

**REASONS, FACTS-ABOUT-EVIDENCE, AND  
INDIRECT EVIDENCE**

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As McBride points out in his interesting and thought-provoking paper, “Kearns and Star on Reasons as Evidence,” we have proposed and defended the following (see our 2008, 2009, 2011, and 2013):

R: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  *iff* F is evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$  (where  $\Phi$  is either a belief or an action).

RA: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  *iff* F is evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$  (where  $\Phi$  is an action).

McBride first revives an old objection to RA, and then suggests replacements theses for R and RA. We think that neither McBride’s revived objection, nor his positive proposal, is successful.

**The Objection**

One objection to RA that we have previously addressed runs as follows:

A newspaper says that there are people starving in Africa. This is evidence that one ought to give money to Oxfam. However, the fact that the newspaper says that people are starving in Africa is not a *reason* to send money to Oxfam. This may seem most obvious when the newspaper (which is, on the whole, reliable) actually incorrectly reports that there are people starving in Africa. Rather, it is the fact (if it is a fact) that there are people starving in Africa that is a reason to send money to Oxfam. Thus it seems possible for a fact to be evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  without being a reason to  $\Phi$ . (2009: 233)

We have suggested that the seeming force of this objection comes from two ideas: (a) that reasons are right-makers, and (b) that the newspaper report does not make it right to give money to Oxfam. Our reply to this objection (2009: 233–4) was that there is a case for thinking that the newspaper report does indeed make this action right and that, if it does not, then neither does the fact that people are starving in Africa (after all, it is possible, though not actual, that

starvation is a pleasurable and healthy experience to undergo). We concluded that, either way, the newspaper report has just as good a case for being a reason as do more paradigmatic reasons (such as that people are starving in Africa).

McBride provides a new diagnosis as to why the above case has some intuitive pull against RA. Unfortunately, this diagnosis is not very easy to discern. He says:

I deny the fact that the newspaper says that people are starving in Africa is a reason to give money to Oxfam because—*unlike as with* the fact that people are starving in Africa—it doesn't entail *that people are starving in Africa*. [. . .] the latter fact is a reason to give money to Oxfam as it—*unlike the former*—entails *that people are starving in Africa*. In reasoning thus, one can—*pace K&S*—reject the idea that the fact that the newspaper says there are people starving in Africa is a reason to send money to Oxfam *without also having* to reject the idea that the fact that people are starving in Africa is a reason to send money to Oxfam. (3–4)

The main distinction McBride emphasizes between the two facts is that people's starving in Africa *does*, and the fact of the newspaper report's existence does *not*, entail that people are starving in Africa. It is this, somehow, that makes the difference between the former's being a reason to give money, and the latter's not. But why is this a relevant distinction? McBride leaves us little to go on. Notice that the distinction is symmetrical, since the newspaper report's existence does, and people's starving in Africa does *not*, entail that the newspaper reports that people are starving in Africa. There must be some hidden premise doing substantial work here, if this argument is to amount to anything.

One possible hidden premise is that the fact that people are starving in Africa is a right-maker, and thus also entails the truth of a right-maker, while the newspaper report is not a right-maker, nor entails the truth of one. But if this is the hidden premise, the objection reduces to the one we have already discussed. McBride provides no fresh criticism of our discussion.

We believe, however, that McBride has different diagnosis in mind, since he concludes the above passage as follows:

And I take it, as each new case arises, one will be able to distinguish, in a like manner (*mutatis mutandis*), between the germane fact-about-evidence and fact-*not*-about-evidence. (4)

This is the author's crucial distinction: facts-about-evidence contrast with facts-not-about-evidence. It is not clear, however, what exactly this distinction amounts to, as McBride never defines "fact-about-evidence." He says that any such definition might well be contentious and that he can instead rely on "intuitive paradigmatic instances" (2). This is unsatisfactory, since "fact-about-evidence" is a technical term, rather than a natural language term, and his use of this term is crucial to his objection to RA (as well as his replacement theses, as we shall see). So what is a fact-about-evidence?

Here are some natural possibilities: a fact-about-evidence is (a) a fact that explicitly mentions the property of being evidence; (b) a fact that is about some other fact that is evidence for something; (c) a fact that is about another fact that is evidence for what one ought to do. None of these can be what McBride has in mind. The first is ruled out by the fact that McBride judges the newspaper report fact to be a fact-about-evidence, even though this fact does not explicitly concern any evidential property or relation. The second and third are ruled out by the fact that the newspaper report fact is a fact-about-evidence even if no one is starving in Africa, and thus that the newspaper report does *not* concern any fact that is evidence for something (it instead concerns a false proposition).

