelly is surely not creditworthy for going to the pub.

One might deny that the prospect of a reward in this case is a second-order reason. However, that a person will be rewarded for doing something is in general a reason for doing it. It is hard, then, to see why it would not be a reason in this case. Moreover, Raz suggests that many second-order reasons are valid because conforming to them encourages conformity with first-order reasons (1999: 183). In this case, acting so as to achieve the reward will ensure conformity with the first-order reason provided by a promise. So, again, it is hard to see what grounds there are for denying that the prospect of reward counts as a second-order reason.

The case in which Kelly acts for a reason for the reason that she will get a reward shows that it cannot be true *both* that acting for a good reason suffices for creditworthiness *and* that it is possible to act for a reason for a reason. So, we must reject either the claim about credit or the supposition that in this case Kelly acts for a first-order reason for a second-order reason.

²³ These authors discuss moral worthiness, rather than creditworthiness more broadly, but I take their points to generalise.

I suggest that we reject the latter. For one thing, the former has been defended at length elsewhere (Arpaly 2002; Arpaly and Schroeder 2013; Markovits 2010).²⁴ For another, consider why Kelly does not deserve credit. The most natural explanation is that she is not creditworthy precisely because she is not *really* acting for a good reason.

One might agree with this assessment of this case but doubt that it reveals anything general about our capacity to respond to second-order reasons. To see that nothing turns on the particular example, consider a version of an earlier case:

Kelly is deciding whether to send her daughter to school A or school B. The career-related considerations favour B, but the weightier education-related considerations favour A. Kelly promised Dave that she would make her decision on educational grounds alone. So, Kelly decides to send her daughter to A for educational reasons on the basis of her promise to Dave. As it happens, had Kelly not made her promise, she would have sent her daughter to B, not A. She is concerned about her daughter's education only because she is concerned with keeping her promise to Dave. That is, she responds to the education-related considerations only for the reason that she promised Dave to do so.

In this case, Kelly is surely not creditworthy for doing the right thing; she does not deserve praise for sending their daughter to the school which provides the best education. And, even more clearly than in the previous case, it is not open to the

²⁴ The claim I need here is in fact much weaker than the claim these authors defend. Their view is that, if a person ϕ s for a good reason, she is creditworthy, even if she thinks that her reason for ϕ ing is a bad one. Suppose, however, that a person is creditworthy for ϕ ing only if she believes that her reason for ϕ ing is a good one, or rationally believes this, or knows this. I can stipulate that in the relevant case Kelly satisfies these conditions.

proponent of the view that I am challenging here to deny that Kelly's promise provides a second-order reason.

This shows, again, that it cannot both be true that a person deserves credit if she does the right thing for the right reason *and* that it is possible to respond to second-order reasons. And, again, I suggest we reject the latter claim. Kelly is not really acting for the sake of her daughter's education.

One might worry that I have set up the case so as to deliver the desired verdict. Specifically, I have stipulated that Kelly lacks any self-standing or independent concern for her daughter's education. This is a character flaw for which Kelly is criticisable. It is this, one might conclude, which lies behind our negative assessment of the case.

There are several things to say in response to this. First, one can no doubt distinguish assessment of a person's character from assessment of her performance on a given occasion. But, having drawn that distinction and granted that Kelly is criticisable for being indifferent to her daughter's education, we can ask whether Kelly is nonetheless praiseworthy for sending their daughter to the school which will most benefit her education, thanks (only) to her promise to Dave. The intuition remains that Kelly is not praiseworthy in this regard.

Second, it is not a given that Kelly is criticisable if she lacks concern for her daughter's education. That depends on what explains her indifference, to what extent she is responsible for it, and so on. Suppose that we fill out the case so that Kelly is blameless for her lack of concern. Still, she seems not to be praiseworthy for making the right decision in this case.

