

WRONGNESS AND REASONS

Introduction

Is the wrongness of an action a reason not to perform it? Common-sense says 'yes': That it would be wrong to do so can be a person's reason for refraining from acting in a certain way. But the philosopher retorts 'no': Thinking that wrongness is a reason is confused - and, alas, common-sense has been known to be confused. There can't be such a reason if ' ϕ -ing is wrong' is verdictive, and an all things considered judgment about what (not) to do in a certain situation. Such judgments are based on all the relevant reasons for and against ϕ -ing. If that ϕ -ing is wrong, while being an all things considered verdict, would itself be a reason, it would upset the balance of reasons: It would be a further reason which has not yet been considered in reaching the verdict.¹ Hence, the judgment wasn't 'all things considered' after all. We have to include *it*,² before we can proceed to

¹ "These verdicts do not themselves specify further reasons..., on pain of changing the very situation on which they pass verdict." Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, 2004:16. Similar concerns have been raised by Philip Stratton-Lake (2000).

² That is, the reason would be the resultant property that an action has if the verdict is true.

forming an all-things-considered judgment - which would meet with the same fate. But that is absurd. Thus, that an action is wrong cannot be a reason against it. The point may even generalize:

[T]he point that verdictive judgements do not contribute to the situations on which they pass judgement is only one application of the more general truth that thin concepts cannot be used to add to the store of reasons. That an action is good, or right, is no reason to do it. (Dancy 2004:16)³

And similarly:

It will be the features that make the action good or right that stand as the reasons for doing it, approving of it, or whatever. That it is good or right will not add to those reasons. The action's being good or right merely passes on whatever normative pressure is coming from below, without increasing that pressure. (Dancy 2004:16-17).

In this paper I will discuss and reject two arguments which (I think) can be extracted from Dancy's remarks about the relation of wrongness and reasons

³ Similarly: "Judgements like [There is no greater reason not to do it] are verdictive; to assert [There is no greater reason not to do it] is to pass judgement on the balance of the reasons present in the case. If [There is no greater reason not to do it] was itself a further reason over and above those on which it passes judgement, we would be forced to reconsider the balance of reasons once we had asserted [There is no greater reason not to do it], in a way that would continue ad infinitum. Which is ridiculous. So [There is no greater reason not to do it] is not itself a favourer." Dancy 2004:40.

(sections 1 and 2). The result of this discussion will be that Dancy gives us no reason to believe that wrongness is not a reason. Moreover, in section 3, I will offer an argument why wrongness is a reason. Throughout this paper, I am not concerned with discussing or criticizing Dancy's account of practical reasons in general. I find myself in agreement with much of what he says. I am only concerned with the arguments regarding wrongness as a reason which are important in their own right. Furthermore, considerations similar to Dancy's drive part of the current discussion of so-called buck-passing accounts of value (as will become clearer in section 2). But the claim that wrongness is a reason is, as far as I can see, not essential to particularism. If it were a reason it would presumably be a general one, but I take it that the particularist claims that not all reasons are general, rather than that there no reasons which are general.

1. Preliminaries

One way of interpreting Dancy's remarks is that he suggests a buck-passing account for deontic properties according to which for an action to be right or wrong just *is* for it to have other properties that provide overall reason in favor of or against the action. On the (prevalent) semantic interpretation of this view, saying that an action is wrong would be the same as saying that there is overall reason against it. On a metaphysical interpretation, the buck-passer claims that the fact that an action is wrong is the same fact as the fact that there is overall reason against it. However, both interpretations are problematic. Later on, in section 4, I will show in detail why we should reject them. Until then I will be careful to discuss the arguments without presupposing a deontic buck-passing

account. That, however, is not a problem as will become clearer if we focus on the question what it is to be a verdict.

Ordinarily, verdicts are often speech-acts which can differ from judgments in their function and their consequences. They may be valid just because someone who inhabits a certain role asserts them, as when a judge utters “Guilty as charged.”⁴ I will ignore this (as does Dancy), and regard verdicts as a kind of judgment. Verdicts are warranted only if they are based on all the available reasons. What matters for our purposes is that the justification of such judgments requires a closure, or a nothing-else-matters clause: There are no further reasons which could unsettle the judgment. In this sense, verdicts are all-things-considered.⁵

Judgments about conclusive or overall reasons are but one kind of verdict. A verdict can be restricted to a certain domain or some specific body of evidence or reasons. Unqualified all-things-considered judgments which are not relativized to any domain are by no means the only kind of verdict.

‘Economically speaking, you should buy those shares’ is a verdict which is

⁴ I believe that it might have been Austin who introduced verdicts and verdictives into the philosophical discussion. His nuanced presentation brings out many subtleties of the ordinary use, which are not, however, relevant to our discussion. See J. L. Austin, 1975, 143-161. Foot, later, uses the term ‘verdict’ in a way very much akin to Dancy’s. See Foot 1978.

⁵ I am not interested in the actual history of making judgments here. It may of course happen that a person judges that p , and p is true, but she has no reasons or only insufficient reasons for her judgment. In short, I am not interested in how people may come to form beliefs, but in the truth conditions and the justification of certain kinds of judgments.

relativized to all the economically relevant considerations. But it can be defeated: It may be that while, economically speaking, you should buy, all-things-considered, unqualified, you should not do it (because it would be immoral to do so, say).

