Can Reasons Be Propositions?

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One obviously relevant question that arises when discussing reasons is their ontological nature.

Are they states of affairs, mental states, propositions or ...?

This question is an important example of the relevance of the link between epistemology and practical philosophy – and between these two and ontology.

For we can ask:

- Are epistemic reasons and practical reasons the same kind of thing? What are they?
- We focus on propositions and states of affairs here.
Two initial intuitions seem to pull in different directions:

① Parity: whatever they are, reasons had better be the same kind of thing across fields.

② The use of the term ‘reason’ here hides a difference: epistemology has to do with beliefs directed towards propositions and can consequently be propositions; practical philosophy has to do with actual-world actions and their normative properties, and cannot consequently be propositions.

Statism for practical reasons and propositionalism for epistemic reason?
Well, maybe...

This would mean to follow, say,

Dancy (2000) is right in his rejection of propositionalism in the practical case:
- Practical reasons are states of affairs, for that is what is relevant for the normative features of our actions.

Williamson (2000) and Millar (1993) are right in their claim that:
- Epistemic reasons are propositions that *evidentially support*, i.e., ‘speak in favour of’, our beliefs.

This might be the most natural and intuitive view, but:
One could claim that in the epistemic case too it is ultimately worldly facts (at least when it comes to our beliefs about material entities, processes, facts etc.) that support our beliefs.

If so, statism should be extended across the board, so satisfying parity.

We want to go the other way around:

Provide reasons for propositionalism in the practical case, and then suggest that parity is a good thing, so it is not absurd to (try to) argue that all reasons (both epistemic and practical) are propositions.
Three parts:

① (Elaborate upon) and reject Dancy’s attack against propositionalism in the practical case.

② Provide (limited) positive reasons for preferring propositionalism there.

③ Suggest an extension to epistemic reasons via parity.

- [3) will turn out to be only partly successful.]
Dancy really moves two related objections to propositionalism, not just one.

A. Propositions are too thin to play the role reasons play towards the normative.

B. Propositions are merely representations of what really counts, i.e., states of affairs.
A) Propositions are too thin to play the role reasons play towards the normative

- The idea here is that propositions are metaphysically inadequate, for they cannot determine things in the real world.
- Plus, things in the world is what we care for, worry about, etc.

*Reply*: even if abstract, propositions need not be devoid of causal powers.

- At any rate, one can attribute non-causal ‘ontological grounding’ features to them.
Moreover, that things in the world are what we care about etc. is not in contradiction with the idea that propositions are what we consider when deliberating.

It just requires to establish a connection between the propositions we consider in deliberation and the facts in the world that are relevant for that deliberation and its normative outcome.

Which leads us to the other objection by Dancy (or, better, reconstructed from Dancy’s work).
B) Propositions are merely representations of what really counts, i.e., states of affairs

- Fine!
- It is exactly by representing that propositions can play the normative role they play.
- This objection really reduces to a mere statement of (sophisticated) propositionalism.

- A natural reaction:
  - Ok, we *might be* propositionalists. But why go through all the mess about representation etc. if we can consider states of affairs directly as reasons?
(2) Provide (limited) positive reasons for preferring propositionalism there

- The ‘challenge of wrong reasons’

- The agent can falsely believe s/he has a reason to act, i.e., s/he can have a ‘wrong’ reason, in one of two ways:
  
  i. By having a false belief about the obtaining of certain states of affairs in the world.
  
  ii. By having a false belief about whether the relevant relation between a state of affairs (that obtains) and the (properties of) action obtains.
We submit that statists have no problems with ii) but do have problems with

i. by having a false belief about the obtaining of certain states of affairs in the world.

Consider the case in which I go to the shop to buy beer ‘because there is no beer in the fridge’, while there is in fact beer in the fridge.

The statist can only say that there is in fact no reason for acting there.

However, it seems natural to hold that reasons exist as entities of some sort in spite of their not corresponding to anything in the world: after all, I believed I had a rather good reason to go and buy beer!
In these sort of cases, it is natural to think that it is abstract entities in our mind, i.e. propositions, that play the role of reasons.

One might go for a two-part story, in which states of affairs are reasons unless one is dealing with ‘wrong reasons’ in the above sense.

But this is *ad hoc*.

