

## SIX WAYS SOMETHING CAN BE VALUABLE<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I elaborate upon four different categories of practical reasons and the possible combinations they admit. These are explained by appeal to the distinct structure of each of the four different ways in which the obtainment of a state of affairs can be valuable. First, I explain the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative values. Second, I distinguish between person-affecting and impersonal values. The combination of these categories produces six possible ways in which the obtainment of a state of affairs can be valuable —four basic and two derived. It also shows that it is not possible for something to be at the same time both agent-neutrally and agent-relatively valuable.

**Keywords:** agent-neutral, agent-relative, impersonal, person-affecting, practical reasons, value.

### RESUMEN

En este artículo argumento sobre cuatro categorías diferentes de razones prácticas y las posibles combinaciones que admiten. Se explican apelando a las cuatro formas diferentes en las que la obtención de un estado de cosas puede ser valiosa. En primer lugar, explico la diferencia entre valores agencialmente-neutrales y agencialmente-relativos. En segundo lugar, distingo entre valores relativos-a-la-persona e impersonales. La combinación de estas categorías produce seis maneras posibles en las que la obtención de un estado de cosas puede ser valiosa -cuatro básicas y dos derivadas. También muestra que no es posible para algo ser al mismo tiempo valioso de forma agencialmente-neutral y agencialmente-relativa.

**Palabras clave:** neutralidad-agencial; relatividad-agencial; impersonalidad; relativo-a-la-persona; razones prácticas; valor.

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Practical reasons differ in their strength. Thus, our reasons for or against a particular course of action may be stronger or weaker than our reasons for or against the alternative courses of action available to us. This has consequences for what we have most reason to do. Thus, for instance, when our reasons for a particular course of action are stronger than those for all the other alternatives, we have decisive reasons to try and pursue it.

Reasons, however, also differ in their, so to speak, *structure*. In the literature, this difference is recognised in the usual distinctions between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, on the one hand, and person-affecting and impersonal reasons, on the other. In this article I will assume a value-based conception of practical reasons, such as the one defended by Derek Parfit or Joseph Raz<sup>2</sup>. According to this views, it is the fact that something is valuable what gives us practical reasons. Thus, the adequate response to the belief that the obtainment of some state of affairs has positive value is to that one has a reason to desire its obtainment, and to try and ensure that it obtains. Conversely, the adequate response to the belief that the obtainment of some state of affairs has negative value is that one a reason to desire that it does not obtain, and to try and prevent its obtainment.

On this view of practical reasons, we can explain this difference between all four kinds of reasons by appeal to the distinct structure of each of the four different ways in which the obtainment of a state of affairs can be valuable. My aim in this article is to elaborate upon these four ways in which things can be valuable, and how that affects the kind of reasons they give us. In the first section I will deal with the agent-neutral/agent-relative dichotomy. In the second section I will do so with the person-affecting/impersonal dichotomy. Finally, in the concluding section, I shall clearly spell out the six combinations these categories admit, and the one which is excluded.

## 1. THE FIRST DICHOTOMY: AGENT-NEUTRAL AND AGENT-RELATIVE REASONS

The first dichotomy regarding the structure of our practical reasons distinguishes between those that are agent-neutral and those that are

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<sup>2</sup> See Parfit (2011a), especially pp.29-174, but see Raz (1975, p.17; 2002, pp. 22, n.4). Though not uncontroversial, I do not have the space here to defend this view of practical reasons.

agent-relative. It concerns whether, regarding some state of affairs, only those agents suitably related to it, rather than all agents, have reasons for or against its obtainment. Consider the practice of lying. Occasionally, the following is true

(1) I have a reason not to lie.

Yet whenever we have a reason not to do something, on a value-based conception of practical reasons, it must be because there is something bad (of negative value) about it. We may therefore ask what is bad about lying. There are, at least, two possible rough answers to that question:

(2) It is bad that *I* lie.

(3) It is bad that lies are told.

Suppose, for the time being, that (2) is the most plausible description of what is bad when I lie. Through generalisation we can arrive to a more precise account of what is bad with anybody's lying, and in what way<sup>3</sup>:

(4) It is bad that there is some person, *p*, and some state of affairs, *s*, such that *s* entails *p*'s lying,

and

It is bad in that it gives *p* a reason to try and prevent *s* from obtaining.

