***Reasons and Beliefs***

***Abstract***

The present paper identifies a challenge for a certain view of practical reasons, according to which practical reasons (both normative and motivating) are states of affairs*.* In particular, the challenge is taken to affect the particular ontological conception of practical reasons that has been defended by Jonathan Dancy. The problem is that Dancy seems forced to maintain both a) that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs and b) that the view according to which the contents of beliefs are states of affairs is outlandish. The suggestion is put forward that, by distinguishing the content of a belief (as a proposition) from its object (as a state of affairs), the conflict between a) and b) can be neutralised. The resulting proposal seems to be of interest for all those sharing the view that practical reasons must be states of affairs, i.e., things capable of being the case.

***Keywords:*** Practical reasons; Jonathan Dancy; content and object of belief; states of affairs; propositions.

**I. Dancy’s account of the ontology of reasons**

Consider the following example: you happen to be walking along a railway, when you suddenly realise that a train is coming and, after quick deliberation, you decide to avoid certain death by making a long leap towards the nearby woods. When we say that you have a reason to jump off the tracks because the train is coming, what is your reason? That the train is coming, the coming of the train, or perhaps your belief that the train is coming? This is a question about so-called ‘practical reasons’. Practical reasons come in two forms. ‘Normative’ practical reasons[[1]](#footnote-1) are those things that favour actions and that, consequently, are referred to in evaluating one’s actions. When making claims about normative reasons, we say such things as “There is a reason for him to act” or “She has a reason to act”.[[2]](#footnote-2) ‘Motivating’ reasons are instead the considerations that figure in explanations that point at the reasons for which the agent acted. These are ‘hybrid’ in character: for the agent, at the time of acting, these motivating reasons appear as normative reasons. Yet, they need not correspond to normative reasons.[[3]](#footnote-3)

According to Jonathan Dancy, the answer is clear: in our example, one’s reason is the second on the list, namely, the coming of the train. Dancy construes this entity as a state of affairs and argues in no uncertain terms that practical reasons must be states of affairs. Moreover, from the point of view of their ontology, Dancy sees no difference between motivating and normative reasons. In his book *Practical Reality* (Dancy 2000)*,* for instance,he argues explicitly that both normative reasons and motivating reasons are states of affairs – this is what we will call the ‘unity of reasons’ thesis, or UR for short.[[4]](#footnote-4) The foregoing entails, then, that, according to Dancy, both normative and motivating reasons are states of affairs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are other candidates, of course: practical reasons could be mental states (or facts about mental states), or they could be propositions.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this paper, however, we will follow Dancy in rejecting both ‘psychologism’ and ‘propositionalism’ focusing instead on the best defence of Dancy’s own position.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On the other hand, we can best understand Dancy’s view of states of affairs, hence of practical reasons, by proceeding in the same way he does: that is, by contrasting states of affairs with propositions.

In discussing propositions, Dancy (2000; 115) claims to work with what he takes to be the two dominant accounts. The first appears to follow Lewis (1986) and takes propositions to be sets or classes of possible worlds, namely, those in which the sentences that express the propositions are true. The second, which clearly resembles Frege (1892), regards propositions as abstract objects whose structure mirrors the structure of an assertoric sentence. Dancy, rightly, regards propositions on both accounts as abstract and, more controversially, as not part of the world (Ib.; 114, 116).[[8]](#footnote-8) He says, on the other hand, comparatively little about states of affairs.[[9]](#footnote-9) What is uncontroversial is that states of affairs obtain or do not obtain (as opposed to propositions that are true or false) or, as Dancy also puts it, they are entities capable of being the case (Ib.; 116-7, 146-7), i.e., of being features of the world (114, 146) and of the agent’s situation. Also, Dancy takes propositions to be representational entities that are made true by what they represent, namely, states of affairs (117).

Having said this, the focus of the paper will be on the internal consistency of this view of Dancy’s, which we will dub ‘statism’ in what follows.[[10]](#footnote-10) In particular, in what follows we would like to present an argument that is potentially damaging to Dancy’s statist position. Although we will ultimately come to the view that Dancy’s view of practical reasons can be defended against the proposed objection, this is by no means tantamount to claiming that the position should be given preference over other forms of statism or altogether different ontologies of practical reasons. Nor, on the other hand, does it make the present paper a sterile philosophical exercise. On the contrary, our discussion here is intended as a way to introduce some crucial qualifications in the debate, thus hopefully preparing the ground for a more focused critical assessment of Dancy’s position as well as of statism and the ontology of practical reasons more generally. To this purpose, it is sufficient to interpret the claims in this paper as conditional in form: *if* one has reasons to share Dancy’s fundamental assumptions, hence, to endorse his specific form of statism (or something sufficiently close to it), *then* a problem arises; and, although some issues persist, that problem is best dealt with along the lines suggested in the present paper.

**II. The Outlandishness Argument**

Our basic claim is that Dancy holds certain views that are not consistent with each other and, , in order to resolve the tension, he must give up either statism or some other of the claims that he seems to consider fundamental in his system. In more detail, here’s the argument against (Dancy’s version of) statism[[11]](#footnote-11) that we wish to discuss (bracketed page references in the argument are to Dancy (2000)):

1. Things that act as practical reasons (both motivating and normative) for us are what we (can) believe (99, 101).[[12]](#footnote-12)
2. What we believe are the contents of beliefs (113, 147-8).

Therefore (from 1-2),

1. Motivating and normative reasons are the contents of beliefs.
2. Normative reasons are states of affairs (not propositions, mental states or some other alternative) (115-7).
3. Motivating and normative reasons belong to the same ontological category (UR - 2, 99).

