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SIGNAL, DEFINITION, FUNCTION, CONSTITUTION OR *WHAT*?

A question about the relation between value and reason-giving in the buck-passing account of value

ABSTRACT

The so called 'buck-passing account of value' claims to offer an account to the effect that the value, or goodness, of things is amenable to the existence of some natural properties giving us reason for certain pro-reactions. This essay argues that we hardly can accept that. The offer is obscure already when we consider the relation assumed in BPA to obtain between value and reason-giving. Once the various forms of this relation are distinguished BPA appears implausible or not more than a research program. As to the much debated 'wrong kind of reason argument' that Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen have developed, it is shown to be a trap for buck-passers.

1.

A focus in recent controversies in the philosophy of value is Thomas Scanlon's buck-passing account – BPA, for short. To call something valuable is, according to BPA, "to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it" (Scanlon 1998, p. 96). Value and goodness would not be substantive properties, providing us with reasons, but "purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind" (idem). A reason is said to be a consideration that counts in favor of us having

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a certain (positive) judgment-sensitive attitude or reaction in regard to a thing; reason in this normative sense – standardly called 'normative reason' – is taken to be a primitive concept (ibid, pp. 19-21).

BPA being correct would reduce the evaluative to the deontic, to the normativity of reason-giving, and so in principle eliminate it; "the buck," which is to point out the responsible dealer in the game,[1] should in the game of normative ethics be passed from the former to the latter. Is this accurate? I cannot say, because I hardly understand what BPA claims in the first place. Good distinctions are badly needed. In this essay I shall discuss not the notoriously problematic reason-giving relation, but the seemingly more innocent relation (since rarely treated of in the debate) assumed in BPA to obtain between value-ascriptions and reason-giving. I discern several versions of it, all of which I think turn out to make BPA either implausible or programmatic.

2.

According to Scanlon's original phrasing BPA is an account of our value-language, about what it is to call something valuable; it is, let's say, about *ascriptions of value*. Scanlon further holds BPA to be a description, viz. an

[1] The metaphor of buck-passing is said to have originated with the game of poker, in which a marker or counter, frequently a knife with a buckhorn handle, was used to indicate the person whose turn it was to deal. If the player did not wish to deal he could pass the responsibility by passing the 'buck,' as the counter came to be called, to the next player. The purport of the metaphor, then, is to identify the responsible dealer in the game. See Mathews 1951, p. 198.

abstract description "of the structure of the idea of value" (ibid, p. 96). This makes BPA sound as the result of an investigation into the sphere of evaluative concepts, thoughts and arguments. But on one interpretation it is not, since ascriptions of value just would be *signals*. This is how BPA would seem to be interpreted by, for instance, R. Jay Wallace. "To say that something is good," he writes, "is just a way of signaling that there are some such substantive reasons for choosing, preferring, recommending, or admiring it" (Wallace 2002, p. 446). Sometimes he uses the expression "a way of pointing" instead (ibid, p. 448). Scanlon, in his comments on Wallace's interpretation, has no objection (Scanlon 2002, p. 513).

If signaling is all there is to value-ascriptions, then the claim that value is of a higher order than reason-giving, and that value is only a formal property, would be a claim that value-ascriptions lacks conceptual content and does not express any idea. Since there is no concept or idea of value to dissect an analysis has to be limited to what we *do* when we say things evaluative: we signal or point to things giving us reason for reaction. This interpretation, then, makes BPA a *pragmatic account* – BPA-P.[2]

[2] A related, *psychological account* is suggested by a passage like this: "According to this conception, valuing something consists of certain standing, positive attitudes toward the object of value, including intentions to act in appropriate ways in relation to the object" (Suikkanen 2004, p. 528).

What would we signal, or point to, by ascribing value to a thing in a situation, according to BPA-P? I presume that the signaling in question shall be an intentional act and not some behaviorist response to occurrences of reasons for pro-reactions. According to Wallace's interpretation we signal that *there are* some substantive reasons for pro-reaction (see quote above). What else can this possibly mean than that we consciously indicate that we perceive and recognize the occurrence of some substantial reason for some pro-reaction? Hence, we would signal a kind of belief. This belief must be complex, since to say that something is valuable is to say that others also have reason to value it as you do (Scanlon 1998, p. 95). The use of value-terms, however, would not carry any indication as to what the reason-giving set of properties is or what reaction, or attitude, it gives us reason for. Neither would it indicate the correctness of any belief. As Scanlon puts it, "exactly what these reasons are, and what actions and attitudes they support, will be different in different cases" (1998, p. 95).