Thus, on this construal, it is indeed bad when I or anybody else lies. Yet because of the way it is bad, each of us has a reason not to tell *our* lies, and each ought to strive to take that reason into account and act

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<sup>3</sup> In this section I follow Nagel (1970, pp. 91-98) and Parfit (1984, pp. 27, 55, 93, 102-104). Notice, however, that Nagel calls what in this article I will refer to as agent-neutral reasons 'objective' and what I refer to as agent-relative reasons 'subjective'.

according to it. Sometimes it might be true that we can cause people to lie less by our telling some lie that would give us no reasons for telling lies. Even in that case, each of us still has a reason not to lie, since each of us never had a reason to *minimise* the number of liars or lies, but simply reason not to tell *our* lies.

Suppose now that the most plausible description of what is bad when I lie is

(3) It is bad that lies are told.

Through generalisation we can arrive at:

(5) It is bad that there is some person, *p*, and some state of affairs, *s*, such that *s* entails *p*'s lying,

and

It is bad in that it gives all rational agents a reason to try and prevent *s* from obtaining.

On this construal, it is also bad when people tell lies. Again, this means that we have a reason not to lie. Yet what matters here is that there are as few people telling lies as possible or, perhaps, that there exist as few lies as possible. On occasion, therefore, even though one may have a reason not to lie, one may also have a reason to do so if that is what would cause there to be fewer people lying in the world<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, (5) is just *one* possible way of rendering (3). An alternative way of doing so would be to do without a variable ranging over persons altogether:

(6) It is bad that there is some state of affairs, *s*, such that *s* entails that there are lies.

and

It is bad in that it gives all rational agents a reason to try and prevent *s* from obtaining.

In a world where there could be lies caused otherwise than by people telling them, (6) would give us additional reasons for acting (5) would fail to provide. As it is, though, in the actual world (5) and (6) provide us with the same reasons.

I am not presently interested in whether (4) or (5) is the best account of the morality of lying. As I said, the case of lying is used here merely to illustrate two senses in which things, or states of affairs, can be good or bad in a reason-implicating way. Sometimes we individuate a state of affairs and judge that, somehow, it is its *mere obtaining* which is good or bad—as in (5)—, so that we all have a common reason to try and cause it to happen, or to try and prevent it from happening. When things are good or bad in this way, we say that they are good or bad in an *agent-neutral* way and they give us agent-neutral practical reasons:

*Agent-neutral valuation*: a state of affairs is valuable in an agent-neutral way just in case

a. It gives *all* rational agents a reason for acting

and

b. It assigns as the *common* rational aim for those agents the obtainment of such state of affairs.

In contrast, consider *prudence*. Prudence is a central case of a second way in which a state of affairs can be good: it is good that *each* of us strives to make *her* life as flourishing as possible<sup>5</sup>. When we say that it would be prudent for someone to spend his time reading *A Tale of Two Cities* instead of playing video-games we are probably appealing to something like,

(7) It is good that there is some person, *p*, and some state of affairs, *s*, such that *s* entails that *p*'s life is maximally flourishing,

and

It is good in that it gives *p* a reason to try and cause *s* to obtain.

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<sup>5</sup> For prudential or self-interested rationality as a paradigm of agent-relativity see, for example, Parfit (1984, pp. 3-5 and 55).

Here, we imply nothing about the existence of reasons to contribute to the flourishing of lives in general. Even if such reasons exist and are common to all agents, they cannot be derived from (6). We are only allowed to claim that *each* of us has a reason to care for the flourishing of *her own* life. If that were our supreme rational aim, it would be irrational for us to help others flourish when that would, all things considered, undermine our efforts to achieve it for ourselves.

When things are good or bad in this way, we say that they are good or bad in an *agent-relative way* and they give us agent-relative practical reasons:

*Agent-relative valuation:* a state of affairs is valuable in an agent-relative way just in case

- a. It gives reasons for acting *only* to those rational agents who also figure as one of the terms in the relation featured in the description of the state of affairs,

and

- b. It restricts *each* agent's rational aim to the obtainment of the state of affairs in which *she* so figures.