Therefore (from 3-5),

1. At least insofar as they constitute practical (motivating and normative) reasons, the contents of beliefs are states of affairs.
2. The view that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs is outlandish (117-8).

Therefore (from 6-7),

1. Reasons (both motivating and normative) cannot be states of affairs.
2. Contradiction (between 6. and 8.)

For simplicity’s sake, we will call the argument formalised in 1-9 above the Outlandishness Argument (OA) from now on.

Is OA compelling? Dancy himself appears to realize that questions could be asked about his overall position. He nonetheless refrains from explicitly dealing with the issue.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, a careful analysis is in order. Premises 1 and 2 appear compelling. OA could be avoided by giving up either statism about normative reasons (premise 4), or the unity of reasons thesis (premise 5). However, the first option is clearly a non-starter for Dancy and his brand of statism. And the second is not particularly appealing either. First, UR represents the very cornerstone of Dancy’s thinking about reasons. Additionally, relaxing, or even abandoning, the idea that all practical reasons are entities of the same ontological type would not help the statist: for, she should in any case say that *some* reasons (be they motivating or, more plausibly, normative) are states of affairs, and this, together with premises 1 and 2, leads to the same problematic conclusion anyway.

On the other hand, *prima facie* there would seem to be good reasons for following Dancy in thinking that the view that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs, as Dancy pictures them, is outlandish (premise 7).[[14]](#footnote-14) There are at least three ways one can substantiate this premise. First, it appears to be an outlandish position in the philosophy of mind to hold that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs: for, then what do we say about false beliefs? That they have no content? This is something Dancy himself explicitly alludes to (117). Secondly, a related problem - discussed by Dancy in a different context (131-7), whereby the contents of beliefs are identified with reasons for action - is that the position sounds outlandish also in the theory of motivation. For, it commits one to the claim that some actions that have correct explanations must be explained by using non-existent explanantia. In particular, false beliefs and the actions they explain pose the challenge that, on a statist construal, there seems to be nothing, i.e., no part of the world, that truly accounts for an agent’s motivation in spite of the correctness of the explanation provided. How could this be? Finally, it looks as though the contents of mental states must be individuated in a more fine-grained way than states of affairs can be. Otherwise, how do we allow for such truisms as, say, that the belief that there is water in the bottle is different from the belief that there is H2O in the bottle?

In what follows, we will assume that the foregoing lends clear support to OA. However, rather than inferring from the above the defeat of Dancy’s statism and, more generally, of all those theories that similarly take both practical and normative reasons to be (at least in some cases) states of affairs, we will present an alternative way out for statists: that of resisting the conclusion by having recourse to an independently motivated distinction the acceptance of which makes OA unsound.

**III. The content/objection distinction**

Our claim is this: the anti-statist conclusion above does not follow if a key distinction is made explicit between the *content* of a belief and its *object*. Such a distinction vindicates the fundamental statist intuition but, at the same time, makes the view sufficiently sophisticated so as to neutralise OA.

Let us begin by looking more closely at the distinction between content and object. The view that the content and the object of a belief are to be kept distinct has a good historical pedigree. It dates back at least to Gottlob Frege and Franz Brentano, who both urged philosophers to inquire into the nature of the intentional connotation of a lot of our thinking, i.e., of the fact that our minds can represent, be about things ‘out there’ in the world. Edmund Husserl famously elaborated upon Brentano’s insights, claiming that the essential property of being directed onto something does depend on the existence of some physical ‘target’, but only in virtue of the relevant intentional act.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The content/object distinction also has its authoritative defenders nowadays. According to Tim Crane (2001a, b), for instance, we need both object and content in order to characterise a subject’s perspective on the world (note that Crane is not discussing reasons and actions). As he puts it:

“Directedness on an object alone is not enough because there are many ways a mind can be directed on the same intentional object. And aspectual shape alone cannot define intentionality, since an aspect is by definition the aspect under which an intentional object (the object of thought) is presented” (Crane 2001a; 29).

The necessity of intentional contents (in Crane’s terminology, ‘aspectual shapes’) in addition to objects is illustrated by Crane on the basis of an example:

“When you think of St Petersburg as St Petersburg, the aspectual shape of your thought is different from when you think about St Petersburg as Leningrad, or when you think of it while listening to Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony*” (Ib.; 19).

That is, although the intentional object, namely St Petersburg, is the same in all three thoughts, it is represented in three different ways, thereby being associated with three different intentional contents.

As for the claim concerning the need for objects in addition to intentional contents, the point is the following: since we are dealing with *the way an object is presented to a subject* having an intentional attitude, the existence of an intentional content/aspectual shape presupposes that of an object the subject enters into a relation with.

It could be contended already at this point that, as it is conveyed by the above St Petersburg example, the object/content distinction is not instrumental to the statist’s purposes, for it applies to *objects*, not *states of affairs*.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, it is sufficient to reply that objects may indeed be the basic entities in the present context, but they are always provided with certain properties. And since states of affairs are always analysable in terms of objects, properties and relations, the alleged ‘ontological gap’ is filled. That is, the very ontological nature of states of affairs as complexes of objects and properties/relations suggests that the intentional element that emerges in one’s relationship with objects is also present in one’s relationship with states of affairs involving those objects. Thus, the content/object distinction appears to be perfectly applicable in the present case.

