

Letter sent to Editors: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy regarding Reasons for Action.

Greetings:

I do not know if this is the proper procedure for making such comments, but . . .

Two entries in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy regarding “reasons for action” seem to contain an error regarding desire-based theories.

They both seem to assume that a desire-based theory cannot take advantage of a distinction between “Agent has a reason to do X” and “There is a reason for Agent to do X”. They present desire-based theories in terms of “Agent has a reason to do X,” then show that this analysis fails for “There is a reason for Agent to do X” as if the desire-based theory must provide the same account of both terms, even though their meanings are significantly different.

Specifically:

The SEP entry, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External" literally defines "there is a reason" in terms of "has a reason." For example, it presents the Humean Theory of Reasons as:

***The Humean Theory of Reasons (HTR):** If there is a reason for someone to do something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it.*

This switch from "There is a reason" to "She must have some desire" is unexplained and, actually, I would argue, unjustified.

Instead, a more accurate account would take something like the form:

***The Humean Theory of Reasons (HTR):** If there is a reason for someone to do something, then there must be some desire that would be served by her doing it, and If she has a reason for someone to do something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it.*

This issue is carried through the article, where a revised Humean Theory of Reasons is presented as:

***HTR (revised):** If there is a reason for someone to do something, then she must have some desire that would be served by her doing it, which is the source of her reason.*

In the SEP entry, "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, and Explanation," in the discussion of desire-based theories, the author presents the case for desire-based theories in terms of "has a reason".

*Roughly, someone’s having a reason to act requires their having some motivation that would be served by acting in the way favoured by the putative reason.*

But in the criticism switches to "There is a reason"

*But desire-based accounts fare less well in accommodating another central claim about normative reasons. For it seems equally plausible that there are reasons (for instance, moral reasons) that apply to agents regardless of their motivations.*

Here, again, I see a move from "having a reason" in the first quote to "there are reasons" in the second that is unexplained and unjustified.

It appears to me that a desire-based theorist would have no trouble using the distinction between "has a reason" and "there is a reason".

It is obvious that the reasons (motives) that I have are not the only reasons (motives) that there are (that exist). I see myself surrounded by people who have their own desire-based reasons/motives. Certainly, unless I embrace solipsism, I cannot deny that the set of reasons that exist is significantly larger than the set of reasons that I have.

Respecting the distinction between the "reasons I have" and the "reasons there are," it is not the case that the fact that somebody else has a reason (for example, to not be in pain) implies that I also have a reason (not to cause that person to be in pain). This would not follow. However, it is the case that the other person's aversion to pain means that this other person has a reason to promote / encourage / reward / create in me reasons for action that will help him avoid being in pain, and to discourage / extinguish / condemn any desire in me that will tend to bring about a state in which he is in pain.

So, I can distinguish the desires that I do and do not have from those that other people have reason to cause me to have or not have (or, in other words, the reasons for action I should have).

I may not have an aversion to causing pain to others, but it is still true that there are reasons for me to have an aversion to causing pain to others - that is, the aversions to pain that others have, which gives them reason to cause me to acquire an aversion to causing pain to others.

Using the terminology that appears in the entry, "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, and Explanation," the desire-based theorist can well recognize the distinction between "having a reason" and "there is a reason":

- (1) Having a reason to act requires having a motivation that would be served by acting in the way favoured by the putative reason.
- (2) There being a reason for me to act requires there being a reason that would be served by acting in the way favoured by the putative reason.

The reasons that "there are" are reasons that others have to encourage or discourage the development of the reasons that "I have."

We can get this idea straight from Hume, who argued (in the Enquiry) for evaluating the motives (passions, character traits) that an agent has according to the reasons that there are for encouraging or discouraging them - pleasing to self, useful to self, pleasing to others, and useful to others.

One additional point to make: the discussion of desire-based reasons in "Reason for Actions: Justification, Motivation, and Explanation" ends with this:

Arguably, we all have reason to do what morality dictates, whether or not we are (or would be, if we reasoned consistently from our current motivations), motivated by those reasons.

Arguably, indeed. The desire-based theorist who recognizes the distinction between "desires I have" and "desires there are" would have to reject this. In fact, to push this on the desire-based theorist who

respects such a distinction is to beg the question against him, as this can only be the case if the distinction between "desires/reasons I have" and "desires/reasons others have reason to cause me to have" does not exist.

It is not that we have a reason to do what morality dictates, but that there are reasons for us to do what morality requires. And the "reasons that are" give other people reason to praise and condemn, reward and punish, encourage and discourage, the formation of certain reasons within each of us. If everybody already had reasons to do what morality required, then nobody would have reason to praise or condemn, reward or punish, or in other ways create those reasons.

To deny the desire-based theorist the use of the distinction between "desires/reasons I have" and "desires/reasons there are" is to force him to accept an absurdity - that the desires/reasons he has are all of the desires/reasons that exist. Under that assumption, it is no wonder the theory produces such absurd implications.

Well . . . my purpose is to argue that the entries concerning desire-based theories for action seem to be unjustifiably denying the theorist the use of the "desires/reasons I have" and "desires/reasons there are" distinction - even though it appears obvious that the desires I have is just a subset of the reasons there are. Perhaps there is something in this that I do not understand, but I wanted to put it out there.

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