The judgment ' ϕ -ing is wrong' has many usages, and I doubt that there is a unified sense of 'wrong' that is shared among all of them. It can simply mean 'false' as in ' $7 + 4 = 12$ is wrong' or in 'wrong answer.' Something can be the wrong move in a game or the wrong investment in the sense that it will not lead to the desired result. Yet, there is also a moral sense of 'wrong', and that is the sense I am interested in as, I believe, is Dancy.⁶ In its moral sense, ' ϕ -ing is

⁶ T. M. Scanlon alleges that there is a unified sense of 'wrong' which holds across its use in different areas: "I take it that the most general meaning of 'wrong' is something like 'open to serious (decisive) objections.'" (2007:6) I am doubtful about this particular suggestion, because there can be serious objections to an action without it being wrong (an action may be cruel, hence open to a serious objection, but not wrong in the circumstances, perhaps because the alternatives would be even worse); that objections are 'decisive' on the hand amounts to saying that there is overall reason against the action. Thus as a unified meaning one could suggest that something is wrong if and only if there is overall reason against it. However, the suggestion does not seem to apply to some of the cases. The arithmetic example is a case in point where it would be mistaken to understand wrongness as related to reasons. After all, what is wrong is the result, not the action that led to it. Of course, Scanlon's lose formulation may still apply: there is a (perhaps) decisive objection to ' $7 + 4 = 12$,' namely that it is false. But understood in that way the remark becomes vacuous: there is nothing unifying to what makes an objection decisive.

wrong' is verdictive: it is true only if it is based on all the relevant reasons, considered morally.⁷ Derek Parfit suggests that we should distinguish between 'all moral reasons considered' and 'all reasons considered, morally'.⁸ The first formulation presupposes that there is a sub-class of reasons which are the moral reasons. According to the second there needn't be such reasons, but in forming a moral verdict one would consider the relevant reasons (and possibly all of them) from a moral point of view, or in a particular manner that pertains to morality. I agree with Parfit that the adverbial construction is preferable, because it does not rest on the assumption that morality is concerned with a specific sub-class of reasons (yet it doesn't exclude that there may be reasons which can be classified as 'moral reasons' either). I will therefore use 'there is overall moral reason to ϕ ' (and similar formulations) throughout the paper in this sense. The expression should be read as 'morally, there is overall reason to ϕ '.

That morally, there is overall reason against an action is a necessary condition of its being wrong. As we will see later, it is not a sufficient condition.

⁷ Derek Parfit suggests that there are three senses of moral wrongness: wrongness in the belief-relative, the evidence-relative, and the fact-relative sense. My explanation captures only the third. I don't think we need to be concerned with Parfit's tripartite distinction here. But if he is right, there is further reason to doubt that there can be a unified account of wrongness that links it to reasons. Only in the third, fact-relative sense can wrongness be explained in terms of reasons. Cf. Parfit, *On What Matters* (manuscript), chapter 6.

⁸*On What Matters* (manuscript), chapter 6.

' ϕ -ing is wrong' is a verdict because it is based on *all* the relevant reasons, considered morally.

Whether or not the judgment ' ϕ -ing is wrong' can be defeated depends on our understanding of morality. Judgments about one's overall moral reason would coincide with unqualified all-things-considered judgments, if the moral point of view necessarily could not be overridden. But this is a contested issue.⁹ Some regard it as the defining feature of morality that its verdicts can't be overridden. The alternative view has it that it may sometimes be justified to act wrongly.¹⁰ This is a substantive debate about the nature of morality and I am not going to take issue with it in this paper.

I will regard as a verdict any statement that passes judgment on the balance of reasons - either on the reasons which are relevant within a specific domain, or on all the reasons that there are, unrestricted - and any judgment that entails the truth of some judgment of the former kind. That is: 'morally, you ought not to ϕ ,' is a verdict, and so is ' ϕ -ing is wrong', because - while possibly not being equivalent to the former - it entails its truth. Thus the judgment ' ϕ -ing is wrong' can be verdictive whether or not the semantic or the metaphysical interpretations of the buck-passing account are true. It is verdictive because the

⁹ Philippa Foot (1978) introduces the term 'verdictive' for all-moral-reasons considered judgments, but argues that moral reasons may well at times be overridden.

¹⁰ Bernard Williams (1973 and 1981), for instance, claims that consideration concerning the way in which an action affects the agent's integrity or her possibility of pursuing her projects and living up to her commitments adversely can sometimes override a moral verdict.

judgment entails that there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing, but this is a weaker claim than either of the two buck-passing theses which concern identity, not just entailment. As Dancy remarks, even if we reject buck-passing accounts of rightness and wrongness, we will get to the same conclusion:

[E]ven if we do not accept these 'buck-passing' accounts of the thin properties, and suppose instead that the relevant judgements about what we have overall reason to do are consequences of the thin judgements about rightness and wrongness, we will get the same result. (Ibid)

It should now be clear why this is so. Whether ' ϕ -ing is wrong' is verdictive does not depend on the truth of the buck-passing thesis (in its semantic or metaphysical interpretation), nor does it entail it. The arguments why wrongness cannot provide reasons rely only on the verdictive character of the judgment that ϕ -ing is wrong. The claim is that the facts stated in (true) verdictive judgments aren't reasons.

2. The arguments

Will common-sense give way when being confronted with Dancy's arguments that the facts stated in verdictive judgments can't be reasons? I assume, following Dancy,¹¹ that the judgments themselves aren't reasons (because judgments generally are not), nor are the propositions expressed in those judgments. The only contenders for being reasons are the facts that make the judgments true (that is: true propositions) or the instantiations of the properties that the

¹¹ For Dancy's arguments for this view, see his *Practical Reality*, 2000.

judgments are about (when true). Thus the question is whether being wrong, is a reason against an action that is wrong. The arguments purport to show that properties which figure in verdictive judgments can't be reasons.

