DISCOUNTABLE REASONS AND THE EVALUATIVE "OUGHT"

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Abstract

I argue that discountable (optional) reasons may contribute to an ought-statement, even if "ought" only relies on those discountable reasons. An "ought" is, in that case, itself discountable. I maintain there is such an ought, namely a weak evaluative ought, outside the deontic sphere.

This "ought" constitutes a recommendation, contra a requirement. If we demand action on such a "weak" ought, our reasons do not support the demand. That is, our demand does not amount to a rational or a moral requirement. Here, "ought" does not denote an act whereby not to act is wrong but an act which is considered a better course of action than an alternative, though the agent would be rational, yet perhaps silly, to choose the alternative.

Now, as an alternative explanation to discountable reasons, I examine incommensurability. Incommensurability, I argue, does not rule out discountable reasons but shows, rather, that any reason may be or become discountable.

Keywords: Ought; reason; requirement; defeating; incommensurability

1. Introductory Remarks

In what follows, I discuss *discountable* (optional) reasons and their relation, if any, to oughts. If a relation between reasons and oughts obtains, their relation is presumably severed at the juncture of *discountable* reasons. If we arrive at oughts by reasons, discountable reasons are presumably excluded. For discountable reasons, supposedly, do not *contribute to* an ought.

Yet this is the question I pose: Can discountable reasons c*ontribute to* an ought? If they do, what makes them yet different to non-discountable (requiring, contributory, *pro tanto*, etc.) reasons? — I shall maintain that discountable reasons, given they obtain, *can* contribute to an ought; yet if an ought relies only on discountable reasons, it is a "weak" *evaluative* ought, itself discountable. The relation to oughts is, then, not what separates discountable from non-discountable reasons but the strength of oughts relative to the strength of reasons.

2. Proposition 1

Let us propose (P1): Not to act on a reason, applicable to certain circumstances, is wrong, irrational, unreasonable, etc. Given no opposing reason, one *ought* to act on a present reason. So: If there is a reason to φ, and no reason not to φ, then p ought to φ. (Broome 2000[1].) An *undefeated* reason, then, *requires* one (p) to act, that is, as long as it pertains to a situation where no opposing reason obtains. Moreover, if a reason *defeats* opposing reasons, it *requires* one to act.

Now, an opposing reason, let us say, is equal in strength. Not to act on the reason *opposed* is, then, arguably justifiable, as long as acting on the opposing reason is (also) the right thing to do. However, if the opposing reason is stronger or, better yet, *defeating*, then one *ought* to act on that reason.

2.1. *A contrario*

We can, however, distinguish reasons from requirements. Where one has a reason to act, whether one *ought* so to act, is not determined by that reason alone. For (a) there may be a *defeating* reason to act otherwise; and (b) a reason may be *discountable*, viz. optional or excluded by a higher-order reason[2].

Reasons do not *require* action. They do not carry an ought; neither a conditional ought (i.e. a requirement). If a reason requires action, the action is not required by that reason alone — or by definition of "a reason." If it derives from a reason, an ought derives only partly, or mediately, from that reason. That is, the ought is not generated by that reason alone — or by definition of "a reason." A reason does not *entail* an ought.

Though not *requiring*, *demanding*, *commanding*, etc., reasons are *normative*; they *suggest*[3] action; or they *favor* one action over another. (Cf. Dancy 2004a, b.) Still, P1 needs to be amended, or else abandoned. Normativity does not *entail* a requirement, though reasons, suggestive of action, may *amount to* a requirement. A norm does not immediately require action.

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[1] Broome is no longer of this view.

[2] Here I examine discountable reasons *qua* optional reasons, that is, discountable at will, not those discountable by higher-order reasons (e.g. commands). The latter are discussed in Raz (1975).

[3] Here I apply "suggest" in addition to "favor." The problem with the more common term "favoring" is that it implies a comparison between courses of action when we might in fact only be considering a single course of action, viz. where no opposing reasons are at play.

