

Setiya, Kieran: Reasons without rationalism

Setiya, Kieran: *Reasons without rationalism*, Princeton, NJ [u.a.]: Princeton Univ. Press: Palgrave Macmillan 2007

ISBN-13: 978-0-691-12749-1, 131 S., \$33.95 / £23.95

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A reason for action is a consideration that counts in favor of performing a particular action. By giving reasons for what one is doing, one aims at justifying it, i.e., at showing that one's action has a point instead of just being stupid or a waste of time. Hence, acting for a reason is acting on a consideration one takes to be casting a favorable light on what one is doing. On the face of it, these are elemental platitudes, an acknowledgment of which is a criterion of having mastered the concept of a reason for action. Furthermore, the view that reasons for action essentially play a normative or justificatory role has shaped philosophical thought on this concept from Plato and Aristotle onwards up to the current analytic theory of action. Thus, it is shared by almost all philosophers presently working in that field. It is acknowledged equally by the adherents of the major competing approaches to theory of action, that is, by the proponents of a preferentialist as well as of a cognitivist account of practical reason. One of the few dissidents who deny the essential normative character of reasons for action is Setiya.[1] Moreover, he is the only one who has presented a properly worked out argument for this denial. That argument makes up the core of his recent book, *Reasons Without Rationalism* (RWR). It is developed in the book's first Part, while in the second Part he addresses the view of practical reason that follows from the denial of the normativity of reasons for action. The first and the second Parts are presented in Sections I and II of this review essay, respectively. In the final Section (III), I shall show why Setiya's account of acting for reasons is untenable.

I. Against the Guise of the Good

Setiya characterizes the view to be refuted in his book as follows:

“The doctrine I have in mind is that reasons for action must be seen under the guise of the good. We can act for bad reasons, on this view, but we must at least regard our reasons as good, as doing something to justify our action.” (RWR, 21, original emphasis).

That account of what is involved in acting for a reason is to be understood as a consequence of the following two claims:

(1) A reason for an action is a consideration that justifies the relevant action, i.e. that qualifies it as in a particular respect good or worthwhile.

(2) Acting for a reason is acting on a consideration that one takes to be a reason for what one is doing.

As (2) constitutes an undeniable platitude with regard to reasons for action, Setiya's repudiation of the guise-of-the-good conception amounts to a denial of (1), i.e., to a denial of the normative nature of reasons for action. He argues in two ways against the guise-of-the-good conception of reasons for action: On the one hand, he tries to refute it by presenting counter-examples to it, that is, by describing cases that are allegedly clear instances of doing something for a reason and in which the subject does not see anything good or worthwhile in what he is doing. (I shall return to this aspect of Setiya's argument in Section III.) On the other hand, Setiya develops an account of reasons for action in non-normative, namely causal, terms, according to which someone can act for a reason that he does not take to be a justification of what he is doing. On that account, doing something for a reason basically is doing something because one is motivated to do it, that is, caused to behave in that way by one's beliefs or desires. As it stands, that characterization of doing something for a reason is clearly unsatisfactory. For, the notion of a reason for action derives part of its point from the contrast between mere motivated behavior and a reason-governed action. In order to do justice to this consideration, Setiya supplements that simple causal characterization of acting for a reason by the specification of the condition that a mere motivated behavior must satisfy in order to count as a proper instance of doing something for a reason. For this purpose, Setiya draws on Anscombe's (1972) famous investigation of the notion of an intentional action. In particular, he relies on the following result of that investigation: There are two constitutive features of an intentional action. Firstly, what someone is doing is an intentional action, iff a certain sense of the question, "Why are you doing that?," is applicable to it, namely, the sense in which that question is an inquiry into the agent's reasons. Secondly, what someone is doing is an intentional action only if he is immediately aware of what he is doing and why. Since Setiya's account aims at illuminating the concept of a reason for action, which is presupposed in the specification of the first feature, it is the second one that he exploits in his explanatory strategy.

