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Conditional and Conditioned Reasons

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In his interesting and helpful paper 'McNaughton and Rawling on the Agent-relative/Agent-neutral Distinction,' Douglas Portmore criticizes our formalization of duties on the grounds that we have overlooked an important class of conditional cases in which the antecedent of the conditional falls outside the scope of the deontic operator.

He also suggests that we might do better to speak of reasons rather than pro tanto 'shoulds.' In his note 11, Portmore sees our formulation as ruling out supererogatory acts if they conflict with even minor moral duties. We have since reformulated (see, e.g., McNaughton and Rawling, 2001) our 'S' to abbreviate 'should, *pro tanto*, ensure to the best of her ability that,' and see such 'shoulds' as not necessarily moral; and where they are moral, they can, if sufficiently minor, be over-ridden not only by supererogatory considerations, but also by entirely non-moral considerations. However, discussion of reasons is of independent interest; and, in at least one dimension, it is simpler than discussion of 'shoulds.' We agree in part, but not in whole, with Prichard in his 'Duty and Ignorance of Fact' (1949) concerning the subjectivity of 'ought', and see this as carrying over to 'should, *pro tanto*.' Prichard does not discuss reasons; we shall reserve the term for objective considerations – so that, to borrow Prichard's example, you ought to slow down at a traffic junction, even though, if there is no traffic coming, you have no reason to do so.

We shall focus here, then, on objective practical reasons, so as to leave matters of subjectivity aside for the nonce. We shall use 'R' to abbreviate 'has some (objective) reason to ensure that' (in the sense of 'doing' rather than 'checking'). This is a different usage from Portmore (who uses 'R' to abbreviate 'has a pro tanto moral reason to ensure, to the best of x's abilities, that'), but shifting examples into our locution does not materially affect the present discussion.

Our central topic is the contrast between:

Conditional reasons[i]:

(A) (x)xR[A→B]

and

Reasons on a condition, or conditioned reasons:

(B) (x)(A→xR[B])

If '→' is read as the material conditional, (A) entails

(C) (x)xR[notA or B]

When conditionals enter into talk of reasons, we have been inclined to read the reasons as conditional rather than conditioned. As Portmore points out, this might lead to trouble. Consider first his:

(7a) (x)(y)(x is y's foster parent→xR[y feels cherished])

(7b) (x)xR[(y)(x is y's foster parent→y feels cherished)]

Suppose that a foster parent finds cherishing somewhat onerous, then (7b) apparently permits (objectionably) the foster parent to return the foster child to the system in light of his (the foster parent's) reasons. The foster parent has reason to ensure that: either he does not foster this child or he cherishes her. And he can bring about the truth of this proposition by returning the foster child to the system. (7a), on the other hand, states that foster parents have reason to cherish their foster children simpliciter.

Matters might actually be more counterintuitive than Portmore supposes for those who would force conditional readings. Consider his:

(6a) (x)(x is a parent→xR[x's children do not starve])

(6b) (x)(xR[x is a parent→x's children do not starve])

(6b) states that parents have a reason to ensure that: either they are not parents or that their children do not starve. And this they can ensure by ceasing to be parents. Thus parents who find keeping their children fed too onerous, can, apparently, under (6b), release themselves from this burden by ceasing to be parents. And they can accomplish this by letting their children starve. Of course, they have other over-riding reasons not to let them starve, but there is nevertheless something counterintuitive about a statement of the fact that parents have reason to ensure that their children do not starve that permits derivation of a statement to the effect that parents have some reason to let their children starve.

There are two independent ways we might try to save the conditional readings in these cases, however. First, we might move from 'is' to 'becomes' as in:

(7b') (x)(xR[(y)(x *becomes* y's foster parent→y feels cherished)])

(6b') (x)(xR[x *becomes* a parent→x's children do not starve])

Losing children does not reverse the fact that one has in the past become a (foster) parent; and we have a statement of the fact that one has reason not to become a (foster) parent if one does not want to be under the burden of the relevant reasons of care. (Note that, particularly in (6b'), a subjunctive reading of the conditional is to be preferred, since x's children do not exist prior to x's becoming a parent.)