A more serious problem seems to be that, in the case of states of affairs, the needed uniqueness of intentional entities in spite of the multiplicity of their modes of presentation appears lost. What state of affairs should we identify as *the* object underlying diverse belief contents such as, for instance, London being the largest city in the UK, or the seat of the British government being the largest city in the UK? Indeed, it seems that reasons can only be plausibly identified as states of affairs if sufficiently fine-grained individuation criteria are provided for them - otherwise, say, my moving to Paris because it is close to the largest city in the UK would be the same as your moving to Paris because it is close to the seat of the UK government.

This objection is not conclusive, though. In response to it, we would urge that one not be misled by the unquestionable claim that states of affairs, unlike objects, cannot simply be named or unambiguously pointed at. Once it is acknowledged that objects always exemplify properties and relations and that states of affairs are constituted by objects, properties and relations, regardless of the way in which *we describe* a state of affairs, it seems plausible to think that, exactly in the same way in which there is only one thing that we can imagine, remember, talk about etc. in many ways when it comes to objects, so there is only one thing that we can imagine, remember, talk about etc. in many ways when it comes to states of affairs. That is to say, in exactly the same way in which, say, ‘St Petersburg’ refers to one and only one specific thing with a specific, determinate set of properties, so we can postulate a minimal set of real world entities, properties and relations that act as truth-makers for ‘London is the largest city in the UK’, ‘London is the seat of government’, ‘London is where The Who played innovative music in the 1960s’ and so on, in the case of states of affairs.

At the same time, crucially, this set of worldly entities acts as a reason *only* through modes of presentation, which make certain distinctions relevant to the agent. Thus, it is simply wrong to take the present proposal to entail that, say, we should always be able to unambiguously identify the one true (relevant) state of affairs that is the *real* reason for our actions. On the contrary, we always work with a mechanism of individuation of states of affairs which is fine-grained enough to identify the features that are relevant for the subject - in the present case, for explanatory/practical purposes (but also coarse-grained enough not to require a complete account of everything that exists out there). Indeed, it may be plausibly contended that it is exactly the dualism just pointed at that requires one to employ the object/content distinction when states of affairs are regarded as the entities that play the role of reasons for our actions.

Having said this, let us set the issue concerning the individuation of states of affairs aside for the time being (we will return to it towards the end), and see in more detail whether, and how, the object/content distinction can be of help for statists dealing with OA.

**IV. Neglected possibilities (and one winner)**

Once the object/content distinction is in place, premise 1 of OA can be straightforwardly rejected by pointing out that practical reasons (both motivating and normative) are not what we believe but *what our beliefs are about*:that is, they are not the contents of beliefs but their *objects*. This means that a key *de dicto/de re* distinction must be drawn between the reason for an action as a) what is identified as such by the agent and b) what is actually out there in the world, and makes an action right (or wrong, or motivated), or what have you; and that only a conflation between the two levels leads to the problematic conclusion of OA. Here is a pictorial illustration of what we are suggesting (bold indicates the path taken, similarly for the rest of the figures in what follows):

Content

Object

*Figure 1. First possible view.*

However, there are other possible ways in which the content/object distinction might be implemented and, if only for completeness’s sake, it is necessary to consider them here. To begin with, at one point Dancy himself comes close to the idea expressed above and depicted in Figure 1. He says the following:

“Application of this distinction between content and object to the case of belief is more contentious, because we are used to thinking of the proposition that stands as the content of belief also as the ‘what is believed’, that is, as the *object* of belief. My own (heretical) view about this is that we should stick to our guns, and announce, contrary to established philosophical practice, that a proposition cannot be believed; when I believe that p, *what I believe* is a putative state of affairs, something capable of being the case but not of being true” (Dancy (ms), probably an earlier version of his (2009); italics added).[[17]](#footnote-17)

This, together with Dancy’s explicit rejection of the view that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs, suggests that he explicitly endorses the content/object distinction with the corresponding metaphysics. However, Dancy also states, as we have just seen, that reasons are *what* we believe, which he identifies with the *objects* of our beliefs (contrary to premise 2 of OA). This suggests a picture that may be illustrated as follows:

*Figure 2. Second possible view.*

This is no doubt a strange position, and hardly one that helps the statist with OA. For it is commonly agreed that what we believe are things that are designated by *that*-clauses and that *that*-clauses designate propositions, not states of affairs (McGrath 2014, section 3.1). Now, it is true that Dancy (2000, 116, 121-2) appears to deny this. He explicitly states that i) the things that can be specified via *that-*clauses may be propositional only in form; ii) even if normally such clauses are in the proposition-specifying business, this is not so when it comes to specifying reasons; and, this is because, iii) reasons, as the things that are capable of being believed cannot be propositions (but instead must be states of affairs). From which it follows that, normally, if not necessarily, the things that can be specified via *that-*clauses in the case of practical reasoning are states of affairs (as objects of belief). However, given the mainstream position, Dancy’s view is certainly an idiosyncratic approach that requires an explicit argument. However, he does not provide such an argument.[[18]](#footnote-18) The same would be true were Dancy to give up the first half of the above claim (that what we believe are things designated by *that*-clauses): since this thesis is very plausible, the burden of proof would be on Dancy to provide an alternative account, which, again, he doesn’t do. Given that the less contentious alternative that we sketched at the beginning of the section is available, we therefore conclude that this second option is not worth pursuing any further.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another possibility is the following. With a view to making sense of both the nature of *that*-clauses and the statist claim that propositions cannot be reasons, one could point out that there are really two kinds of propositions.[[20]](#footnote-20) Namely, on the one hand, what one may call ‘Russellian propositions’, which are entities built up out of objects, properties, and relations (as in Russell 1903); and, on the other hand, what one may call ‘Fregean thoughts’, or ‘Gedanken’, which are entities corresponding to modes of presentation of those objects, properties, and relations.[[21]](#footnote-21) Using this idea, one could say that *both the objects and the contents of beliefs are propositions*: Fregean propositions in the latter case, Russellian propositions in the former.

