

REASONS AND BELIEFS

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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. The problem is that those who endorse such a view seem forced to maintain both (a) that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs and (b) that the conception 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 neutralized.

KEYWORDS: practical reasons. Jonathan Dancy. content of belief. object of belief. states of affairs

I. THE ONTOLOGY OF REASONS

CONSIDER the following example: you happen to be walking along a railway, when you suddenly realize 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 this 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 are those things that favor actions and that, consequently, are referred to in evaluating one’s actions.¹ 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 ‘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, although they often do.³

The standard view on this issue is that normative reasons are things in the world (in our example, the coming of the train), while motivating reasons are psychological states (the belief that the train is coming). However, recently the view has become influential that such a rupture in our ontology is misguided. In part based on the abovementioned observation that motivating reasons may coincide with normative reasons, one may prefer instead a uniform ontological treatment of motivating and normative reasons. This is what we will call the ‘Unity of Practical Reasons’ (UPR) assumption.⁴ Its advocates see no ontological difference between motivating and normative reasons, and indeed think that they must belong to the same ontological category.⁵ Given UPR and the above standard view about normative reasons, the view follows that all practical reasons are things in the world.⁶ This is the view that we will be exploring.

The next matter to consider is what one means by ‘things in the world’—a clause we have deliberately left vague so far. We will approach this question by focusing on the work of Jonathan Dancy, who is a convinced defender of the view that all practical reasons are things in the world, and is also an important voice in the debate. (It is important to point out, however, that we use Dancy’s view only as a proxy in order to pin down the precise details of the theory of practical reasons we want to discuss.) To begin with, Dancy thinks that reasons must be things that are the case, *or at least are capable of being the case*. For instance, he says:

What are these ‘things believed’ that are supposed to be what explain intentional actions? . . . I argued . . . 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. (2000: 147)

One may wonder how exactly this is to be understood. In particular, there is an ontological difference between things that *are* the case (and cannot exist in some sense while failing to be the case) and things that are *capable of being* the case (but may not be). The former belong to the category of *facts*, the latter to the category of *states of affairs*. This means that a choice has to be made between the two. Dancy does not explicitly make this choice (although it is clear that, rightly, he does not identify facts with states of affairs.) However, we think it is reasonable to read him as having states of affairs rather than facts in mind. For one, his notion of ‘non-factive’ explanation, which we will introduce and discuss below, suggests that for Dancy explanations may refer to things that do not obtain, and therefore it is states of affairs that should be regarded as reasons.⁷ More importantly, and independently of exegetical matters, we think this is the right choice based on the simple thought that it is uncontroversial that reasons may at least sometimes fail to correspond to the world—something reference to states of affairs can make sense of but theories only based on facts cannot. In view of the foregoing, in what follows we will refer to the theory constituting the focus of the paper as PRSA (‘Practical Reasons are States of Affairs’).

Before we move on, though, a further, partially interpretative matter needs to be considered. In the earliest published formulation of his ontological position, Dancy ambiguously claims that “between beliefs on the one hand, conceived as

psychological states, and normative truths, facts or states of affairs (all of which are incapable of falsehood) lie such things as what is believed” (1995: 15). Moreover, the above quoted discussion from Dancy (2000: 147) continues with the following conclusion: “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.” These two quotes suggest that Dancy does not see a choice between facts and states of affairs so much as reckon that an altogether new ontological category has to be introduced that is different from these standard categories. The problem is that such a controversial claim should be backed up by proper discussion and argument, something Dancy does not provide. In a sense, what we propose below can be read as trying to make sense of Dancy’s position. Be this as it may, in the absence of any further textual support we feel warranted in continuing to read Dancy as endorsing PRSA.