3. Proposition 2

Now, let us propose (P2): It is not wrong, etc., *not* to act on *some* reasons. These are *discountable* reasons, i.e. optional. They are of a special kind, weak or of no force — or of a special kind of force. If not acted upon, or if not acted upon as a better option or acted upon as a weaker, they are less prone to rational criticism. As Greenspan (2007:177-78) notes, to explain or justify not acting on a discountable reason, an appeal to preference suffices.

If P2 is true, P1 is not: Given a reason to φ, and no reason not to φ, p ought not *thereby* to φ — (a) if there is a reason to φ, and no reason not to φ, then p may yet not φ; (b) if there is a reason to φ, and a reason not to φ, then p may yet φ, (c) even if not φ-ing is a stronger or a defeating, yet itself a discountable, reason. Here, the action of p is rational, at least not irrational.

Now, in the absence of opposing reasons, *not* to act on a present reason, is not wrong, etc., by definition of "a reason." Not to act on a reason does not establish wrongness; as acting on a reason does not establish rightness. The *strength* of reasons explains, supposedly, why not acting on them is wrong. The *weakness* of reasons explains why not acting on them is not wrong. Further, some reasons may count as non-discountable but in a weaker sense, such that they are in fact *discountable* with regard to P2(a) and (b), but not P2(c). While P2(c) is, as we propose, true of discountable reasons, it is not true of non-discountable reasons: If there is a *defeating non-discountable* reason to φ, then p ought to φ.

4. P4: *Defeating*

Regarding defeating, within the spectrum of discountable reasons, let us propose either: (a) Reasons do not defeat each other — they present an alternative, more or less favorable; or (b) reasons can defeat each other, such that *defeated* reasons remain a viable option on which to act, that is, within reason, though not invariably immune to some trivial criticism. Discountable reasons [4], *even if* they defeat opposing reasons, do not impose requirements; rather, they present an opportunity (Greenspan 2007:177-78).

5. Amendment to P1

In light of the foregoing, we amend P1 by qualifying reasons generating requirements. Let us, then, propose (P1´): Requirements are generated not by reasons *per se* but by *overall*

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[4] Or, on Greenspan's (2007) terminology, "purely positive" reasons.

reason, *conclusive* or *absolute* reasons, *non-discountable undefeated* reasons (viz. where there is no reason not to φ), or *non-discountable defeating* reasons. Thus, not to act on overall reason (i.e. an aggregate of reasons amounting to a requirement), conclusive or absolute, or sufficiently strong, reasons, is wrong, etc., but not to act on a reason is not wrong, etc., by definition of "a reason." *A reason* may be discountable, thus not requiring.

6. Implication

Here, we exclude discountable reasons from an ought-judgment ("*p* ought to φ"). By implication, we divide normativity into two relations, the *deontic* ("right and wrong") and the *evaluative* ("good and bad"). Discountable reasons are relevant to the evaluative sphere; non-discountable reasons to the deontic. (Dancy 2004b:24.)

In the case of an ought, one is required to act by the latter, given they succeed in generating requirements. Whereas non-discountable reasons stand in a relation to oughts, discountable reasons, lacking the deontic sense, stand in no such relation (Dancy 2004b:21, 24). As Dancy (2004a:116) puts it, "peremptory" reasons take us to oughts, while "enticing"[5] reasons only take us to "bests," i.e. the (most) attractive.

Further: *If* discountable reasons obtain, we cannot define a reason (i.e. reason in general) in terms of its relation to oughts (Dancy 2004b:21). Yet, let us grant, reasons suggestive of action, *can be* requiring in aggregate; or otherwise as stated in P1´. Non-discountable reasons, in *suggesting* or *favoring* action, stop short of requiring action but they *contribute to* an ought, in generating requirements by aggregation. Thus, at a point, they "take us to" a conditional ought (i.e. requirement), further generating an *overall* ought, i.e. an aggregate of reasons whereby an ought can be stated "all things considered." Whether singular or in aggregate, discountable reasons, however, do not generate requirements — if a reason is discountable, one cannot be required to act on it. In that case, a reason does not, and cannot, lead to an ought.