This might be regarded as a way of preserving the distinction between two different kinds of entities suggested by the content/object dichotomy, while at the same time explaining Dancy’s claim above that “when I believe that p, what I believe is a putative state of affairs” without ipso facto giving up the thought that things that can be designated by using *that*-clauses are the contents of beliefs. For, this claim would be made true by the fact that the things designated by using *that*-clauses are Fregean propositions, which would be the contents of beliefs. At the same time, it would be Russellian propositions, i.e., entities built up out of worldly objects, properties, and relations, that qualify as the objects of our beliefs, i.e., as what serve as reasons for our actions. And this, given the peculiar ontological nature of Russellian propositions, might be taken to vindicate Dancy’s claim that, when it comes to making sense of our actions, what we believe cannot be abstract objects. The view can be represented like this:

*Figure 3. Third possible view.*

This position too bleeds from many wounds, though. First of all, Russellian propositions are sufficiently distinct from states of affairs because, as is the typical view of them, they are taken to be *logical* complexes and hence considered abstract - in which case statists cannot be happy with the view since, sharing Dancy’s general ontological picture, they are looking for something concrete and in the actual world we inhabit. Secondly, should – although it is hard to see how - Russellian propositions turn out to be sufficiently analogous – identical, perhaps - to states of affairs to satisfy the statist,[[22]](#footnote-22) trouble would still follow. For, Dancy’s denial of propositionalism in favour of statism would lose its point: in effect, as far as his views on reasons are concerned, the two positions would collapse onto each other.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The same holds for a fourth possible view, which does not make use of the content/object distinction, but retains the distinction between Fregean and Russellian propositions. The idea is that reasons are what we believe, namely, the *contents* of our beliefs, which are entities designated by *that*-clauses; and that these are propositions of two kinds: Fregean and Russellian. This position would enable one to accept premises 1-2 of OA, but at the same time deny that conclusion 8 (hence the fatal contradiction) follows. Here is a schematic depiction:

*Figure 4. Fourth possible view.*

On this view too, however, in a vast class of cases if not in all cases, reasons turn out to be abstract entities (whether they are understood along Fregean or Russellian lines), which is the exact opposite of the fundamental postulate of the statist theory. Furthermore, the statist would additionally have to give us the grounds for carving up the set of reasons in terms of the ontology in the way proposed here but it is hard to see any such grounds that would fit the statist picture of reasons.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The above discussion, we believe, goes to show that our proposed view, according to which a) the content and the object of our beliefs should be sharply distinguished and b) reasons are what our beliefs are about (the objects of beliefs), namely, states of affairs, is the best path to take for the (Dancy-style) statist. In particular, the content/object distinction can help the statist to avoid endorsing an allegedly outlandish view and hence successfully tackle OA.

Before we move on to potential criticisms, an important point ought to be emphasised in order to avoid unnecessary objections. Our contention is that, based on the fact that a distinction between the object and the content of a belief *can* be drawn, statism about practical reasons *can* be given at least one plausible formulation which doesn’t fall prey of OA (and yet stays faithful some initial assumptions). Albeit we did provide some limited support to the content/object distinction, in no way are we suggesting that it is an absolutely non-contentious view.

**V. Is *our* view outlandish?**

When we presented OA, we suggested three reasons why premise (7), i.e., the premise that articulates the charge of outlandishness, should be seen as true. It is now time to see more in detail whether invoking the content/object distinction can truly disarm those reasons.

Starting from the reading of the outlandishness charge based on the individuation of beliefs on the basis of their contents, it poses no problem. The standard account of the content of beliefs, understood as (Fregean) propositions suffices for individuating beliefs in a fine-grained way on the basis of their contents. And, as we have suggested above, there are ways to fill the gap that seems to exist between the individuation of reasons as worldly entities and the individuation of reasons as contents of beliefs.

As for the issue concerning motivation in the case of false beliefs, Dancy (2000; Chapter 6) argues for the existence of non-factive explanations in ‘error’ cases – that is, when an action is produced by false beliefs. He maintains that such actions are done for a reason *p* even though that reason adduced to motivate them is false, i.e., it was not the case that *p*. More recently, Dancy seems to have given up his endorsement of non-factive explanations while still insisting that actions based on false considerations are in any case done for a reason (Dancy 2014). Whatever one makes of this[[25]](#footnote-25), the supporter of the content/object distinction can either i) agree with Dancy and claim that in error cases beliefs still have objects (see our view below), or, giving up statism and endorsing propositionalism, ii) claim that in these cases reasons are identical to the content of beliefs. Although, admittedly, the content/object distinction doesn’t seem decisive here, especially in case ii) above it appears at least to contribute to providing a solution to the problem at hand.

This leads us to the issue concerning the status of false beliefs in the philosophy of mind.

