

Reasons and Evidence One Ought*

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Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star have recently argued that the concept of a reason can be helpfully explained in terms of the concept of *evidence* and the concept of *ought*.¹ Kearns and Star defend the thesis

(R) Necessarily, a fact *F* is a reason for an agent *A* to Φ if and only if *F* is evidence that *A* ought to Φ (where Φ is either a belief or an action).²

R is a general thesis applying to both reasons for belief and reasons for action. To take an example concerning reasons for belief, according to R, the fact that Ann says Bob is out of town is a reason for me to believe Bob is out of town if and only if the fact that Ann says Bob is out of town is evidence that I ought to believe Bob is out of town. To take an example concerning reasons for action, according to R, the fact that the resort is pleasant is a reason for you to visit it if and only if the fact that the resort is pleasant is evidence that you ought to visit it. As Kearns and Star note, R seems true for these “standard cases.”³

If R is true, then we could use the right-hand side of this biconditional to explain the left-hand side. This explanation would be informative. Unlike the explanation of reasons merely in terms of the idea of ‘counting in favor of’—which, as some have noted, is not informative since the idea of ‘counting in favor of’ can itself be understood only

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1. Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, “Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?” *Ethics* 118 (2008): 31–56, and “Reasons as Evidence,” forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 4, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 215–42.

2. Kearns and Star, “Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?” 37, and “Reasons as Evidence,” 216.

3. Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” 222–24.

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by immediately reverting back to the idea of a reason⁴—the concept of a reason is here explained in terms of two concepts on which we have an independent grasp: the concept of evidence and the concept of ought.⁵ The concept of evidence is itself understood by Kearns and Star on a probability-raising conception, which I'll explain below and assume to be correct for the purposes of this discussion.

However, I don't think that R is true. I'll argue in this discussion that this biconditional is false in both directions. I'll argue in Section I that some fact could be a reason for an agent *A* to Φ without being evidence that *A* ought to Φ . And I'll argue in Section II that some fact could be evidence that *A* ought to Φ without being a reason for *A* to Φ . I'll proceed by presenting and discussing some counterexamples.

But, before getting to those counterexamples, we should first say a bit about how the concept of evidence—itsself a much-discussed concept in epistemology and the philosophy of science—is understood by Kearns and Star. They adopt a probability-raising understanding of evidence, according to which evidence is that which raises the probability (Pr) of a hypothesis.⁶ More precisely, according to this understanding of evidence, *e* is evidence for *h* if and only if $\text{Pr}(h | e) > \text{Pr}(h)$. If we apply this understanding of evidence to R, we get:

4. See, e.g., T. M. Scanlon, who writes: "I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. 'Counts in favor how?' one might ask. 'By providing a reason for it' seems to be the only answer" (*What We Owe to Each Other* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998], 17). Similarly, Derek Parfit writes: "If we were asked what it means to claim that we have some reason, it would be hard to give a helpful answer. Facts give us reasons, we might say, when they count in favour of our having some belief, or desire, or our acting in some way. But 'counting in favour of' means, roughly, 'giving a reason for.' Like some other groups of fundamental concepts . . . the concept of a reason is *indefinable* in the sense that it cannot be helpfully explained in other terms" ("Climbing the Mountain" [unpublished manuscript, 2008], 21).

5. John Broome also attempts to provide an informative explanation of reasons as facts which play a "for- Φ " role in what he calls "weighing explanations." See his "Reasons" in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28–55. Broome's view, which I will not discuss here, is carefully criticized in detail in Kearns and Star, "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?"

6. See Kearns and Star, "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?" 44–45, and "Reasons as Evidence," 230–32. Peter Achinstein has presented some counterexamples which purport to show that *e*'s raising the probability of *h* is neither necessary nor sufficient for *e*'s being evidence for *h*. See, especially, chap. 4 of Achinstein's *The Book of Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Sherrilyn Roush, "Discussion: Positive Relevance Defended," *Philosophy of Science* 71 (2004): 110–16, and Peter Achinstein, "A Challenge to Positive Relevance Theorists: Reply to Roush," *Philosophy of Science* 71 (2004): 521–24, for further discussion of Achinstein's counterexamples to probability-raising being a necessary condition for something's being evidence.

