

Comments on Maguire’s “There Are No Reasons for Attitudes”

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Speaking as someone who has always been uncomfortable with the right kind of reason (RKR)/wrong kind of reason (WKR) distinction, I’m really excited about Maguire’s main thesis here. I too am skeptical that any normativity of putative RKR for attitudes really is that of reasons. But in these comments I’ll try to put pressure on Maguire’s arguments against the existence of RKR for attitudes.

I’ll take on board Maguire’s characterization of RKR as considerations that make an attitude fitting. My strategy is to show how fittingness facts are as slack as reasons, are graded, and can sometimes even weigh against each other.

Slackness

I take it that a normative notion is *slack* or *contributory* if it can only be used for an *incomplete* explanation of some strict fact, such as an ought, duty, or permission. Maguire wants to argue for a contrast: whereas reasons are slack, fittingness considerations are not.

But this gives us two plausible ways to derive a contrast: we could show that fittingness considerations don’t contribute to the explanation of any strict notions, OUGHT included, or we could show that they do completely explain some strict facts. At the beginning of the talk Maguire asserted that RKR don’t explain oughts, but in the body of the talk he argues that they “directly make specific attitudes fitting”. This suggests two different ways the argument could go.

1. Fittingness conditions don't explain any strict facts

The first option is that RKR's are non-slack because they don't explain any strict fact at all. Maguire doesn't say much to support this version. But here he runs up against what I'll call the the "Rather Plausible View":

Rather Plausible View: A person ought to have the attitudes she has (overall?) RKR to have, and because those are the ones for which she has the right kind of reason, unless the WKR's to have other attitudes are very strong indeed.¹

The paradigm here is belief: perhaps one ought to believe on the basis of the evidence, except in the rare circumstance where there are strong reasons for wishful beliefs. Even if RKR's don't weigh against each other because they make attitudes fitting, they could still weigh against WKR's in determining what attitude one ought to have. So plausibly, RKR's do offer an incomplete explanation of a strict fact, namely of what attitudes one ought to have. So they are slack, just like reasons, and there is no contrast.

2. Fittingness conditions explain fittingness facts

The second option, which seems to better fit the argument anyway, has it that:

1. Fittingness is a strict notion, and
2. Fittingness considerations completely explain the fittingness of an attitude,

rendering FITTINGNESS a non-slack notion, in contrast to reasons.

But now that fittingness facts are understood to be strict, in the same league with oughts, duties, and permissions, I think we can press back against the contrast. Why should we think that reasons are always merely contributory? Why not think that whereas fittingness considerations directly make an attitude appropriate, reasons directly make an option *avored*, where facts about what's favored are understood as strict?

This raises the question of what differentiates strict from non-strict facts. It cannot just be the appropriateness of criticism for falling short of a standard expressed by the fact, for although you may be appropriately criticized just for having neglected a duty, you may not be appropriately criticized just for failing to have a fitting attitude. On the other hand, Maguire could hold that fittingness is strict because it's rule-like. But this over-generalizes, for it's not clear that reasons *shouldn't*

¹Chris Howard has recently pressed me to consider this view.

be thought of as rule-like. Perhaps they are *default* rules, as in Horty (2012). (Indeed, if the Rather Plausible View is right then RKR's can be construed as default rules that may be overruled by certain WKR's.)

The natural response to this might be that strict facts such as fittingness facts have a *firmness* or *finality* to them which separates them from reasons. This can't require an *absolute* firmness if *pro tanto* duties are to be included among the strict facts. But importantly, it's not clear that *some* reasons *don't* have a similar firmness or finality. Raz (1975) thinks that an undefeated exclusionary reason entails by itself that one ought not act for the excluded reason. A deontologist who was also a reasons-firster could hold that some reasons weigh against each other while others trump: we can weigh how much beauty an action creates against how much pain it will cause, but once we learn that it will kill an innocent person then we learn it has a definite *disfavored* status.

If this is right then RKR's are non-slack, but so are some reasons for action. So the case for a contrast has not been made.

This makes me wonder if the intuitions driving this section don't lead elsewhere, to the idea that fittingness facts don't really compete in the way reasons do. So it's to these arguments I now turn.

Gradability & Weighing

First I ask a question about Maguire's understanding of the contrast between fittingness and unfittingness. Then I'll argue that fittingness facts are graded, then that they can sometimes compete. A key aspect of each argument that there are individuations of attitudes with fittingness conditions that Maguire can't allow.

Gradability

First: A question. Take degreed attitude A_d . If A_1 is more unfitting than A_2 , doesn't it follow that A_2 is more fitting than A_1 ? Or why can't we just *define* the more-fitting-than relation as the inverse of the more-unfitting-than relation?

Maguire thinks that standard-like notions such as CORRECTNESS are exclusively binary, while a notion such as INCORRECT is gradable. But I don't see the reason to deny that the two notions are rather a binary notion of correctness/incorrectness (correct or not; incorrect or not incorrect) and a gradable one (more or less correct; more or less incorrect). Indeed, I know that the US nursing board exam answer key will state, "Answers B and C are both correct, but C is more correct."