The original problem, recall, is that the contents of beliefs cannot be states of affairs because then our corresponding philosophy of mind would have no place for false beliefs. Here is an example (Lord 2008). John believes that his house is on fire and therefore calls the fire department. But the house is not on fire and thus the calling of the fire department was prompted by a false belief. Now, what is the *content* of John’s belief, given that the relevant state of affairs, that there is a fire at John’s house, does not obtain? The correct statist answer may appear to be that a false belief is a belief with no content. But of course this is not right: when we have a false belief, the latter does have a content, it is just that such a content does not ‘correspond’ to anything in the concrete, actual world we inhabit - i.e., it is not matched by an *object*. [[26]](#footnote-26) And this is exactly *the* problem in the context of our present discussion. Although we have no difficulty in claiming that John’s belief has propositional content, we are now forced to hold that his belief has no object. And this appears to be no less absurd than the original claim concerning content.

Our response is to deny that this claim is absurd, as it is perfectly possible for it to be true *de dicto* but not *de re* that someone has a reason for acting.[[27]](#footnote-27) More precisely, our claim is that false beliefs do have contents (i.e., propositions), while their corresponding objects can only be existentially quantified over in a non-ontologically-committing sense. As Crane (2001a; 33) eloquently puts it, although “there is a sense in which one may be thinking, and yet thinking about nothing, there is no sense in which one may be thinking, and yet thinking nothing.” This means that we can answer the question what our beliefs are about when asked, *without* this entailing the existence of something ‘out there’. Take John’s belief in our example above: when asked, John can reply that his belief is about the fire at his house even if, as a matter of fact, there is no fire at his house. In all cases like John’s[[28]](#footnote-28) we can meaningfully say that ‘there is an *x* such that...’, and act accordingly, without thereby incurring inevitable ontological costs in terms of *x*, or the *x*s, existing in the actual world *in a way that makes our existentially quantified statement true*.[[29]](#footnote-29)

On the other hand, the precise ontological nature of things that we can quantify over but do not take to be (wholly) actual and/or existent should be specified; and it is also unclear whether these things are sufficiently ‘thick’ to play the role of reasons in a statist setting. For the time being, we will not discuss this further and emphasise that, although with an important differentiation between false and true beliefs, a uniform treatment is in any case given of the content of all practical beliefs, and in such a way that OA is neutralised.[[30]](#footnote-30)

One may be unhappy with this, based on a worry analogous to Dancy’s objection to Alan White (1972)’s statist account of belief contents:[[31]](#footnote-31) namely, that the view being put forward here is not sufficiently realist about true beliefs because, if it is enough for false beliefs to have objects in an ontologically non-committing sense, then it is not clear why true beliefs should have objects in a stronger sense. Our reply to this is twofold. First, true beliefs are different from false beliefs in that they are *true*, and *this is why* they have an ontologically thicker/stronger content as well as object. Secondly, and relatedly, the idea of extending the ontologically-thin-object view to all beliefs really makes no sense, especially in a statist framework. Indeed, what else could the object of a true belief be (in the case of practical thinking, at least) if not a state of affairs that obtains?

Let us then assume that our proposed version of statism is internally coherent and plausible. What are the consequences of this view in the philosophy of mind? A restricted form of internalism seems to follow. For, insofar as they accept the thesis that the existence of a relation entails the existence of its relata, statists can and should deny that all thoughts are relations between objects that exist ‘out there’ and their thinkers. In particular, they should contend that, while true beliefs involve such relations, false beliefs need not. This form of internalism is certainly a substantial specific view in the philosophy of mind. However, it is in general not considered outlandish by philosophers, and consequently represents an adequate tool for dealing with OA.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Hence, we conclude that statism seems to have been saved from the threat represented by OA.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**VI. Further objections and responses**

Before ending our discussion, there are three other difficulties to consider.

The first problem takes us back to the question of the individuation of *reasons* we have discussed, in passing, in section III. Mantel (forthcoming) argues in favour of an ontological distinction between motivating reasons as Fregean propositions and normative reasons as states of affairs, based on the need to regard the former as being sufficiently fine-grained to correspond to what actually motivates actual agents, and the latter as more coarse-grained entities in the world. In the course of the discussion she considers something like the option we are defending here, but rejects it for two reasons. On the one hand, Mantel claims, if motivating reasons are the objects of beliefs, they may fail to mirror the agent’s *perspective* on deliberation. On the other hand, she continues, if motivating considerations are the objects of beliefs under a certain mode of presentation, things are less straightforward but the problem persists nonetheless. For, as illustrated above, one is committed to the existence of non-obtaining states of affairs, but then it is better to make do with propositions only, given that propositions are needed anyway while non-obtaining states of affairs are not.

While, as is clear from our remarks on individuation in section III, we agree with Mantel’s first criticism (modes of presentations need to be taken explicitly into account), we don’t think the individuation issue is really decisive here. For, as we have suggested earlier, it can be contended that, while it is true that states of affairs in the world are often individuated more coarse-grainedly than reasons, all the relevant bits, as it were, are out there in the world, and it is really the content of our beliefs that is shaped by ‘picking out’ those bits of the unique relevant worldly state of affairs that are significant for the subject (on this, see also Textor (2014)). As for the second issue raised by Mantel, we don’t think it is compelling. We believe that a statist can insist that i) non-obtaining states of affairs are a fair price to pay insofar as they are part of an overall more plausible account of reasons, according to which states of affairs (in the thickest ontological form possible in each case) are our reasons for acting; and, consequently, ii) it is in fact propositions that can and should be dispensed with, or at least cannot do all the work on their own. Thus, there certainly is space for discussion here regarding the overall pros and cons of propositionalism and statism, but it seems fairly uncontroversial that the (putative) issue of individuation is not the basis for a knockdown argument against statism.