I am going to show that Dancy's arguments are flawed. But to see why, we have to set them out more clearly. Call ' ϕ -ing is wrong' a verdictive judgment or (V). - It is the only kind of verdictive judgment that I will be concerned with at the moment. Dancy's offers two arguments for his view:

First argument:

- (i) (V) is a judgment based on *all* the relevant reasons $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$ that apply to the situation.
- (ii) Therefore (V) is not about a further reason (in addition to $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$).
- (iii) (V) is about being wrong.
- (iv) Therefore, 'being wrong,' the property that figures in (V), is not a reason.

Second argument (by *reductio*):

- (v) If (V) were about a reason, it would have to be a further reason (in addition to $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$).
- (vi) If (V) were about a further reason, this reason would affect the balance of reasons.
- (vii) If the fact that makes (V) true would affect the balance of reasons, (i) would be false, i.e. (V) would not be a verdict, based on all the relevant reasons $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$.

(viii) Therefore, (V) is not about a reason: the property of being wrong is not a reason.

(i) holds for all verdictive judgments. (ii) follows from (i). (iv), so Dancy's claim, follows from (ii) and (iii). The second argument proceeds by *reductio*: If (ii) were to be false, i.e. if (v) were true, (vi) would have to be true as well, and in that case (i) is false: (V) wasn't a verdict to begin with. I will show that both arguments fail to establish their conclusion: The first, because (ii) is false (or ambiguous, and once disambiguated the conclusion does not follow), and the second because (vi) is false.

The second of these arguments (but possibly also the first) assumes that a property that does not affect the balance of reasons is not a reason. It is a generalized version of premise (vi).

Let me call this assumption

(Δ^*): A property that does not affect the balance of reasons is not a reason.

I will start by discussing assumption Δ^* and the second argument.¹²

¹² Scanlon discusses (and rejects) the possibility of a buck-passing account of wrongness. What would seem to count in favour, he says, is that the "specific reasons [why an action is wrong] seem sufficient in themselves, and it may seem that they make 'it would be wrong' redundant as a reason-provider." (2007:6) He then sets out to show that 'it would be wrong' is sometimes not 'redundant' and therefore a reason, accepting that if other reasons are sufficient [for determining

Affecting the balance of reasons

The relevant sense of 'further reason' that the argument relies on is that a reason is a further reason if, in the given circumstances, it affects the balance of reasons. The truth of 'x affects the balance of reasons' requires the truth of some counterfactual. Take the following definitions:

(ABR) For all considerations C , if reasoning¹³ on the basis of $C_1 \dots C_m$ yields a certain verdict, then, if reasoning on the basis of $C_1 \dots C_m + C_n$ would yield the same verdict, C_n does not affect the balance of reasons. *And:* For some considerations C , if reasoning on the basis of $C_1 \dots C_m$ yields a certain verdict, then, if reasoning on the basis of $C_1 \dots C_m + C_n$ yields a different verdict, C_n does affect the balance of reasons.

On these definitions premise (vii) above may well be true: Assume that reasoning on the basis of $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$ yields the verdict that the action is wrong. The question now becomes whether $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n +$ being wrong yields a different verdict. As Dancy rightly claims, it does not. Since 'x is wrong' is a verdict based on $r_1,$

what the agent ought to do, I take it] wrongness would not be a reason. Thus, he too accepts Δ^* or some such.

¹³ As with judgments, I am not interested in the actual psychology of reasoning. Thus, 'reasoning' should be understood as correct or valid reasoning.

$r_2 \dots r_n$ it cannot change the verdict. Thus, if we interpret 'affecting the balance of reasons' as suggested in ABR, premise (vii) comes out true.

*Premise (vi) / Δ^**

But how about (vi)? Is it true? More specifically, I will consider whether the generalized assumption Δ^* , of which (vi) is an instance, is true. Is a consideration that does not affect the balance of reasons not a reason? First of all, note that Dancy's claim that this is so gives us some rudimentary understanding of what a reason is: A reason is a consideration which affects the balance of reasons, meaning that its presence alongside other considerations makes it the case that the verdict is different than it would have been otherwise.¹⁴ It is this approach towards explaining what it is to be a reason that I find doubtful. Let me begin by showing that in a variety of familiar situations, there are reasons which do not affect the balance of reasons. Here are two examples.

- (1) School. You have an obligation to pick up your child at school, and it is undefeated. In this case you have sufficient overall reason to pick her up. As it happens you also look forward to it, because you had been away for a conference during the last week, and really missed seeing her. Thus, you have a further reason to pick her up. But this reason does not change the

¹⁴ Note that this account may well be at odds with Dancy's claim in chapter 2 of *Ethics Without Principles* that all attempts of explaining the notion of a contributory reason in terms of its relation to the overall fail. It seems that his argument for verdicts not being reasons rests on a certain understanding of the relation between the contributory and the overall. Thus, it may be that in setting out his argument that verdicts aren't reasons Dancy failed to fully absorb his own lesson.

balance of reasons: your reason to pick her up would have been sufficient without it. The verdict about what to do in this situation remains the same, whether or not you have the additional reason. Thus, further reasons and reasons that affect the balance of reasons may come apart, which opens the possibility that there could be further reasons which do not affect the balance of reasons.

- (2) Defeated reasons. Reasons that are defeated in the circumstances do not affect the balance. That's what it is to be a defeated reason, you may say. Yet, surely defeated reasons are reasons.