The PRSA-friendly position, then, is simply that both normative reasons and motivating reasons are states of affairs. But what are states of affairs exactly? While, as we just pointed out, Dancy never precisely defines the ontological categories he employs, he claims that states of affairs, as opposed to propositions, are concrete (rather than abstract), are in the world (rather than in some Platonic realm), are truth-makers (rather than truth-bearers), and in particular, are capable of being the case/obtain (rather than capable of being true) (Dancy 2000: 114, 116–117, 146–147). As a further positive characterization, we add that the standard view in the literature is that states of affairs are complexes constituted by objects, properties exemplified by those objects and/or relations between those objects (Textor 2016). Given what he says against rival views, the position advocated by Dancy should be understood in the sense that states of affairs are not merely logical complexes, but rather concrete entities composed of concrete constituents such as objects, properties, etc. Lastly, we note that, given his distinction between things in the world and other things, Dancy must deny the Wittgensteinian view that the world itself is abstract (Gaskin 2009) and hold, e.g., that the world we presently inhabit is concrete and actual, and only possible worlds are abstract (Plantinga 1974; Divers 2002).

In what follows, we will focus exclusively on PRSA as just defined, setting aside alternative positions on the ontology of reasons. In particular, we will discuss neither ‘psychologism’ (reasons are mental states or facts about mental states, sometimes also referred to as ‘statism’) nor ‘propositionalism’ (reasons are propositions).⁸ Dancy considers both positions as inferior to his own, and for dialectical purposes—since we are interested in discussing PRSA, not in providing a critical assessment of it in comparison to other views—we will not question his (nor anyone else’s, for that matter) arguments and statements on this point.⁹

Here is how we are going to proceed. In the next section (II), we will present an argument that is potentially damaging for PRSA. We call it the Outlandishness Argument (or OA). After this, in section III, we introduce a distinction that we claim can salvage the position (with certain qualifications). In the remaining sections, we consider potential problems: that there may be more plausible alternatives to our proposed solution (section IV); that, as a matter of fact, our proposal cannot avoid

OA (section V); and, lastly, that it has shortcomings of its own (section VI). We end the paper with a brief summary and some concluding remarks.

Two notes of caution before we proceed. First, we have defined PRSA in a particular way, largely building on the work of Dancy. This means that, although we will ultimately come to the view that PRSA or, maybe better, *something sufficiently close to it* can be defended against OA, our conclusion can only be a qualified one taking the following conditional form: *if* one endorses the form of PRSA put forward here, *then* a problem arises. The second note of caution has to do with the above clause “something sufficiently close to it.” Our proposed solution will not keep PRSA entirely intact, yet we think it is the best one can get while both responding to OA and keeping as much of PRSA intact as possible.

II. THE OUTLANDISHNESS ARGUMENT

Here’s the argument against PRSA that we wish to discuss (for simplicity’s sake, we will call it the Outlandishness Argument (OA)):

- A1. Supporters of PRSA must say that, at least insofar as they constitute practical (motivating and normative) reasons, the contents of beliefs are states of affairs.
- A2. The view that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs is outlandish (Dancy 2000: 117–8).

Therefore (from A1–A2),

- A3. Supporters of PRSA must acknowledge that reasons (both motivating and normative) cannot be states of affairs (from A2).

Since A3 contradicts A1, and A2 is explicitly accepted by Dancy, it looks as though there is a problem for Dancy’s view of practical reasons, and PRSA more generally. It is therefore necessary to examine OA, first of all by looking at the two premises more closely. Premise A1 is, of course, far from obviously true. It can be argued for as follows:

- B1. Things that serve as practical reasons (both motivating and normative) for us are what we (can) believe (Dancy 2000: 99, 101).¹⁰
- B2. What we (can) believe are the contents of beliefs (Dancy 2000: 113, 117, 147–150).

Therefore (from B1–B2),

- B3. Motivating and normative reasons are the contents of beliefs (from B1–B2).
- B4. Normative reasons are states of affairs (not propositions, mental states or some other alternative) (Dancy 2000: 115–7).
- B5. Motivating and normative reasons belong to the same ontological category (UPR; Dancy 2000: 2, 99).

Therefore (from B3 together with B4 and B5, which entail PRSA),

- A1. At least insofar as they constitute practical (motivating and normative) reasons, the contents of beliefs are states of affairs.