The second difficulty we want to discuss here is that the proposal being put forward might in fact be taken to violate UR (premise 5 of OA) – which many, including Dancy, would be reluctant to give up. Isn’t it the case now that motivating reasons can be both obtaining and non-obtaining states of affairs, hence they are not the same thing as normative reasons, which can only be obtaining states of affairs?

Although we acknowledge the important of discussing this issue explicitly, we don’t think this is a crucial objection in the context of the present discussion – which, recall, only concerns OA. For, Dancy (2000; 101-105) supports UR with the claim that any theory of reasons must meet what he calls the Explanatory Constraint (EC) – normative reasons must be capable of also playing the role of motivating reasons – and the Normative Constraint (NC) – motivating reasons must be able to function as normative reasons. Now, first, the view under consideration meets both constraints – as they, notice, do not require that *every* motivating reason also acts as normative (and vice versa). Secondly, and more importantly, the claim that intentional objects might be non-obtaining states of affairs is not meant to introduce a new ontological category. All that follows from such a claim (when coupled to statism) is that *whenever there in fact is* both a normative and a motivating reason for a given action, they are identical - they are both obtaining states of affairs.[[34]](#footnote-34) This is sufficient for preserving UR.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The last putative difficulty has to do with an alternative theory of reasons that Dancy rejects: the so-called content-based approach. On this view, normative reasons are the contents of beliefs, while motivating reasons are beliefs *with a content*. This might now be turned into an ‘*object*-based approach’ on the basis of the content/object distinction: motivating reasons would then be beliefs *with an object,* while normative reasons would be the objects themselves. One might argue that *this* approach can overcome the problems of the content-based version and, consequently, that the introduction of the content/object distinction weakens statism rather than lending support to it.

However, this is not so. Dancy (2000; 114-9) argues that the content-based view faces a dilemma: if one holds that the contents of beliefs are propositions, one cannot maintain (premise 4 of OA) that normative reasons are states of affairs. If instead one holds that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs, one must endorse an outlandish view in the philosophy of mind. Now, in the context of the object-based approach just outlined one can claim both that the contents of beliefs are propositions and that normative reasons are states of affairs. Thus, one can indeed slip through the horns of the dilemma. However, it remains the case, as Dancy (Ib.; 113) argues, that the approach is unable to meet NC. For, motivating reasons will still be mental states, consequently proving unable, given Dancy’s assumption of practical realism, to act as normative reasons. This implies that the object-based approach would not only give up UR, but also endorse psychologism about motivating reasons, which is anathema even to those statists who are ready to reject UR.

**VII. Summary and concluding remarks**

In this paper, we have identified a possible and, as far as we can tell, so far neglected way to refute the ‘statist’ theory of practical reasons, and in particular Jonathan Dancy’s version of it. The analysis and discussion of such potential refutation – we called it the Outlandishness Argument – has larger repercussions for the debate on the ontology of reasons, insofar as it offers statists additional tools for defending their view. In particular, we have argued that statists should make explicit use of a distinction between the content and the object of beliefs; and hold that reasons, both motivating and normative, are to be identified with the latter (states of affairs) and not the former (propositions).

Of course, one might wish to avoid the anti-statist criticism in some other way, perhaps not committed to the content/object distinction. But it seems to us that our recommendation is the best available strategy – if not the only one. In particular, we have seen, in section IV, that possible alternatives are inferior to our approach.

On the other hand, error cases do seem to pose a threat for statism, in that they require at least a weakening of the notions of states of affairs and of reasons as objects of belief. As a matter of fact, albeit we urged statists to insist on such weaker notions, and indeed think this is an available move for them, we believe that, on the whole, propositionalism is superior to statism.[[36]](#footnote-36)

However, this branch of the debate is immaterial for present purposes. Whatever one makes of error cases the claim that statists who accept certain basic assumptions should also endorse the object/content distinction can and should be evaluated separately. Only based on such an assessment, we think, can the discussion of statism and the ontology of practical reasons more generally, truly achieve progress.