Third, consider a version of the case in which Kelly made no promise to Dave. Although in general Kelly lacks concern for her daughter's education, on this occasion, and out of character, she is moved by her needs. In this case, Kelly seems creditable or

praiseworthy for doing the right thing, her standing indifference notwithstanding. Since, in general, a person can be creditworthy for doing the right thing despite having a background disposition not to do so (cf. Markovits 2010: 209ff), there is no reason to think that, in the case involving second-order reasons, it is Kelly's characteristic lack of concern which explains why she is not creditworthy for acting.

I conclude, then, that, given an independently plausible claim about credit, the above cases support the claim that it is not possible to act for a first-order reason for a second-order reason. In that case, given (MC), second-order reasons are not really reasons at all.

In this and the previous section, I argued by appeal to (MC) that there are no second-order reasons. Of course, one might reject (MC). This seems a cost and ad hoc. Be that as it may, I will argue later that making this move does not help proponents of the epistemological views I discuss. In the next section, I raise a further concern for the idea that there second-order reasons, one which provides additional support for the claim that such reasons fail (MC).

5. The wrong kind of reason

There is a familiar distinction between reasons of the right kind (RKR) for an attitude and reasons of the wrong kind (WKR). For example, evidence that I am taller than my brother is a RKR for believing this. That it would make me happy to do so is a WKR for believing that I am taller than my brother. Similarly, that drinking the toxin will save my family from a worse fate is a RKR for intending to drink it. That a billionaire offers me a reward for intending to drink the toxin is a WKR for intending to drink it.²⁵ I will argue

²⁵ The example is an adaptation of Kavka's (1983).

that second-order reasons are WKR²⁶ (Arguably, the WKR/RKR distinction does not apply to actions, so I will focus on attitudes.)²⁷

A difficulty here is that there is no uncontroversial way of distinguishing WKR^s from RKR^s. There is considerable debate at present as to what makes for a WKR and it is beyond the scope of this paper to resolve it. Rather than attempt this, I will consider three features which are thought to be typical or characteristic of paradigmatic examples of WKR^s and show that second-order reasons share those features. While this does not prove that second-order reasons are WKR^s, it provides a case for that claim.

One influential proposal is that a sign of a WKR for an attitude is that specification of it requires reference to that attitude, not just to its object (Olson 2004; Parfit 2011; Piller 2006). In the toxin case, for example, the reason for intending to drink the toxin is that by so intending I will get a reward.

In light of this, consider the earlier example. The alleged reason for Kelly to decide not to send their daughter to the school on career-related grounds is that she promised Dave to make that decision for educational reasons. In specifying the second-order reason, it is necessary to make reference to the relevant attitude and its basis, not just the object of that decision, namely, to send their daughter to the school.

So, if a characteristic feature of a WKR is that its specification requires reference to an attitude, second-order reasons are WKR^s.

A second feature which paradigmatic examples of WKR^s seem to possess is that they conform to a distinctive transmission pattern:

²⁶ Piller (2006) compares second-order reasons and WKR^s – or, in his terms, attitude-based reasons. However, his point is a different one. Piller *contrasts* second-order reasons and attitude-based reasons, and suggests that the examples which might seem to support the idea that there are second-order reasons can be accounted for by invoking attitude-based reasons.

²⁷ It is also unclear whether it applies to certain attitudes, for example, imagining (cf. Hieronymi 2005). It applies most clearly to what one might call *commitment-involving attitudes*, such as belief (commitment to the truth of a proposition) or intention (commitment to acting). I consider only such attitudes here.

If there is a WKR for attitude A, that attitude B facilitates A is a WKR for B.²⁸

Suppose that believing that the toxin is harmless facilitates intending to drink it, which in turn will secure the reward. That looks like an instrumental reason for so believing. But it is not evidence that the toxin is harmless; it is a WKR for believing that.

