

## Reasons, Rationality and Exercising Capacities subpar

This paper presents a new way to defend the following version of the view that there is a strong connection between (objective, normative) reasons and rationality:

- (1) Rationality consists in responding to reasons one *has*.

To have reasons, or to possess them, here means to stand in an epistemic relation to them.

A crucial problem for (1) is presented by cases of error:

### **Error**

Baddie sees smoke coming from the windows above him, he hears flames roaring and feels heat emanating from the walls. The fire alarm is blaring. Baddie believes that the hotel is on fire and thus leaves the hotel. He later learns that it was all an elaborate fire drill.

Baddie's belief that the hotel is on fire is false. So absent any secondary reasons (for example not to annoy the fire department by disobeying them), there are no reasons for Baddie to leave the hotel. Moreover, since there are no reasons for Baddie, there is nothing for Baddie to stand in an epistemic relation *to*. So Baddie does not *have* a reason to leave the hotel. But Baddie is clearly rational in leaving. This configuration of judgements contradicts (1). Error cases thus reveal a trilemma structure at the heart of the debate about the connection between reasons and rationality. The following three propositions, it turns out, are not co-tenable:

- (1) Rationality consists in responding to reasons one has.
- (2) Baddie is rational.
- (3) Baddie does not *have* a reason to leave the hotel.

This trilemma can serve as a useful dialectical watershed for different approaches in the debate about reasons and rationality. Philosophers who significantly weaken (Scanlon 1998), or abandon entirely (Broome 2013), the idea that there is a connection between reasons and rationality reject (1). Philosophers committed to this connection either brazenly deny (2) (Littlejohn 2012) or reject (3). A prominent way to deny (3) is to claim that some of Baddie's epistemic reasons – facts about what seems to be the case to Baddie – are also his practical reasons, thereby significantly extending the realm of reasons for action (Kiesewetter 2013, Lord 2013).

This paper pursues a different strategy for denying (3). This strategy is to deny that the epistemic relation of having reasons is factual. Factualism about having is the thesis that *S has* a reason to  $\phi$  only if *there is* a reason for *S* to  $\phi$ . In other words, factualism claims that *S* has the reason that *p* to  $\phi$  only if *p* is true.

The reasoning in support of (3) presented above crucially relies on factualism. Because *there is* no reason for Baddie to leave the hotel, I said, Baddie cannot *have* a reason to leave. Yet, if factualism is false, this reasoning does not go through. Baddie might then have a reason to leave without there being a reason to leave.

In the paper, I propose a novel argument for non-factualism. The argument starts with the assumption that to have reasons is to exercise the capacity to respond to reasons (more precisely, the subcapacity to recognize reasons) and then exploits insights about what it means to exercise capacities in general: It is a common assumption in our practice of ascribing capacities to agents that it is possible to exercise those capacities badly, or *subpar*. If we take this possibility seriously, then it follows that not every exercise of the ability to  $\phi$  is a successful  $\phi$ -ing. For example, not every exercise of an archer's ability to hit the target will be an actual hitting of the target. The archer might miss the target yet still exercise her ability to hit it. I defend this view of subpar exercise against a number of objections.

I then discuss the possibility that a given activity is a *good* exercise of the ability to  $\phi$  while not being a successful  $\phi$ -ing. For a paradigm example of this possibility, imagine a tachometer on a bicycle propped up on a table. The tachometer has the capacity to indicate speed correctly. Yet if we spin the wheel of the bicycle, the tachometer will incorrectly indicate a speed. Since there is no intrinsic flaw in the tachometer (it is working just fine), the tachometer appears to be exercising the capacity to indicate speed well, even though it is not indicating the correct speed.

These observations translate to the capacity to respond to reasons correctly. Under the assumption that to have reasons is to exercise the capacity to respond to reasons correctly, we can see that error-cases (at least how they are typically presented) are structurally identical to the tachometer-case above:

Baddie exercises his capacity to respond to reasons well without exercising it successfully, that is, without actually latching onto objective normative reasons. However, this does not mean that Baddie does not *have* a reason to leave the hotel. The insight that it is possible to exercise the capacity to  $\phi$  (and exercise it well) without exercising it successfully, in the case of the capacity to respond to reasons correctly, implies that factualism about the having-relation is false, i.e. that an agent can *have* reasons to  $\phi$  without there *being* reasons to  $\phi$ . This importantly does not mean that *no* exercise of the capacity to respond to reasons is successful, it just means that to exercise the capacity is not necessarily to successfully latch onto the reasons there are.

In conclusion, the theory of capacities can render a sophisticated version of the thesis that rationality is determined by responding to reasons correctly. The sophisticated version also embraces the idea that rationality is determined by reasons an agent has, but it clarifies this idea by presenting a

disjunctive picture about having reasons. To have a reason is to exercise the capacity to respond to reasons – either by successfully latching onto reasons or by failing to latch on successfully while still exercising the capacity to respond (like Baddie).

References:

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