Second, we might point out that the following is not always the case: if you have reason to A, and this can be accomplished by Bing, then you have reason to B. The mother has reason to stop her child running into the street, and this can be accomplished by shooting him, but she has no reason to shoot him. The move from 'I have reason not to be a parent' to 'I have reason to let my children starve,' or that from 'I have reason not to be a foster parent' to 'I have reason to return my foster child to the system' are not, then, justified by the logic of reasons alone.

In cases where one has no say in the becoming, this second manoeuvre is key to saving conditional readings, as in:

(13a) (x)xR[(y)(y is x's mother→x honours y)]

On a material reading of the conditional, Betty's child Fred has reason to ensure that: either he is not Betty's child or he honours her. Given how tiresome he finds the honouring, a reason for matricide looms if we license the move from 'Fred has a reason not to be Betty's child, and this can be accomplished by murdering her' to 'Fred has a reason to murder Betty.'

Similarly, the second manoeuvre is key to preserving the conditional reading in Portmore's:

(9b) (x)xR[x is a Kuwaiti citizen→x fights the Iraqi invaders]

Under (9b), on the material reading of '→,' you have reason to ensure that: either you are not a Kuwaiti citizen or you fight the Iraqi invaders. Thus if you are incapable of fighting, you have reason to ensure that you are not a Kuwaiti citizen, and we need to block the move to the counterintuitive claim that if you are incapable of fighting you have reason to renounce Kuwaiti citizenship.

However, on closer scrutiny, we think that the second manoeuvre fails. Why does the mother not have reason to shoot her son, given that it will accomplish her goal of preventing him running into the street? Because the reason to prevent him running into the street is an instance of her more general reason to see that he thrives. In the case of (6b) we must also appeal to this general reason in order to block the move from 'I have reason not to be a parent' to 'I have reason to let my children starve.' But a parent's reason to ensure that her children do not starve is an instance of this general reason to ensure that her children thrive, thus (6b) is not an appropriate formulation of the former reason. The general reason to ensure that one's children thrive does not yield a more specific reason to ensure that: *either* one ceases to be a parent *or* one keeps one's children fed. (6a) is closer to the mark. Similarly, if the reason behind (13a) is one of respect, then it is *not* a reason to: honour one's mother *or* be motherless. To block the move to matricide from (13a), we appeal implicitly to the thought that a reason based on respect cannot generate a reason to murder. But that thought blocks the formulation of the reason as (13a) in the first place. The appropriate formulation is:

(13b) $(x)(y)(y \text{ is } x\text{'s mother} \rightarrow xR[x \text{ honours } y])$

Analogous reasoning applies in the case of (7b): the appeal that blocks the move to a reason to return one's foster child blocks the formulation of the reason to cherish as (7b) in the first place. In the case of (9b), the reasons that Kuwaitis have to fight the Iraqi invaders might be based on various considerations: patriotism, resistance to bullying, or preservation of autonomy, perhaps. But these serve to underpin a reason to fight, not a reason to ensure that: either one is not Kuwaiti or one fights, and hence (9b) is ruled out.

Thus we are inclined to agree with Portmore that (9b) is false. We are less inclined to agree with Portmore, however, that

(9a) $(x)(x \text{ is a Kuwaiti citizen} \rightarrow xR[x \text{ fights the Iraqi invaders}])$

is true.

First, there is the issue of detachment. Under (9a), if you are a Kuwaiti citizen, you then reason by modus ponens to detach the conclusion that you have reason to fight the Iraqi invaders. But suppose the Kuwaiti leadership strips you of your citzenship. Then, contra (9a), you may no longer have reason to fight.

Second, we are inclined to think that you have no reason to ensure something of which you are incapable. Thus it is false that all Kuwaitis have reason to fight; only those who are capable of doing so have such a reason.