But perhaps these examples miss the point. True, some of the reasons in the examples do not affect the balance of reasons. But this is a matter of context and circumstances. They are the kinds of reasons that, in principle, could change the balance. It is only in a given context that they don't. A reason which is present alongside an obligation could make a difference if there was no obligation, but it can even make a difference if the obligation is a weak or petty one. And a defeated reason is, of course, not always and necessarily defeated. It can make a difference.

The facts that make verdicts true, on the other hand, cannot affect the balance of reasons on pain of contradiction, as pointed out above. Thus, it is not a matter of context or circumstances that they don't affect the balance. Let me sharpen the assumption that the argument relies on, so that it reflects this. The assumption should not be that a consideration which in a given situation does not affect the balance of reasons is not a reason, but rather that a consideration which *necessarily* never affects the balance of reasons is not a reason. Let me call this assumption:

(Δ) A consideration which *necessarily* never affects the balance of reasons is not a reason.

In the following, I will assume that Δ is the relevant assumption and that 'affecting the balance' should be interpreted in accordance with ABR above. If you agree with me on this I suggest that you move on to p. 18. If you have doubts, however, let me briefly talk you through some responses to possible worries – perhaps yours are among those that I will address on the next couple of pages.

Is tipping the balance the only way in which a reason can affect the balance of reasons, you may have wondered all along.¹⁵ A reason may affect the balance by making the verdict stronger, say. An agent sometimes would have lesser, but still sufficient reason to do something, but for the presence of a certain consideration. It is possible that a reason which does not 'tip the balance' affects it, as long as it *can* tip the balance. And a consideration fails to affect the balance only if it necessarily doesn't tip it (as is the case with wrongness).

Perhaps the suggestion could be captured by the now quite common phrase that a reason is a consideration counting in favor of an action. The claim would then be that 'counting in favor' is all the affecting of the balance that is required for a consideration to be a reason. I don't think that this will do though, because if this were the relevant sense of reason, neither of the arguments above would have even any initial plausibility. Surely that an action is wrong can count in favor of refraining from it (by any ordinary understanding of 'counting

¹⁵ I am grateful to Simon Robertson for pressing this question.

in favor'), as long as it is understood that it is a consideration which could not possibly tip the balance. To understand and make sense of the idea behind the arguments - the idea that verdicts cannot affect the balance of reasons -, we need to understand affecting the balance in the way I proposed above (I think).

But might the following suggestion perhaps work:

(Δ , amended): A consideration which necessarily does not affect the balance of reasons, or fails to strengthen or weaken the verdict is not a reason.

I don't think (Δ , amended) is more permissive than Δ in that it would exclude fewer consideration from being reasons – if Δ is too demanding, so is Δ , amended. To show why take School again. Does the father who looks forward to seeing his child have a stronger reason to pick her up? Is the verdict more 'pressing' in his case? Since we assume that he has sufficient overall reason whether or not he looks forward to the action, what would 'stronger' or 'more pressing' mean? It could either mean that the agent would be more strongly motivated, or that there is an increase in *normative* strength or pressure. Only the latter is of interest to us. My contention (for which I cannot here argue) is that reasons of different kinds (as in School: having a reason to do one's duty, and having a reason because one would enjoy the action) cannot be added so that overall strength or normative pressure increases – the verdict is determined by

the undefeated reason to do one's duty. The reason to pick up the child because the father would like to do it does not increase the normative pressure, but it could affect the balance of reasons in other situations. Thus, according to Δ it is a reason. We don't need to amend Δ to get this result, and – at least, if my contention about reasons of different kinds is correct - the proposed amendment doesn't take us any further than Δ itself. If reasons are of the same kind, on the other hand, they can be added, and normative strength will increase. If I have a reason to do something because it would be fun, but also a reason against it because it would be tedious to arrange, any further reason of a similar kind will strengthen the one side or the other. But in this case, each reason can also tip the balance. So again the relevant considerations would be identified as reasons by Δ , and the amended version does include as reasons considerations that have been excluded by Δ . The strengthening condition, considered on its own, is less rather than more permissive than Δ , because a reason strengthens the verdict or increases normative pressure only if it could also tip the balance. But sometimes a reason which can tip the balance does not increase normative pressure (School).

Wrongness however is not a reason, according to both Δ and (Δ , amended) alike, because it necessarily does not affect the balance, and *a fortiori* does not increase normative pressure.¹⁶

Δ and the buck-passing account of value

While there may be counterexamples to the proposed view of reasons (as expressed by Δ), I will not rely on those. I would like to take the issue further at this point. The same line of thought that prompts Δ has recently been used in so-called buck-passing accounts of value to show that goodness or being of value is not a reason for action.¹⁷ I will not here argue that the buck-passing account of value fails¹⁸, but I am only interested in a specific argument in favor of it that relies on Δ . Taking a look at Δ when applied to goodness will show what is wrong with Δ . Thus, I will discuss the buck-passing account of value here only to

¹⁶ As mentioned this conclusion depends somewhat on the sketched view of additivity which I did not defend. I reject (Δ , amended) only because I think it doesn't take us further, and it may be confusing. If the reader finds my view of additivity unconvincing, she may well proceed substituting (Δ , amended) for Δ . I don't think it makes a difference to my argument.

¹⁷ Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1998: 95ff; Dancy (2000), 'Should We Pass the Buck?' is critical of Scanlon.

¹⁸ But, for the record, I have done so in my 'Explaining Reasons: Where Does the Buck Stop?' (2006).

show why Δ is false – and because it is false, it cannot be used to show that wrongness is not a reason. Let me therefore take a brief detour.