Accordingly, he explains what it is to do something for a reason as a particular kind of motivated behavior that is marked off from mere motivated behavior by involving a specific motivational mechanism, the successful working of which produces in the agent an immediate awareness of what he is doing and why. That mechanism is constituted by a certain kind of self-referential belief. The belief in question is one that represents itself as causing another of the agent's beliefs (or one of his desires) to motivate him to behave in a particular way. Furthermore, that belief is akin to a desire in that it has the tendency to produce the satisfaction of its own truth-conditions. Setiya takes such a desire-like belief to be constitutive of an intention. So, he can appeal to that belief's self-referential character in order to explain why a person necessarily has an immediate awareness of what he is intentionally doing and, in particular, of what he is doing for a reason. In the case of a reason-governed action, that desire-like belief confers upon another belief the role of the motivational source of the subject's behavior. (By contrast, intentional actions that are performed for no particular reason are only motivated by the self-referential belief alone.) It is the content of this latter belief, according to Setiya, that makes up the reason on which the subject acts. It is a noteworthy consequence of this account that it entails no principal restriction on the content of the reason on which one could have performed a particular action. (I shall discuss this consequence further in Section III.) In particular, it is not required, on that account, that a consideration cast a favorable light on an action in order to serve as a reason for performing it.

II. The Virtue Theory of Practical Reason

In the second part of his book, Setiya argues, on the basis of the principal negative result of its first part—that is, on the basis of the following claim for a particular view of practical reason, namely, for the virtue theory of practical reason:

(A) Taking a consideration to be a reason for an action does not require that one attribute a normative or a justificatory significance to it.

What is the significance of (A) for an account of practical reason? Practical reason is the capacity to recognize which of the alternative courses of action that are available to one in a given situation is supported by most reasons, and to act accordingly. In particular, it comprises the ability to determine by practical deliberation in the case of a difficult decision which of the available alternatives is supported by most reasons. Setiya coined the term, “practical thought,” to cover practical deliberation as well as acting for a reason. Accordingly, he conceptualizes practical reason as a disposition to good practical thought, or a good disposition to practical thought. The characterization of practical reason given above entails that the standard for good practical thought is basically that for being a good reason for action, which also is the standard for how good a reason for action is, i.e., for the extent to which it counts in favor of a relevant action. The traditional accounts of practical reason, like the Humean, the Kantian, or the Aristotelian account, elucidate that standard in terms of the specific nature of practical thought, and thus, of reasons for action. But this explanatory strategy is incompatible with (A). For, according to (A), the notion of a reason for action is not a normative concept, that is, one from the application of which to an object it follows analytically that the object is assessable in a specific normative dimension or subject to a specific evaluative standard. (However, the specification of this dimension or this standard need not be analytically true.) So, (A) entails that a consideration is not subject to a specific evaluative standard in virtue of playing the role of a reason for action. Therefore, given (A), it is not possible to explain the notion of good practical thought in terms of the specific nature of practical thought or reasons for action.

What alternative ways are there of illuminating the standards of good practical thought? Setiya tries to show that the only viable option for an account of practical reason that is left is the virtue theory. Thus he uses (A) to argue for the virtue theory by elimination. In his argument, he draws on Geache's (1967) logical analysis of “good.” The essential result of this analysis is that “good” is used as a logical attribute. In a nutshell, the idea behind this characterization of the logical semantic role of “good” is the following: it does not make sense to say of an object, as such, that it is good or not, as “good” applies to an object only as an instance of a particular kind, i.e., only insofar as it falls under a particular sortal predicate, where the standard that the object has to satisfy in order to qualify as good is provided by that kind. In other words: an object is neither good nor not good as such, but only a good *k* or not a good *k* (where *k* is a sortal expression that applies to the object in question).

Setiya points out that Geache's attributive account of “good” has an important consequence. It can be put as follows:

(G) If “good” is applied to a particular kind *k* of objects although there is no specific standard for being a good *k*, there must be a more general kind *l*, such that *k* is a species of *l* and *l* is the ultimate source of the evaluative standard for applying “good” to instances of *k*.

Having presented the essential assumptions on which Setiya bases his argument for the virtue theory, I shall now sketch that argument itself. Before turning to it, though, I want to state the claim it is supposed to establish—that is, the virtue theory. Here is how Setiya puts it:

(VT) “Being good as a disposition of practical thought is being a disposition of practical thought that is good as a trait of character” (RWR, 8).

Setiya argues for the virtue theory as follows: As pointed out above, (A) entails that the standard of good practical thought cannot be explained in terms of the specific nature of this kind of thought. That claim, together with (G), implies that practical thought is a species of a more general kind I that is the source of the standard for being a good I. Furthermore, the standard for being a good disposition of practical thought is the standard of being a good I as it applies to practical thought. According to Setiya, the only suitable candidate for I is the kind of character traits. Therefore the standard for being a good disposition of practical thought is the standard for being a good character trait, that is, for being a virtue. From this it follows that the virtue theory is true.

