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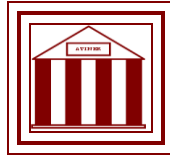
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Arbitrariness, Choice and Practical Reason

Patrick Fleming
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
James Madison University
USA

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Arbitrariness, Choice and Practical Reason

Patrick Fleming
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
James Madison University
USA

Abstract

A value-based theory of reasons claims that there are facts about the value of actions that hold independently of any person's attitudes towards those actions. Our reasons for action are determined by these facts. A desire-based theory claims that facts about what we desire, or would desire on appropriate reflection, determine our reasons. Reasons for action depend on what we are like psychologically. The key difference between the two is to what extent our reasons are independent of our attitudes. The value-based theory advocates complete independence, while the desire-based theory accepts some measure of dependence. In this paper I argue what counts as my reason is arbitrary for a value-based theory. If no internal factor plays a role in determining our reasons, then what reasons are my reasons are outside my control. This might be an attractive feature of moral reasons, but it is deeply implausible for personal reasons. The paper will argue that the value-based theorist is committed to arbitrariness in cases of choices between rational eligible options. That is, cases where I have to choose a career amongst a set of rationally permissible options. The value-based theorist has no resources to explain why some ends are more valuable to an agent than other available ends. The main strategy they employ is the Contextualizing strategy. They can claim that one's context can determine how value-based reasons apply in a situation. However, we will see that one's context is outside of one's direct control. So we still have no control over what reasons among the available reasons count as our reasons. I argue that sort of arbitrariness is deeply problematic.

Keywords: Metaethics, Practical Reason, Desire, Value

Corresponding Author:

A value-based theory of reasons claims that there are facts about the value of actions that hold independently of any person's attitudes towards those actions. Our reasons for action are determined by these facts. A desire-based theory claims that facts about what we desire, or would desire on appropriate reflection, determine our reasons. Reasons for action depend on what we are like psychologically. The key difference between the two is to what extent our reasons are independent of our attitudes. The value-based theory advocates complete independence, while the desire-based theory accepts some measure of dependence. In this paper I argue what counts as *my reason* is arbitrary for a value-based theory. If no internal factor plays a role in determining our reasons, then what reasons are my reasons are outside my control. This might be an attractive feature of moral reasons, but it is deeply implausible for personal reasons. The paper will argue that the value-based theorist is committed to arbitrariness in cases of choices between rational eligible options. That is, cases where I have to choose a career amongst a set of rationally permissible options. The value-based theorist has no resources to explain why some ends are more valuable to an agent than other available ends. The main strategy they employ is the Contextualizing strategy. They can claim that one's context can determine how value-based reasons apply in a situation. However, we will see that one's context is outside of one's direct control. So we still have no control over what reasons among the available reasons count as our reasons. I argue that sort of arbitrariness is deeply problematic.

On the face of it, reason and arbitrariness are incompatible. Chris Heathwood claims, "arbitrariness is anathema to reasons" (2011: 87). That seems very plausible. The thought seems to be that reasons justify. Arbitrary factors are just those that do not justify. So reasons could not be grounded on arbitrary factors. For instance, to say that the agent acted for a reason seems to entail that he did not act arbitrarily. In general, to judge that something is arbitrary is to judge that there is no reason for it. So there does seem to be some sort of conceptual incompatibility between reasons and arbitrariness. Call this the non-arbitrariness requirement on reasons.

Why might this be? It is natural to think that the incompatibility arises because of the connection between choice and reasons. Reasons can only be understood by how they function to justify and guide choice. The value-based theorist accepts that there is a conceptual connection between reason and choice because he claims reasons can only be understood as things that *count in favor* of a choice. If you do not understand that reasons work to justify choices, then you do not understand what reasons are according to the value-based theorist. Unless you grasp this basic fact, there is nothing anyone can say to help you better understand reasons.

A value-based theory satisfies the non-arbitrariness requirement on reasons because it places substantive constraints on what counts as a reason. Reasons are constrained by value. Now it might seem that this removes all arbitrariness from the realm of reasons. I argue that is not so. Arbitrariness arises at another level. What is a reason is not arbitrary on a value-based theory, but what counts as *my reason* is arbitrary. I argue that this is problematic because of reasons connection to choice. The value-based arbitrariness is worrisome because it arises for some of our most important choices.

One problem a value-based theory faces is explaining why different agents have different reasons. A desire-based theory appeals to psychological differences between agents to explain the differences in reasons. The value-based theory cannot go this route. So instead it appeals to the agent's context. Call this the contextualing strategy for explaining the differences between agent's reasons. Let us look at some examples to see how these different explanations go.