According to the buck-passing account, being good or being of value is not a reason for action, because the properties that make something good are reasons for action. Its being good is not a further reason in addition to them. It is not a further reason, because it does not make a difference: it doesn't affect the balance of reasons. A theatre performance may be good because it is thought-provoking, presents a novel interpretation of a play, is well-acted, etc. Those properties are reasons for seeing it. That it is a good performance is not an additional reason, and therefore - according to the buck-passing account - not a reason at all.¹⁹

“ x is good” allows for at least two different interpretations. It may mean either that x is good in a certain respect (as in: ‘As far as the acting is concerned it was a good performance’) or that x is good overall (as in: ‘Despite its shortcomings it was a good performance overall’). I will focus on being good in a certain respect, because doing so will suffice to show that Δ is false.

Being good in a certain respect is a property that necessarily does not affect the balance of reasons (as I will show presently). Therefore, if we follow the buck-passing view (or, alternatively, Dancy's arguments), it is not a reason. Here is a simple way of showing that ‘good in a certain respect’ cannot affect the balance of reasons.

¹⁹ “It is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value...”, Scanlon 1998: 97.

Goodness in a certain respect is a general, specifiable property. Whenever something is good in a certain respect it must have other properties that make it so. If these properties are evaluative properties (like so-called thick properties, such as kind, pleasant, delicious etc.), we can understand the relation between them and goodness as a specification-relation. That a meeting is pleasant specifies the way in which it is good. I take it that specification is a familiar concept, and it therefore seems unnecessary to define it. But I will point out a number of conditions that have to be met for the property relation to count as specification:²⁰ If something is pleasant it is necessarily good (in one respect), but not all good things are pleasant. Yet if they are not pleasant, they must have some other property which makes them good. Maybe they are tasty. Put more generally the conditions are the following ones:

If E , F and G are variables for properties, then F specifies G if

- (1) necessarily all F s are G s, but
- (2) possibly some G s are not F s, and

²⁰ These are only necessary conditions. I don't attempt a definition here because I believe that we have a good enough grip on the concept without it. For a more comprehensive discussion, focusing on determination, which brings out a number of difficulties that may arise with specification as well, see Funkhouser (2006).

- (3) if a G is not an F then necessarily there is some E such that necessarily all E s are G s, but possibly some G s are not E s, and E is different from $G \& \neg F$.²¹

Since pleasantness and tastiness are properties that provide reasons, and they are specifications of goodness, it follows that goodness cannot add anything to the reasons that are provided by the more specific properties. From the first condition of specification, we get: That, say, a dish is tasty entails that it is good in some respect (or that it has something good about it). Its goodness cannot add anything that goes beyond its tastiness. Thus, if not being a further reason shows that a property is not a reason, then being good is not a reason. But if being good weren't a reason, because it is a specifiable property that is entailed by its specifications, the same would be true of all properties that are specifiable. Entertaining, tasty and pleasant are specifiable too - thus they cannot provide reasons. Only the most specific properties would be reason-providing on this view. But that seems to be completely at odds with our normal understanding of reasons. I regard this as a *reductio* of the claim that goodness (in a respect) cannot

²¹ I am grateful to Wlodek Rabinowicz for pointing out that (3) is not going to add anything to (1) and (2) if E is $G \& \neg F$. Hence the final subclause in (3). A different way of making the point may be to say that there is an *independent* E . But this may be misleading, because – as colour exclusion shows – the various properties that specify color may not be logically independent of one another. However, the relation of being colored to specific colors is a prime example of specification. Thus, 'independent' would have to be understood *not* as logically independent, but as not being $G \& \neg F$. For that reason the formulation above seemed clearer to me.

provide a reason because it necessarily does not affect the balance of reasons.²²

This is enough to show that Δ is false – and this is so, independently of the context in which it is appealed to.

Let me draw some preliminary conclusions. A crucial assumption in showing that wrongness is not a reason is that a consideration which necessarily cannot affect the balance of reasons is not a reason. The detour about being good in a certain respect has shown that this is false: If pleasantness is a reason for, say, choosing something, so is goodness. Where does this leave us regarding the

²² Overall goodness is different. It is not a specifiable property, because the first condition of specification does not apply to it. Something is good overall, if, given the combination of properties that it instantiates, it is a good thing of its kind. But it does not follow that everything which has the properties that make a certain thing overall good in a given case will ensure overall goodness in other cases. A film may be overall good because of the quality of its cinematography and acting, even if the story-telling is rather lame. But not every film (let alone everything) which is comparable with respect to its quality of photography and acting will be overall good - it may have further vices that outweigh its good qualities. 'x is good overall' is a verdict of the restricted variety: Given all the considerations that matter with regard to the question whether x is a good x the verdict is, yes, it is. But the judgment is based only on a comparison of various features of one option, and not on a comparison of all available options. Calling something overall good is like drawing an intermediate sum. As with other verdicts, as a sum, it cannot add to the sum on pain of distorting the result. Is being overall good a reason then? It surely is a property that ordinarily can be invoked as a reason. As with wrongness, any denial that it is a reason had better not turn on the fact that it does not affect the balance of reasons.

two arguments? It seems that the second argument fails, because, as we now can see, (vi) is false. (vi) said:

- (vi) If (V) were about a further reason, this reason would affect the balance of reasons.

We have shown that the underlying assumption of (vi), Δ , is false: The assumption that a consideration can be a reason only if it can affect the balance of reasons.

