

The agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction: my two sense(s)¹

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Abstract

The agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction is very well established and widely employed in the metaethical literature. However, I argue that there are actually two different senses of the distinction at large: the hetero-/homogeneous sense and the dependence/independence sense. The traditional, unqualified distinction ought, therefore, to be amended, with each use of the distinction being stipulated as used in either the hetero-/homogeneous sense or the dependence/independence sense. Careful analysis of various metaethics supports that there are these two senses – analysis, in particular, of a neo-Kantian metaethic, according to which reasons are agent-relative in the dependence sense but agent-neutral in the homogeneous sense, and – perhaps surprisingly – of Utilitarianism, according to which reasons are agent-neutral in the independence sense but agent-relative in the heterogeneous sense.

Introduction

Minimally, a reason is a consideration in favour of some action.² This is a normative definition, such that, if an agent has a reason to Φ and he/she fails to Φ , he/she has done something *wrong* – although the definition leaves open the question of whether this is moral wrongness or merely prudential, etc., wrongness. This very basic definition of a reason also leaves open the question of a reason's defeasibility; that is, the definition allows that (1) if an agent has a reason to Φ as well as a reason to not- Φ , his/her reason to Φ may be entirely defeated by the greater reason to not- Φ , or (2) his/her reason to Φ may simply be trumped but not defeated by the greater reason to not- Φ . It also leaves open the question of (motivational) internalism/externalism; that is, the definition allows that (3) if an agent has a reason to Φ , his/her having a reason entails that he/she is at least minimally (defeasibly) motivated to Φ , or that (4) the agent may be subject to a reason to Φ and yet have no motivation to Φ at all. Anything more substantial than this is difficult to say without committing to the nature of reasons as either agent-relative or agent-neutral, and, the direction in which the metaethicist decides – agent-relative, or agent-neutral – will bring with it a host of further implications about reasons.

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² This definition precludes theoretical reasons. This paper deals with the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction as applied – as it most commonly is – to metaethics, and thereby to practical, and not theoretical, reasons.

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