Part of the thought here is that a WKR for intending to φ is not a respect in which φ ing is good but in which intending to φ is good. If intending to φ is good, then adopting the means to realising this good is instrumentally good. So, that having a belief is a means to intending to φ is an instrumental reason to have it – a respect in which so believing is instrumentally good.²⁹

Second-order reasons exhibit the above pattern. Suppose that Kelly is aware of career-related reasons for deciding to send her daughter to a school. Believing that those reasons have been disabled would facilitate making her decision on educational grounds, which in turn would ensure that she keeps her promise. That looks like an instrumental reason for having the belief. But it is not evidence that the career-related reasons have been disabled; it is a WKR for believing this.

²⁸ For arguments that this pattern is distinctive of WKRs, see Way 2012.

²⁹ One might think that RKR exhibit the same pattern: If there is a RKR for A, that B facilitates A is a WKR for B. For example, drinking the toxin would save loved ones from a worse fate. That is a RKR for intending to drink it. If believing that the toxin is harmless facilitates having the intention, isn't that a WKR for so believing?

That it would save loved ones from a worse fate is a respect in which *drinking the toxin is good*, not in which *intending* to do so is good. If having the intention is not good, that having a belief which facilitates the intention is not instrumentally good. So, it is not an instrumental reason for having that belief.

In some cases, having the intention is itself instrumentally good, say, when so intending is a means to drinking the toxin. But one can imagine cases in which intending is not a means to acting (for example, in which the subject is as or more likely to drink the toxin unintentionally). In any event, the point is that, while RKR sometimes exhibit the pattern, they do not always do so, whereas WKRs always exhibit the pattern. (For more detailed discussion of these issues, see Way 2012.)

Note that the fact that by doing so Kelly keeps her promise is a respect in which *deciding on educational grounds* is good, not a respect in which *what she decides on* those grounds is good. If deciding to ϕ for certain reasons is good, then adopting the means to realising this good is instrumentally good. So, that having a certain belief is a means to deciding to ϕ for the relevant reasons is an instrumental reason for the belief – a respect in which so believing is instrumentally good. This explanation for why the second-order reason in this case transmits in the relevant fashion suggests that second-order reasons will in general transmit in that fashion.

If WKR but not RKR always fall into the pattern above, and second-order reasons always fall into that pattern, second-order reasons are WKRs.

A final feature which WKRs typically exhibit is that it is not possible to ϕ on the basis of a WKR for ϕ ing (cf. Kelly 2002; Parfit 2011; Raz 2011: ch. 3; Schroeder 2012; Shah 2006) For example, I cannot believe that I am taller than my brother for the reason that so believing makes me happy, and I cannot intend to drink the toxin for the reason that so intending will bring rewards.

Earlier, I claimed that it is not possible to respond to second-order reasons. If you are already on board with that, you can now take that suggestion as providing further support for the claim that second-order reasons are WKRs. Alternatively, if you are already on board with the claim that second-order reasons are WKRs, you can take it as providing further support for the claim that they fail the motivational constraint. In short, the two claims are mutually reinforcing.

I have not proved that second-order reasons are WKRs. As noted above, what makes for a WKR is a controversial matter which I cannot settle here. But I take the above points, cumulatively if not individually, to provide considerable support for that suggestion.

To be clear, the suggestion is not that some second-order reasons are WKR while others are RKR; rather, it is that *all* second-order reasons are WKR. The features which I have considered here, and which are supposed to be characteristic of WKRS, are characteristic of second-order reasons in general, not just of some such reasons. To see this, recall the point that a second-order reason for deciding to φ on a certain basis is a respect in which *deciding to φ on that basis* is good, not a respect in which *what on that basis is decided* is good, namely, to φ . This feature – which is characteristic of WKRS – is not just a feature which some second-order reasons display but is one which all second-order reasons display; indeed, it is part of what makes the relevant consideration a second-order reason. After all, if the reason were merely a respect in which what is decided on the relevant basis is good, that is, a respect in which φ ing is good, it would not be a second-order reason at all, but a first-order reason for φ ing.

A number of philosophers deny that WKRS are genuine reasons – by appeal to intuition (Skorupski 2010), or the motivational constraint (Kelly 2002; Shah 2006), or more principled arguments (Way 2012). If WKRS are not genuine normative reasons, and second-order reasons are WKRS, then second-order reasons are not genuine normative reasons.