III. Setiya's account is untenable

Setiya's initial line of attack against the guise-of-the-good conception of acting for a reason consists in presenting a series of alleged counter-examples. Most of these are examples where someone is doing something that is, according to his ethical self-understanding, completely worthless or even intrinsically bad. Thus he describes a case where a person succumbs to his sexual desire even though he holds religious beliefs according to which seeking sexual satisfaction constitutes a major sin (compare RWR, 36). However, this type of case would only work as a counter-example to the guise-of-the-good conception, if the only criterion for what course of action someone takes to be good or worthwhile is provided by his ethical or moral convictions. In particular, he must exclude from the outset the possibility of a person's spontaneous affective responses revealing those of his evaluative attitudes that are at odds with his considered views on how one should live or act. However, these presuppositions are at least doubtful. Thus, on the face of it, that someone is enjoying doing something, e.g., having sex, shows that he perceives it as worthwhile. Accordingly, it seems much more natural to construe the Puritan fanatic who gives in to sexual temptation, not as someone who does not see anything worthwhile in seeking sexual pleasure, but as someone who rejects his spontaneous appreciation of such pleasure as a delusion, i.e., as a misperception of its intrinsic value. The other type of counter-examples cited by Setiya concerns random acts. As I have argued elsewhere (Grönert 2009, 4-5), these cases are not proper instances of doing something for a reason, and thus, are irrelevant for an assessment of the guise-of-the-good conception.

It is to Setiya's credit that he admits that his argument by cases is not compelling. This concession leads him to focus on a principle objection to the guise-of-the-good conception—which objection is based on his analysis of the concept of a reason for action, according to which it is a non-normative concept. But, as I will now show, that analysis is ultimately not coherent. To put it more precisely, the notion of a self-referential belief that takes center-stage in it is not really intelligible. This is so because it is conceptually impossible to specify the content of a belief of the relevant kind. This criticism must seem surprising, as Setiya apparently provides a clear and transparent formulation of that content, for instance, in the following passage:

“Thus when Freud acts for a reason in breaking the inkstand, in our modified case, he is motivated by a desire-like belief, B, whose content is that he is breaking the inkstand partly because he believes that his sister will buy him a new one, and partly of because B itself” (RWR, 45).

So in this example, Freud could express the content of his self-referential belief as follows:

(B) I am breaking the inkstand partly because I believe that if I break it my sister will buy me a new one and partly because I believe that B.

This sentence is to be read according to the convention that a letter at the beginning of a line designates the proposition expressed by the sentence adjunct to that letter. It is important to realize that, according to the relevant convention, “B” stands for the proposition that is expressed by the sentence indicated by “B” and not to that sentence itself. The latter construal of B is unintelligible, since only the proposition and not the sentence can figure as a belief's content. But, if “B” is taken as a designation of a proposition, B is also unintelligible. For, in order to grasp B, one must identify the object to which “B” is referring as it appears in the sentence expressing B as an indexical expression that fulfills an essential semantic function. But in order to recognize the reference of “B” in this context, one must grasp what proposition is expressed by the sentence in which it is occurring, i.e., one must understand B. From this it follows that in order to grasp B, one must have already grasped it—which is conceptually impossible.[2] Since in the argument for this conclusion, I have only exploited those features of Setiya's example that apply to all other instances of self-referential beliefs of the relevant kind, it follows that the content of such a belief cannot be coherently expressed, and hence, that the very idea of such a belief does not make sense.

It might seem that this criticism is unfair, as it only takes into account one of the two ways in which Setiya tries to specify the content of the relevant self-referential beliefs. The other way is based on the model of explicit performatives. Thus, he expresses the content of the desire-like belief that allegedly constitutes the intention of someone who is going for a walk because the weather is fine as follows (RWR, 48):

(C) I am hereby going for a walk because I believe that the weather is fine.

This kind of self-referential formulation seems innocuous, as it matches performative sentences like the following:

(D) I hereby promise you to marry you.