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1. Sometimes these reasons are called justifying reasons, but we agree with Dancy (2000: 107), that the qualifier ‘normative’ is more appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There could be a difference between these two locutions: what it is to have a reason is an issue theorized in its own right (see e.g., Schroeder 2008). But this question need not concern us in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is important to point out, however, that here we are not interested in what Alvarez (2010; 36) and Mantel (forthcoming) call explanatory reasons: i.e., reasons insofar as the play the role of explanantia. Dancy’s view that will be discussed in what follows, has the same focus. See also Hyman (2015; esp. chapter 6) for a good discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dancy’s master argument for UR consists in his endorsement of the ‘Explanatory Constraint’ - normative reasons must be capable of playing the role of motivating reasons - and the ‘Normative Constraint’ - motivating reasons must be able to function as normative reasons (Ib.; 101-105). The conjunction of these two constraints, Dancy thinks, provides the grounds for believing that motivating reasons and normative reasons are ontologically the same kind of thing. For a thorough (and, ultimately, sympathetic) recent treatment of UR, see Miller (2008) and Alvarez (2010). Mantel (2014) is a good critical discussion. In this paper we will not question UR. However, there will be occasions when the distinction between motivating and normative reasons becomes important. In these cases, the context or the qualifier will make clear which of the two we have in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It might be objected that Dancy is not explicitly interested in ontological issues, and is happy to talk about reasons as entities (whatever they exact nature) that are capable of being the case, and also capable of being believed. This, however, would be incorrect: for, whatever Dancy says about this, it seems clear that his commitment to UR plus his claim that reasons (especially normative reasons) must be capable of being the case, i.e., of being parts of the concrete world, entails that, for Dancy, all practical reasons are states of affairs that (may) obtain. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Turri (2009; 491-492) provides extensive bibliography. What we call ‘propositionalism’ Turri calls ‘abstractionism’, a difference which is irrelevant for present purposes. See also Alvarez (2016) for a brief overview of the literature and Mantel (2014, 2016, forthcoming) also canvass much of the relevant literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dancy is not alone in this rejection, see e.g. Alvarez (2010; 2016); while others, giving up UR, endorse a mixed position that could in principle accommodate psychologism. Much of this debate is further complicated by the fact that there are two ways of explaining action using two different notions of reason. Many of these authors would be willing to accept that explanatory reasons are mental states and deny only that motivating reasons are mental states. Dancy is not one of them, although this appears to be because so he holds the view that explanatory reasons do not deserve to be called ‘reasons’ in the first place. See esp. Dancy (2003) on this. Here, at any rate, we will not need to get into the details of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘More controversially’ since, following Wittgenstein, some take the world itself to be abstract. See Gaskin (2009) for such a view. One can, however, always say that the world we presently inhabit is concrete and actual and only possible worlds are abstract. For more on this see Plantinga (1974) and Divers (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In particular, he does not define what states of affairs are. The standard view in the literature, we take it, is that states of affairs are complexes constituted by objects, properties exemplified by those objects and/or relations between those objects. However, note that for Dancy states of affairs cannot be *logical* complexes since that would make them abstract, which is something he clearly denies. See Textor (2014) for a good overview. There is also the vexed question whether Dancy means states of affairs or facts (or both), where, roughly, the former may fail to obtain while the latter may not. The relevant places to check are Dancy (2000, Chapters 5-7), (2004a, Chapter 2), (2004b) and his (ms). He often talks about facts *or* states of affairs and says at points things like “facts or better, states of affairs”. However, he nowhere clearly identifies facts with states of affairs. Also, his notion of ‘non-factive’ explanation, which we will introduce and discuss later, suggests that explanations may refer to things that do not obtain, and therefore it is states of affairs that should be regarded as reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We are aware that this label has been used by Pryor (2007) to refer to what we call ‘psychologism’. We also know that Dancy has a name for his position (he calls it the ‘normative story’). However, first, there is no risk of confusion here, as it is clear that we are discussing states of affairs, not mental states. As for Dancy’s own label, moreover, we should emphasize that statism is a broader category, and Dancy’s theory only constitutes one version of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The parenthetical qualification and analogous ones will be often dropped in what follows. For argumentative purposes, that is, ‘statism’ will be intended as coextensive with ‘Dancy’s version of statism’ (i.e. what he calls ‘normative story’ in his book). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The parenthetical addition ‘can’ is needed because while motivating reasons are always things we do believe, normative reasons can be such that we do not actually believe them, yet they still apply to us. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Here is what he says (147): “My second difficulty is a purely metaphysical one. What are these ‘things believed’ that are supposed to be what explain intentional actions? Are they propositions? Are they states of affairs? Are they facts? In particular, what are they when they are false – if indeed they are capable of falsehood? The issue here is whether to take these questions seriously. If one does take them seriously, the only answer is regrettably brief. I argued in Chapter 5 that they are not propositions, since they must be capable of being the case, and no proposition is of that sort. What we believe may be the case or fail to be the case; it may obtain or fail to obtain. Propositions are true or false; they cannot obtain or be the case. But this does not tell us what sort of thing a what-is-believed is when it is not the case – where to place such a ‘thing’ metaphysically. Perhaps the only answer is that it is something that may or may not be the case. But I do not pretend that this is very enlightening.” But this is too easy a way out for Dancy. For we are querying exactly what kind of ontological entity he is talking about here – without this there is no answering of OA. The key point for present purposes is that, judged from what he says, the fitting ontological category, by Dancy’s own lightsis that of states of affairs (since these are the ‘things’ that can be the case, obtain or do not obtain). But, the problem is, if state of affairs is the ontological category he must be using, then OA follows in the way we present it in text. Lord (2008: 5) notices this problem, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One could object to premise 7 that Dancy does not think premise 7 applies to his own case, as he only considers the possibility en route to criticizing McDowell and others and, see the quote in the previous footnote, his ultimate position instead is that belief contents are what can be the case. However, to repeat what we said above, this will not do, since if he has a ‘new’ ontological category in mind (something that can be the case but is neither a fact, nor a proposition, nor a state of affairs), Dancy never explicitly says what it is. And since it seems in fact hard to define such a category, it is only natural to have recourse to states of affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also Twardowski (1977, originally published in 1894), where the thesis is put forward that in every mental act a content (‘Inhalt’) and an object (‘Gegenstand’) must be distinguished. According to Twardowski, every mental phenomenon is directed towards its object, but not towards its content. See Moran (2000) on Brentano, Husserl, Twardowski and Heidegger. See also Stout (1918) for further uses of the content/object distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Note