Premise B1 appears compelling (at least if one sidelines, as Dancy does, psychologism). And so does premise B2: it seems hard to deny that if a subject *S* believes something *x*, then *x* is the content of *S*'s belief. As a matter of fact, this looks like a matter of definition. One could resist the inference from B1–B2 to B3, however, based on the idea that the content of a belief is somehow different from the 'thing believed.' However, it is difficult to see the grounds for this distinction. As for Dancy, he nowhere discusses how this would come about or how it would affect the ontology of reasons. For now, therefore, even though we will expand exactly on this point in what follows, it is best to stick to the 'standard' picture as painted in OA and take B1–B3 for granted.

Moving on, OA could be avoided by giving up either the idea that normative reasons are states of affairs (premise B4), or the unity of practical reasons thesis (premise B5). However, both options are clear non-starters. For PRSA, as construed above, is based exactly on the idea that normative reasons must be things in the world, i.e., things capable of being the case. Additionally, abandoning the idea that all practical reasons are entities of the same ontological type (i.e., giving up UPR, hence B5) would not help with OA. For, one should in any case say that normative reasons are states of affairs (B4), and this, together with premises B1 and B2, leads to a similarly problematic conclusion anyway.

Let us now consider the other main premise of OA (premise A2). *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 is outlandish. In particular, there are three ways one can substantiate this premise.

First, that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs is an outlandish position in the philosophy of mind. Normally, the contents of beliefs are taken to be propositions (Schwitzgebel 2015: esp. section 3). Suppose, however, that the PRSA supporter insists that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs. Granting this at least for the sake of argument, philosophers of mind can raise the issue of false beliefs, since obviously these do not correspond to obtaining states of affairs. There are two possible responses here on behalf of advocates of PRSA: i) that beliefs may in some cases have no content; ii) that, since states of affairs may fail to obtain, they have some form of existence, or 'subsistence,' even when they are not part of the actual world, hence false beliefs have at least a 'thin' content. Both options, however, are problematic. The view that false beliefs have no content appears to be clearly outlandish. If, on the other hand, belief-contents may fail to be things in the world but in some way 'subsist' and thus constitute, in the case of false beliefs, some kind of ontologically thin content, why wouldn't they do so in all cases? Summing up, the view that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs is problematic because it produces a dilemma: either it departs radically from the common view of belief-contents as propositional and introduces outlandish solutions in the philosophy of mind in order to account for false beliefs; or it accepts the idea that beliefs may have 'thin' contents, so abandoning the basic intuition underlying PRSA altogether.

A related problem—discussed by Dancy in a different context (2000: 131–7) where the contents of beliefs are considered as reasons for action—is that the position according to which the contents of beliefs are states of affairs 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 non-existent explanantia. In particular, false beliefs and the actions they explain pose the challenge that there seems to be nothing (in the world) that truly accounts for an agent's motivating reasons (and subsequent action) in spite of the correctness of the explanation provided. How could this be? Again, if motivating reasons may fail to be in the world, what remains of the initial intuition underpinning PRSA?

Finally, it looks as though the contents of beliefs 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 H_2O in the bottle? There are two different *propositions* in operation here that use different concepts (since 'water' is not synonymous with ' H_2O '), but only one state of affairs since water *is* H_2O . If the contents of beliefs were states of affairs, one would be forced to say that these are one and the same belief and this is clearly wrong.

In what follows, we will assume that the foregoing lends clear support to OA. However, rather than inferring from the above the defeat of PRSA, we will argue for the possibility of resisting the conclusion by having recourse to an independently motivated distinction, the acceptance of which makes OA unsound.

III. THE CONTENT/OBJECT DISTINCTION AND AN ANSWER TO OA

Our claim is this: the anti-PRSA 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 intuition that reasons are things in the world but, at the same time, makes the view sufficiently sophisticated so as to neutralize OA.

In order to spell this out, 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.¹¹ It dates back at least to Frege and Brentano, who urged philosophers to inquire into the nature of the ability of our minds to represent, be about, things 'out there' in the world. Husserl famously elaborated upon Brentano's insights, claiming that the essential property of being 'directed onto' something depends on the existence of some physical 'target' (the object), but only in virtue of the relevant intentional act of the subject (which has a content that is not identical to the target of the act).