Consider again the case of lying. An agent-relative account of its badness would describe the relevant state of affairs as one in which the agent lies. Such a description must include a relation between the existence of a lie and the agent's utterance of it. This account would also assign the agent the aim of preventing that state of affairs from obtaining. Since the state of affairs at issue can only obtain through the uttering of a lie by the agent, the account remains silent about the reasons a particular agent has when lies are uttered by other agents.

The structural distinctiveness of agent-relative valuation resides in the relation that the relevant state of affairs must feature —one of whose terms must always be a rational agent. It is on the basis of that relation that it is possible to assign distinct practical reasons to different agents.

## 2. THE SECOND DICHOTOMY: PERSON-AFFECTING AND IMPERSONAL REASONS

Important as the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons is, there is a second dichotomy related to different ways in which values may give us reasons, and which distinguishes between those that are person-affecting and those that are impersonal<sup>6</sup>. It concerns whether there are reasons for or against the obtainment of some state of affairs only when it affects, either positively or negatively, an individual's wellbeing. Or whether, alternatively, those reasons might exist even when an individual's wellbeing remains unaffected.

Let us reprise the case of lying. We may wonder whether, on the one hand, lying is bad whenever it is bad for us or others or whether, on the other hand, it is bad even when it is bad for no-one. Thus,

(8) Lying is bad for someone

or

(9) Lying is *just* bad.

Let us suppose that (8) is the most plausible starting point for an account of the badness of lying. Under this assumption, lying is bad whenever it is bad for someone. So, for instance, in those cases in which lying harms others, we have a reasons not to lie. Yet in those cases in which lying harms no-one, including the liar, we would have no reasons against lying. Again, we can be more precise:

(10) It is bad that there is some person, *p*, and some state of affairs, *s*, such that *s* entails *p*'s lying,

and

It is bad in so far it detracts from someone's net wellbeing.

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6 In this section I follow Dworkin (1994, pp. 68-81), McMahan (2002, pp. 330-331), Boonin (2003, p. 42) and Kamm (2006, pp. 227-230).

Things are good or bad for individuals. What might be taken as rationally significant, or reason-giving, on these occasions is that someone's wellbeing is affected positively or negatively. Whenever this is the case, we say that some state of affairs is *valuable in a person-affecting way* and that it gives us *person-affecting* practical reasons:

*Person-affecting valuation:* a state of affairs, *s*, is valuable in a person-affecting way just in case that there is an *s* and a sentient being, *x*, and the predicate 's is valuable for *x*' is satisfied by both.

Structurally, person-affecting values are dyadic attributes of states of affairs that express how they affect the wellbeing of individuals. That being said, I believe two clarifications are in order. First, talk of 'persons' is misleading. There is no conceptual, necessary link between person-affecting values and what is good or bad for persons. That is why I predicate the relation 'being valuable for', and its variants, of sentient beings, and not merely of, e.g., rational autonomous agents. All (and only) sentient beings, and not just those that qualify as persons (however defined), possess a wellbeing of their own which can be positively or negatively affected. Thus, the aforesaid relation can be predicated of all sentient beings, be they human or nonhuman<sup>7</sup>.

Secondly, it would be a mistake to believe that whenever something is valuable in a person-affecting way, it must *necessarily* be valuable also in an agent-relative way. Indeed, it can be so *contingently*. This is the case with *self-interested* reasons. Recall our discussion about prudential considerations. If someone would be better off reading *A Tale of Two Cities* rather than playing video games, then she has an agent-relative reason to do so, and since it is given by facts about her wellbeing, it is also a person-affecting reason. Conversely, states of affairs that are valuable in a person-affecting way can provide us with *agent-neutral* reasons.

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<sup>7</sup> It would have been more transparent to name this kind of values, and their reasons, *sentient-affecting*. In this way, it would have been clearer that they have to do with what is good or bad for sentient beings. But I find the usage of the expression 'person-affecting' too established in the discussion to attempt the change.



Suppose that it is true of someone that, if not killed, she would lead a life of very high net positive value. Continuing to live is very valuable, in a person-affecting way, for that individual. Plausibly, that is what would give us all agent-neutral reasons not to kill her.