7. Proposition 3 — The *Evaluative* Ought

Dancy assumes "[…] the notion of an ought is both normative and deontic. It is deontic by definition, more or less" (Dancy 2004b:24).

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[5] Following up on Raz (1999), Dancy (2004a, b) applies "enticing" to reasons here given the adjective "discountable" or "optional." Now, "enticing" indicates an attractive consideration or option. Not all discountable reasons present attractive options, though. "Enticing" reasons are, rather, a type of discountable reasons — or an occurrence of a discountable reason where that consideration presents an attractive option.

Broome (*via* Dancy (2004a)), notably, suggests there may be a "weak" *overall* ought, applicable to discountable reasons, or an aggregate thereof. In so far as there are enticing reasons, Broome (2013:60-1) argues, they can lead to oughts in the same way as any other reasons. That is, if one believes one ought to act on an attractive option, yet declines, one can be accused of a mild lapse of rationality.

Though not dismissing this "weak" ought, Dancy (2004a) is skeptical of applying it. Ordinarily, Dancy (2004a:102) argues, if an action is permissible, not to act on it is not put under criticism. However, Dancy (2004a:102, 104) also argues that, though inaction or acting on a lesser option is permissible, it may be put under some, though trivial, criticism, where one can be said to be silly, etc. There is, indeed, nothing odd about a permissible choice of action being put under criticism, provided one is not criticized for irrationality. Though a choice of action is permissible, it is not immune from criticism.

The "weak" ought suggested by Broome, is still treated as a *deontic* ought, suggesting a "weak" requirement, thus giving rise to problems for permissibility. Dancy (2004a, b) and Broome (2013) do not consider an *evaluative* ought. As there are two normative relations, two senses of "ought" are here at play, namely (1) a directive in the sense of a requirement or a demand; and (2) a recommendation or advice. (1) is the deontic sense of "ought." Within (1), there are final (overall) and conditional oughts. (2) allows an ought in the *evaluative* sense, itself discountable.[6] The ought, then, is *weaker* than a requirement.

On this "weaker" sense of ought, a person may be permitted not to act on some reasons; yet it might be *recommended* that she act on them — that she "ought" so to act. There is no *rational requirement* for not being silly, foolish, etc. — yet here a *rational recommendation* may be put forth. What one "ought" to do or how one "ought" to act is *not* by definition what one *has* or is *required* to do. "You ought to φ — but you do not have to φ" is valid. Here, "ought" denotes the "best" reason to act within viable options; yet as an *evaluative* ought-judgment, viz. as recommended.

We thus propose (P3): Discountable reasons can contribute to, or suggest, a "weak" ought in the evaluative sense, *qua* recommendation or advice. They do not contribute to, or suggest, an ought in the deontic sense, *qua* directive, viz. command or direct action. We can,

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[6] While Dancy (2004a:102) does recognize the notion of a discountable ought, he sees this as a defect, in the light of problems for permissibility. An *evaluative* ought-judgement is not considered, however, where permissibility would pose no problem.

however, recommend, or advise on, a course of action, where our recommendation is *to some degree* supported by reasons though discountable.

Now, if inaction or acting on a lesser option is deemed wrong, etc., our judgment is not supported by our reasons, be they discountable. Our judgment demands too much, in that case. Proceeding from discountable reasons, we can at most criticize a choice of action as silly or something to that effect, as noted. Here, an ought-judgment, if expressed in the deontic sense, is not backed up by reasons. Rather, the judgment is one of demand over and above rational requirements.