The content/object distinction also has its authoritative defenders nowadays. According to Crane (2001a; 2001b), for instance, we need both object and content in order to characterize a subject's perspective on the world. 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 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*. (Crane 2001a: 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*, the existence of an intentional content/aspectual shape presupposes that of an object the subject enters into a relation with. This, we take it, is a conceptual point: the notion of an 'intentional content' presupposes the notion of an 'object,' since one cannot make sense of the idea that something appears in such and such a way to a subject without presupposing that that 'something' is something outside of the subject that acts as the object of the belief.

It could be contended already at this point that, as it is conveyed by the above St Petersburg example, the object/content distinction applies to *objects*, not *states of affairs*.¹² However, while objects may indeed be the basic entities in the present context, they always exemplify certain properties and relations: and since states of affairs are always analysable in terms of objects, properties and relations, the alleged 'gap' is filled. For, the very ontological nature of states of affairs as complexes of objects and properties/relations suggests that an intentional element emerges in one's relationship with objects if and only if it 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 is that, in the case of states of affairs, the uniqueness of intentional entities in spite of the multiplicity of their modes of presentation seems 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 Cambridge because it is close to the largest city in the UK would be the same as your moving to Cambridge because it is close to the seat of the UK government.

This objection is not conclusive, though. 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 entity 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.

In the case of practical reasons, the idea is that the relevant set of worldly entities acts as a reason *only* through modes of presentation, which make certain distinctions relevant to the agent. Indeed, 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 us—in the present case, for explanatory/practical purposes. (At the same time, individuation is also coarse-grained enough not to require a complete account of everything that exists out there.)

Having introduced and clarified the content/object distinction, let us now see in more detail how it can be of help in dealing with OA. Once the object/content distinction is in place, premise B1 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. With this in place, it becomes possible to claim that only a conflation between the two levels leads to the problematic conclusion of OA. Indeed, if B1 is replaced with something like

B1* Things that serve as practical reasons (both motivating and normative) for us are what our beliefs are about (i.e., the object of our beliefs)

B3 above, i.e., that practical reasons are the contents of our beliefs, doesn’t follow any longer. Consequently, that the contents of beliefs are (or at least may in certain cases be) states of affairs doesn’t follow either.

The supporter of PRSA, in other words, can, and should, say that reasons are states of affairs in the world and, as such, they constitute the object of our beliefs; yet, this by no means entails that our relevant beliefs need to have states of affairs also as their content. In particular, it becomes possible to deny that beliefs may have non-obtaining states of affairs as their content (or no content at all) when they are false—for, the contents of beliefs are now correctly identified as propositions.

IV. OTHER NEGLECTED POSSIBILITIES

The foregoing may seem already sufficient for concluding our discussion. Yet, since there is more than one way to implement the content/object distinction in the present context, we now need to consider some alternatives.

To begin with, at certain points in his later work, Dancy himself comes close to the idea expressed above and depicted in Figure 1. In an unpublished manuscript, he appears to have endorsed the content/object distinction in order to hold that when I believe that *p*, *what I believe* (not, note, *what my belief is about*) is a putative state of affairs¹³, which is then construed as the *object* of belief (contrary to premise B2 of OA), while holding onto to the idea that *the content of beliefs are propositions*.¹⁴

This is, however, no doubt a strange position, and hardly one that helps with OA. For, it is commonly agreed that what we believe are things that are designated by *that*-clauses and *that*-clauses designate propositions, not states of affairs (see, e.g., McGrath and Frank 2018: 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 the things that can be specified via *that*-clauses in the case of practical reasoning are states of affairs (as objects of belief). However, the resulting view is not convincing. For, to the extent to which it claims that the things specified via *that*-clauses are states of affairs, it ends up facing the same difficulties pointed out earlier, when discussing the outlandishness charge in connection to the philosophy of mind. And, to the extent to which it maintains that what one believes is a state of affairs, it again leads to problems with false beliefs. Given that the less contentious alternative that we sketched at the beginning of the section is available, we conclude that this second option for applying the content/object distinction to PRSA is not worth pursuing any further.