Portmore's (9a) uses 'S' rather than 'R,' however (where, recall, 'S' abbreviates 'should, *pro tanto,* ensure to the best of her ability that'). So perhaps his original formulation is true. Portmore sees (9a) as true because a Kuwaiti incapable of fighting can nevertheless be ensuring *to the best of his ability* that he fights the Iraqi invaders even though he does nothing. However, we not only think it false that an agent can have reason to do something of which she's incapable, we also think it false that an agent should ensure to the best of her abilities that she do something of which she's incapable. (Or, for those who prefer to think in terms of imperatives here, commands to phi where phi-ing is impossible lack the appropriate force.) Thus we think both formulations of (9a) are false. The insertion of the phrase 'to the best of her ability' into the 'S' operator is designed to cover cases where the agent can only partway ensure, or merely increase the likelihood of, the truth of the relevant proposition (as in ensuring that happiness is maximized, or that nobody lies, or that your children thrive). Whilst it is true that someone incapable of phi-ing can be ensuring to the best of her ability that she phi (by sleeping, for instance), it is false that she should be so ensuring, and false that she has a reason to so ensure. (Cases of genuine absolute incapability in our sense are rare, of course: the parent in a famine stricken country can often do something toward ensuring that her children do not starve, for example.)

We think, then, that both (9a) and (9b) are false. (9a) because it falsely attributes reasons to fight to those Kuwaitis incapable of fighting; (9b) because, as Portmore points out, it falsely attributes reasons to renounce Kuwaiti citizenship to those incapable of fighting. There are several formulations that might be proposed to meet this point. Here is one such:

(9c) $(x)((x \text{ is Kuwaiti} \ \& \ x \text{ is capable of fighting}) \rightarrow xR[x \text{ fights the Iraqi invaders}])$

(The reasons that capable Kuwaitis have to fight the Iraqi invaders do not serve to underpin a reason to ensure that they are incapable of fighting or not Kuwaiti, hence

$(x)xR[(x \text{ is Kuwaiti} \ \& \ x \text{ is capable of fighting}) \rightarrow x \text{ fights the Iraqi invaders}]$

is ruled out.)

But what of the issue of detachment? In many cases of conditioned reasons, if the truth-value of the antecedent changes, one no longer has reason to ensure the truth of the consequent,

hence detachment is invalid. Such is the case with (9c). You have reason to fight Iraq provided, amongst other things, the Iraqis persist in their invasion, you remain capable of fighting, and you are not stripped of Kuwaiti citizenship. Time-indexing (9c) as follows perhaps solves this difficulty:

(9d) (x)((x is Kuwaiti at time t & x is capable of fighting at t)→
(xR[x fights the Iraqi invaders at t]))

We turn finally to the modification of our account of the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction in light of conditioned reasons. We shall combine our original formulation (call this 'C1'):

> A statement of the form
>
> (x)xR[B]
>
> is agent-relative (AR) if there is a free occurrence of x in [B] (when [B] is taken in isolation, of course). It is agent-neutral (AN) otherwise

with Portmore's friendly amendment, which runs, roughly, as follows (call this 'C2'):

> A statement of the form
>
> (x)(y…)(A(y…)→xR[B(y…)])
>
> is AR if there is a free occurrence of x in either A(y…) or [B(y…)].
>
> It is AN otherwise

(We use 'A(y…)' and 'B(y…)' to denote formulae that contain zero or more free variables that do not include x, and '(y…)' as the quantifier binding these. Below we shall have recourse to the notation 'A(x)' (etc.), which denotes a formula in which exactly x occurs free[ii].)

There are, however, two difficulties to overcome. First, as Portmore notes (note 9)

(x)(Ax→xR[B])&(x)(notAx→xR[B]

is equivalent to

(x)xR[B]

Thus there is a danger that a theory comprising only a statement that has the latter form will be classified as AR even if [B] contains no free occurrence of x. Portmore attempts to overcome this by insisting that the universal reasons statements be written as 'concisely as possible.' Whilst conciseness might cope with this specific difficulty, it will not cope with all instances of the general problem that some systems can be written in both AR and AN forms. For example, we

have noted elsewhere (see McNaughton and Rawling, 1992) that the following pair are equivalent:

(x)xR[x maximizes the general happiness]

(x)xR[(y)(y maximizes the general happiness)]

Yet utilitarianism is clearly AN.