Further, an *evaluative* ought does not establish a relation between reasons and oughts. On the contrary, discountable reasons do not *determine* the presence of an ought. An ought might not be appropriate to a situation were it not for the presence of a person who is in a position to recommend or give advice, e.g. a wise friend, an expert, a professional. A person in an authoritative position may suggest a course of action for which there are only discountable reasons; yet express her suggestion as an ought-statement, to be understood as a recommendation or an advice, *contra* a directive. Here, an ought is not wholly supported by reasons given but it can be stated by a person because she is *accepted* for giving recommendation or advice. Discountable reasons do not *generate* oughts, as dictated by reason. Rather, where one appeals to another for giving recommendation or advice, an ought can be stated by the latter, in spite of the reasons.

8. Problem 1

The argument thus far rests on the actuality of discountable reasons. — Raz finds the notion of discountable ("enticing") reasons problematic.

> [T]he very same considerations which in some circumstances seem to be enticing reasons are under other conditions [or in conjunction] requiring reasons (Raz 1999:100).

Yet, as Dancy (2004a:94) expounds, a normative-evaluative relation is to be distinguished from a normative-deontic (requiring) relation in which a consideration stands under conditions where it otherwise would not. The same consideration, then, stands *qua* deontic under the latter relation whereas under the former it would stand *qua* evaluative. So,

in view of these different relations, once the context is changed, an enticer may be *converted* into a requirer, or an aggregate of enticers may *amount to* a requirer.

However, on Dancy's view, enticers cannot generate oughts, but here they can be seen as so doing, namely through conversion or aggregation. Also, Dancy (2004a:93) rejects the notion of a *requiring* reason — yet he applies it here in defense of his own account of *enticing* reasons.

Enticing reasons, in conjunction, do not have to be understood as potentially requiring, as in converting into a conclusive or amounting to an overall reason, where they otherwise, in singular, would not. In conjunction, enticing reasons may suggest an ought, but not in the deontic sense. They suggest an ought in the evaluative sense, rather — in the sense of a recommendation or an advice. So they may do in singular as well — yet the recommendation has assumedly more weight, consisting of reasons in combination. Whether in singular or in combination, reasons can thus be "enticing."

9. Problem 2

A further problem Raz (1999:101) observes with enticing reasons is their seemingly defeating "requiring" reasons in some scenarios, if the latter are not too strong or not so weighty — yet not "enticing" (discountable). If true, this conclusion renders the distinction between discountable and non-discountable ("requiring") reasons meaningless.

9.1. *Alternative Explanation — Incommensurability*

As an alternative explanation to the one of "enticing" reasons, Raz proposes *incommensurability*[7]. As Raz (1999:101) defines it, reasons are incommensurate when they do not defeat each other. There is no decisive reason either way — opposing options are both or all within reason. Reasons are, notably, not absolutely optional: "[A reason] can be said to be optional relative to competing reasons which are incommensurate with it" (Raz 1999:102). That is, reasons are not optional in themselves but in certain circumstances (in C) where they happen to be incommensurate.

However, incommensurability does not rule out *enticing* reasons. We can accept incommensurability as an explanation for discountable reasons — yet grant the notion of *enticing* reasons, as long as we see them as enticing in C, not in themselves. Reasons are

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[7] With regard to normative conflict between moral and prudential reasons, Broome (2013:61), also, presents incommensurability as unraveling apparent conflict as incomparable oughts at play.

enticing, let us say, because in C one faces opposing attractions the reasons for which do not defeat each other. There can be other discountable reasons where in C, irrespective of attraction, one faces options the reasons for which do not defeat each other.

Given incommensurate (i.e. non-defeating) reasons in C, there are reasons other than enticing which can be discounted in C — or, if we drop "enticing," any reason may be discounted in C. So, let us propose (P4): Reasons, otherwise contributory to oughts, are discountable in C. Or: Reasons, otherwise *capable of* contributing to oughts, are discountable in C. — If we offer incommensurability to solve the problem of defeating by discountable reasons, we grant that any reason may be discounted in C, that is, any reason otherwise non-discountable.