A fourth option is (d) a fact-about-evidence is a fact about (and a fact that is evidence for) a proposition that would (or could) be evidence for something were it true. Maybe this is what McBride means, but there is at least some reason to think not. We assume that McBride would want to give the same diagnosis of the original newspaper case as of the following case. That Jim is wincing and crying is evidence that we ought to help him. Is this fact a reason to help him? Well, one might argue that Jim's being in pain is the real reason we have to help him. His wincing and crying are merely indications of this further fact but need not entail it. Thus the fact he is wincing and crying is not a reason to help him. We suggest that this kind of objection to our account is just as forceful (or as lacking in force) as the original newspaper case. Furthermore, it looks like they are forceful (if at all) for the same reason. If so, and McBride is right to think that the crucial distinction in such cases is between facts-about-evidence and facts-not-about-evidence, then that Jim is wincing and crying is a fact-about-evidence. That is, it is not a reason precisely because it, like the newspaper report, is a fact-about-evidence.

In the light of this kind of case, we propose a different way of understanding McBride's point, using new terminology, which might capture what he has in mind. Perhaps the idea is this: that people are starving in Africa is (if true) *direct* evidence that one ought to give money to Oxfam. That is, it is evidence of this proposition but *not* in virtue of being evidence of some other proposition which is (or *would* be, were it true) evidence for it. That the newspaper reports that people are starving in Africa is (if true) *indirect* evidence that one ought to give money to Oxfam. It is evidence of this proposition in virtue of being evidence of some other proposition (namely that there are people starving in Africa) which is (or would be, were it true) evidence for it.

Given this distinction, one might claim that the pull of the above case against RA is due to the fact that the newspaper report is merely indirect evidence of what one ought to do and that only direct evidence about what one ought to do can count as a reason to do something (exactly the same thing may be said about the above wincing case, *mutatis mutandis*). Our discussions thus far leave this possibility untouched. Before we address this objection, we will show how we understand McBride's suggested modification of our thesis in the light of this distinction between indirect and direct evidence.

## The Replacement Theses

McBride suggests replacing RA and R with the following theses:

RA-McBride: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff**  $F \rightarrow (A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$  (where F is *not* a fact-about-evidence, and  $\Phi$  is an action).

R-McBride: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff**  $F \rightarrow (A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$  (where F is *not* a fact-about-evidence, and  $\Phi$  is either a belief or an action). (7)

The phrase " $F \rightarrow (A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$ " has replaced "F is evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$ " as a result of McBride analyzing the notion of evidence in terms of reliable indication, and his analyzing that in turn in terms of Ernest Sosa's notion of subjunctive implication (Sosa 2002). Thus " $F \rightarrow (A \text{ ought to } \Phi)$ " means "its being so that [F] offers some guarantee, even if not an absolute guarantee, that it is also the case that [A ought to  $\Phi$ ]" (5). While we have no particular objection to McBride analyzing evidence in this manner (and, as he points out, we have said that evidence might be understood in something like this manner), we do not think of this conception of evidence as central to our account. If there were some problem with understanding reasons as reliable indicators of what one ought to do, this would not entail that reasons are not evidence about what one ought to do. It may instead simply justify one in giving up the idea that evidence is reliable indication.

We thus propose that the following are more resilient to attack:

RA-McBride1: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff** F is evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$  (where F is *not* a fact-about-evidence, and  $\Phi$  is an action).

R-McBride1: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff** F is evidence A ought to  $\Phi$  (where F is *not* a fact-about-evidence, and  $\Phi$  is either a belief or an action).

Furthermore, given our understanding of facts-about-evidence as being indirect evidence, we suggest the following understanding of the replacement theses:

RA-McBride2: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff** F is *direct* evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$  (where  $\Phi$  is an action).

R-McBride2: Necessarily, F is a reason for an agent A to  $\Phi$  **iff** F is *direct* evidence that A ought to  $\Phi$  (where  $\Phi$  is either a belief or an action).

These theses rule out the possibility that a fact that is merely indirect evidence that one ought to  $\Phi$  can count as a reason to  $\Phi$ . As we have said, we are not sure if these theses are what McBride had in mind. They are, at least, clearer in their implications. Until we know more about the nature of facts-about-evidence, it remains difficult for us to judge any thesis that invokes them.

Two questions remain: are R-McBride/R-McBride2 and RA-McBride/RA-McBride2 correct? Does McBride's objection to RA hit home? In short: we think not. Instances of R-McBride2 (and any other reasonable interpretation of R-McBride) where  $\Phi$  is a belief clearly fail. Say that the newspaper reports that extremely reliable sources claim that the president is dead. This fact-about-evidence is (indirect) evidence that the president is dead, and thereby also evidence that one ought to believe that the president is dead. It is also a reason to believe that the president is dead. Thus a fact-about-evidence can be a reason to believe something. In general, indirect evidence can still be a reason to believe (when it comes to belief, evidence is evidence, no matter how indirect).

