

# Reasons for Actions Lecture Series

## The Bootstrapping Objection

(sections 6-7 of The Normativity of Reasons and Rationality)

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In this talk, I will concentrate on the Bootstrapping Objection. The handout goes beyond my presentation. It introduces the background of the debate and indicates where I stand on the main issue.

(1) The Ideal of Consistency of the Normative Domain

(2) A two-part theory which leaves too much room for potential inconsistencies

Part 1: Rules of rationality. They are mind-based. They determine what we have reason to do and to believe and what we ought to do and what we ought to believe based on what mental states we are in. Examples: Consistency, Instrumental Rationality, Obvious Implication, the normative belief requirement, NBR, which says that you ought to (intend to) do what you believe you ought to do.

Part 2: Rules of what counts as a reason. They are world-based. They determine what we have reason to do and to believe and what we ought to do and what we ought to believe based on what the world is like. Examples: Something's being poisonous is a reason not to drink it. Something's being fun is a reason to do it. Something's being just is a reason to prefer it.

(3) Four responses

(A) We try to separate the domain to which these principles apply.

(B) We can argue for a distinction between different senses of 'ought', defined by the distinct constraints that on the one hand the world and on the other hand, our mind imposes on us.

(C) We deny mind-based oughts and our intuitions about what made them look plausible will have to be explained in terms of world-based oughts.

(D) We deny world-based oughts and our intuitions about what made them look plausible will have to be explained in terms of mind-based oughts.

(C1) Kolodny's View

(C1a) There is no mind-based normativity; all normativity is world-based.

(C1b) The transparency account explains why we (mistakenly) thought that there is mind-based normativity.

(C2) Broome's View

(C2a) There is world-based normativity.

(C2b) What looks like mind-based normativity are (neither world-based nor mind-based) wide-scope requirements.

(C2c) Whether these wide-scope requirements are normative is an important question, about which one has to remain agnostic.

(4) Why I do not share Kolodny's view

(4.1) The transparency account fails to explain the apparent normative force of mind-based oughts.

(4.2) There is the danger that Kolodny's (like any world-based view) collapses into Moore's theory 'Do what is best!' 'Believe what is true!', which denies normativity as we understand it.

(5) Why I do not share Broome's view

(5.1) Rules of rationality, when understood as wide-scope requirements, are normatively implausible. They are too weak.

(5.2) Wide-scope requirements do not solve the inconsistency problem. There is deontic detachment.

(5.3) A lack of match between reasons and rationality can make us doubt either the normativity of rationality or the normativity of reasons. It is hard to understand what the normative question is.

(6) What is supposed to be wrong with Mind-Based Oughts and Mind-Based Reasons

(7) Answering These Objections

(8) Can one really deny world-based reasons?

'The agent believes that this stuff is gin, when it is in fact petrol. He wants a gin and tonic. Has he reason, or a reason, to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it? ... it is just very odd to say that he has a reason to drink this stuff, and natural to say that he has no reason to drink it, although he thinks he has.' (Williams 1980, 102)

(a) Accepting NBR does not commit me to tell you to do what you think you ought to do.

(b1) Advising the agent not to drink is compatible with exclusively mind-based normativity.

(b2) It is part of one's perspective to think that one's perspective is superior to the agent's perspective. (In order not to lead to a Moorean account, the perspective superiority claim needs to be understood as perspective dependent.)

(c) The fact that we say 'The reason not to drink is the fact that it is poisonous' does not decide the question whether reasons are world-based, i.e. facts, or mind-based, i.e. mental attitudes. See Jim Pryor, 'Reasons and That Clauses' *Philosophical Issues* 17, 2007

(9) NBR: Why we ought to do what we believe we ought to do

Accepting NBR is a necessary condition of the possibility of practical reasoning.

(10) The Infallibility Problem and Weak NBR

Strong NBR: If one believes one ought to *fi*, then one ought to *fi*.

Weak NBR: One ought to do what one believes one ought to do, or there is nothing one ought to do.

Compare: (Weak Claim) It is irrational to act against your own well-considered judgement about what you ought to do. (Strong Claim) It is rational to act in accordance with your judgement about what you ought to do.

Take a case in which someone does not do what he believes he ought to do: B(Ofi) and not-*fi*. Someone who rejects any NBR would distinguish three different versions of failing to do what one believes one ought to do.

(a) B(Ofi) and not-*fi* and Ofi

(b) B(Ofi) and not-*fi* and not-Ofi

(c) B(Ofi) and not-*fi* and Onot-*fi*.

