

the negative reason existential fallacy

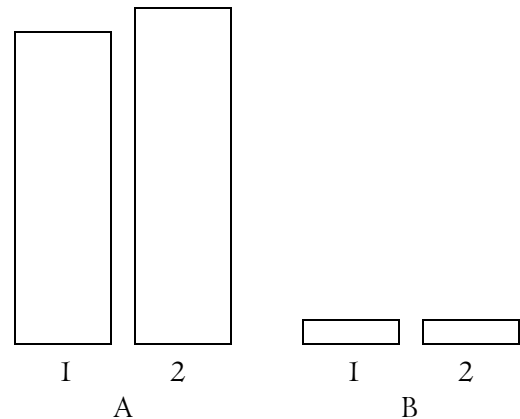
I There is a very common form of argument in moral philosophy nowadays, and it goes like this:

- PI** It follows from view *V* that there is a reason [for *X*] to do *A*.
- P2** But obviously there is no reason [for *X*] to do *A*.
- C** So view *V* is false.

In this paper I explain why this form of argument is highly problematic. It is problematic in a way that is common enough across different subject matters that I think the problem deserves a name: it is the negative reason existential fallacy.

This style of argument comes up everywhere in the philosophy of practical reason, leveled against theories of the norm of means-end coherence on intention, against Humean theories of reasons, and many other places. It comes up in normative moral theory – for example, in arguments against buck-passing. It comes up in epistemology, in discussions of how to account for the rational connection between believing the premises of a valid argument and believing its conclusion. And it comes up in political philosophy, where one of its most salient occurrences is in the so-called ‘leveling down’ objection to egalitarianism.

To focus on one example, just to illustrate, the ‘leveling down’ objection begins by posing the following choice between two social situations, *A* and *B*, represented by the diagram on the right. Each bar represents a population group, and the height of the bars represents well-being. The argument goes like this:



- PI*** It follows from egalitarianism that there is a reason to prefer situation *B* to situation *A*.
- P2*** But obviously there is no reason to prefer situation *B* to situation *A*.
- C*** So egalitarianism is false.

This style of argument is supposed to be a sophisticated successor to its ancestor, which went like this:

- PI† It follows from egalitarianism that we ought to prefer situation B to situation A.
- P2† But obviously it is not the case that we ought to prefer situation B to situation A.
- C† So Egalitarianism is false.

This ancestor argument is unsound, because PI† is false. Egalitarians do not, generally, think that equality is the only important thing; they simply think that it is among the important things. The sophisticated leveling down argument is supposed to be a way of running the same argument, while getting around this minor difficulty. Versions of the negative reason existential argument directed to other topics are similarly supposed to be sophisticated successors to ancestors which are unsound for similar reasons. The move from an argument like the † argument to an argument like the * argument is now one of the standard elements in the up-to-date moral philosopher's toolkit.

But this highly popular move is also highly problematic. The problem comes in premise 2. Negative existentials are not, in general, something that can be obvious, and negative existentials about reasons are worse. In what follows I explain why. My argument is composed of three parts. First, I'll argue that *if* there are reasons of very low weight, then pragmatic factors will dictate that when we consider an action in favor of which there are only such reasons of low weight, it will seem to us that there are no reasons in favor of them. The pragmatic explanation of why this is so makes concrete predictions, and I'll show that those predictions are borne out. Second, I'll argue that there are, in fact, reasons of very low weight, and show that even in some cases in which there are reasons of relatively high weight, these have seemed by philosophers not to be reasons at all. And third, I'll show that cases like the one considered in the sophisticated leveling down objection are constructed in precisely the way required in order to take advantage of the ways in which the preceding arguments show negative existential claims about reasons to be misleading.

2 Reasons vary with respect to their weight. Some are weightier, and some are less weighty. The weightier ones have a bigger impact on what we ought to do, and so they rightly interest us more. Since we are typically interested in reasons because we are interested in what we ought to do, it is the weightier reasons that matter more. This leads to a standing presumption that only relatively weighty reasons are conversationally relevant. If God makes a list of the pros and cons of some particular action, it might be infinitely long. But we are finite beings, and so we can only focus on the pros and cons that make it in

relatively close to the top of the list. The hypothesis that there is such a standing presumption is just a hypothesis, but it is a natural hypothesis, and I'll test it, shortly.

If there is such a standing presumption, ordinary pragmatic factors will reinforce it, in the case of merely existential claims about reasons. If I tell you that there is a reason to do something, but don't tell you what it is, then my remark will be more informative, if I intend to be conveying that it is a relatively weighty reason, than if it is of very low weight. For very many – perhaps most – actions have at least *some* reason in favor of them, if we include reasons that are of such low weight as not to be worth considering. If all I had in mind was a reason of very low weight, then I could have been more informative by at least telling you what the reason is. So Grice's maxim of quantity predicts that bare existential claims will lead to a stronger presumption that I have a relatively weighty reason in mind – they will reinforce the standing presumption that this is so.¹

The combination of these two pragmatic factors leads to two predictions. If there is some action in favor of which there are only reasons of very low weight, and I say that there is a reason to do that thing, but don't say what it is, then what I say will sound false. But if I then tell you what the reason is, then that should cancel the reinforcement of the standing presumption due to Grice's maxim of quantity, and so what I say should sound less bad. And then, if I clarify that I don't mean to be implying that it is particularly weighty, and emphasize how little weight I think it has, then that should cancel the standing presumption, and make what I say sound less bad yet again.