BPA-P, however, is not necessarily an account of all ascriptions of value but only a certain class of them. According to Wallace a plausible understanding of the buck-passing account is that the pertinent contrast is not between the evaluative and the entirely natural, but between abstract goodness and what he calls some 'particular form of value' (Wallace 2002, pp. 448-49).[3]

[3] Wallace also calls the latter 'concrete modality of value' (p. 447) and 'concrete value' (p. 448). Concrete modalities of value would "provide our reasons for action in particular contexts of decision" (p. 449).

Scanlon confirms Wallace's reinterpretation, or at least concedes that "more specific properties often play this role [of reason-giving]" (Scanlon 2002, p. 513). Wallace's reinterpretation is mainly cast in terms of concepts of value.[4] Transposed to the pragmatic version of BPA it becomes a thesis about what belief we signal when we use thin value terms (see note 4).

Let me call *radical buck-passers* those buck-passers who operate with a contrast between the evaluative and the natural (e.g., Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen), and *moderate buck-passers* those who instead operate with a contrast between the abstractly or generally evaluative and particular forms of value. [5] Schematically the pragmatic version of BPA would be one of these:

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[4] Making this contrast Wallace refers to Susan Hurley's discussion about the role played by general and specific concepts of value (Hurley 1989, p. 11 ff). Her distinction between these is said to correspond to Bernard Williams' distinction between thin and thick value concepts (ibid, p. 290).

[5] From Scanlon's hesitation in (2002) one could also construe a hybrid between radical and moderate buck-passing. Framed as a pragmatic interpretation, it would be this: saying that a thing is valuable we merely signal a belief that a thing *either* has some set of natural properties *or* some particular form of intrinsic value, such that having it gives us a normative reason for a certain fitting pro-reaction with regard to the thing in question. I abstain from discussing the hybrid in this paper. It rather adds to the problems for a buck-passing account of value by creating further demands for explanation: why would we believe that some particular forms of intrinsic value are reason-giving whereas others are not, or why would we believe that particular forms of intrinsic value reason-giving only sometimes? Why would sets of natural properties take the place of particular forms of intrinsic value in reason-giving only

BPA-P$_{radical}$: A speaker, S, saying that a thing, t, is valuable *merely signals* that S believes t to have some set of natural characteristics, N, such that t having N gives us reason for a certain [fitting] pro-reaction, R, with regard to t

BPA-P$_{moderate}$: A speaker, S, saying that a thing, t, is valuable (using a thin value term) *merely signals* that S believes t to have some particular form of value, PV, such that t having PV gives us reason for a certain [fitting] pro-reaction, R, with regard to t

Unfortunately it is easy to see that most people, and most moral philosophers, when they use (thin) value terms do not merely signal the presence of instances of some natural properties or some particular form of value that they suppose give reason for some pro-reaction – it suffices to consult current books in ethics. They also articulate general concepts of value. The buck-passer might counter by saying that signaling still is all we reasonably can do with (thin) value terms. But to underpin such a claim would force the buck-passer to

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sometimes, or would sets of natural properties double particular forms of intrinsic value in reason-giving?

change BPA from an account of linguistic acts into an account of metaphysics and epistemology of value.

3.

More in line with common views is that BPA offers a definition that brings out the conceptual content of (thin) value terms. Definitional forms of BPA have major historical antecedents, which are tracked by Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen in (2004). There are contemporary representatives, too. Philip Stratton-Lake, for instance, says that BPA is "meant as a definition of value" (2005, p. 788). And remember, Scanlon introduced his account as a descriptive claim about what we *say* when we call something valuable (Scanlon 1998, p. 96). Also, Jonathan Dancy understands BPA to be about the identity of value judgments (Dancy 2004, p. 16). The thought, then, is that BPA offers a *conceptual account*, an account of what we say and mean when we ascribe (general) value to things – BPA-C. It can perhaps be rendered like this, separating its radical and moderate versions:

> **BPA-C$_{\text{radical}}$**: 't is valuable' *means* 't has some set of natural properties, N, and having N gives us reason for a certain [fitting] pro-reaction, R, toward t'

BPA-C$_{moderate}$: 't is valuable' *means* 't has some particular form of value, PV, such that t having PV gives us reason for a certain [fitting] pro-reaction, R, toward t'

Maybe BPA is a definition. If so, is it a description of what we actually mean with our value-ascriptions? This is what Stratton-Lake, for his part, seems to intend when he takes the definition to be one that can be true or false (idem). For such a definition to be assessable we need to know which group of language-users it is believed to be true about. This is not indicated. All one can do then is to guess, and my guess is that BPA-C is doubtful for large groups – even though they would agree that things being valuable always do give us reason for positive reactions toward it.