(R*) Necessarily, a fact F is a reason for an agent A to Φ if and only if $\Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi | F) > \Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$.⁷

Kearns and Star also defend a proportionality thesis, according to which “the strength of a reason to Φ is the degree to which this reason increases the probability that one ought to Φ .”⁸

But a problem seems to immediately arise here. Suppose the probability that one ought to Φ is already quite high (or already one). In that case, the addition of another, perhaps weighty, reason to Φ , r , would not increase the probability that one ought to Φ that much (or not at all, if the probability is already one) and so would count as a “light-weight” reason (or no reason at all, if the probability is already one). Kearns and Star deal with the problem by suggesting that we shouldn’t require that r raise the probability that one ought to Φ relative to one’s entire body of evidence but instead relative to “some salient relevant subset of one’s total body of evidence.”⁹ However, they do not go on to explain what would make for such a salient relevant subset. But they have, at least in outline, a way of dealing with cases in which the probability that one ought to Φ is already quite high. But, as I’ll now explain, I think there are some counterexamples to Kearns and Star’s thesis that cannot be avoided by this modification.

I

I’ll first argue that some fact F could be a reason for A to Φ without raising the probability that A ought to Φ . Let’s suppose that Mother’s Day is coming up, and I am deciding what gift to get for Mom. Suppose I come to acquire the following piece of information:

(e_1) Dad would be happy were I to get Mom some specific gift he found featured in the *Sears Catalog*.¹⁰

Suppose that I do not doubt, nor have any reason to doubt, that e_1 is true. Now, I haven’t yet looked at the catalog to see what that specific gift is. But I do have the following relevant piece of background information:

(b_1) Whenever Dad would be happy with Mom getting some gift, there is always some competing, weightier reason(s) against getting that gift for Mom.

7. Unlike R above, this formulation is not explicitly presented by Kearns and Star. But I do not suspect that they would object to it since it simply combines R with their understanding of evidence as probability-raising.

8. Kearns and Star, “Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?” 45. See also Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” 232.

9. Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” 232 n. 10.

10. Below I’ll refer to this specific gift from the *Sears Catalog* as “the gift.”

Again, suppose that I do not doubt, nor have any reason to doubt, that b_1 is true. (Suppose Dad has a long history of being inclined toward gifts that are either tasteless, tacky, overly expensive, insensitive, or bad in some other way.) So, when I come to believe e_1 , I also come to believe that there are competing, weightier reasons against buying the gift (though I don't yet know what these reasons are).

We should here note two things about e_1 . First, e_1 is a reason for me to buy the gift. The fact that buying the gift will increase my father's happiness is a consideration counting in favor of buying the gift.¹¹ Of course, it is a consideration that I am sure is outweighed by the considerations counting against buying that gift, but it is nonetheless a reason for me to buy the gift. Second, the addition of e_1 does not raise and indeed it lowers the probability that I ought to buy the gift. More precisely, $\Pr(\text{I ought to buy the gift} \mid b_1) > \Pr(\text{I ought to buy the gift} \mid e_1 \text{ and } b_1)$. So, e_1 is a reason for me to buy the gift, but it does not raise the probability that I ought to buy the gift.¹² So, R^* is false in the left-right direction.

I'll now consider some ways one might defend R^* against my counterexample. It might be tempting to respond to this example by claiming that e_1 is here both evidence for and evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. But that claim simply cannot be made on the understanding of evidence as probability-raising, since it is logically incoherent to say that addition of e_1 both raises and lowers the probability that I ought to buy the gift; the probability is either raised or lowered (or stays the same) but not both. And since the addition of e_1 lowers the probability that I ought to buy the gift, it is not evidence for the claim that I ought to buy the gift.

Perhaps one might instead suggest that e_1 is both evidence for the claim that I ought to buy the gift and evidence for the claim that I

11. I am not committing myself here to the controversial thesis that the fact that my father would be made happy by my Φ -ing is, in every case, a reason for me to Φ . As moral particularists often point out, were Φ -ing something cruel or sadistic, the fact that he would be made happy by my Φ -ing is no reason at all for me to Φ . But I do not think that it's controversial, in the specific example I've given, to claim that the fact that my father would be made happy by my buying that gift would be a reason (of some weight, perhaps not that much) for me to buy that gift.

12. An important feature of this example is that, before coming to believe e_1 , I do not already know the competing weightier reasons against buying the gift (or even that there are such reasons)—I haven't even looked at the *Sears Catalog*. Now, were the reasons against buying the gift already part of my body of evidence, then the addition of e_1 would indeed raise the probability that I ought to buy the gift. But since they are not already part of my body of evidence in the example I give, the addition of e_1 lowers the probability that I ought to buy the gift.

ought not to buy the gift.¹³ On this suggestion, we can avoid the logical incoherence of claiming that e_1 is both evidence for and against some hypothesis by saying instead that e_1 is here evidence for two (logically compatible) hypotheses: that I ought to buy it and that I ought not to buy it. (The hypotheses are logically compatible, one might argue, because there could be ‘deontic conflicts’ such that it is possible that one ought to Φ and ought not to Φ .)

