

Are Normative Reasons Evidence for Obligations?

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In a series of recent papers, Daniel Kearns and Kenneth Star have held that the concept of a reason, in its normative sense, could be informatively characterized by means of the following *reasons as evidence* thesis:

(R) Necessarily, a fact f is a reason for one to ϕ if and only if f is evidence that one ought to ϕ (where ϕ is either a belief or an action).

The main motivation they give for (R) is that it allows for an illuminating account of the notion and possibility of ‘weighing reasons’ if we assume, as Kearns and Star explicitly do, a *positive probabilistic relevance* account of evidence in the spirit of this one:

(E) A fact e is evidence for an hypothesis h if and only if e raises the probability of h , that is, if and only if $p(h|e) > p(h)$.

My purpose in this talk is to make it clear that on this assumption, (E), the analysis in (R) is both too narrow and too wide.

(1) To show that assuming (E), (R) is too narrow, I will argue that a fact can be a reason for one to do an act even if it does not thereby increase the probability that one ought to do this act. This situation can arise in two different ways.

a. First, a reason to do an act can be *evidentially irrelevant* to the obligation to do this act. To illustrate, I will consider a case where given a certain fact e_1 , another fact e_2 uncontroversially qualifies as a reason for one to do an act α , even though the conditional probability that one ought to α given $e_2 \wedge e_1$ is exactly the same as the conditional probability that one ought to α given e_1 alone, so that e_2 does not affect the probability – hence *is not* evidence – that one ought to α at all, neither positively nor negatively.

b. Second, a reason to do an act can be *negatively relevant* to –that is, it can incrementally disconfirm– the obligation to do this act. As an example, I will provide a case where a fact e_4 unproblematically counts as a reason for one to do an act β , although the conditional probability that one ought to β given $e_4 \wedge e_3$ is strictly lower than the conditional probability that one ought to β given e_3 alone, with the result that e_4 does not increase, but on the contrary decreases the probability – hence *is no* evidence– that one ought to β .

(2) To show that assuming (E), (R) is too wide, I will argue that a fact can increase the probability that one ought to do an act even if it does not thereby constitute a reason for one to do this act. The example I will make use of appeals to a ‘disjunctive’ fact $e_5 \vee e_6$ that cannot, by any means, qualify as a reason for one to do an act γ , even though the conditional probability that one ought to γ given $e_5 \vee e_6$ is strictly higher than the unconditional probability that one ought to γ , that is, even though $e_5 \vee e_6$ does increase the probability – hence *is* evidence – that one ought to γ .

I will conclude that the analysis in (R) fails to adequately capture the concept of a normative reason. Of course, this conclusion holds only within the scope of an understanding of evidence in terms of probability-raising. But by casting doubt on the appropriateness of this sort of understanding for making sense of what it takes for a fact to be a reason, I hope to make a strong enough case to question one of the main and most interesting motivations of Kearns and Star’s analysis, viz. the possibility of explaining the notions of weighing reasons in terms of a particular, well-known account of weighing evidence.

References

- [1] Kearns, S. and D. Star. 2008. Reasons: explanations or evidence? *Ethics* 119: 31-56.
- [2] Kearns, S. and D. Star. 2009. Reasons as evidence. In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics 4*, ed. R. Shafer-Landau, 215-242. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Kearns, S. and D. Star. forthcoming a. On good advice: a reply to McNaughton and Rawling. *Analysis*.
- [4] Kearns, S. and D. Star. forthcoming b. Weighing reasons. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.