If WKRS are genuine reasons, it is widely held that a failure to respond to a WKR by forming the corresponding attitude is not a failure of rationality or criticisable (see, e.g., Schroeder 2012). For example, I know that believing that I am taller than my brother would make me happy. Nonetheless, my belief that I am shorter than him remains rational (indeed, knowledge). Arguably, the point about rationality relates to the one about motivation. Since you cannot respond to WKRS, a failure of response is not something for which you are accountable

If second-order reasons are WKR, a person is not criticisable or irrational for failing to respond to them. The point will be important in the remainder.

Before moving on, consider again the view that WKR are not really reasons. A common suggestion which proponents of this view make is that what might seem like a reason (of the wrong kind) for the relevant attitude is really a reason (of the right kind) for something else, say, bringing about that attitude or wanting to have it (see, e.g., Skorupski 2010: 87). For instance, that I will get a reward for intending to drink the toxin is not a reason for so intending, on this view, but a reason for bringing it about that I have that intention, say, by hypnosis, or for desiring to have it.

My present concern is not whether this offers a promising account of the reasons there are in the cases which might seem to support the view that there are WKR, or a plausible diagnosis of what our intuitions are tracking when we reflect on such cases.³⁰ Instead, I want to suggest that, if one rejects the view that there are second-order reasons, one might tell a similar story about the cases which seem to support it. For instance, one might suggest that Kelly's promise to Dave to make decisions about their child's schooling only on education grounds is, not a second-order reason to make that decision only on those grounds, but a first-order reason to bring it about that she does so, or for wanting to do so. One way Kelly might bring it about that she makes her decision on the relevant grounds is – to return to an earlier idea – by focusing her attention on certain considerations and away from others. More drastic or fanciful ways for her to bring this about might include undergoing hypnosis or taking a magic pill.

Needless to say, this is only the start of a longer story. And I am not suggesting that the same story will extend to all cases which might seem to support the view that

³⁰ For further discussion, see Way 2012.

there are second-order reasons.³¹ The thought here is simply that, in the case at hand and others like it, there are ways of doing justice to the idea that Kelly's promise to Dave makes a normative difference to the situation which do not involve an appeal to second-order reasons.

6. Epistemic norms for practical reasoning

So far, the focus has been relatively narrow. Now I will widen it.

As mentioned at the outset, it is common to find views in contemporary philosophy – in particular, epistemology – which entail the existence of second-order reasons. They are not presented in that fashion but, on inspection, it is clear that proponents of those views are committed to there being second-order reasons. If there are no second-order reasons, we should reject those views, at least as stated. That is not to say, of course, that there are no truths in their vicinity but to say that, whatever those truths are, the views as presented do not capture them.

Consider the influential and widespread suggestion that there are epistemic norms governing practical reasoning. According to Hawthorne and Stanley, for example:³²

³¹ In others, what appears to be an exclusionary reason not to hold an attitude for some reason might really be an undercutting consideration, which might itself be a first-order reason for performing certain mental acts.

³² This formulation appears in Stanley 2005. In his 2004, Hawthorne offers the following:

(K*) You should not use that p as a premise in your practical reasoning unless you know that p.

This is not equivalent to (K). As noted above, not every premise of practical reasoning which results in an action counts as the subject's reason for that action (Neta 2009). In Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, they formulate the norm as follows:

(K**) You should not treat that p as a reason for acting unless you know that p.

Neta (2009) claims that this is not equivalent to (K), since treating something as a reason requires conceiving of it as such (whereas acting on a reason does not). Neta's claim is controversial but I will not

(K) You should not act on the proposition that p unless you know that p.

There is considerable dispute as to whether knowledge should figure in this norm or some other epistemic status, say, rational belief.³³ This dispute is not my present concern. I will focus on (K) for illustrative purposes but my target is the more general idea that there is an epistemic norm which tells you not to act on the basis of certain considerations.