How about the first argument? The first argument was this:

- (i) (V) is a judgment based on *all* the relevant reasons $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$ that apply to the situation.
- (ii) Therefore (V) is not about a further reason (in addition to $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$).
- (iii) (V) is about being wrong.
- (iv) Therefore, 'being wrong,' the property that figures in (V), is not a reason.

One way of understanding the argument would be that (ii) tacitly relies on the same understanding of 'further reason' that is made explicit in (vi): A reason is a further reason if it can affect the balance of reasons. In that case, (ii) is false because (vi) is, and the first argument goes down with the second.

There may, however, be a different way of understanding the first argument: Wrongness cannot be a further reason, because the verdict 'x is wrong' is based on *all* the available reasons. According to (i) this is what it means to be a verdict. But if wrongness were a further reason, the verdict wouldn't have been, strictly speaking, based on all the reasons, but only on all-minus-one – and that is so, whether or not Δ is true. However, being based on all the relevant

reasons is ambiguous between 'the logically independent reasons' and simply 'all the reasons that there are.' If we take the reasons that the verdict is based on as logically independent reasons, then wrongness may well be a further, albeit logically dependent reason. If, on the other hand, we take the reasons that the verdict is based on as all the reasons that there are, then there are two possibilities: (a) Either wrongness is not a reason, or (b) it is a reason and judgments about wrongness aren't verdicts. Now, it may not matter much how we understand the concept of a verdict, since it is a philosophical concoction anyway. But I take it that for the purposes of this paper we should take it as given that judgments of the form ' ϕ -ing is wrong' are verdicts. That rules out (b). So the options we are left with are the two remaining ones: Either wrongness is not a reason (because if it were the verdict would not be based on all the reasons that there are); or wrongness may be a reason, but a logically dependent one. The first of these options seems unattractive to me, because it rules out of court the possibility that wrongness could be a reason by a mere stipulation about the meaning of the concept 'verdict.' Therefore, I would propose understanding verdicts (and thus premise (i)) as judgments based on all the logically independent reasons, but not necessarily on all the reasons that there are.

Put as a reply to Dancy's argument, this amounts to saying that the first premise is ambiguous and, once disambiguated, (ii) does not follow from (i). The fact that makes a verdict true can be a further reason, provided that reason is not logically independent of the reasons the verdict passes judgment on. We could rewrite the first argument thus:

- (i*) (V) is a judgment based on *all* the relevant logically independent reasons $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$ that apply to the situation.
- (ii*) (V) is a further, but logically dependent consideration (in addition to $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$).
- (iii*) (V) is about being wrong.
- (iv*) Therefore, 'being wrong,' the property that figures in (V), may well be a reason, albeit a logically dependent one.

But showing that the arguments fail is not tantamount to showing that being wrong *is* a reason. The argument about specification shows why specifiable properties must be reasons. And they can be reasons only if Δ is false. But wrongness is not a specifiable property. Thus, it may turn out that while goodness (understood as a specifiable property) is a reason, wrongness is not. We would, of course, need an argument that shows why that is so, and *whatever the argument is, it has to dispense with Δ* . That is, what disqualifies wrongness, or more generally, those properties that figure in verdictive judgments from being reasons cannot be the feature that they share with specifiable ones, namely that they necessarily don't affect the balance of reasons. I will discuss a different argument presently. But let me first explain why wrongness is not specifiable.

If something is good in virtue of being pleasant, both its goodness and its pleasantness are reasons. But its being pleasant entails that it is good in a certain respect. This follows from the first condition of specification, and it explains why being good, while being a reason, does not affect the balance of reasons.

However, if an action is wrong in virtue of being cruel, say, cruel does not specify wrong. Being wrong is not specifiable, because the first condition of specification does not hold: Some actions may be wrong in virtue of being cruel, but it does not follow that, necessarily, every action which is cruel is wrong. Thus wrongness is not a specifiable property. A judgment about the wrong-making properties of an action (its cruelty, etc.) together with a closure premise may entail its wrongness, but this does not establish that the wrong-making properties specify wrongness, because the entailment is not based on a relation between the properties involved.

So far I have shown why specifiable properties are reason-giving even if they do not provide a reason which can affect the balance of reasons, but the argument for this claim does not extend to wrongness. While it is not generally true that properties which necessarily don't affect the balance of reasons aren't reasons, it may be true in the case of being wrong. But there had better be an argument for it which is different from Dancy's, and his observations about the verdictive.

One intermediate result is that, whether or not wrongness is a reason, we should not regard reasons as independent of one another, and as contributing their weight to an overall sum. It may happen that a particular reason's contribution is being made by a different reason already, and there may be a reason which (in the circumstances) does not contribute anything. There may even be reasons which necessarily don't contribute anything.

3. Trusting common-sense?

As mentioned above, common-sense sides with the view that wrongness *is* a reason. I will now try to construct an argument for this view on behalf of common-sense.

I take it that wrongness seems to be a reason because it functions as one. Doing something because failing to do so would have been wrong seems to explain the action; doing it even though it was wrong is surely, and for that reason, criticizable. And this is just what acting for a reason consists in, you may say. A reason is a consideration which explains actions, and which in appropriate circumstances can be invoked in criticizing actions that fail to conform to it. The two roles of reasons are explaining and justifying actions, and wrongness seems well-suited for both.²³

But this may be too quick. Let us grant that the content of a person's belief that the action is wrong can serve as an explanatory reason, a reason which makes her action intelligible. But is the action's wrongness also a normative reason? Common-sense does not always distinguish between normative and explanatory reasons. But not all explanatory reasons are normative ones.²⁴ How does this affect the role of wrongness? If I refrain from acting because the action would be wrong the balance of the moral reasons favors my refraining and I can

²³ I take it that this understanding of reasons is fully compatible with Dancy's realistic view that reasons are facts, but not committed to it. Thus, I am assuming that the concept of reasons that common-sense relies on is the very same that Dancy sets out to explain in his theory of reasons.