Another possibility is the following. With a view to making sense of both the nature of *that*-clauses and the claim that propositions, understood as abstract entities, cannot be reasons, one could point out that there are two kinds of propositions.¹⁵ 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 (as in Frege 1892).¹⁶ 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 required distinction between two different kinds of entities. In particular, the things designated by using *that*-clauses—the contents of beliefs—would be Fregean propositions. 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. This could be taken to vindicate Dancy’s claim that, when it comes to making sense of our actions, what we believe cannot be abstract objects.

This position too faces serious problems, though. First of all, Russellian propositions are *logical* complexes and hence to be considered abstract. Secondly, even if they turned out to be sufficiently analogous—identical, perhaps—to states of affairs to lend support to PRSA,¹⁷ trouble would still follow. For, Dancy’s rejection of propositionalism in favour of a view based on states of affairs would lose its point: in effect, as far as his views on reasons are concerned, the two positions would collapse into each other.¹⁸

The above discussion, we believe, shows that our proposed view—according to which the content and the object of our beliefs should be sharply distinguished

and practical reasons are what our beliefs are about, namely, states of affairs—is the best path to take for the supporter of PRSA. In particular, the content/object distinction enables one to avoid endorsing an allegedly outlandish view, and thus to successfully tackle OA.

V. IS *OUR* VIEW OUTLANDISH?

When we presented OA, we suggested three reasons to think that premise A2, i.e., the premise that articulates the charge of outlandishness, is true. It is now time to see whether invoking the content/object distinction along the lines suggested in the previous section can disarm those reasons.

We will proceed by reversing the order followed in section II. Hence we will discuss first the worry about the individuation of the contents of beliefs vs. the individuation of states of affairs, then the issue of motivation in the case of false beliefs, and finally the worry about the contents of beliefs in the philosophy of mind.

If one takes the outlandishness charge to be related to 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 in this case for individuating beliefs in a fine-grained way on the basis of their contents. For, recall that we are now denying that the supporter of PRSA has to say that the contents of beliefs are states of affairs. As for the alleged resulting gap between the individuation of states of affairs (i.e., reasons as worldly entities) and the individuation of the corresponding contents of beliefs, as we have suggested earlier (section III), there are ways to fill it.

As for the worry concerning the philosophy of action and 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 (2014) 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. Our solution to OA provides the way to make sense of this.

Let us begin with the following example (Lord 2007: 5). 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 original answer of the PRSA-theorist, recall our presentation in section II, must either be that John’s belief has no content or that it has ontologically thin content. Our solution can do better than this, however, since we can claim that John’s belief has propositional content. This is perfectly standard: of course, whenever we have a false belief, it does have a content, it is just that such a content does not ‘correspond’ to anything in the world we inhabit—i.e., it is not matched by an *object*.¹⁹ This, however, seems to lead to a new problem: for, it looks as though we are now forced to hold that John’s belief has no object, which is obviously bad for the advocates of PRSA!

Our response is this. We think the right thing to say in the present case is that it is perfectly possible for it to be true *de dicto* but not *de re* that someone has a reason for acting. 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. 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’s²⁰ we can meaningfully say that ‘there is an x such that . . .’, and act accordingly, without thereby incurring inevitable ontological costs in terms of x existing in the actual world *in a way that makes our existentially quantified statement true*.²¹

Our proposal, then, is to introduce the idea of an ontologically thin notion of object in order to be able to claim that false beliefs also have objects. It could be legitimately objected that this raises a problem analogous to that encountered when considering the idea of ontologically thin belief-contents in section II. 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 objects (as well as contents, since the latter correspond to the former). Secondly, and relatedly, the idea of extending the ontologically-thin-object view to all beliefs makes no sense, especially in a PRSA-based 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? In other words, the objection doesn’t go through, due to a key difference between the claim that there is a distinction between two kinds of contents, and our claim that there is a distinction between content and object. Only the latter, we think, provides a principled differentiation between reasons corresponding to true beliefs and reasons corresponding to false beliefs, while at the same time granting a sufficiently uniform treatment of the contents of such beliefs (and, obviously enough, the way to steer clear of OA).