If we accept Strong NBR, cases (b) and (c) are not possible and case (a) is a violation of Strong NBR. If we accept Weak NBR, then case (c) is not possible, but case (b) is. One can be wrong about what one ought to do. According to Weak NBR, in case (b), a case in which one wrongly believes one ought to *fi* and does not *fi*, one did not violate Weak NBR, as there was nothing one ought to have done.

## The Bootstrapping Objection (Sections 6 and 7)

**Bootstrapping 1: Against attitudinal (i.e. mind-based) reasons. Why beliefs are not reasons. You cannot, by means of your beliefs, bootstrap a new reason into existence, to add to your evidence.**

'First, there are no attitudinal reasons. Attitudes are not reasons in the way I have described. Here is why. Take R3: If you believe *p* and you believe if *p* then *q*, your two beliefs are together a reason for you to believe *q*. For '*p*' substitute 'Carbon dioxide is poisonous' and for '*q*' 'Emissions of carbon dioxide are harmful'. There are various pieces of evidence for the proposition *q*, and others against it. Each of these pieces of evidence constitutes a pro tanto reason either for or against believing *q*. Just for the sake of argument, let us assume that the evidence falls short of being conclusive, so, by a small margin, these evidential reasons do not require you to believe emissions of carbon dioxide are harmful. Now suppose there is no evidence for the proposition *p*, that carbon dioxide is poisonous, but nevertheless you believe it. Suppose you also believe that if *p* then *q* – that, if carbon dioxide is poisonous, emissions of it are harmful. According to R3, these beliefs of yours constitute a reason to believe *q*. Since the evidential reasons fall short of requiring you to believe *q*, we may assume this attitudinal reason tips the balance, therefore all your reasons together require you to believe emissions of carbon dioxide are harmful. That is not credible. Your evidential reasons do not require you to believe emissions of carbon dioxide are

harmful, and it is not creditable that your beliefs could add to these reasons. You cannot, by means of your beliefs, bootstrap a new reason into existence, to add to the evidence. (J Broome, *How To Be Rational*, p. 91)

Response: Whether you can add to your evidence by believing something depends on how we understand what evidence is. Broome's argument is question-begging. We have to assume that beliefs are not reasons in order to show that they are not.

### **Bootstrapping 2: If beliefs were reasons, any belief you have gives you a reason to have it. That cannot be so; it would be absurd bootstrapping.**

Broome continues, 'I can reinforce the example. R3 entails that, if you believe p and you believe that if p then p, these beliefs constitute a reason for you to believe p. That cannot be so. We can take it for granted that you believe the tautology that, if p then p. Given that, R3 entails that believing a proposition gives you a reason to believe it. Any belief you have gives you a reason to have it. That cannot be so; it would be absurd bootstrapping.'

Response: What it is to be a reason. In the belief case, a reason makes what it is a reason for more likely. (a) Suppose an agent's probability function contains the following:  $P(F/S) > P(F)$ . I say that, for this agent, smoke is a reason to believe that there is fire. It is a reason the agent has, if he notices/believes that there is smoke. Then, having this reason, his probability of fire increases. (b) For this agent, given his conditional probabilities, smoke would be a reason to believe that there is fire. It becomes or is a reason when the agent notices smoke. (c) Noticing smoke (believing that there is smoke) is a reason to believe that there is fire. (d) Dynamic Version: Acquiring the belief that p (in any degree) is a reason to believe q iff the new probability of q (as determined by the appropriate probabilities via Jeffrey conditionalization) is higher than the old one.

Strict Conditionalization: If  $P_n(E)=1$ , then  $P_n(H)=P_o(H/E)$

Jeffrey Con.: If you acquire  $P_n(E)$ , then  $P_n(H)=P_o(H/E).P_n(E)+P_o(H/not-E).P_n(not-E)$

Broome's Self-Application Example:  $P_n(p)=P_o(p/p).P_n(p)+0$

On (d), acquiring any belief in p will not change the belief in p. Thus, it is not a reason. R3 needs to be changed appropriately. to confirm with the idea that reasons raise the probability of what they are reasons for. Given (a) p is a reason for itself (on the strength of the conditional probability). However, this is not counterintuitive. P is a reason for P but not a reason an agent can have.

### **On the Way to Bootstrapping 3: Intentions are not reasons.**

#### **(3.1) Metaphysical reading: You cannot bootstrap a reason into existence from nowhere.**

The Bootstrapping Problem: Forming an intention to do something surely cannot give one a reason to do it that one would not otherwise have. If it did, we could give ourselves a reason to do something just by intending to do it; and that cannot be right. (Richard Holton, 'Rational Resolve', *Phil Rev* 113, 2004, p. 513)

'The objection is that you cannot bootstrap a reason into existence from nowhere, just by forming an intention.' (John Broome, 'Are Intentions Reasons? And How Should We Cope with Incommensurable Values', in Morris and Ripstein, eds., *Practical Rationality and Preference*, Cambridge UP, 2001)

Response: Compare: (a) Promising to do something surely cannot give one a reason to do it that one would not otherwise have. If it did, we could give ourselves a reason to do something just by promising to do it; and that cannot be right.