Whether (K) holds is an independently interesting question. But it is of additional significance insofar as philosophers appeal to it in arguing for other views in epistemology, for example, the view that practical considerations, including what is at stake, bear on whether a person knows a proposition (see Fantl and McGrath 2009; Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005). I will not engage with that view here or the arguments for it, except indirectly by challenging (K).

There is a tendency to defend or criticise (K) by appeal to intuitions about cases. This is legitimate but, when the relevant parties have a clash of intuitions, the debate can reach stalemate. Situating (K) within a broader debate in the theory of reasons might provide a way of moving forward.

question it here. Instead, I will suggest that (K) better captures what Hawthorne and Stanley have in mind than (K*) or (K**). In all the works cited, Hawthorne and Stanley move without comment between talk of using a consideration as a premise in reasoning (or treating it as one) and talk of acting on that consideration, which suggests that they understand the above formulations as variants on (K). Moreover, all the examples they offer in support of the view that a norm of knowledge governs practical reasoning involve subjects *acting on* beliefs which fall short of knowledge, not just reasoning with those beliefs or thinking of them in certain ways. So, their case at best supports (K), not (K*) or (K**). Finally, if Neta is right that treating is a matter of conceiving, then (K**) is equivalent to: You should not conceive of that p as a reason for acting unless you know that p. If conceiving is a matter of believing, this is an instance of the principle: You should not believe that p unless you know that p. And this is a norm for *belief*, not practical reasoning. For critical discussion of the view that knowledge is the norm for belief, see Whiting 2013.

³³ For a critical overview, see Brown 2008.

Assuming that, if you should do something, there is a reason for you to do it, (K) entails that there is a reason for you not to act for the reason that p if you do not know that p.³⁴ That reason is a second-order reason. Above, I argued that there are no second-order reasons. So, (K) is false.

Lying behind (K) might be the view that only what you know provides normative reasons, or that you are not in a position to act for a normative reason unless you know it (cf. Hyman 1999). On this account, the reason why you should act only on what you know is that otherwise you are not really acting for a normative reason at all. So understood, (K) still entails that there are second-order reasons: reasons to act only on normative reasons. If there are no second-order reasons, (K) is false.

Suppose, however, that I have yet to establish that there are no second-order reasons. Certain points I made along the way remain relevant. For example, subjects cannot be motivated by second-order reasons and (so) they are not criticisable for failing to respond to them.³⁵

Interestingly, the case for (K) rests almost entirely on reflection on when criticism is called for. To adapt Stanley's example (2005: 10), if I need to get milk and go to an unfamiliar shop rather than the usual store, you might criticise my decision by saying, 'You didn't know it would have milk!' If a person is not criticisable for not

³⁴ One might challenge the assumption that 'should' as it figures in (K) is to be understood as reason-implicating in this way. Perhaps it is intended as to express an evaluative notion. On this view, (K) is akin to statements such as 'The heart should pump blood' or 'The toaster shouldn't burn the bread'.

If that is the case, then at the very least the discussion here serves to clarify the view. But the contexts in which they advance (K) suggest strongly that that is not how Hawthorne and Stanley understand the principle. Hawthorne (2004: 29), for example, talks of the norm as 'prohibiting' acting on ignorance, Stanley talks of subjects 'justifying' their decisions by appeal to what they know (2005: 10), and Hawthorne and Stanley state explicitly that the norm specifies when it is 'permissible', 'acceptable', 'proper', etc., to act on a belief (2008: 578).

³⁵ To return to earlier themes, the claim that you cannot refrain from acting on the basis of a consideration for the reason that you do not know it is consistent with the claim that you can, say, direct your attention away from that consideration when deliberating for the reason that you do not know it, which might in turn result in your not acting on it.

conforming to second-order reasons, this provides no support for the view that decision-making is subject to (K).

To make a related point, (K) is explicitly presented as a principle of *rationality* (cf. Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). But, as discussed above, a failure to respond to a second-order reason is not a failure of rationality. If a failure to accord with (K) is not a failure of rationality, (K) is not a principle of rationality.