Imagine you and I are friends and you are feeling blue. That gives me a reason to try to cheer you up. And my reason seems different or stronger than the reasons a stranger would have to help you. What explains the difference between my reasons and the stranger's reasons? A desire-based theory points to the differences in our psychology. The fact that I care about you gives me a reason to help you on a desire-based theory. A value-based theory seems to disallow this move because our attitudes are not directly relevant. The reason I should help you on a value-based account is the value there is in helping others and the value in friendship. For the value-based theorist, normative truths, when stated sufficiently abstractly, are the same for every one. All the differences between individuals' reasons must be explained by non-normative factors that determine how these truths apply. These non-normative factors are one's context. In this case the value-based explanation appears more attractive. There is a reason to help those in need, but how that reason applies depends on one's opportunities to help. My reason to help you stems from the general normative truth that one ought to help those in need and it applies at this moment because our friendship gives me a special opportunity to help you. Following this general strategy the value-based theorist maintains that all normative truths are perfectly general, but how they apply depends on the agent's context.

However, for other cases this sort of explanation seems less plausible. Take the case of mere matters of taste. In such a case it seems that something internal to the agent makes all the difference. Imagine we are friends and we go out for pizza. What sort of slices should we get? My desire for pepperoni gives me a reason to choose pepperoni. Your desire for mushroom gives you a reason to choose mushroom. Desire makes all the difference.

Value-based theorists will counter that an internal factor makes a difference, but not a normative difference. It is just a further fact about one's context that changes how a normative truth applies. Context now includes not just external factors, but internal psychological states as well. T.M. Scanlon allows that some reasons are grounded in "subjective conditions" (1998: 42). Subjective conditions determine what an agent enjoys and we have reason to do what we enjoy. Parfit takes the next logical step in the contextualizing strategy by appealing to "hedonic likings and dislikings" to explain mere matters of taste (2011:1: 53). Some sensations are neutral in value. However, individuals might intensely like or dislike these sensations and that makes these sensations pleasant or unpleasant. Since we have reason to do what we find pleasant and reason not to do what we find unpleasant, these subjective states play a role in determining our reasons. That role is not normative though because it is merely a matter of one's context. It is similar to how one's opportunities determine whom one has a reason to help.

It is an open question whether this strategy succeeds for mere matters of taste.[1] I will not address it here. Note one fact about this strategy though: the factors that figure in our context are not direct products of our agency. Of course, friendship and opportunities are something we have some control over, but they are not immediate expressions of our agency. Likewise, subjective conditions or hedonic likings are not things we choose. In most cases we have no control over these at all. We simply find that we like some things and not others. On the value-based view none of our reasons are the product of our agency. We do not have any normative powers. We do not have the power to create reasons. It is essential to a value-based theory that no reasons are generated by our agency. Reasons may non-normatively depend on something internal to the agent, but the source of all value is external to our agency. Our reasons are not under our control.

Now consider cases of choices between rationally eligible options where the reason for each option is distinct. So it is not a mere matter of taste, but it is not unreasonable to choose either option. Each potion is made eligible by some value, but there is not a good reason to choose one over the other. Nevertheless, one must choose. We can call such cases ties. In most cases, choosing to have a child or picking a career is a case of a tie. What can the value-based theorist say about choice in such cases? They might deny that such cases exist, but the most prominent defenders of the view do not do so. Parfit and Scanlon explicitly allow for them.[2] Moreover, to deny they exist entails that the balance of reasons always singles out one option. That is implausible. A better picture of rational agency would be that in many cases reasons make a number of options eligible for choice, but they do not single out one alternative as the only rational option. The values in play might be described as incommensurate, equal or on a par. I will defend no particular version of this thesis about value, but I assume it is true.[3]

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[1] See Sobel (2005) and (2011)
[2] See Parfit (2011:32) and Scanlon (2004: 232).
[3] See Chang (1997) for some alternatives.

Scanlon (2004) addresses what role choice plays in these cases. He argues against what he calls an apparent duality in the source of our reasons. He claims that, "the *source* of all reasons is independent of the will, although the exercise of our wills may sometimes change our situation in ways that change the reasons that apply to us" (233). He makes a distinction between two different ways of thinking that a choice might have normative consequences. He says "one is by changing what the agent can do, or what attitudes she can hold, without being irrational. The other is by changing the reasons the agent has." (2004: 233). The first kind of change comes about because rationality bars certain combinations of attitudes. It would be irrational to believe that P, but refuse to rely on it in deliberation. The second kind of change would involve the creation of new reasons through an act of the will. Perhaps by intending to take my revenge I give myself a reason to take my revenge. Scanlon denies the existence of the second kind and attempts to explain the difference in our reasons to pursue personal projects in terms of the first kind. An act of the will does not change our reasons, but it does change our context.