This suggestion would indeed be helpful were we dealing with a piece of evidence that is evidence for the claim that I ought not to buy the gift but not also evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. But in the example I’ve given e_1 seems to be both. One could, quite reasonably, cite e_1 as evidence supporting the claim that I ought to buy the gift and, just as reasonably, cite e_1 as evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. And, assuming I’m rational, when I come to learn e_1 , I come to have increased confidence in the former claim and decreased confidence in the latter. But if the addition of e_1 does indeed lower the probability that I ought to buy the gift, it cannot also raise the probability that I ought to do so. In other words, e_1 cannot also be evidence that I ought to buy the gift—even though it is a reason for me to do so.¹⁴

There might be yet another way for Kearns and Star to deal with this counterexample. As I mentioned earlier, Kearns and Star respond to worries about cases in which the probability that one ought to Φ is already high (or already one) by noting that R requires only that one’s reasons be such that they raise the probability one ought to Φ relative to “some salient relevant subset of one’s total body of evidence” and not relative to one’s total body of evidence. Now perhaps Kearns and Star could appeal to that same idea here. Perhaps they could claim that b_1 , while part of one’s total body of evidence, is not part of the salient

13. The possibility of this line of reply is suggested by some remarks made by Kearns and Star in response to a similar line of objection in Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” 237–38.

14. Perhaps Kearns and Star might suggest that e_1 is not itself evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. Rather, e_1 is evidence for the claim that there are competing, weightier reasons against buying the gift, and this claim—namely, that there are competing, weightier reasons against buying the gift—is evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. And, so, on this suggestion, e_1 is not itself evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift. However, such a reply is not available to those who adopt a probability-raising understanding of evidence, since, on that understanding of evidence, a sufficient condition for e ’s being evidence for h is e ’s raising the probability of h when added to one’s body of evidence (including background assumptions) and a sufficient condition for e ’s being evidence against h is e ’s lowering the probability of h when added to one’s body of evidence (including background assumptions). And, since the addition of e_1 in my example lowers the probability that I ought to buy the gift, e_1 counts as evidence against the claim that I ought to buy the gift.

relevant subset relative to which the probability must be raised. They could note, letting SS stand for the “salient relevant subset of one’s total body of evidence,” which here excludes b_1 , that $\Pr(\text{I ought to buy the gift} \mid e_1 \text{ and } SS) > \Pr(\text{I ought to buy the gift} \mid SS)$.

Perhaps they could reformulate R in light of this suggestion:

(R^* - SS) Necessarily, a fact F is a reason for an agent A to Φ if and only if $\Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi \mid F \text{ and } SS) > \Pr(A \text{ ought to } \Phi \mid SS)$.

The example we have been considering is no counterexample to R^* - SS : e_1 is a reason to buy the gift, and it raises the probability (relative to SS) that I ought to buy the gift.

As I mentioned earlier, Kearns and Star do not provide us with any explanation of what would make certain parts of one’s total body of evidence salient or not. So, it is difficult to assess the merits of this possible line of reply. But I’ll suggest one general reason to be cautious here: once we exclude certain evidence from view and determine what one has reason to do in light of a limited view of the evidence, we could end up with a distorted picture of what one has reason to do. For instance, let’s suppose that, all evidence considered, I have no reason to drive to Sears Plaza on my way home from work. Since my reasons for buying the gift are outweighed by the weighty reasons against buying the gift, and so I ought not buy the gift, I have no reason to take those steps that would facilitate my buying the gift, such as driving to Sears Plaza. But were my reasons to buy the gift not outweighed by competing reasons, or otherwise defeated, I would indeed have a reason to take those steps that would facilitate my buying the gift.¹⁵ But here’s the problem: when we exclude evidence of my reasons for buying the gift being outweighed—as we do when we exclude b_1 from SS —then it seems right to say that I do have evidence that I ought to drive to Sears Plaza on my way home. More precisely, relative to SS , a certain fact (that driving to Sears Plaza would facilitate my buying the gift) raises the probability that I ought to drive to Sears Plaza. And so it follows from R^* - SS that this fact is a reason for me to drive to Sears Plaza.¹⁶ But, as we said above, there is no such reason since I ought not buy the gift. In short, my worry is that, by excluding evidence, like b_1 , in this way, we will end up with wrong conclusions about what we have reason to do.

