

## Morality

If this is what reasons are, do we have reason to be moral or do what we are morally obligated to do? First, what would it mean to be morally obligated to do something? Considers all of the disparate things people have intelligibly held to be morally obligatory (e.g. not harming others, cooperating, etiquette, obeying god(s), abstinence, etc.). It seems that the only satisfactory account explaining what is common to all these views is the following: to judge that one is morally obligated to do something is to judge that one should feel guilt towards not doing it.

Now, part of feeling guilty towards doing something is being motivated not to do it, so reasons to feel guilty towards doing something are reasons to be motivated not to do it. Similarly, since our actions are deliberatively guided through the deliberative guidance of our motivational states, reasons to be in motivational states simply are reasons for action. Thus, reasons to feel guilty towards doing something are reasons not to do it.

Now one still might worry that we have no genuine moral obligations. According to our account, this would amount to thinking that the standards of our normative governance systems never endorse feeling guilt. But this would seem just as implausible as thinking that they never endorse our being in any other motivational states (e.g. desire). Guilt is one among many natural sources of motivation we often feel and take to be warranted. There is no reason to suspect that our normative governance systems would reject wholesale a central human emotion.

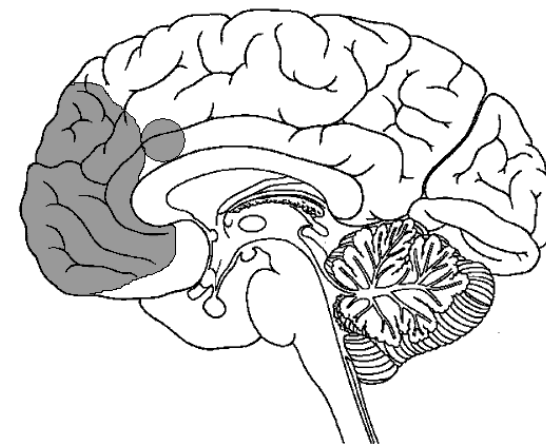
## Replies to Objections

One might object to our view by agreeing that we have a normative governance system as we have described, but still raise the question, “Why should I endorse the standards of my normative governance system?”

What could this kind of questioning amount to? Perhaps one intends to hold the standards of one’s normative governance system up to some kind of external standard. But if it really is a standard external to our normative governance systems, then given our account of deliberation, seeing that this external standard is met cannot settle our deliberative questions. Since judgments of what to endorse must be able to settle our deliberative questions, these external standards would be irrelevant to the question of whether to endorse the standards of our normative governance systems.

The only way for this questioning to be relevant to our reasons for endorsement would be for its answers to settle our deliberative questions. But that would mean that this questioning just amounts to questioning whether or not our normative governance systems meet their own standards. This kind of question makes sense because there could be agents whose normative governance systems endorsed not following their own endorsements. It seems highly unlikely that human normative governance systems are like this, but we can certainly conceive of agents constructed in this way. They might not be guided very effectively by their normative governance systems, but this does not change what reasons are. In short, these agents might be screwed, but our view would not.

# What Reasons Are: From ‘Is’ to ‘Ought’



Adapted from <http://staff.washington.edu/chudler/colorbook.html>

by John Ku and Howard Nye

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## **Reasoning as Guidance**

What is it to think that someone should do something, or that she has reason to do it? Some people think that we are judging that the action meets whatever external standards happen to be commanded by god(s) or cultures. It seems, however, that we can deliberate about whether or not we *should* accept such standards. In doing so, we would be evaluating these standards in terms of further principles that we treat as more authoritative. Rather than any such external standards then, it is these principles guiding our deliberation that would be at the heart of our judgments of what to do.

Others have thought that when we judge that an agent should do something we are expressing *our* endorsement of the agent's conduct. This may seem plausible when we are saying that *we* should do something, but consider cases in which the speaker and the agent are different people. In such cases, if the speaker is just expressing her endorsement, she would seem to fail to be reasoning with the agent. The mere fact that I endorse your action would no more settle what you should do than the fact that it conforms to some external standard. To speak to what *you* should do it seems I must address the standards guiding *your* deliberation. Indeed, facts about what an agent should do must be able to guide her by answering the questions she asks herself in deliberation.

## **Deliberation**

So, what then *would* answer an agent's deliberative questions? Clearly, when we deliberate, we hold our motivations up to standards. Moreover, these standards guide

our motivations: when our motivations appear to meet (or fail to meet) these standards, we tend to come to have (or refrain from having) them. Principles we intuitively "endorse" or norms we consciously accept are standards that play this role, but norms we accept can also guide our deliberations without our being consciously aware of it.

The norms we accept include intuitively "first-order" principles, like "don't lie!" Of course we are able to evaluate such first-order principles themselves. Yet, to evaluate these principles, it seems that we must be doing the same thing that we do in evaluating our motivations. We must be holding our principles up to some further standards in such a way that when our principles appear to meet (or fail to meet) these further standards, we tend to come to accept (or reject) them. It seems, however, that our psychologies must terminate at standards that are used for determining the acceptance of all other principles. We might call these standards "fundamental norms."

What these facts about our deliberations seem to entail is that we have a dedicated psychological system – which we might call a normative governance system – that operates through our holding motivations and principles up to standards that cause us to endorse or reject them. Moreover, this psychological system is unified by its constituting a hierarchy of norms governing our motivations. Within this hierarchy, higher-order accepted norms guide the acceptance of lower-order norms.

What an agent's deliberation seems to amount to is a search for the prescriptions of this dedicated psychological system guiding

her motivations and actions. To question an action or principle in deliberation ultimately involves nothing other than holding it up to a standard with the kind of causal influence we attributed to fundamental norms. To settle a deliberative question is to determine whether a principle does meet such a standard.

## **What Reasons Are**

As we saw, facts about what an agent should do must be answers to the questions she asks herself in deliberation in order to be capable of guiding her. But as we have just argued, answers to an agent's deliberative questions are nothing other than facts about whether her conduct meets the standards of her normative governance system or fundamental norms. Thus, what it is for an agent to have reason to do something is simply for it to meet the standards of her normative governance system.

While we have focused on the case of reasons for action for the sake of simplicity, exactly analogous arguments could be given in the case of other domains. These would include reasons for belief, emotions, and other motivational states (like desires). Deliberations about whether beliefs are justified or emotions are appropriate have the exact same kind of causal impact on beliefs and feelings that deliberations about what to do have on actions. Just like judgments of what an agent should do, there is nothing more to judgments of what an agent should feel or believe than this guiding role in deliberation. Thus, to think that an agent should believe or feel something just is to think that it meets the standards of her normative governance system.