Some writers – like Jussi Suikkanen (2004)[6] and in some passages Philip Stratton-Lake (2005)[7] – take BPA to be a stipulative or, perhaps more accurately, a normative definition. As a normative definition it recommends a content for the expression 't is valuable' in ethical contexts. But what is the recommendation? An unclear issue is the exact character of the reason-giving relation and the thing given reason for in *definiens*. Two main candidates can be distinguished, roughly

[6] Suikkanen writes, "the buck-passing account asserts that claims about the value of an object ought to be understood as claims about the reasons the object can provide" (2004, p. 529).

[7] Stratton-Lake discusses the conditions that the definition of BPA has to fulfill in order to be "valid" (2005, p. 789), and, suggesting a modification of BPA, he contends that this is not an "arbitrary stipulation" (p. 798).

corresponding to the different normative relations that Jonathan Dancy discerns, viz. the relation between reasons and oughts and the relation between reasons and actions or reactions (2004, p. 22 f). The former reasons he calls *ought makers*. The latter reasons he in later works calls 'favorers,' but let me call them *reaction makers* (though they only make reactions favored). Hence, we get relations with ought makers and relations with reaction makers.

Dancy proclaims the latter relation to be the interesting one for an understanding of the notion of reason for action (idem). It is also what seems alluded to in the citation from Wallace above, viz. that general value-ascriptions signal the presence of some characteristics that give us reason for "choosing, preferring, recommending, or admiring." But possibly general value-ascriptions should instead be about the presence of some characteristics such that they give reason for a certain pro-reaction being normatively fitting. This is what, e.g., Johan Brännmark (2003), Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) opt for. The latter consequently refer to BPA as 'the fitting-attitude analysis.' 'Fitting' being a deontic term make it plausible to say that reasons here are a kind of ought makers.

For both these versions of BPA-C as a normative definition, however, there are two alternative roads to choose between. The first and belief-oriented road would make BPA-C a recommendation to use value-ascriptions for phenomena in the realm of concepts, thoughts and arguments; BPA-C would recommend us to use them for judgments that some set of natural properties, or possibly some particular

form of value, exists and gives us reason for some ought-judgment, or possibly some reaction favoring-judgment, where a reason is itself a judgmental specification, a piece of practical reasoning. This seems to be how Dancy regarded ought makers (but not reaction makers) in the first place. Let us here talk about *reason-judgments* being *ought-judgment makers* and *reaction-judgments makers* respectively.

The second and matter of fact-oriented road would make BPA-C a recommendation to use value-ascriptions to refer to phenomena in the world not construed by our concepts, thoughts and arguments, to use them for reasons for oughts, or possibly reactions being favored, regardless of what we believe, or rationally believe. The reasons in question, then, are factual, let call them *reason-facts*, and factual are also the oughts, or if it is the favored reactions. The reason-facts would be *ought-fact makers* and *reaction-fact makers* respectively.

Buck-passers often waver between these roads. Take, for instance, Jussi Suikkanen. Like many other buck-passers he appears to be on the belief-oriented road (his strategy being "to understand 'right', 'ought' and 'duty' to be concepts that in some way are analyzable in terms of reasons;" 2004, p, 515). Soon, however, he passes on to speak of properties rather than concepts.

The matter of fact-oriented road may stand out as ideal, and so to be where we ultimately would like to find ourselves. After all, we do want to find the truth about the world! Even though obscure notions whirl around on this road – what on earth are reason-facts, ought-facts and favored reaction-facts? – there is probably a place for talk of things like that in ethics, just like there is a

place in philosophy of science for talk of objective truth and an existing world. But the same ideality, were it the only thing we should express with our value language, would block us from ordinary life uses of the same language. We often want to say that things are valuable without therefore intending something like the ought- or the reaction-fact makers view, especially if we don't know what that implies or how the moral facts are found. Best is, I think, that we abstain from all monistic dogma for value language, that different normative definitions are allowed to work in different ethical contexts. Whether a matter of fact-oriented version of BPA_c is a good recommendation for some branch of ethics remains to be argued, with considerations pertaining to that branch. The conceptual account lingers in the shadow of some other kind of account; which remains to be seen.

However, regardless of whether a descriptive or a normative definition be chosen for BPA_c, and no matter how these be construed with respect to beliefs and facts, a crucial shortcoming of the conceptual account is not overcome, namely that the "some" and "a certain" in the *definiens* are so open-ended as to make the issuing concept almost empty. This is theoretically unsatisfactory and it makes BPA_c unfit for assessment.