There might be ways of revising (K) which avoid committing its proponent to second-order reasons while allowing the principle to do its explanatory or argumentative work. The onus is on the proponent of (K) to provide and defend such alternatives. My point here is that, as stated, (K) entails the existence of second-order reasons and as a result faces the difficulties discussed above.

Of course, if one rejects (K), one then needs to account for the considerations which might seem to support it, in particular, the observations about criticism. A full account of the normative connection between knowledge and action is beyond the scope of this paper but I will make some remarks which point in that direction. Before doing so, it is worth stressing that the objections to (K), based on its commitment to second-order reasons, do not turn on the positive proposal to follow.

Suppose, to return to an idea introduced above, that the reason for which you act – your motivating reason – is not a normative reason unless it is knowledge.³⁶ Suppose further, to return to another idea introduced above, that you are creditable or praiseworthy for doing the right thing only if you act for the right reasons, that is, for the reasons which make so acting right (Arpaly 2002; Arpaly and Schroeder 2013;

³⁶ It might help here to distinguish *real* or *objective* normative reasons, which are given by facts, from *apparent* or *subjective* normative reasons, which are given by apparent facts, that is, by one's beliefs about the facts. (For discussion, see Dorsey 2012; Parfit 2011; Schroeder 2009; Sylvan 2015; Vogelstein 2012; Whiting 2014.) One might then say that, when a person acts on less than knowledge, her motivating reason is not a real or objective reason, although it might be an apparent or subjective reason.

Markovits 2010). So, to suggest that someone does not know the proposition on which she acts is to say that she does not deserve credit or praise for acting.³⁷ And to suggest that is, of course, is to criticise her.

Again, this is only a sketch of an alternative account of the normative role knowledge plays with respect to action. The claims on which it relies need discussion and defence, and more work is required to show that it is adequate to the data. These are tasks for another occasion.

The basic proposal is that, when a person acts on ignorance, her action is not praiseworthy (admirable, etc.). This explains why criticism is called for in such a case. Arguably, to return to an earlier point, it entails that there are first-order reasons to bring it about that one acts (only) on knowledge, or to want to do so. It might also entail that there are first-order reasons to admire those who do so.³⁸ But crucially, unlike (K), the proposal does not entail that there are second-order reasons to act (only) on knowledge.

7. Higher-order evidence

A commitment to second-order reasons crops up elsewhere in epistemology. In particular, it emerges in the recent debate over the role of higher-order evidence (HOE).

First-order evidence for a proposition is evidence that indicates, raises the probability, makes it likely, etc., that that proposition is true. Suppose that Agatha is

³⁷ More carefully, depending on the details of the case, a person who does the right thing when acting on a belief which falls short of knowledge might deserve some credit but, first, she not deserve full credit and, second, what she deserves credit for is arguably not *doing the right thing*. In a similar fashion, a proponent of (K) needs to accommodate the fact that a person who acts on less than knowledge need not be criticisable in all respects. This is a familiar point from the literature.

³⁸ In response to these points, a proponent of (K) might revise the principle so that it concerns, not when you should act on some basis but, say, when you are in a position to do so. I have no objection to this, although it is worth noting that the resulting principle would no longer express a norm.

trying to determine who killed Jones. That Smith's fingerprints are on the gun is (first-order) evidence that she killed Jones. Such evidence might provide a (first-order) reason for Agatha to believe that Smith killed Jones, or make it rational for her to do so.

HOE is not supposed to bear in this way on the truth of a proposition; rather, it is supposed to be evidence concerning one's capacity to appreciate, identify, or respond to the first-order evidence.³⁹ (It might also include evidence about what the first-order evidence is, or about what it supports.) That Agatha is exhausted is not evidence for or against the claim that Smith killed Jones, but it might be evidence that Agatha is not in a position to evaluate such evidence. Many think that, in a case like this, the HOE makes a difference to whether it is rational for Agatha to believe the relevant proposition – more specifically, that it makes it less rational for her to do so.⁴⁰ This is apt to appear puzzling. If the first-order evidence supports believing that Smith killed Jones, and if the HOE does not suggest otherwise, what role is it playing?