²⁴ To borrow Williams's example: That I believe that the liquid is gin explains why I drink it, but my belief is not a normative reason for drinking it, and in the case where the liquid is in fact petrol there is no normative reason for drinking it at all.

know as much. Yet, this does not show that wrongness provides a normative reason. Those who doubt it may object that it is not the action's wrongness that provides a normative reason for my refraining from acting. Rather, it is those properties that make the action wrong that do. It is the action's cruelty (e.g.) which justifies abstaining from it, not its wrongness. Thus, wrongness may be but an indicator of the presence of other properties which provide normative reasons.

But there is a problem with this reply, which comes to the fore if we focus on certain kinds of examples. If all I know about an action is that it is wrong and because of this I intentionally refrain from it, did I refrain for a reason? Sure. So what is my reason? That the action is cruel or disrespectful are reasons, but they cannot be *my* reasons for I did not know them nor suspect them. The way around this is to say that my reason was my belief that there is a reason. But that is not a reason for action. So to avoid the conclusion that its wrongness was my reason we need to assume that my reason was that the action is cruel, even though I did not know that that was my reason. But this is odd, to say the least. This suggests a test for being a reason which I will call it the *Limited-Knowledge-Test*, or for short: *LK-test*.²⁵ The *LK-test* determines whether a fact is a reason in cases where a person acts on the basis of limited knowledge.²⁶ The test's general form is this:

²⁵ The *LK-test* is based on an idea of Frances Kamm's, who (in a different context) suggested to me a roughly similar way of finding out whether something is a reason.

²⁶ In calling this test the *Limited-Knowledge-Test* I do not assume that normally, or even ever, we act on the basis of complete knowledge. I call it the *Limited-Knowledge-Test* because it applies when the agent's knowledge is limited in a particular way (as explained).

Imagine a person's only relevant knowledge is that p , and she ϕ s for p .

Could p explain her ϕ -ing and could it, when the circumstances are appropriate,²⁷ justify it? If so, p is a reason for ϕ -ing.

I submit that something like the *LK-test* explains why (prior to philosophical worries) we tend to be so confident that wrongness is a reason: It passes the test with flying colors.

The *LK-test* vindicates the view that wrongness is indeed a reason, and as a test it is intuitive enough. I myself am not sure whether we should endorse it. One worry is that the test may seem too permissive. Let me explain the worry by focusing on a different kind of example, namely cases where my only relevant knowledge is that there is conclusive reason to ϕ , but I don't know why this is so. It may seem doubtful that the fact that there is conclusive reason for ϕ -ing is itself a reason for ϕ -ing. If the conditions of the *LK-test* obtain, and I only know that there is conclusive reason, but not what the reasons for the verdict are, and if I ϕ because I know that there is conclusive reason for me to do so, it seems my belief that there is conclusive reason will be an explanatory reason, and my action will be justified. But is it the fact that there is conclusive reason for it which justifies it, or is it, rather, those reasons which are, on the occasion, conclusive?

There is an intuitive resistance to accepting that quantificational facts about reasons, as e.g. the fact that there is conclusive reason to ϕ , could themselves be reasons. But at this point in our argument it is hard to explain

²⁷ I insert this sub-clause because acting for a normative reason is not always justified, as for instance in cases of weakness of will, or, more generally, when the reason is defeated.

why. If we were in the business of counting reasons, there could be a worry about double-counting. But it is, after all, the purpose of this paper to show that reasons don't 'count' in the way that they can be added up, or weighed. A further worry may be that reasons explain why one ought to act in one way rather than another. But the fact that there is conclusive moral reason for an action does not afford much of an explanation. Taking a leaf out of John Broome's book, we could say "Reasons do not merely imply the agent ought to perform the action; they explain why she ought to."²⁸ Neither of these considerations is particularly strong though, and I am not sure how to make the case either way.

Insofar as the resistance is based on a view of reasons as additive and the worry about double-counting, we needn't be concerned with it. The worry about explanation is potentially more serious. But then it is not clear that the fact that there is conclusive moral reason has no explanatory value. One thing is certain though: The *LK-test* tells us that both wrongness and the fact that there is conclusive reason to act are reasons. If we reject the latter (but not the former), we had better reject the test.

In the beginning we considered the buck-passer's question whether 'ϕ-ing is wrong' means the same as, or refers to the same fact as 'there is overall moral reason against ϕ-ing.' If either of these two suggestions is correct, then obviously

²⁸ John Broome, "Reasons", p. 36.

an action's wrongness can be a reason only if the fact that there is overall moral reason against the action is a reason as well. Earlier I left it open whether or not there is semantic or metaphysical identity, and defined 'verdict' in such a way that it only requires entailment, but not identity. I will argue presently that ' ϕ -ing is wrong' does not mean the same as 'there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing.' Nor is the fact that an action is wrong the same as the fact that there is overall moral reason against it. If so, it is at least conceivable that wrongness may be a reason but the fact that there is overall moral reason against an action is not. Whatever distinguishes between the two may explain the asymmetry.