Our proposed solution runs as follows. First write out the system as a series of universal reason statements, each statement having one of the following two forms:

(x)xR[B]

(x)(A→xR[B])

Call a system 'syntactically AR' if it contains at least one AR statement by criteria C1 and C2 above. Any system has an equivalent syntactically AR formulation. (As noted above, (x)xR[B] is equivalent to the pair: (x)(Ax→xR[B]), (x)(notAx→xR[B]); and (x)(A→xR[B]) is equivalent to the pair: (x)((Cx&A)→xR[B]), (x)((notCx&A)→xR[B]).) A system is *genuinely* AR, however, if and only if *all* its equivalent formulations are syntactically AR. A system is genuinely AN otherwise.

The second difficulty concerns the issue of AN transforms of AR rules. AN transforms of AR statements that fit our original templet are easy to generate. The AN transform of

(x)xR[B(x)]

is

(x)xR[(y)B(y)]

Whereas the deontologist insists that each agent has special underived reason to ensure that she does not lie, which is formulated:

(x)xR[x does not lie],

the direct act consequentialist argues that this reason is derived from the fact that, since lying is a bad thing, each of us has reason to ensure that nobody lies:

(x)xR[(y)(y does not lie)]

But now we have a second templet with which to contend, and it has variants that differ with respect to AN transformation. The AN transform of

(x)(A→xR[B(x)])

(where A contains no free occurrence of x) is

(x)(A→xR[(y)B(y)])

Thus the AN transform of Portmore's

(12) (x)([it is Earth Day]→xR[x plants a tree])

is

(x)([it is Earth Day]→xR[(y)(y plants a tree)])

reflecting the thought that if planting trees is valuable, we all have reason to encourage everyone to plant (we do not contend that the consequentialist must have this thought – cf the discussion of lifeguards below).

The AN transform of

(x)(A(x)→xR[B(x)])

(where, recall, A(x), B(x) contain exactly x free) is:

(x)(y)(A(y)→xR[B(y)])

which is logically equivalent to:

(y)(A(y)→(x)xR[B(y)])

Not that a consequentialist would necessarily have such a statement in her system, but the AN transform of the thought that able-bodied Kuwaitis have reason to fight the Iraqi invaders is the thought that we each have reason to encourage them to do so:

(y)((y is Kuwaiti at time t & y is capable of fighting at t)→

(x)(xR[y fights the Iraqi invaders at t]))

The AN transform of

(x)(A(x)→xR[B])

(where [B] contains no free x) is

(y)(A(y)→(x)xR[yE[B]])

where y is a variable that does not appear in [B], and 'E' abbreviates (roughly) 'ensures, *pro tanto*, that.' For example the AN transform of Portmore's

(11) (x)(x is wealthy→xR[(y)(y is wealthy→y gives to charity)])

is

(z)(z is wealthy→(x)xR[zE[(y)(y is wealthy→y gives to charity)]])

(11) states that the wealthy have reason to encourage their peers to give to charity. Its AN transform states that we all have reason to encourage the wealthy to encourage their peers to give to charity. Or, to take another example, the AN transform of

(x)(x is a lifeguard→xR[(y)(y does not drown)])

is

(z)(z is a lifeguard→(x)xR[zE[(y)(y does not drown)]])

The former states that lifeguards have reason to ensure that nobody drowns; the latter is the AN thought that we all have reason to encourage lifeguards to ensure that nobody drowns. (The consequentialist does not insist that we all plunge in to save the drowning; rather, although we have the common aim (cf Parfit, 1984) of ensuring that nobody drowns, this is best accomplished by encouraging those in the appropriate position to fulfill their role.)

This list of variants and their AN transforms is not complete, but we leave the remaining cases as an exercise for the reader.

References

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[i] Forms (A) and (B) below we dub 'universal reasons statements.' Whether reasons are universal is a matter of controversy that we shall not tackle here. However, when we agree (below) with Portmore that there are true statements of form (B) that are not equivalent to any statement of form (A), we have in mind that much can be packed into the antecedent of A→xR[B]. Some of the items in the antecedent might be described as reasons, some as background conditions, with the dividing line between the two being, perhaps, inquirer-relative.

[ii] We are guilty of confusing use and mention. We leave it to the concerned reader to make the obvious adjustments.