Finally, what are the consequences of the proposed 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, supporters of PRSA 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 in general regarded as plausible, and certainly not considered outlandish, by philosophers of mind. Consequently, it represents an adequate tool for dealing with OA.²²

With this, our response to OA is complete. It is now time to reiterate what we already admitted in section I. Although the story just given may be endorsed in the context of PRSA with a view to providing a systematic differentiation between actions that require the individuation of a state of affairs in the world and actions that do not, a supporter of PRSA may be unhappy with this. Indeed, we believe

that this would be understandable and, for this reason, we refrain from claiming that having recourse to the content/object distinction allows one to keep PRSA entirely intact. Rather, we think it is fair to say that, by invoking this distinction we have done the most that can be done to stick with the key intuition underlying PRSA while at the same time defusing OA.

VI. FURTHER OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Before ending our discussion, there are three other difficulties to consider—thus shedding further light on the view of practical reasons that we are putting forward.

Mantel (2017) 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. In the course of the discussion she considers something like the option we are defending here, but rejects it for two reasons (Mantel 2017: 12–3). 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, which is rather determined by belief contents. On the other hand, she continues, if motivating considerations are the objects of beliefs under a certain mode of presentation, one is committed to the existence of non-obtaining states of affairs at least in the case of wrong motivating reasons. But then, says Mantel, it is better to opt for a simpler and more uniform propositionalist view of *all* motivating reasons.

As for the first point, we disagree that the agent's perspective is not adequately taken into account if one claims that motivating reasons are the objects of the agent's beliefs. To the contrary, one of our main claims here is exactly that practical reasons are (according to supporters of PRSA, at least) things in the world, hence cannot contain any agent-related element; yet, the beliefs that the agent entertains about these things have a content which is (or, at any rate, maybe) richer, in that it also includes an intentional element.

In response to Mantel's second point, we believe that a friend of PRSA 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. This is why we argued that the advocate of PRSA has to opt for states of affairs rather than facts in the first place! 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—for, notice, Mantel's claims concern motivating reasons only, and she seems to grant the plausibility of PRSA when it comes to normative reasons. Both (i) and (ii) follow from the basic tenet of PRSA according to which propositions, being abstract entities, cannot act as practical reasons—a tenet which we simply granted at the outset in this paper.²³

The second difficulty we want to discuss in this section is that the proposal being put forward might in fact be taken to violate UPR (premise B5 of OA). Isn't it now the case 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? Of course, there is in principle no problem with

this. However, as stated in the introduction, we are working here on the assumption that UPR is indeed correct and we don't think the present objection is strong enough to force one to abandon that assumption. For, Dancy (2000: 101–105) supports UPR with the claim that any theory of reasons must meet what he calls the Explanatory Constraint (normative reasons must be capable of also playing the role of motivating reasons) and the Normative Constraint (motivating reasons must be able to function as normative reasons). Now, our proposed solution 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 PRSA) is that *whenever there is in fact* both a normative and a motivating reason for a given action, they are identical—they are both obtaining states of affairs. This is sufficient for preserving UPR in the present context.

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 PRSA rather than lending support to it.

However, this is not so. Dancy (2000: 114–119) argues that the content-based view faces a dilemma: if one holds that the contents of beliefs are propositions, one cannot maintain (premise B4 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 (Dancy 2000: 113) argues, that the approach is unable to meet the Normative Constraint. 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 UPR, but also endorse psychologism about motivating reasons, which is anathema even to those supporters of PRSA who are ready to reject UPR.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have identified a possible and, so far as we can tell, neglected way to try to refute the view that practical reasons are states of affairs (PRSA)—which we have called the Outlandishness Argument (OA). Our response to OA has larger repercussions for the debate on the ontology of reasons, insofar as it offers supporters of PRSA additional tools for defending their view. In particular, we have argued that they 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), yet the content of beliefs plays a non-negligible theoretical role.