This is really just an invitation for Maguire to explain his reasoning more.

Second: An argument for gradability. You're in the audience of a performance of Poulenc's *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*, and it's the final scene — a tragic one in which nuns are martyred during the Reign of Terror. They go to the scaffolding singing a psalm, and the chorus is cut off one by one by the guillotine. You look to your left at your friend Jim, tears streaming down his face with an expression of *sadness* on it, and you think, *That's fitting*. Then you look to your right at your friend Shivani. She's not sad exactly, but *moved to tears*. You think, *That's even more fitting* — for though the nuns have met a sad end, their heroism means all the more glory in the hereafter. That appears to be a difference in degree of fit between distinct attitudes, not in the degree of one attitude. Moreover, there appears to be no pressure for you to retract and say that *you were wrong* about Jim and that his emotion is unfitting. His emotion is fitting too — just not as fitting as Shivani's.

I think Maguire's best response is to argue that *being moved* is two emotions, sadness and joy, and to claim that all there is to say is that *both* are fitting. Shivani just has one more fitting attitude than Jim. But this restriction seems arbitrary, even if the analysis is right. Some emotions are just more determinate or specific than others, and we can compare the fit of the more and less determinate. Why shouldn't *being moved* count as a single, structurally complex emotion, just as nostalgia does?² In such cases it's intuitive to say that it's more fitting to have the more precise emotion. Compare: when visually presented with a green patch, it's accurate for the blue receptor to fire and for the yellow receptor to fire. But it's more accurate for both to fire than for just the blue to fire.

Weighing

So suppose that fittingness is itself gradable. Here is an argument that sometimes fittingness facts can weigh with respect to a single attitude, much as reasons can weigh with respect to a single option.

Traditionally, attitudes are individuated by kind, degree (if applicable), and object. Some similar-seeming attitudes can be yet distinct because one takes a propositional object and the other a person as an object. For instance, there's a difference between being angry *that Damian came home late* and being angry *at*

²Note that it wouldn't count as an *overall* attitude and emotion, since having the complex emotion is not a matter of whether you're *on balance* more sad or joyful. You just have both emotions.

Damian *for* coming home late.³

Now suppose that, fed up with your lot in life, you've decided to leave town to spend the rest of your days alone on a Caribbean island. You've brought one last newspaper from home on the boat with you, and you read a story about a homeless woman, Sally, in which you learn that she has, to date, been homeless for three months. It seems that:

3. The fact that she's been homeless for three months makes it now fitting (to some extent) to pity Sally (to some extent).

Note that the attitude in 3 is not pity *that* Sally has been homeless, but *pitying Sally*, for being homeless.

Now suppose that at the end of the article you learn that Sally has just won the MonsterPowerball Jackpot. Immediately upon receipt of the prize one is ushered into a palatial house, given a fulfilling job with great benefits, and introduced to loyal and genuine new friends. It also seems that:

4. The fact that she's just won the MonsterPowerball Jackpot makes it now fitting (to a significant extent) *not* to pity Sally, at all.

Sally, after all, is in many important respects better off than you. Not that you need to resent her fortune, but it does seem to make her an unfitting object of pity.

Lastly, it seems that 3 and 4 conflict with respect to pitying Sally. Something needs to be resolved when we say that it's fitting to pity Sally, and also that it's fitting not to. And that's not all, for it seems that we can weigh 3 and 4 against each other: when it's somewhat fitting to pity someone and significantly fitting not to pity them, it seems that overall it's fitting not to pity. But if that's right then fittingness considerations can weigh on attitudes just as reasons weigh on options.

Maguire will reply that the considerations in 3 and 4 don't really conflict. 3 bears on pitying Sally *for having been recently homeless* and 4 on not pitying her *in light of now being well-off*. These are different attitudes on his view, and both are fitting.

I've tried to design the example to showcase why I think this reply doesn't work. That you and I may have different grounds for an attitude may mean that we have different mental states, but it doesn't mean that we don't share that attitude. Compare: you and I have the same belief, *that there was a blue moon in July 2015*. I believe it on perceptual grounds, you on the ground that your almanac says so.

³Example adapted from Dancy (2014).

Moreover, there are fittingness conditions for *that* attitude: namely, it's fitting to believe it just in case one has sufficient evidence for it. There may be something off about forming that belief solely on the ground that it was written in the tea leaves when one is also looking at the night sky, but it needn't be that one has formed an unfitting attitude; it may rather be that one has irrationally formed a fitting attitude. Similarly, the question about Sally is whether it's fitting to pity *her*, to any degree at all and on any grounds. 3 and 4 need to be construed as different considerations bearing on the fittingness of *one* attitude.

On the whole I wonder if the apparent non-weightingness of fittingness considerations comes from the fact that whereas most of the actions for which we consider reasons *conflict* — we can't do all of them — most of the time, as Maguire very effectively points out, we encounter RKR for distinct attitudes which we can hold all at once. But maybe there's still a limit to the multitude of attitudes we can contain, which explains when RKR can weigh.

I think that Maguire's put forth some exciting ideas here, and in the end I hope he's right. I'm looking forward to seeing where I've gone wrong!

References

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