- Going for non-existent, intentional entities doesn’t help the statist either.

Given the foregoing, it now looks sensible to take practical reasons to be propositions.
Punchline(s):

- Reasons, both motivating and normative are always propositions (possibly false propositions in the former case, always true propositions in the latter).

- In the case of wrong reasons, such propositions act as reasons in themselves, i.e., representing nothing and being the only relevant thing – the content of the relevant intentional state.

- As such, they determine (causally or otherwise) actions and their properties.

- In the case of ‘good’ reasons, propositions act as reasons again by determining (causally or otherwise) actions and their properties but getting, so to speak, some of this power from obtaining states of affairs, which they correctly represent.
3) Suggest an extension to epistemic reasons via parity

- How about *epistemic* reasons?
- If we are right, parity cannot be used to infer that epistemic reasons are states of affairs from the fact that practical reasons are.
- The converse, instead, becomes possible.

- One might think it is also advisable.
- For, not only is propositionalism about epistemic reasons (although perhaps not the dominant position), considered less troubling than propositionalism about practical reasons.
It also looks as though something like the challenge of wrong reasons can be formulated in the epistemic case.

That is, it is possible that the belief $a$ that I entertain and take to support belief $b$ is actually false, as it doesn’t correspond to anything.

Isn’t it the case that $a$ still is in some sort of epistemic relation to $b$?

But then it is propositions that count in this case and, for uniformity, in all cases.
Turri (2009) agrees with this diagnosis:

- The problem of false facts.
- The problem of the twins seemingly believing something for the same reason, but living in realities as different as the real world and the Matrix world.

However, he favors the view that epistemic reasons are mental states rather than propositions.

He acknowledges that

- If you thought that reasons were propositions, and you thought, as at least some leading epistemologists do, that logical relations determine evidential relations, then your ontological theory of reasons would cohere nicely with your theory of evidence.
However, he also puts forward an ‘argument from circularity’:

1. If propositionalism is true, then if S heeds the call of experience, then S thereby believes Q directly on the basis of Q itself;

2. If S (thereby) believes Q directly on the basis of Q itself, then S thereby moves in a circle;

3. Therefore if propositionalism is true, then if S heeds the call of experience, then S thereby moves in a circle;

4. It is not the case that if S heeds the call of experience, then S thereby moves in a circle;

5. Therefore propositionalism is false.
And then adds the ‘problem of withholding’:

① If I suspend my judgment on A, but believe that B only if not–A, it looks like I should suspend my judgment on B.

- However, if I focus on the propositional contents of <B only if not–A> and <A>, as propositionalists do, I should conclude believing that not–B instead.

② If I come to believe that A, and still believe that B only if not–A, I should then update my beliefs so as to include not–B.

- The basis for this, however, are the same propositional contents as before: <B only if not–A> and <A> – something seems to have gone wrong.
Finally, an additional problem from us:

- Propositions can evidentially support, i.e., favour, belief–*contents*, but not the believings themselves.

We take these to be important challenges, requiring one to:

1. Drive a wedge between propositional contents and the propositions playing the role of epistemic reasons.

2. Assume that propositions can ‘include’ uncertainty/withholding etc. and not just be (believed to be) true or false.

3. Question that the favoring relation must stand between reason and the believing.
On this, however, we allow ourselves to be much more sketchy.

- Not only because we focused more on practical reasons so far, but also because we think there is a genuine challenge here.

- Namely, that of choosing between:
  - Parity as a positive meta-ontological feature (which demands revisions such as those just mentioned, or others with the same consequences).
  - Plausibility and effectiveness of specific ontological analyses in specific cases, possibly without overall uniformity.
The former option does require more work on epistemic reasons.

The latter, instead, allows us to formulate a tentative conclusion based on our previous argument together with the extant literature.

- Contrary to the statements we began with, practical reasons are likely to be propositions rather than states of affairs; while epistemic reasons seem to be mental states rather than either propositions or states of affairs.

But of course, more elaboration is needed:

- In particular, to see whether it is possible to circumvent Turri’s objections to propositionalism in the epistemic case, and consequently satisfy parity while also benefitting from the abovementioned advantage.

- That of an ontological theory of epistemic reasons that fits nicely with our theory of evidence.