Of course, to what extent supporters can be happy with the proposed view is left open to discussion. On the one hand, one might wish to avoid the anti-PRSA criticism in some other way, perhaps not committed to the content/object distinction and more faithful to the basic intuition underlying the view. On the other hand, one may instead have grounds for dropping the view altogether (or redefine it in a way considered more appropriate), even independently of OA. Be this as it may, it seems to us that our recommendation is the best available strategy—if not the only one—for those sympathetic to PRSA as defined here.²⁴

ENDNOTES

1. Sometimes these reasons are called justifying reasons, but we agree with Dancy 2000: 107 that the qualifier ‘normative’ is more appropriate.
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 Schroeder 2008).
3. It is important to point out, however, that we are not interested in what Alvarez 2010: 36 and Mantel 2017: 7 call explanatory reasons: i.e., reasons insofar as they are understood merely as those considerations that explain action (roughly: the reasons why something happens). Dancy’s view, which will be discussed in what follows, has the same focus. See Hyman 2015, esp. chapter 6, for a good discussion.
4. This is to be distinguished from the thesis that our stance on epistemic and practical reasons should be consistent, which is often called the ‘unity of reasons’ thesis. See Littlejohn 2014.
5. Jonathan Dancy is a particularly strong supporter of UPR. His master argument consists in the 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 (2000: 101–105).
6. However, there will be occasions when the distinction between motivating and normative reasons will be important. In these cases, the context or a qualifier will make clear which of the two we have in mind.
7. See Dancy 2000: chapters 5–7; 2004a: chapter 2; 2004b; 2009.
8. See Turri 2009: 491–492; Alvarez 2016; Mantel 2014; 2016; 2017; Pryor 2007 for overviews of much of the relevant literature that use partially different terminology.
9. Dancy is not alone in the rejection of psychologism and propositionalism, see Alvarez 2010; 2016. Others, such as Mantel 2014, give up UPR and endorse a mixed position that could in principle accommodate psychologism (but only as an account of explanatory reasons). Mitova 2016 has defended psychologism and elsewhere (Morganti and Tanyi 2017) we promote propositionalism. We should note that what we have said so far shows that PRSA is not to be understood in terms of an identity theory according to which (normative) reasons = facts = true propositions.

10. 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.

11. In addition to the authors mentioned in the main text, 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.

12. Note that ‘object’ here is understood in the traditional sense of a property-bearer, individual thing, substance, not as the ‘object’ of the content/object distinction.

13. The qualification ‘putative’ is needed to take care of the possibility of false beliefs.

14. It is difficult to provide exact textual evidence for this interpretation, but this is not crucial for our discussion that our interpretation of Dancy is right; what matters is that this *is* an available position to hold. As for Dancy’s published text, it argues for a distinction between the content of a belief and the thing believed (which Dancy sometimes calls ‘intentional object’). But this doesn’t do the job any more than the version we discuss in the text. For, Dancy still holds that what we believe is the thing believed and not the content of the belief, which leads to the issues we point out. See Dancy 2009: 284, 289, 292, 294, 295, 297.

15. To be precise, there is also Lewis’s (1986) 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 point out would also apply to this reading of propositions.

16. 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.

17. 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, yet ‘worldly’ (Gaskin 2009 is an example of this approach; see also Prior 1971). However, in clear contrast with Dancy’s basic assumptions and aims, this achieves identity at the price of making states of affairs ontologically too ‘thin.’

18. 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. According to it, reasons are what we believe, namely, the contents of our beliefs, which are entities designated by that-clauses; and these are propositions of two kinds: Fregean and Russellian. This position would enable one to accept B1 and B2, but at the same time deny that A3 (hence the fatal contradiction) follows. On this view too, however, in a vast class of cases—if not in all cases—reasons turn out to be abstract entities. Furthermore, a reason should be provided for dividing reasons into two distinct sub-categories that have equal right to qualify as contents of beliefs. 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 UPR.

19. It could be suggested that we are unfairly disregarding Dancy's (2000: chapter 5) 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' (ibid.: 128, 133) and his claim that reasons-contexts are intensional (ibid.: 134, 144, 165). However, the appositional account concerns the role of beliefs in action-explanation—its aim being to somehow keep beliefs as 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 of actions. In both cases, basically nothing is said with respect to the ontology of practical reasons.

20. 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 applies to all three alternatives.

21. 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.

22. Incidentally, Crane is willing to embrace an even more radical internalism, extending the claims above to intentional attitudes towards actually existing objects. See Crane 2001a, 2001b for further discussions of this matter. As he (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."

23. We do question this tenet elsewhere. See Morganti and Tanyi 2017.

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