that the term ‘object’ here is not to be intended in the sense of the content/object distinction, but rather in the traditional sense of a property-bearer, individual thing, substance etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The qualification ‘putative’ is needed to take care of the possibility of false beliefs, i.e., of reasons not corresponding to obtaining state of affairs. We will discuss this important scenario in the next section. Incidentally, this quote shows that, although he tries to only work with notions like ‘what can be believed’ and ‘what can be the case’, if pressed Dancy would definitely say that practical reasons are states of affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It could be said, referring to Pryor (2007), that in the philosophy of action Dancy’s position about what *that*-clauses designate is not unusual. However, this defence still appears *ad hoc* in the present context, for we need to make clear that there can be no gap between action theory and metaphysics to the extent that the issues one deals in the context of the former are metaphysical in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Recall that here we are not criticising Dancy as much as considering a possible interpretation of what he says - one which, we suggest, is in any case inferior to another interpretation, which we have already outlined. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. To be precise, there is also Lewis’s view of propositions as classes of possible worlds. However, for our purposes this account does not require separate treatment because the problems and objections we mention would also apply to this reading of propositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. George Bealer (1998), for instance, can be interpreted as having something like these two types of propositions in mind when he distinguishes between ‘connections’ and ‘thoughts’. Gaskin (2009) also posits Russellian propositions on the level of reference (‘the world’) and Fregean propositions (‘Thoughts’) on the level of sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There appear to be two ways of achieving this outcome. On the one hand, Russellian propositions would have to be argued to have concrete, worldly constituents that are structured mereologically or in some other way that does not make them abstract. Perhaps this is a possible route, but it is certainly not the standard way. Alternatively, one can embrace some version of the identity theory of truth (for details, see Gaskin 2015) that equates true (Russellian) propositions with facts; then read facts as obtaining states affairs; and finally construe states of affairs as logical complexes that are therefore abstract (Gaskin 2009 is an example of this). However, in clear contrast with Dancy’s basic assumptions and aims, this achieves identity at the price of making states of affairs abstract. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Dancy’s acceptance of non-obtaining states of affairs as reasons (which seems implied, for instance, by his acknowledgment that there are non-factive explanations) doesn’t commit him to the view that reasons may be abstract entities – at least not in the sense that reasons might belong to ontological categories that have abstractness as an essential feature. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. It could be said that normative reasons are Russellian propositions, whereas motivating reasons are Fregean propositions. Alternatively, it could be said that reasons, both normative and motivating, are Russellian propositions, except in those cases in which the relevant states of affairs fail to obtain, when they are Fregean propositions. However, the first reading is *ad hoc*, and both readings requires the rejection of UR. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. We have no space here to discuss the details and overall plausibility of these views. There is another account on the table (e.g. Alvarez 2010, 2016) that holds that in error cases - although the action can be explained by invoking explanatory reasons - no practical reasons, be these motivating or normative, were present, hence there is nothing to account for. Setting now aside the fact that Dancy is no fan of this form of explaining actions (which is relevant since we aim to stay within the confines of Dancy’s central commitments), there is something problematic about claiming that only those actions are done for a reason that are actually done for the right reason (Mantel forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. It could be suggested that we are unfairly disregarding Dancy’s (2000, Chapter 5) own way of dealing with error cases (false beliefs) and, more generally, providing a detailed characterization of the agent’s perspective of the world in which the agent is acting: namely, we are not adequately considering his ‘appositional account’ (Ib., 128, 133) and his claim that reasons-context are intensional (Ib., 134, 144, 165). However, the appositional account concerns the role of beliefs in action-explanation– its aim being to somehow keep beliefs as some part of the explanation of action even though they cannot be a motivating or even explanatory reason. As for the intensional nature of reasons, it too is part of Dancy’s attempt to make sense of non-factive explanations. In both cases, the story might be satisfactory as far as the explanation of action is concerned, but it certainly isn’t when it comes to discussing the ontology of practical reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. There can be other responses but they come with more metaphysical baggage and are not in line with Dancy’s ontological commitments as outlined in section I. One option would be to follow the Meinongian line of distinguishing what exists from what is real, so allowing for non-existing entities that can count as the real things that act as reasons (see Parsons 1980, who explicitly refers to Meinong 1960). A similar strategy would be to take the line, inspired by Frege (1892) and Russell (1904), according to which the objects of false beliefs exist, period. That is, it could be argued that reasons are non-obtaining states of affairs but these also exist and are real in some sense. Plantinga (1974) would agree. See also Skorupski’s (2002) distinction between nominal facts and worldly facts. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. There are in fact three types of error cases: states of affairs involving i) in principle impossible objects (the round square); ii) objects that are not in the actual world (Pegasus); iii) objects that are in the actual world but do not have the properties we ascribe to them (the fire in John’s house). Although our interest lies in type-iii) objects and states of affairs, the general point that we are making concerns all three alternatives, if one is willing to accept that there are such things as non-existent entities. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The qualification in italic takes care of the obvious objection that the relevant objects do exist in the actual world. This is true, but it is only certain states of affairs involving them, which nevertheless fail to obtain, that are relevant for us. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. We take it that Crane’s (2001a; 13-8) somewhat obscure distinction between the *schematic* and the *substantial* is meant to capture essentially the intuition just presented in the main text. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. White’s suggestion is that false beliefs (can) have non-obtaining content without having no content at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Incidentally, Crane is willing to embrace an even more radical internalism, extending the claims above to intentional attitudes towards actually existing objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. On a different, but related note, Prior (1971) even employs the content/object distinction within a view according to which facts are true propositions. Such an identity theory, however, as we remarked earlier, is not something the Dancy-style statist can endorse. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Notice that, in fact, Dancy too must hold that motivating reasons are obtaining as well as non-obtaining states of affairs. Thus, the issue being discussed is in fact independent of the content/object distinction we are invoking. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Notice, at any rate, that OA does *not* crucially rely on the assumption that practical reasons are ‘ontologically unitary’, since it is sufficient for the argument to apply that *some* practical reason is both what is believed by an agent and a state of affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. We explain this in more detail in (*redacted*). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)