4.

A fair guess is that formulations of BPA making it a pragmatic or a conceptual account are a bit careless. What most buck-passers intend is rather an account in the

metaphysics and possibly also epistemology of value and normativity. Wallace, for instance, writes that Scanlon's examples and arguments suggest the idea that "general normative and evaluative claims indicate the presence of concrete modalities of value, which are both metaphysically and epistemologically basic" (2002, p. 462). Scanlon seems to agree in (2002, p. 513) and at the same time he states that his thesis in (1998) was about properties. This is also how Roger Crisp (2005, p. 81) and Pekka Väyrynen (2006, p. 296) reads Scanlon. And Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen describe buck-passers as maintaining that "value is nothing but the existence of reasons for […] concerns" (2004, p. 401).

Scanlon and other buck-passers appear to move rather freely between an account of value concepts and an account of value properties and facts. This might be explained by the circumstance that Scanlon's account initially is presented as an alternative to G. E. Moore's analysis of what it is to be good, which Moore phrased in definitional terms (Scanlon 1998, p. 97). But a conceptual and a metaphysical account are not the same thing. For some, though, they appear to be logically interwoven. Stratton-Lake thus considers the definition of BPA to inform us about what it is to *be* valuable. If its definition is true, he says, a corresponding biconditional will be true.[8] Hence, (2) would follow from (1):

[8] He writes: "The buck-passing account of value is meant as a definition of value. If this definition is true, then the following biconditional will be true: x is good ↔ X has properties (other than its being good) that give us reason to have a certain pro-attitude toward X" (2005, p. 788).

(1) ‘t is good’ *means* ‘t has properties (other than its being good) that give us reason to have a certain pro-attitude toward X’

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(2) t is good ↔ t has properties (other than its being good) that give us reason to have a certain pro-attitude toward t

This is an odd argument. One cannot infer what is valuable or good from statements about what we mean by expressions, nor can we infer why the good things are good either. Even if philosophers were to agree on some definition of moral terms, no moral facts would follow from it, as Lars Bergström convincingly has argued (1972). Stratton-Lake’s argument has sense only if he considers the definition of (1) to actually catch the essence of what it is to be good, that it is a normative definition offering the correct account of what it is to be good. The core of BPA, then, would be metaphysical. So the argument must be inverted. If (2) holds we have reason to accept (1), read as a normative definition; BPA-C would be justified by the fact that a material equivalence holds between a thing being valuable and a thing having a set of natural properties, or if it is a particular form of value, that give us reason to have a certain pro-attitude, or pro-reaction, toward it.

The question what it is to “be” valuable may pertain to quite different aspects of value. One issue is of what matter values are, in particular, in virtue of what qualities in the world things have their value, where an answer could be that

they only have value in virtue of some natural characteristics such as pleasantness. Another issue is how values function, e.g., what explanatory role they play in regard to each other and to other properties and relations, like reasons for reactions or oughtness of reactions, where a buck-passing view might be (but is not) that all that values do is to give some reason for certain positive reactions. A third issue is how it comes about that values exist, viz. how value is constituted, where a somewhat buck-passing answer could be that all values are construed by a certain reaction of an ideal observer. A fourth issue is how we can know or be rationally justified in believing that certain states and things are valuable, where a buck-passing position could be that only experiences of particularities in the natural world are reliable. Let me call a version of BPA that takes position on the first issue for a *grounding account*, a version taking position on the second issue a *functional account*, a version taking position on the third issue a *constitutional account*, and a version taking position on the fourth issue a *justificational account*. All four touch upon very difficult questions, in regard to which BPA appears to be more of a program than an account. I shall briefly illustrate this.

Mostly BPA seems to be a mixture of grounding, functional, constitutional and justificational accounts. The interpretation that appears to make BPA most plausible is that it gives a functional account of the kind suggested above. However, as such it would be fail-safe but non-committing, since an indefinitely wide range of circumstances, actions, reactions and attitudes are considered because of the "some" and "a certain" included in the account. Anything positive that any

phenomena may give rise to seem to fit with the account, so the buck-passer can always say, "Well, that is also included." But the functional account does not satisfy buck-passers since it might be true without values being reduced to reason-giving. Such reduction is just what is assumed, starting with a negative grounding thesis about general value; as Scanlon puts it, "being valuable cannot be identified with having any set of natural properties" (1998, p. 97). It seems that on BPA general value therefore does not exist, or merely has semi-existence as a linguistic device proclaiming to indicate some other existing thing, namely some set of natural properties or some particular form of value, and a relation, that this is a reason for a certain [fitting] pro-reaction.