Yet, as proposed in P2(c), reasons, e.g. enticing, can be discounted even if they are commensurate, viz. if they defeat (or are defeated by) other *discountable* reasons. Incommensurability does not rule out this possibility for enticing reasons or other discountable reasons. Hence, since any reason may be discounted in C, any reason may be discounted, whether incommensurate or commensurate with other reasons.

Now, Raz (1999) seems to be arguing that reasons are discountable only when they are incommensurate. However, Raz does not show that some commensurate reasons cannot be discounted. His alternative explanation begs the question, rather. So: If commensurate (defeating) *enticing* reasons are discountable, and those are not ruled out, some commensurate reasons, of similar strength or weakness, can also be discounted.

10. Example

Raz (1999) gives the example of Mary who defers a visit to see her mother at the hospital to go to a play. Mary is supposed to visit her mother at the hospital from time to time; and today she considers whether to visit her mother or to go to a play instead. The reason to visit her mother is not enticing. So, Raz asks:

> If the enticing reason to go to the play could have justified [Mary's] deferring the visit to the next day does it not show that enticing reasons can defeat requiring reasons? (Raz 1999:101)

Well, not quite. Mary can defer the visit because visiting her mother *at a particular time* is not an obligation (i.e. a requiring reason) but rather to visit her mother sometime during the week or in the near future. The example of Mary is not obviously a case of defeating; at least it can explained without appealing to defeating. In fact, Raz presents an explanation without appealing to defeating, namely incommensurability. Yet we can also appeal to the notion of enticing reasons. The notion of a *requiring* reason is, rather, the problem.

The *enticing* reason to see the play, let us presume, does not defeat Mary's reason to visit her mother. Given Mary has a *defeating* reason to visit her mother on regular basis — to visit her mother today, can be a reason of similar strength, though not enticing, as going to the play. To visit her mother does not have to weigh so much more that to go to the play would be wrong or otherwise blameworthy. To visit today, is not "requiring" — it is optional, as Raz seems to grant, in fact. If Mary chooses the play, visiting her mother is not defeated; both options are within reason. That the visit is deferred, is not a case of defeating but of incommensurate reasons, as Raz himself goes on to argue — yet one reason can be "enticing" and the other of similar strength but not enticing.

Now, let us grant, Mary's reason to go to the play *does* defeat her reason to visit her mother. As long as these reasons are of similar strength — that is, if deferring the visit is not a reason for blame — then defeating here does not render the distinction between discountable and non-discountable reasons meaningless — because Mary's reason to visit her mother is also a discountable reason, as Raz, again, recognizes.

If Raz's example of Mary is at all a case of defeating, it is not a case where an enticing reason defeats a "requiring" reason but an enticing reason defeats another optional reason, judging by strength within the domain of optional reasons. Raz fails to show that discountable (enticing) reasons conceivably defeat requiring reasons. The case of Mary does not lead us to that possibility.

Further, as the case of Mary shows, the *contributory* reason, or the reason that would otherwise be contributory to an ought (to visit her mother today) — a reason *capable of* contributing to an ought in the deontic sense — is itself discountable in C of Mary, *even if* commensurate with the opposing reason — thus eligible for ought in the evaluative sense, rather.

11. Conclusion

We amended the proposition (P1) that not to act on a reason, applicable to C, is wrong, etc., by qualifying those reasons (*qua* conclusive, overall, etc.) constituting or amounting to requirements, generating oughts (P1´). We further proposed (P2) that not to act on some — discountable — reasons is not wrong, etc.

Given P2, we proposed and concluded that (P3) discountable reasons do not contribute to an ought in the deontic sense (*qua* directive or command) but potentially in the evaluative sense (*qua* recommendation or advice). Also, (P4) reasons, whether enticing or otherwise contributory to a deontic ought, can turn out to be discountable in C, where they are incommensurate, even commensurate (defeating), with opposing reasons.

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