Scanlon writes that, "a failure to take oneself to have a reason to advance a goal one has adopted, and continues to hold, is irrational" (235). Choice changes what other attitudes one can rationally hold in two ways. First, once one has made a choice it is irrational to continue contemplating alternative actions. Second, one has "purely pragmatic reasons" not to abandon a choice unless new information arises (241). In both cases, these are second-order reasons stemming from the costs of further deliberating about the case. In the case of ties though, the choice does more normative work. Scanlon argues that one can change the way reasons apply in the situation. When one has made a choice to pursue a goal then that changes what one must *take* to be a reason. It changes what one must see as a reason and treat as significant. Furthermore, in these cases what agents "take to be reasons are in fact reasons" (236). This is because the act of will changes one's situation. Again the idea is that one's reasons are determined by normative truths about objective value and the context one finds oneself in. By adopting an end, one has put oneself into a special relationship to some class of reasons. However, it is the relations to reasons that change, not the reasons themselves. We can see this as a natural extension of the contextualizing strategy. We count psychological factors as part of one's context. Choices play the same role as hedonic likings or subjective conditions.

However, the contextualizing strategy cannot work for choice. That would require choice to play two incompatible roles. Choice is an expression of our agency. The other factors handled by the contextualizing strategy are not part of our agency. One's opportunities and preferences determine what one has reason to do. They are factors that one must take note of in deliberation. Their presence in the deliberative field is discovered and must be accounted for in making a choice. Choice, on the other hand, is not just another fact that one takes note of in deliberation. Choice is a product of deliberation and an expression of agency. *Earlier* choices can be treated as facts that one must be mindful of in the future. The fact that one has decided to have a child is a factor one must account for in the future. However, the choice one is making now cannot be treated that way. In deciding to have a child the fact that one has decided to have a child cannot be part of one's context that determines one's reasons. That would be to treat the choice as if it were already made. That cannot work because what guides deliberation and what is guided in deliberation cannot be one and the same thing. One's choice and one's context are fundamentally different kinds of things. Choice is necessarily active, while contextual factors are passive. Since our choices need to be guided they cannot, at the exact same time, be part of the context that guides choice. No one thing can play both roles simultaneously. Aspects of our agency cannot be built into the context that determines our reasons. So the context cannot determine the choice. Another way to see this point is that if one's context includes one's choice, then choices merely happens to us. We come to know our choices in the same way that we come to know our location or our preferences. An implication of this is that the difference between my reasons and your reasons is mere happenstance. Our reasons depend on objective values and the context we find ourselves in. We do not control over either of these factors. It must be this way for the value-based theorist because he claims our psychological states are never normatively significant. But if our reasons are completely independent of our psychological states, then what reasons counts as mine is arbitrary. What has normative significance for me is always outside my control.[1] I have argued that the value-based theory does not remove arbitrariness from the normative realm by placing substantive constraints on what counts as a reason. Within the realm of the valuable our commitments to particular values is arbitrary. Most of the projects that we care about most deeply and give our life meaning are arbitrary. My reasons are *my* reasons for no reason. It is merely a contingent consequence of my context that I do not control. The value-based theorist might respond that this sort of arbitrariness is just a fact of life that we must accept. Parfit seems to take this line. For instance, he claims "we don't need reasons for loving *particular* people" (2011: 1: 100). Since love is good, we have a reason to love someone. But there is no reason to love a specific individual. He seems to think this sort of arbitrariness is unproblematic. This might be because arbitrariness of this sort is unavoidable. By hypothesis, in these cases there is no reason to choose one

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[1] Chang (2009) makes an argument against value-based theories based on similar cases.

end over another, so it cannot count as a failing that the value-based theory makes these aspects of our life arbitrary.

I do not find this compelling. On this account the shape of our lives, that which we care most about, just happens to us. We do not create what we have reason to do. Parfit contends that in practical reason, "we should ask what we have most reason to want, and try to achieve", not what we most want (2011: 2: 462). The problem is that often times this question does not have a single answer. If we are in a burning building, then we may have decisive reasons to jump out the window. However, most of life is not like this. Value-based accounts usually just rule things out. They do not typically rule one option in. The sort of arbitrariness that arises on the value-based account creeps into some of our most important choices. It threatens what gives our lives meaning. If arbitrariness is objectionable because of the connection to choice, then this sort of arbitrariness is problematic. It arises for the actual choices we face.

While we do not create all of our reasons, we do have control over what matters most to us. By coming to care about my ends I give myself reason to pursue them. Part of the reason I ought to do philosophy is that I care about philosophy. When the value-based theorist makes all the relevant normative factors external to the self, they remove the possibility of explaining how I can control my reasons. My reasons are beyond my control. This might be right for moral reasons, but is not right for the personal projects we choose to embrace.

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