For radical buck-passers, reducing value to the presence of some set of natural properties giving reason for a certain fitting pro-reaction, trouble is not over, since they are stuck with a general deontic concept (or property), that of fittingness. This would seem to weaken the credibility of their reduction of value, or else the problem with value is seen not to depend on the generality of moral concepts (or properties), needing to be brought to specificities. What exactly it is that forces us to keep the one and let go of the other is not clear on their account. It cannot be that, as Wallace puts it, "general normative and evaluative claims indicate the presence of concrete modalities of value, which are both metaphysically and epistemologically basic." Is it perhaps only a matter of theoretical-functional simplicity?

For moderate buck-passers, regarding particular forms of value to be substantial and reason-giving, a similar problem remains. Why shouldn't there be

general value when there are particular forms of value? Particular forms of value *are* forms. They have thereby an abstract character and are general in the sense that they in principle have innumerable instances. Wallace, when distinguishing between these kinds of value, referred to Susan Hurley's discussion of general and specific concepts of value (Hurley 1989, p. 11 ff). Hurley, however, only defended a certain conceptual priority of specific concepts over general concepts; she did not reject the latter.

It is difficult to find a good argument on this point. Dancy, who agrees with moderate buck-passers that specific value, or particular forms of value, may be reason-giving, has made a try.[9] He argues on two lines. One is an appeal to what he claims to be a general truth, namely that thin concepts cannot be used to add to the store of reasons (2004, p. 16). This idea, however, strikes at concepts rather than properties and hits not only general value concepts but also general deontic concepts, like right, ought and fitting.

Dancy's other line of argument is an appeal to our intuition about examples of particular forms of value, like this: "that an action is obscene makes a difference to how we should act (though not always the same difference) beyond any made by the features that makes the action obscene" (2004, p. 17). I think radical

[9] Possibly Dancy is here only talking about what I would call 'concrete value,' which is a non-generalist version of particular form of value; I here disregard the complexities that arise from distinctions in particular form of value. For a discussion, see my paper 'Recognizing Superior Values – To Place the Buck Where It Belongs' (forthcoming).

buck-passers could just straightforward deny this intuition. Dancy's reply (as I understand it from a verbal communication) would be an observation about thick value concepts, that in them evaluative and natural characteristics are so fused as to be impossible to disentangle. But again, this is about concepts and it turns on unclear epistemology, things that do not suffice to convince one who doubts the existence of all value.

One would expect the buck-passers' respective positions to be defended by a sophisticated and plausible metaphysics of value and norm, especially on the central, constitutional side. But what mostly is offered is disparate examples and observations drawn from rather commonplace intuitions and judgments about value, without a theoretical underpinning to explain which of these we can trust as valid and why we can do so. This makes both positions shaky and preliminary – mainly programs for research.

A certain and heavy dependence on examples is disastrous for the project of buck-passing value. It is when examples are used to check the correspondence of our value judgments to our judgments about what we have reason to do. Critics maintain that there is no real fit, no equivalence, whereas defenders say that there is, or can be on a more careful construction of BPA. A well-known counter-example is this: if we were threatened by an evil demon we would have reason to admire and respect his saucer of mud, but that is clearly not the same as its being valuable. This was first argued by Roger Crisp (2000, p. 459) and developed by Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen in (2004), calling it 'the wrong kind of reason problem.'

Stratton-Lake, for one, has tried to show that the way we construe reason for fitting reaction can be enhanced in a way to make an equivalence hold (2005).

The drawback is that critics here presuppose what is denied by the defenders of BPA, namely that ascriptions of general value may be conceptually, metaphysically and epistemologically substantial enough to make it possible for us to assess and rely on their validity, and this independent of whether the natural properties of things, or their particular form of value, give us reason for a fitting pro-reaction. When defenders try to show that the equivalence holds they have to make the same assumption – otherwise they achieve nothing. What is the point of the check if the check-point isn't there, with full authority? And even if they did manage to establish the equivalence, unfortunately they would only succeed in saving something like Dancy's tentative alternative to BPA in (2000), that the evaluative is distinct from the deontic but that one and the same object can have both, in virtue of the same natural properties.

So, either there is no common ground for the critics and the defenders of BPA in this strategic use of examples, or else they both have to assume what BPA seems to deny. Hence, current defenses of BPA effectively ruin it. One might say that Crisp, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen have joined forces to maintain a trap for buck-passers of value.

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