What of RA-McBride2 (and RA-McBride)? The fact (were it indeed a fact) that there is extremely good evidence that an asteroid will hit Earth and wipe out all human life unless precautions are taken is, presumably, a fact-about-evidence in whatever sense McBride means the term. It is certainly indirect evidence that we ought to take the requisite precautions (haul out the nuclear weapons, take to underground bunkers, etc.). That is, it is evidence that the asteroid will hit Earth and wipe out all human life unless precautions are taken, which is in turn evidence (or would be, if it were true) that we ought to take these precautions. As well as being a fact-about-evidence, and indirect evidence, it is (we suggest) a reason to take these precautions. This fact, that there is such evidence of the asteroid's hitting Earth, is a reason to take precautions. At the very least it is a reason to take the prospect of humanity's imminent annihilation very seriously.

Another case: that John is being stabbed is a reason to help him. However, it is only indirect evidence that one ought to help him. It is evidence that his life is in danger and he is in pain, which in turn is evidence that one ought to help him. Thus indirect evidence can be a reason to do something. Perhaps McBride will complain that being indirect evidence is not equivalent to being a fact-about-evidence (though if he does this, he is left with the task of explaining the difference between the newspaper case and the wincing case).

The most reasonable alternative suggestion concerning the nature of facts-about-evidence is, as we saw, that they are simply facts about (and that evidentially support) propositions that would or could be evidence if true. But even on this understanding, there are other clear counterexamples to RA-McBride. For example, that Marilyn (credibly) confesses that she murdered someone is a reason to put her on trial for murder (we may imagine that the case against her is not strong enough without this confession). The confession is a fact-about-evidence in the sense that it is a fact that is both about and evidentially supports a proposition (that Marilyn murdered someone), which itself could be evidence for something (were it true). Another case: that the newspaper accurately and exclusively reports that war has broken out is a reason to commend the newspaper's journalism. This is, however, a fact-about-evidence in this same sense. A final case: that James knows that you slept with his wife is a reason to avoid James. But this fact is clearly a fact-about-evidence in this same sense. In summary, then, however we may reasonably understand McBride's replacement theses, they are too narrow to capture all reasons.

## Back to the Objection

That the newspaper reports that people are starving in Africa is indirect evidence (and a fact-about-evidence) that one ought to send money to Oxfam. But the fact that there are people starving in Africa is *also* indirect evidence that one ought to send money to Oxfam. After all, that people are starving there is evidence that one ought to give money to Oxfam in virtue of being evidence that people are suffering there, which is (or would be, if it were true) *direct* evidence that one ought to give to Oxfam. Thus understanding facts-about-evidence as indirect evidence, McBride has provided no distinction between the newspaper report and the starving people.

This said, there is perhaps something to the idea that directness of evidence comes in degrees—the newspaper report is less direct than the fact that people are starving. Perhaps one could argue on this basis that a fact is a reason only if it is *sufficiently* direct, where some reason may be sufficiently direct without being direct. Our own view is that the direct/indirect distinction carries over to reasons. That is, that people are suffering is a direct reason to give to Oxfam, while that people are starving is an indirect reason to do so (while being *more* direct a reason than the newspaper report). It is possible that, in certain contexts, reasons-talk picks out only those reasons that are sufficiently direct, while, in less demanding contexts, reasons-talk ranges over reasons of all degrees of directness.

If we understand facts-about-evidence to be facts about, and that evidentially support, propositions that would or could be evidence if true, then McBride is right to think that the newspaper report is a fact-about-evidence while the fact that people are starving is not. Still, he is not right to think that this distinction shows one to be a reason and the other not. This is because (a) the wincing case is clearly parallel but involves no such distinction, and (b) more importantly, there are many facts-about-evidence in this sense that are reasons to act. Thus, though this distinction is of interest, it does not mark the distinction between reasons and nonreasons. And again, we are tempted to think the distinction carries over—just as there are facts-about-evidence, there are facts-about-reasons. Just as the former can themselves be evidence, the latter can themselves be reasons.

We conclude that McBride's objection fails and that his replacement theses do too. This is not to say, however, that McBride does not bring to the fore important distinctions that should be made regarding the types of evidence that there are. Rather than concluding that only some such types of evidence are reasons, we are more inclined to say that the same distinctions can also be found between different types of reasons. Though we think in the end that RA and R are defensible, we commend McBride's approach to this topic: a successful objection to RA or R need not call for a wholesale rejection of analyses of reasons in terms evidence, but may instead simply call for different such analyses. Despite the differences in our final views, then, we both agree that it is fruitful to think of reasons as evidence, and as such, our similarities far outstrip our aforementioned differences.

## References

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