

Reasons for Action

Edited by David Sobel and Steven Wall

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The essays in this book discuss a wide variety of topics: from cognitivism about instrumental rationality (Michael Bratman) to the role of regret in practical reasoning (Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson), and from the difference between practical and epistemic reasons (Joseph Raz) to wide-scope accounts of practical conditionals (James Dreier). This makes it difficult to say anything about the book as a whole. I can only make some remarks about two of the essays.

In “Mackie’s motivational argument”, Philip Clark discusses J. L. Mackie’s arguments from queerness. According to this argument, if there are moral properties like rightness and wrongness, these properties must motivate anyone who recognises them to act in accordance with them. Since no other property is connected to motivation in this way, Mackie claimed, this makes moral properties too queer to exist. He took this argument to support his famous error theory about moral judgements, according to which all moral judgements are false.

As Clark notes, this argument fails if there can be *amoralists*: people who make moral judgements but who are not motivated to act in accordance with them. More precisely, Clark takes amoralists to be people who have “beliefs, even correct ones, about what morality requires” (p. 204), but who think that there is no reason to act in accordance with these beliefs and who are therefore not motivated to act in accordance with them. He argues that, though Mackie will have to give up his error theory about moral judgements if there can be amoralists, he can then adopt an error theory about what Clark calls ‘the moral outlook’ instead. According to this error theory about the moral outlook, even though some moral judgements are true, amoralists are right to think that there is no reason to act in accordance with these judgements.

Though this is an interesting proposal, I wonder whether having “beliefs, even correct ones, about what morality requires” is the same thing as making moral

judgements. I may correctly believe that Spartan morality required leaving weak babies to die, but that does not mean that I ascribe the property of rightness to the action of leaving weak babies to die. Amoralists may have a similar attitude towards morality in general: they may correctly believe that morality requires honesty, beneficence, and so on, but they may not ascribe the properties of rightness or wrongness to any of these things. In that case, however, it seems to me that they do not really make moral judgements. Alternatively, amoralists' correct beliefs about what morality requires may be genuine ascriptions of rightness or wrongness. But in that case, it is hard to see how they can coherently think that there is no reason to act in accordance with these ascriptions, since, arguably, ascriptions of rightness or wrongness either are or entail ascriptions of reasons to act.

In "The truth in Ecumenical Expressivism", Michael Ridge shows how his version of expressivism, which he calls 'ecumenical expressivism', can accommodate the truth-aptness of normative sentences. According to ecumenical expressivism, the normative sentence that an action is right expresses two distinct attitudes: an attitude of approval towards actions in so far as a certain prescriber would approve of them, and the non-normative belief that this prescriber would in fact approve of this action. Ridge proposes the following account of the truth of normative sentences: when you say that an action is right and I say that what you have said is true, I approve of a certain prescriber (who may not be the same prescriber that you approve of), I have the non-normative belief that uttering the sentence that this action is right while approving of this prescriber involves believing certain non-normative propositions, and I believe that those non-normative propositions are true. The advantage of this account of the truth of normative sentences is that it is compatible with different accounts of truth in general, and not just with the deflationist account of truth that many other expressivists accept.

As Ridge notes, however, one problem for ecumenical expressivism is that we normally seem to think that normative sentences express beliefs, which conflicts with ecumenical expressivism's claim that such sentences express both an attitude of approval and a non-normative belief. Ridge admits that, in this respect, his view conflicts with common sense: like other forms of expressivism, he writes, "ecumenical expressivism [implies] that our understanding of ourselves is in an important way

mistaken” (p. 230). But he thinks it would be “far too glib” to reject ecumenical expressivism for this reason. Just as it is clearly acceptable for physicalists to claim that dualists have a mistaken view about the nature of their own minds, he suggests, it is equally acceptable for ecumenical expressivists to claim that we have a mistaken view about the nature of some of our own attitudes.

Though Ridge’s arguments are ingenious and often persuasive, I am not convinced by this comparison. Since dualism is an abstract view about the metaphysical nature of our mental states, the mistake that physicalists attribute to dualists does not seem to conflict with our introspective awareness of our own minds. But the suggestion that we mistakenly think that normative sentences express beliefs rather than combinations of attitudes of approval and beliefs *does* arguably conflict with our introspective awareness of our own minds. For this introspective awareness seems to include not only an awareness of the contents of our own attitudes, but also a rough awareness of how to categorise the attitudes that we have towards these contents: we do not normally mistake, say, one of our own beliefs for a desire, or one of our own intentions for a belief. It would therefore be more surprising than Ridge suggests if we regularly mistook a combination of one of our own attitudes of approval and one of our own non-normative beliefs for a single belief.

The contributors to this book that I have not mentioned yet are Michael Smith (on the role of instrumental rationality in the explanation of action), Peter Railton (on self-consciousness in practical reasoning), Stephen Darwall (on second-personal reasons), Gary Watson (on promissory obligations), and Ruth Chang (on voluntarist reasons). Like Clark and Ridge’s essays, all the essays in this book are of high quality and well worth reading.

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