4. The difference between ' ϕ -ing is wrong' and 'there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing'

That an action is wrong in the moral sense, I suggested, entails that there is overall moral reason against it. But does ' ϕ -ing is wrong' also mean the same as 'there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing', or do the concepts refer to the same properties? To show why they don't let me start with the following examples:

Small differences. Imagine I am to decide on my career and wonder whether I should become a teacher or a lawyer. I have some inclination (and perhaps talent) to do either. Let's assume that morally it would be somewhat better if I were to become a teacher. Thus, the balance of moral reasons comes down on the side of being a teacher. However, if I were to decide that I am going to pursue a career in law, I would hardly be acting wrongly.

Supererogation. If there are supererogatory actions (as it seems there are), then the balance of moral reasons would have to come down in favor of the

supererogatory action in each case: It is morally better to choose it than any of the available alternatives. But if the action is supererogatory, a person who does not act accordingly does not act wrongly.

These examples show that the fact that, considered morally, the balance of reasons does not favor an action is not sufficient for its being wrong. Yet if the balance of reasons does not favor an action A, and instead favors a different action B, then, that there is most reason for B, is a reason against A. So there is overall moral reason against A.²⁹ In Small Differences the reason for not regarding either of the alternatives as wrong may be because the moral difference between the options is negligible. The case would be different if one of the options were to become the next head of a mafia family. But that the difference is too slight does not explain Supererogation. The difference between supererogatory actions and morally required ones can be momentous. (Take examples of supererogation like rescuing a person from a burning building yourself or calling the fire brigade: Taking on its own, each of these actions is a good one, yet in circumstances where time is extremely pressing the first may be morally significantly better.) It is not sufficient for an action to be wrong that there is an alternative course of action which is morally better, even if it is

²⁹ If the balance of reasons does not favor doing A, it needn't be true that the balance of reasons favors not doing A. If there is a tie between the options, the balance of reasons would not favor doing A, yet it wouldn't be true that the balance of reasons favors not doing A. Excluding ties, it follows though that if the balance of reasons does not favor A, but some other option B, the balance of reasons favors not doing A. That there is more reason for B is a reason against doing A.

significantly better. Considered on its own, the defeated option may be morally innocuous, or even morally good. That there is an alternative course of action which is morally better is a reason against the action, but not a 'wrong-making' reason. For an action to be wrong, it seems, it must have some 'wrong-making' property, like being cruel, or callous, or causing unnecessary pain. Also, not acting in a certain way may be wrong if so acting is morally required, or owed to someone, and this may explain why not acting in supererogatory ways is not wrong: it is not wrong, because the action is not required or owed. That is, for an action (or an omission) to be wrong there must be a moral objection to it, *other than* that the balance of moral reasons does not favor it.

On some views of morality (perhaps some act-utilitarian views) an action is morally required if the balance of reasons morally favors it. If so, not being morally favored by the balance of reasons would itself be a wrong-making property, and perhaps even the only wrong-making property. On such views there would be no supererogatory actions. Furthermore, the metaphysical interpretation of the buck-passing account would be correct: The fact that ϕ -ing is wrong would then be the same fact as the fact that there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing. However, the semantic interpretation would still be false: After all, it is certainly not a conceptual truth that there are no supererogatory actions. Therefore, the semantic interpretation of the buck-passing view is mistaken, and the metaphysical interpretation is a consequence of a substantive view of normative ethics.

In my view, an action is wrong only if there is morally overall reason against it, and there is a further objection to it, namely that it has a wrong-

making property (assuming now that not being morally favored by the balance of reasons is not a wrong-making property).

Neither of the two conditions is on its own sufficient to explain wrongness. Above I explained why that there is morally overall reason against an action is not. But taken on its own that an action has a wrong-making property won't suffice either. After all, an action may be cruel or the agent may owe it to another person to not act in certain way, but all the available alternatives could be even worse. In that case, the action wouldn't be wrong.

I have shown that ' ϕ -ing is wrong' does not mean the same as 'there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing'; whether they refer to the same fact depends on the correct normative theory. Thus, the deontic buck-passing account – as a view in metaethics when it is supposed to be independent of normative ethics - is mistaken. Whether or not the difference between being wrong and there being overall moral reason against ϕ -ing establishes an asymmetry regarding their role as reasons depends on whether the *LK-test* is a valid test for determining whether a consideration is a reason. If it is, there is no asymmetry. If it isn't there will be a further question as to how to establish whether something is a reason – a question to which I don't have an answer.

Conclusion

To sum up then: Is being wrong a further reason in addition to those that it passes verdict on? We have seen that Dancy's arguments that purport to show that it can't be – because if it were it would be a further consideration that has to be taken into account in order to reach a verdict – are unsuccessful. If being

wrong is a reason, it is not a reason that affects the balance of reasons on the account of ‘affecting the balance’ that I defended. But, as we have seen, the same is true of many other reasons. More importantly, being wrong necessarily does not affect the balance of reasons. However, this is true of specifiable properties as well. Yet specifiable properties are reasons. It follows that verdictive judgments may well be about reason-giving properties. Whether or not they are is independent of whether those reasons can affect the balance of reasons.

In section 3, I developed the *Limited-Knowledge Test* for whether or not a consideration is a reason. According to it, being wrong is a reason against actions. While the test has some intuitive appeal, it is not clear to me whether it is valid, since its result may be too permissive.

Finally, in section 4, I have shown that deontic buck-passing, as a metaethical view, is mistaken: ‘ ϕ -ing is wrong’ does not mean the same as ‘there is overall moral reason against ϕ -ing’ and the statements probably don’t refer to the same facts.³⁰

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