Compare (b): Wanting to eat a banana surely cannot give one a reason to eat a banana that one would not otherwise have. If it did, we could give ourselves a reason to do something just by wanting to do it; and that cannot be right.

The metaphysical clothing hides a normative objection. In its metaphysical reading, the objection is question-begging.

#### **(3.2.1) Normative reading: First Version**

'The view that intentions are reasons is implausible. If you have no reason to do something, it is implausible that you can give yourself a reason just by forming the intention of doing it. How could you create a reason for yourself out of nothing? Suppose, say, that you have no reason either for or against doing some act, and you happen to decide to do it. Now you intend to do it. So now, if intentions are reasons, you have a reason to do it. Since you have no contrary reason not to do it,

the balance of reasons is in favour of your doing it. You now actually ought to do it, therefore. But this is implausible. It is implausible that just deciding to do something can make it the case that you ought to do it, when previously that was not the case.' (Broome 2001, 98)

Response: I disagree with the claim that in such cases the view that intentions are reasons has implausible normative consequences.

### **(3.2.2) Normative Reading: Second Version**

Should you go to Paris? Suppose you have decided; you intend to go. Broome says, 'If the balance of antecedent reasons was in favour of your going to Paris, you ought to go there. You have made the right decision and you ought to carry it out. If the balance of antecedent reasons was against your going to Paris, you ought not to go there. You have made the wrong decision and you ought not to carry it out. Your intention itself does not count one whit in favour of going to Paris. It makes no difference to what you should do. What you should do depends only on your antecedent reasons. Suppose there is a slight balance of antecedent reasons against going., but you made a mistake in your calculations and wrongly decided to go. A short time later, having invested nothing in the decision, you discover your mistake. Should you change your mind? If intentions were reasons, there would automatically be a reason not to, and if the balance of antecedent reasons would be slight enough, you should stick to your decision. But actually you should change your mind. Since you have invested nothing in your wrong decision you should change it. (Broome 2001, 99)

Response: Three points 'against' Broome, but one thing remains.

### **The Bootstrapping Objection 3: In a slogan, 'Irrationality does not generate rationality'.**

On the intention-based reasons view (i.e. if intentions are reasons) ... an intentional action ... may be bootstrapped into rationality by an intention it was irrational to form.' (M Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, 1987, 26)

'I do not say that, if you believe p, you ought to believe q. That may well be false, even when q follows obviously from p. No one ought to believe the world was made in less than a week; the evidence is strongly against it. Even if you believe the world was made in six days, still it is not the case that you ought to believe it was made in less than a week.' (Broome, ms. 45, from 'Normative Requirements')

Response: Silly starting beliefs don't make it the case that we ought to have certain other beliefs, even if – and now what should we say? – (a) even if they are reasons for these other beliefs (given Broome's account of reasons as explanations of ought facts, we cannot say this) – (b) even if they would be (conclusive) reasons were they themselves normatively okay – (c) even if one would be irrational were one to keep these silly starting beliefs and not have these other beliefs. Denying (a) does not force us to accept (c); I offer (b) as an alternative, see my 'Particularism and the Structure of Reasons', *Acta Analytica* 2006.

The fact that irrational attitudes are not reasons (such a view would indeed have implausible normative consequences) does not establish idea that no attitudes are reasons. The Bootstrapping Objection leaves the view that attitudes, which themselves are okay in terms of their rationality, are reasons intact.

### **(Bootstrapping 4: The principle 'If you believe you ought to F, you ought to F' entails normative infallibility.)**

'Suppose I believe that I have conclusive reason to have some attitude. In some sense, I ought to have that attitude; it would be irrational of me not to have it. Now suppose that 'ought' here means 'have reason'. Then we get the bootstrapping result that if I believe that I have conclusive reason to have some attitude, then I in fact have reason to have it. This is absurd.' (Niko Kolodny, 'Why Be Rational?', *Mind* 114, 2005.)

Response: We can weaken NBR. If you believe you ought to F, then you ought to F or there is nothing you ought to do. In this way, we have made room for normative fallibility whilst holding on to the idea that it would be irrational to act against one's own well-reasoned judgement about what one ought to do. Is this move ad hoc? No, it is support by independently plausible conditions on what makes a norm normative for one, namely persuasibility under the aim of doing what one ought to do.