Assume now an account of the morality of lying as suggested by (9). Of course, we may wonder whether there are things whose existence is good, even when the fact that they exist is good for no one; or things whose existence is bad even when the fact that they exist is bad for no-one. Yet, again, may aim is not take a stance on the nature of the badness of lying, nor to commit myself to the claim that there are things whose mere existence is valuable in this way. Simply suppose, for the time being, that some states of affairs are *just* good or bad, even if they are good or bad for no-one. On this assumption, what matters in these situations is sometimes captured in phrases like ‘the world becomes a better place’ or ‘a worse place’ where we are concerned with the overall value of the actual world. Whenever something is valuable in this way, we say that it is *impersonally valuable* and that it gives us *impersonal* practical reasons:

*Impersonal valuation:* a state of affairs, *s*, is impersonally valuable just in case the predicate ‘*s* is valuable *simpliciter*’ is satisfied by it.

Structurally, impersonal values are monadic attributes of states of affairs. If there are decisive person-affecting reasons to benefit someone but we act against them, it is not only true that we have acted wrongly, but also say that the individual to whom the benefit was due is worse-off than she would have been if we had acted on the existing reasons. When we act against decisive impersonal reasons, though it is still true that we have done wrong, it may not be true that someone is made worse-off in that way<sup>8</sup>.

There are, again, a couple of conceptual points worth making in order to avoid confusion regarding the notion of impersonal

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<sup>8</sup> See, for this particular point, McMahan (2002, p. 331) and Kamm (2006, p. 230). Perhaps the name of this kind of value, and of the reasons it gives us, ought to be changed in a way similar to the one I referred to in the previous footnote.

values. First of all, just as person-affecting values are not necessarily agent-relative, impersonal values need not be agent-neutral. Just suppose someone obsessed with etiquette conceives of the value of dressing according to the appropriate standards as impersonal and agent-relative, and claims something like ‘each person has a reason to dress according to etiquette, even when it is against her lifelong net wellbeing’. Certainly, this is a ludicrous normative claim, but here we are not concerned about its plausibility, but about its formal structure:

- (11) It is good *simpliciter* that there is some person, *p*, and some state of affairs, *s*, such as that *s* entails that *p* dresses according to etiquette,

and

It is good in that it gives *p* a reason to try and cause *s* to obtain.

What is valuable here has nothing to do with what is good for *p* (or any other sentient being), but simply with her dressing according to etiquette. As per our definition, that makes *s* impersonally valuable. Also, it is not valuable in that we all have a reason to try that *p* dresses properly, not even a reason to ensure that everybody dresses properly. Our rational aim is restricted in the typical agent-relative way —namely, each of us has a reason to care only about her own dressing.

Secondly, although it is not possible for the very same fact to provide us with both agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, given the definitions, some states of affairs which are valuable in a person-affecting way may also be impersonally valuable. Suppose that the fact that *s* obtains is valuable for *p* (e.g., that *p*’s reading *A Tale of Two Cities* is good for *p*). If we add the intermediate premise ‘that something personally valuable obtains is impersonally valuable,’ then we can conclude that the fact that *s* obtains is valuable *simpliciter* (that *p*’s reading *A Tale of Two Cities* obtains is good *simpliciter*).

It is in this fashion how we can compare the value of different ways in which the world may go, depending on how good or bad the sentient individuals inhabiting them fare. Suppose that

*Good World* is the world in which there exist three sentient individuals, all of them with net positive lifelong wellbeing —one at level 60, a second at level 50 and a third at level 40.

and that

*Mediocre World* is the world in which there exist three sentient individuals, all of them with net positive lifelong wellbeing —one at level 30, a second at level 20 and a third at level 10.

Suppose that we ought to decide which world would be better to create. Intuitively, that would be *Good World*. Yet if we fail to create *Good World*, it is false that that would be bad for the individuals who would have inhabited it, or worse for them than if we had chosen otherwise. This is because when we do not create *Good World*, they do not exist. In addition, if we create *Mediocre World*, that cannot be bad for the individuals that inhabit it, or worse for them than if we had chosen otherwise. This is because if we had not created *Mediocre World*, they would not have existed<sup>9</sup>.