For, such sentences constitute clear cases of unproblematic self-reference. However, Setiya's appeal to the model of explicit performatives is quite misleading. This is so for the following reason: In (D), the indexical expression functioning as the vehicle of self-reference—namely, “hereby”—refers to the syntactically individuated utterance of the sentence in which it occurs, and not to the propositional content, i.e., the promise, that is expressed by that utterance. Therefore, one can identify the object to which “hereby” is referring in this context without having already grasped the propositional content that is expressed by the

utterance in question. So, in this case, as well as in the case of explicit performatives in general, the vicious circle does not arise in which Setiya's account of self-referential beliefs gets entangled according to the above argument. But the feature in virtue of which self-reference is unproblematic in the case of explicit performatives makes them unsuitable for serving as a model for the kind of self-referential beliefs to which Setiya appeals. For, as these beliefs are supposed to play the role of intentions, they must be independent of their linguistic expressions. So, in (C), "hereby" cannot be taken to be referring to the utterance of the sentence in which it is occurring, but must instead be construed as referring to the propositional content expressed by that sentence in the context of its utterance. If (C) is understood in this way, the kind of self-reference it instantiates is precisely the same as the one in the example discussed above. Hence, it produces the same vicious circle. In arriving at this conclusion, I have only relied upon those features of (C) that it possesses in virtue of expressing a self-referential belief of the relevant kind. So it seems fair to generalize it: There is no coherent way in which the content of any such belief can be specified. So Setiya's account of acting for a reason must be rejected, since it is based on a characterization of the belief that constitutes taking a consideration to be a reason for acting that is unintelligible. This objection to Setiya's explanatory strategy might seem rather technical, i.e., it might seem that that strategy could be pursued in a way that overcomes the difficulty exposed in the last paragraph, while keeping its basic spirit. However, I don't think that this assessment is correct. For, even if one focuses on the core idea of Setiya's account and sets aside considerations pertaining to the details of working out that idea, it will turn out that this account is fatally flawed. I shall close by setting forth my reason for this assessment. Setiya's account can only fulfill its essential argumentative function if it supports the following claim:

The relation between the reason upon which someone acts and the action performed by that person is basically one of efficient causation.

Hence, it is not required that the person's reason contribute—even from the agent's own point of view—to showing that the action in question is worthwhile or has a point or is in any way reasonable. It follows from this that the following case is a conceivable scenario: In response to the question, "Why are you drinking coffee?", understood as an inquiry into her reasons for what she is doing, Caroline replies: "Because I love Sophocles." Furthermore, it should be assumed that her answer is sincere, correct, and non-elliptical—i.e., there is nothing that she could add to it in order to reveal how the fact that she loves Sophocles is related to her drinking coffee in such a way as to make it intelligible how reference to that fact could contribute to showing that her action is, from her point of view, worthwhile or reasonable. Setiya acknowledges explicitly that cases like this constitute a genuine possibility on his account. He also admits that they seem rather odd. However, he claims that this does not pose a problem for his account, as the latter entails that they cannot be typical instances of acting for a reason (RWR, 64). But this commentary is beside the point. For, under the circumstances in question, Caroline's answer to the reason-seeking question, "Why are you drinking coffee?," is not merely strange but outright unintelligible.[3] So, pointing out that Setiya's account admits that answer as a conceptually sound reply comes as close to a *reductio* of his account as one can possibly get in a philosophical debate. Setiya's book is interesting and stimulating, in particular because he explores thoroughly and in an acute way a radical new approach to the theory of action which breaks with a deeply ingrained assumption shaping philosophical thought on intentional action and reasons for action from Plato up to the present. Its major achievement is to make clear that this approach is not a viable option, such that, in reflecting on the normative character of reasons for action, we'd better stay faithful to the philosophical tradition.

- [1] The other important dissident is Bittner (2001, 135-145), who only adduces superficial considerations in support of his denial of the normative nature of reasons for action.
- [2] A similar argument has been developed in the context of the liar paradox by Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer (1986, 239-244).
- [3] Setiya tries to show that such answers to the reason-seeking question, "Why are you doing this?," are intelligible by pointing out that, through conditioning, any consideration can be turned into a motivational source of any kind of behavior (RWR, 64-65). This argument obviously depends upon the assumption that any consideration potentially motivating conduct of a particular kind could also constitute a reason for which the person in question could engage in that kind of conduct. It is precisely this assumption to which the apparent unintelligibility of, for instance, the case in which someone is drinking coffee for the reason that she loves Sophocles constitutes a prima-facie counter-example. So it is plainly circular to rely upon this assumption, as Setiya does, in an attempt to show that cases like these are—contrary to appearance—intelligible.

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