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On good advice: a reply to McNaughton and Rawling

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David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (2011) take us to task for the following proposal:

R: Necessarily, a fact F is a reason for an agent A to Φ iff F is evidence that A ought to Φ .

In particular, they think a right-to-left reading of R is problematic. Their initial worry is this: that a reliable friend tells you that you have overriding moral reason to Φ is evidence that you ought to Φ , but is not a reason to Φ . Why? Because her telling you does not contribute to the rightness of your Φ -ing. Reasons are, according to them, right-makers.

As McNaughton and Rawling admit, we have two plausible replies open to us. First, we may simply deny that reasons are always right-makers, and claim that your friend's advice is a reason of the non-making variety. Second, we may claim that her advice *does* make it right to Φ . After all, you may plausibly cite it in a justification of your Φ -ing. In fact, we wish to assert the disjunction of these replies (Kearns and Star 2008, 2009).

The real meat of their paper is in their second objection. Having now assumed that reasons are right-makers, they present the following

two theses:

Divine Command Theory (DCT) holds that Φ -ing is obligatory iff God commands it, and that when Φ -ing is obligatory, this is *because* God commands it. God has the power to *make* acts obligatory; God's commands constitute moral reasons to act.

Divine Advice Theory (DAT) agrees that Φ -ing is obligatory iff God commands it. But, according to DAT, when Φ -ing is obligatory, God commands it because it's obligatory – God has epistemic access to the normative facts, but God does not have the power to make acts obligatory (2011: 101).

They then point out that, according to DAT, 'the fact that God commanded you to Φ , although evidence that you ought to do so, is not a moral reason for you to do so in the sense that it is on DCT' (2011: 101). They ask us to account for this fact (on the assumption that all reasons are right-makers). It appears that what they are most worried about is that we collapse the distinction between these two theses.

As it stands, this is not an objection to R per se, but to the conjunction of R and the idea that reasons are right-makers. Call this R+. We believe R+ survives their objection. Imagine, first, that it is true that Φ -ing is obligatory iff God commands it. DCT then claims that God's commands are right-makers, and DAT says they are not. This is a clear distinction that R+ does nothing to collapse. What R+ *does* do is take sides. If R+ is true, then God's commands for one to Φ make Φ -ing right. Thus if R+ is true, DAT is false. In effect, DAT has a denial of R+ built into it. Claiming that R+ is true does not collapse DAT into DCT, but rather simply commits one to the falsity of DAT.

Perhaps, however, they are worried about something deeper, namely that R+ has its own special Euthyphro problem (they refer to *Euthyphro*; 2011: 101). Consider your reliable friend, Mary. When Mary tells you that you have overriding moral reason to Φ , R+ tells us that this is itself a reason to Φ (as it is evidence you ought). But presumably Mary tells you this precisely because you ought to Φ (at least, this is the kind of case we shall consider). So she tells you because you ought to and you ought to because she tells you. How can that be?

Here's how. Imagine Mary knows you ought to Φ (on the basis of some fact, F, that makes it the case that you ought to Φ). She may then ensure that another fact, G, obtains that also makes it the case (and thus overdetermines) that you ought to Φ . In such a case, G obtains because you ought to Φ (as she makes G obtain precisely because you ought to Φ) and you ought to Φ because G obtains. Cases like this are clearly possible. Furthermore, proponents of R+ should think this is what is going on when your reliable friend

tells you that you have overriding moral reason to Φ . Her telling you this overdetermines that you ought to Φ . There are certain other facts that make it that you ought (and thus also serve as evidence you ought). Mary apprehends that you ought, and then brings about further facts (such as that she tells you so) that also make it the case that you ought.¹

A lingering question remains: when Mary tells you that you have overriding moral reason to Φ , does her doing so make it right for you to Φ *in virtue* of being evidence that you ought? If so, then how can the former make the latter the case in virtue of being evidence for it? One possible answer is the following. Her telling you makes it right for you to believe that you ought to Φ (and it does so in virtue of being evidence that you ought). Furthermore, what one ought to do depends on what one ought to believe one ought to do (roughly, one ought to do what one ought to believe one ought to do). Given this, her telling you affects not only what you ought to believe, but what you ought to do. In this way, by giving you evidence that you ought to Φ , she also makes it the case that you ought to Φ .

As we have said, we do not endorse R+ (nor do we reject it), and thus need not assert everything we have said on R+'s behalf. Even those who accept R+ need not agree with everything we say. We have given one possible defence of R+ against some worries inspired by McNaughton and Rawling's paper, but we do not claim it is the only possible defence.

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1 Any remaining air of paradox disappears once we are careful about times. She tells you at t_2 because you ought at t_1 to Φ at t_3 , and you ought at t_2 to Φ at t_3 because she tells you at t_2 .