According to Christensen (2010: 196ff), Agatha's HOE 'requires' her to 'put aside' or 'bracket the reasons [her first-order] evidence provides'.⁴¹ More generally, HOE requires a person (not) to respond to 'at least some' of her first-order evidence when forming or revising a belief. Christensen calls this *the bracketing picture*.

Assuming the 'requirement' to bracket one's reasons entails a reason to do so, that reason is a second-order reason, a reason for Agatha not to believe that Smith killed Jones on the basis of the reasons for doing so which her first-order evidence provides.

³⁹ A complication is that in some cases HOE might bear on the truth of the relevant proposition. In such a case, one and the same consideration might serve as both first-order evidence and higher-order evidence (cf. n7). I will focus on cases in which the HOE seems not to bear on the truth of the relevant proposition, since the present concern is what reason, if any, HOE provides as such.

⁴⁰ For an opposing view, see Lasonen-Aarnio 2013.

⁴¹ As Christensen notes, there are views like the one he advances in the literature on peer disagreement (see Elga 2007). I focus here on Christensen's work because the commitment to second-order reasons is especially apparent there.

One might challenge the suggestion that the bracketing picture commits its proponent to the view that there are second-order reasons. Perhaps bracketing certain reasons is just a matter of, say, excluding them from one's reasoning. As discussed above, a reason to do this need not be a second-order reason; it might be a first-order reason for or against performing certain mental acts.

First, however, note that according to Christensen the requirement which a person's HOE provides for her to bracket the reasons her first-order evidence provides is a requirement which governs how she 'reacts' to her evidence (2010: 196).⁴² A person reacts to her evidence by (not) forming or revising her beliefs on the basis of it. So, the requirement to bracket one's reasons is a requirement not to form or revise one's beliefs on the basis of them.

Second, the suggestion that HOE provides a first-order reason for a person not to include certain evidence in her consideration or reasoning is hard to square with what Christensen wants to say about the relevant cases. Consider again Agatha. Suppose that, although her exhaustion suggests that she is not in a position to appreciate her evidence, Agatha believes that Smith killed Jones on the basis that Smith's fingerprints are on the gun. On this occasion, Agatha's response to that evidence is immediate and unreflective – she did not consider or reason with it. Christensen's view is that Agatha is doing something wrong, insofar as she is not believing in accordance with her HOE. But, if her exhaustion is merely a reason not to consider (etc.) her first-order evidence, she is believing in accordance with that reason, as well as with the reasons provided by her first-order evidence.⁴³

⁴² As stressed at the outset, my main concern is not exegetical. If my presentation of the bracketing picture does not capture Christensen's view, it is an independently interesting question whether that picture provides an accurate account of the role HOE plays, that is, whether HOE provides second-order reasons (not) to base one's beliefs on certain first-order evidence.

⁴³ Admittedly, the force of this point depends on what consideration involves.

Third, recall that a disabling condition is a reason to exclude a consideration from one's reasoning, as discussed above. But Christensen is keen to distinguish defeat by HOE from defeat by undercutting (hence, disabling). There are, he writes, 'substantial differences between HOE and ordinary undercutters' (2010: 202). In the above case, the reason for Agatha to believe that Smith killed Jones which her fingerprints provide might be undercut by Smith's having had access to the weapon only after it was fired. Relative to this additional evidence, the original evidence no longer indicates, makes it likely, etc., that the relevant proposition is true. In contrast, Christensen claims, the original evidence is not undercut by the fact that Agatha is exhausted. Relative to this HOE, the original evidence still indicates, makes it likely, etc., that the relevant belief is true (cf. Christensen 2010: 198ff).