In summary, I have been arguing in this section that R is false in the left-right direction: some fact could be a reason for one to Φ without

15. For further defense of this claim, see Joseph Raz’s discussion of the Facilitative Principle in “The Myth of Instrumental Rationality,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1 (2005): 1–28.

16. While it might be plausible to say that this fact would be a reason were b_1 not the case, it’s not plausible to say that it is a reason. But that’s what would follow from R^* - SS .

being evidence that one ought to Φ . In our example, e_1 is a reason for me to buy the gift, but it lowers the probability that I ought to do so.

II

I'll now argue that R^* is false in the right-left direction. I'll argue that some fact could raise the probability that one ought to Φ without being a reason for one to Φ . I'll borrow (and slightly modify) an example discussed by Jonathan Dancy.¹⁷ Suppose we have the following information:

- (e_2) I've promised to Φ , and
- (e_3) There is no reason for me not to Φ .

It is uncontroversial that e_2 is a reason for me to Φ .¹⁸ But e_3 is a statement about the nonexistence of reasons not to Φ , not itself a consideration counting in favor of Φ -ing. (I'll argue for this claim in a moment.) But, as Dancy notes, e_3 plays an important 'enabling' role in this example. Specifically, e_3 enables me to move, in a piece of practical reasoning, from e_2 to my Φ -ing (or, if you like, to the conclusion that I ought to Φ).¹⁹

The addition of e_3 is evidence that I ought to Φ ; it raises the probability that I ought to Φ in that $\Pr(\text{I ought to } \Phi \mid e_2) < \Pr(\text{I ought to } \Phi \mid e_3 \text{ and } e_2)$. Indeed, the raise in probability is such that whereas before (on the basis of e_2 alone) I was not entitled to conclude that I ought to Φ , I am now (on the basis of e_2 and e_3) entitled to conclude that I ought to Φ .

But e_3 is a statement about the absence of reasons not to Φ ; it is not itself a consideration counting in favor of Φ -ing. If we were to allow that it is itself a consideration counting in favor of Φ -ing, we would quickly find ourselves in difficulty. Consider a case where there is no reason to Φ and no reason not to Φ . (Perhaps put "scratching my finger lightly on the table where my hand rests" or something similar in for Φ). I take it to be intuitively plausible that there are actions such that there are no reasons to do them and no reasons not to do them. But if we allow that the fact that there is no reason not to Φ is also a reason to Φ , then we would now have to say there is a reason to Φ in this example, which contradicts our initial, intuitively plausible, description

17. Dancy's example involves the claim that "there is no greater reason not to Φ " instead of e_3 below: e_3 entails this claim, but this claim does not entail e_3 . Also, Dancy's discussion involves other "enablers" besides e_3 . So I'm here focusing only on part of his example. See Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 38.

18. Assuming, of course, that I didn't make the promise under duress and that there are no other such "disablers" for this reason. See Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, 38–44.

19. *Ibid.*, 38–40.

of the example. (Symmetrically, if we were to allow that the fact that there is no reason to Φ is also a reason not to Φ , then we would now be saying there is a reason not to Φ in this example, which contradicts our initial, intuitively plausible, description of the example.)

But perhaps I should abandon my intuition that there are actions such that there are no reasons to do them and no reasons not to do them. Perhaps the right way to describe such cases is that there is one reason on each side: there is a reason to Φ (provided by the fact that there is no reason not to Φ) and a reason not to Φ (provided by the fact that there is no reason to Φ). But this is absurd. The existence of these reasons would remove the very states of affairs that supposedly provide these reasons, namely, that there is no reason not to Φ and no reason to Φ .

So, we should instead conclude that facts about the absence of reasons not to Φ are not themselves reasons to Φ . So, e_3 is not a reason to Φ . Yet e_3 does indeed raise the probability that I ought to Φ . So, R^* is false in the right-left direction.

III

In summary, I've argued in this discussion that some fact F 's raising the probability that A ought to Φ is neither sufficient nor necessary for F 's being a reason for A to Φ . It's not sufficient because some fact, like e_3 above, could raise the probability that one ought to Φ but not constitute a reason for one to Φ . It's not necessary because some fact, like e_1 above, could be a reason for one to Φ but, given certain background assumptions, actually lower the probability that one ought to Φ .