

## Session II

### *Reasons and Preferences*

Justin Snedegar and Itai Sher

Discussant: Caspar Hare

#### “Overlapping Reasons”

Justin Snedegar discusses why moral philosophers find reasons useful in welfare economics and then defines reasons. Reasons are like marbles that can be weighed on a scale in order to reach a decision, each making a distinct contribution. Yet, this “one reason, one contribution” assumption seems false in many cases where there are overlapping reasons. There can be multiple distinct reasons that don’t make distinct contributions and likewise one reason that can make multiple distinct contributions. Then Snedegar contrasts bottom-up theories for reasons, which analyze reasons in term of an underlying property—a ground to which we ought to appeal. This view is appealing in cases of overlapping reasons. One main competitor to such bottom-up theories is “reasons fundamentalism,” which holds that there exists a set of reasons that are basic or fundamental and therefore have no grounds. Other reasons are derivative, and their grounds are basic reasons.

This theory can also help with cases of overlap. Overlapping reasons are simply cases of derivative reasons, where either two reasons are derivative of a single basic reason—the genuine source of normative weight—or a single derivative reason comes from two basic reasons. Yet operationalizing this strategy requires defining basic reasons, identifying principles that generate the mapping, and justifying the classification of the set of basic reasons. Finally, Snedegar argues that we need to enrich the Instrumental Transmission Principle—which states that the reasons for ends are reasons for the means to an end or if R is a reason for E and M is necessary for E, then R is a reason for M—by requiring that the grounds for the reason for the means are the same as the grounds for the reason for the ends.

#### “Comparative Value and the Weight of Reasons”

Itai Sher motivates why welfare economists may want to consider reasons rather than preferences. If we want to capture what people actually care about, we may not be able to just add up individual utilities in a Social Welfare Function as we so often do. There are two kinds of conflict that arise: 1) different reasons can support different actions and 2) reasons for different actions are often mutually inconsistent. Sher then considers how an economist may choose to model reasons. Consider choosing between a default and alternative action, where there are a set of potential reasons to choose one of the two actions. One could think of the problem as either

featuring true or imagined uncertainty as to whether any of the reasons obtain. The weight of a reason is the degree to which learning that the reason obtains shifts the optimal decision. The value function maps states of the world into reasons. R is a reason for an action when the value conditioning on R is greater than the value without conditioning on R. Sher then defines weights of collections of reasons and independence and completeness of reasons. Finally, he considers how this setup compares to utilitarianism. We can either take weights of reasons as fundamental in our setup, where value is derived from these weights; or we can do the reverse, taking value as fundamental and weights as derivative. He is neutral about which is fundamental since they are interchangeable: if one know the weight for every reason for every action, then one can back out the value function.

## Discussion

Caspar Hare notes that in economic models, rational agents maximize expected utility. Yet, starting with the idea that rational agents do what they have most reason to do seems closer to the phenomenology of decision making. Perhaps, as both speakers acknowledge, academicians are intimidated by aggregating reasons and by the overlap and number of reasons. Sher has now proposed a way to operationalize this through definitions of weight and conditional weight and independence. Snedegar proposes that different grounds are how we should think about independence of reasons. Weight of A conditional on B is not equal to the unconditional weight of A in cases where part of the grounds for A and B are shared.

Hare then considers whether reasons are order-independent. It is not obvious whether it matters if we consider B unconditionally first and then consider A conditional on B (or the reverse).

Suppose A is the consideration that if I go into a burning building, I can save a shirt and B is the consideration that if I go into a burning building, I can save a life. Perhaps the weight of reasons A and B depends on the order in which I consider them.

## Q and A

Comment: Order-independence seems like an attractive feature of Reasons. The example offered by Hare might warrant introducing bias.

Tim Scanlon: Speaking up for Reasons Fundamentalist, I am not sure to what degree there is a disagreement. This is a verbal terminological point. Suppose reasons are facts, so what is fundamental is the set of facts that are reasons for actions.

The ambiguity in this paper [Overlapping Reasons] is the list of things that can be called grounds for reasons. Take desire version: to take that reasons are grounded in desire is not incompatible with reasons fundamentalism. Desires are just facts.

Another question is whether the whole normative domain can be explained by reasons, or the other way around.

Are reasons and conclusive reasons fundamental or do we separately weigh reasons? I am inclined to think that there is no coherent—or separate—idea of weight for a reason. Rather, reasons come with a weight. Also, unless we have some fundamental idea of value, which puts a heavy burden on value, we lack a currency to assign weights.

Johann Frick: Snedegar raises a problem on behalf of Reasons Fundamentalism and then provides a response. Why appeal to these reasons as basic instead of others? Bottom-up theories have an easy answer: appeal to grounds. But why does this solve the problem? Doesn't it just push it back one level?

Justin Snedegar: We get a justification for this set of reasons rather than another set.

Question: Are reasons facts or positions?

Itai Sher: I am partial to the idea that you could include moral propositions as reasons.

The fact that it is wrong to kill is a reason not to do this action. In the context of the model presented, this might be strange. One must imagine that I did not know that it was wrong to kill. It is as if I assigned this moral reason a low probability because I did not know it was wrong to kill. If I then learned that this reason obtained, the weight for this reason undoubtedly would be very high. This is one reason to think that weights rather than value might be fundamental.