The suggestion that, on the bracketing picture, HOE plays the role of a second-order reason also sheds light on a recurring theme in Christensen's work, namely that HOE is 'rationally toxic' (2010; Forthcoming). It is rationally toxic insofar as it requires a person 'to violate or compromise certain rational ideals' (2010: 198). Consider again Agatha. On the one hand, it seems less than ideal rationally-speaking for her not to respond to the first-order evidence. On the other hand, were she to give that evidence its due, she would exhibit a failure of rationality by ignoring her HOE. If Agatha's HOE were to *undercut* the reasons her first-order evidence provides, it might be ideally rational for her not to respond to those reasons. Likewise, if her HOE were to *outweigh* the reasons her first-order evidence provides, it might be ideally rational for her not to respond to those reasons. What supposedly makes Agatha's situation rationally toxic is that, like second-order reasons in general, her HOE does not affect the balance of reasons but requires Agatha not to respond to it.

This point relates to the following. Recall that, in the practical domain, defeat by second-order reasons is like outweighing defeat and unlike undercutting defeat insofar as it leaves room for regret. Regret has no straightforward counterpart in the epistemic domain. But it is noteworthy that, according to Christensen, believing in accordance with HOE can result in (and, I think, justify) a ‘feeling of tension’ or ‘discomfort’ (2010: 206, 207). This is supposed to reflect the fact that HOE does not affect the balance of (first-order) evidence but requires the subject not to base her judgement on it.

As the above shows, HOE, on the bracketing picture, plays the role of a second-order reason.⁴⁴ If there are no second-order reasons, that picture is mistaken.

Again, suppose the arguments against second-order reasons are unsuccessful. Suppose, for example, that (MC) is false. It remains the case that second-order reasons do not make a difference to what it is rational to do. So, it remains the case that the bracketing picture cannot account for the role that HOE plays in determining the rationality of belief.

Importantly, to deny that HOE provides second-order reasons is not to deny that there is such a thing as HOE or that it provides reasons. One might, for example, hold that HOE gives first-order reasons for higher-order attitudes – say, beliefs about what evidence there is or what it supports – but not for first-order attitudes.⁴⁵ Or one might think that HOE is really a kind of undercutting defeat; in which case, as discussed above, it is not ‘rationally toxic’. Alternatively, to echo an earlier suggestion, one might suggest that it provides reasons to bring it about that one has (or lacks) certain beliefs, or

⁴⁴ Christensen (2010: 196) suggests that in some cases HOE might require a person to place less weight on her first-order evidence when updating her beliefs. HOE still seems to serve as a second-order reason on this account. One might think of how much weight a person accords a reason for φ as corresponding to the strength of her disposition to φ on its basis. So, a reason to give that reason less weight is a second-order reason to be less disposed to φ on its basis. I set aside these subtleties here.

⁴⁵ For discussion, see Horowitz 2014.

reasons to want (not) to do so, views which have the interesting, and perhaps surprising, implication that the reasons HOE provides are non-epistemic.⁴⁶

These do not exhaust the options and it might be that different cases call for different stories. I leave the task of developing an alternative account of the roles HOE plays for another occasion. The aim for present purposes is to show that the critique of the view that there are second-order reasons is of wider significance by demonstrating its bearing on certain prominent positions in contemporary epistemology.

8. Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been the view that there are second-order reasons (not) to φ for certain first-order reasons. I have argued that this view clashes with a plausible motivational constraint on reasons, and that it commits its proponent to the existence of reasons of the wrong kind. These points together count against the view that there are second-order reasons. At the very least, they show that second-order reasons cannot do some of the explanatory work they are supposed to do, for example, in explaining why it is not rational to adopt certain attitudes on certain grounds.

I have also argued that the view that there are second-order reasons is not peculiar to those working in practical philosophy. It is held implicitly by proponents of prominent views about the epistemic norms to which practical reason is subject and about the role of higher-order evidence. If the notion of a second-order reason is out of order, so too are those views.

⁴⁶ At least, in the sense that they are reasons for actions or for conative attitudes, as opposed to reasons for doxastic states.

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