So here is the test: I think you have a reason to eat your car. That sounds clearly false, if not unintelligible. But I can tell you what the reason is. It is that your car contains the US Recommended Daily Allowance of iron. Now what I say sounds less bad. You probably still disagree, but plausibly, if anything is a reason for you to eat your car, this is it. And now let me clarify again: I don't think you should eat your car. I don't even think you should think about whether to eat your car. I think something would have gone wrong with you, in fact, if you treated it as a serious option, let alone decided to do it. That's how little weight I think the reason to eat your car carries, in comparison to the excellent and formidable reasons not to eat it. Yet I still think that it is *some* reason. Now that it is clear what I think, it sounds less bad yet again. This confirms both of our predictions. I don't claim that this is evidence that you really do have a reason to eat your car. But I do claim that it is hard to tell the difference. Things work just as they are supposed to, if the pragmatic factors are in play. So how can it be obvious that they are not?

¹ 'Make your contribution as informative as is required' Grice [1967, 26].

3 The pragmatic explanations I've just given depend on the assumption that there can be reasons of quite low weight. I'll now argue that this is so, and along the way, provide evidence that philosophers have been misled about the existence of reasons even in cases in which they are not of very low weight. Consider the classic case from the literature on undercutting defeat of Tom Grabit, who you see come out of the library, pull a book from under his shirt, cackle gleefully, and scurry off.² Other things being equal, in this case you have a reason to believe that Tom stole a book from the library. You saw him, after all.

In a slightly different case, Tom has (and you know he has) an identical twin brother, Tim, from whom you can't visually distinguish him at this distance. In this case, it is claimed, you have no reason to believe that Tom stole a book. In fact, this is how undercutting defeat is usually defined. An undercutting is said to be a further consideration due to which your original reason is 'undercut' or 'undermined' and hence goes away. This judgment about this case is widely shared.

But I think it is false. Consider a third case. In the third case, Tom and Tim have a *third* identical sibling, Tam, from whom you can also not distinguish them (and you know this). I think it is clear that if you form the belief that Tom stole the book on the basis of your visual evidence in the third case, then you are in a worse epistemic position than if you form this belief in the second case. Since having siblings does not prevent anyone from stealing a book, this can't be because you have further reason to believe that Tom did not steal a book. So it must be because your reason to believe that Tom stole the book has gotten worse. But if your reason to believe that Tom stole the book in the third case is worse than it is in the second case, then it can't have gone away entirely in the second case.

By similar reasoning, you must still have a reason to believe that Tom stole a book in the third case, because we can construct a fourth case, in which Tom, Tim, and Tam have a fourth identical sibling, Tem. And so on. If this reasoning is correct, then we can construct cases in this way in which your reason is of arbitrarily low weight. So reasons can be of very low weight. Moreover, the fact that philosophers have found it so obvious that there is no reason even in the second case, in which there is a relatively good reason to believe that Tom stole the book (just not quite good enough to justify that belief) that they have defined undercutting defeat on this basis, is strong evidence that our intuitions about when there are reasons are powerfully affected not only by their weight, but by the weight of countervailing reasons.

4 And that takes us back to the leveling down objection to egalitarianism. If the preceding arguments are on the right track, then what is needed, in order to elicit the intuition that there is no reason

² Lehrer and Paxson [1969].

to do something that there is, in fact, a reason to do, is to choose the case so that the reason to do it is of particularly low weight, and so that there are particularly weighty reasons to do otherwise. The leveling down case that I considered, in which the intuition that there is no reason to prefer situation B is particularly powerful, is designed precisely in order to trade on these features. Because the difference in equality between the two situations is particularly small, even an egalitarian should think that there is only a small egalitarian reason to prefer B to A. And because the difference in overall well-being between the two situations is so great, even an egalitarian who thinks well-being is also important should think that there is a tremendously important reason on the grounds of overall well-being to prefer A to B. So even the egalitarian should predict, given the preceding arguments, that it should be easy to elicit the intuition that there is no reason at all to prefer B to A.

This doesn't mean that better cases can't be constructed, or that egalitarianism is true. But it does illustrate that arguments based on negative existential intuitions about reasons are a particularly suspect element of the moral philosopher's toolkit. The improvement in 'sophistication' involved in moving from the † argument to the * argument buys the truth of the first premise at the cost of the truth of the second. Relying such arguments, and in particular, relying on them in cases in which it is agreed on all sides that the reason, if any, is of low weight, and that there are weighty countervailing reasons, is a fallacy to beware of.³

references

- Grice, H.P. [1967]. 'Logic and Conversation.' In his *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989: I-I44.
- Lehrer, Keith, and Thomas Paxson, Jr. [1969] 'Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 66(8): 225-237.
- Schroeder, Mark [2005]. 'Instrumental Mythology.' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, www.jesp.org, symposium I.
- _____ [2007]. 'Weighting for a Plausible Humean Theory of Reasons.' *Noûs* 41(1): 138-160.

³ This paper draws on arguments previously developed in Schroeder [2005] and [2007].