Appeal to person-affecting values cannot, then, help us decide. But we may appeal to the impersonal value of the life of each individual. In *Good World*, we find three valuable states of affairs one of value 60, a second one of value 50 and a third one of value 40. In *Mediocre World*, we find one of value 30, a second one of value 20 and a third one of value 10. We have reasons to

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<sup>9</sup> We are, of course, facing an instance of the Non-Identity Problem in Same Number Choices as described in Parfit (1984, Part Four), and previously in Parfit (1982). I am not worried, however, whether the way out of this dilemma, as suggested by Parfit in the works just referenced and again in (2011b, p. 744), is justified, though it is the one I will be using here. I am only interested in that it presupposes the existence of impersonal values. But see also, for instance, Glover (1977, pp. 66-69), Steinbock (1992, pp. 37-40; 2011, pp. 31-34) and Singer (2011, pp. 108-111).

prefer the existence of the states of affairs of greater value, even if no one is made better-off by our choice or worse-off by making a state of affairs of lesser value to obtain. Since these worlds are similar regarding equality in the distribution of wellbeing, if we adopt an additive principle for aggregating impersonal value, we can easily conclude that, all things considered, we have decisive reasons to create *Good World* and, consequently, decisive reasons not to create *Mediocre World*.

### 3. CONCLUSION: THE SIX WAYS SOMETHING CAN BE VALUABLE

As we have seen, the obtainment of states of affairs can be valuable in, at least, four different ways. —agent-relatively, agent-neutrally, person-affectingly and impersonally. This different ways can be distinguished by what I called their *structure*. In agent-relative valuation, state of affairs must include a relation in which rational agents figure as one of the terms, so that only those agents are assigned a practical reason. In agent-neutral valuation we need no such device to restrict the assignment of reasons to agents, for all are provided with the same reasons. In person-affecting valuation, a dyadic attribute is asserted of a state of affairs, expressing how it impacts individual wellbeing. In impersonal valuation, what is asserted of states of affairs is a monadic attribute, and no such impact is expressed.

In addition, as I showed, the obtainment of a state of affairs can be valuable in *more than one* of these ways at once. Thus, the obtainment of a state of affairs can be valuable (a) both agent-neutrally and in a person-affecting way; (b) both agent-neutrally and in an impersonal way; (c) both agent-relatively and in a person-affecting way; and (d) both agent-relatively and in an impersonal way. These four basic combinations figure in the table below.

Take  $s$  as a variable ranging over states of affairs;  $p$  as a variable ranging over rational agents and  $s(p)$  as a variable ranging over those states of affairs in which  $p$  figures as one the terms of the relevant relation featured in the description of  $s$ .

<b>Basic Ways Something can Be Valuable</b>	<i>Person-affecting</i>  Being valuable for someone	<i>Impersonally</i>  Being valuable <i>simpliciter</i>
<i>Agent-neutrally</i>  All <i>p</i> are assigned a common rational aim	All <i>p</i> have the common aim to try and make <i>s</i> happen, because the obtainment of <i>s</i> is valuable for someone.  <b>Example:</b> <i>We all have a reason to try and make it that lies are not told whenever someone would otherwise be made worse-off.</i>	All <i>p</i> have the common aim to try and make <i>s</i> happen, because the obtainment of <i>s</i> is valuable <i>simpliciter</i> .  <b>Example:</b> <i>We all have a reason to try and make it that lies are not told because otherwise the world becomes a worse place.</i>
<i>Agent-relatively</i>  Each <i>p</i> is assigned an aim regarding <i>s(p)</i>	Each <i>p</i> has the aim to try and make <i>s(p)</i> happen, because the obtainment of <i>s(p)</i> is valuable for someone.  <b>Example:</b> <i>Each of us has a reason not to tell lies whenever someone would otherwise be made worse-off.</i>	Each <i>p</i> has the aim to try and make <i>s(p)</i> happen, because the obtainment of <i>s(p)</i> is valuable <i>simpliciter</i> .  <b>Example:</b> <i>Each of us has a reason not to tell lies because otherwise the world becomes a worse place.</i>

In addition, as we saw, it is possible that the obtainment of a state of affairs is valuable in both a person-affecting way and impersonally. Thus, we find a pair of derived combinations. In these cases, the obtainment of such state of affairs is either (e) valuable in the two mentioned ways and agent-neutrally, or (f) valuable in those two ways and also agent-relatively. Nevertheless, the obtainment of a state of affairs cannot be both agent-relatively and agent-neutrally valuable.

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