Meeting 8: Fittingness as Normatively Fundamental

I. McHugh & Way on the Buck-Passing Account’s Virtues and Vices

McHugh & Way understand the buck-passing account of value to be a combination of the following theses (where ‘value’ is a cover term referring to a variety of pro-responses, and ‘good’ refers to goodness simpliciter):

- **the fitting-attitudes account of value**: What it is for X to be good is for it to be fitting for anyone to value X.
- **the reasons-first account of fittingness**: What it is for it to be fitting for agent A to φ is for there to be sufficient reason for A to φ.

Putting these together, we get:

- **the buck-passing account of value**: What it is for X to be good is for there to be sufficient reason for anyone to value X.

McHugh & Way take the buck-passing account to have three central attractions:

- **first attraction**: It demystifies the notion of goodness simpliciter, thus answering Geach, Foot, and Thomson’s challenge to the coherence of the notion.
- **second attraction**: It promises to generalize to a range of other value properties, including goodness-for, attributive goodness, and more specific value properties such as admirability and amusingness.

Here are some rough attempts at such generalizations:

- What it is for X to be good for Y is for there to be sufficient reason for anyone who has reason to care about Y to value X, because they have reason to care about Y.

- What it is for X to be a good Z is for there to be sufficient reason for anyone who has reason to want a Z to value X, because they have reason to want a Z.

(Why the ‘because’-clauses? Because otherwise <X is good> will entail both <X is good for Y> and <X is a good Z>, for any Y and Z, on a buck-passing account of these notions.)

- **third attraction**: It can explain various connections between reasons and value, including the following:

  - **the linking principle**: If some consideration is a respect in which X is good, then that consideration is a reason to value X.

  **Scanlon’s observation**: The fact that X is good is not an additional reason to value X, over and above the non-evaluative facts which are reasons to value X.

  The explanation of the linking principle: if X is good iff there is sufficient reason for anyone to value X, then it is plausible that consideration C is a respect in which X is good iff consideration C is a reason for anyone to value X.

  (But is this really so? Plugging the buck-passing account into this last biconditional, we get: consideration C is a respect in which there is sufficient reason for anyone to value X iff consideration C is a reason for anyone to value X. But this is not obviously true.)

  The explanation of Scanlon’s observation: [There is sufficient reason for anyone to value X] is not an additional reason for anyone to value X, over and above the reasons that made this fact the case.

But, of course, the buck-passing account of value also faces a major problem: the wrong-kind-of-reason problem. If the demon’s threat to destroy the world unless we value him provides a reason for us to value him, then the buck-passing account seems open to simple counterexamples.
II. McHugh & Way’s Alternative

McHugh & Way propose that we hold onto the fitting-attitudes account of value but jettison the reasons-first account of fittingness. Then examples like Crisp’s demon are no trouble for them, because the demon’s threat does not make it fitting to value the demon.

More generally, McHugh & Way advocate replacing the popular reasons-first approach to normativity with a fittingness-first approach to normativity:

- the reasons-first approach to normativity: Reasons are not explained in terms of anything else normative, and everything else normative is explained in terms of reasons.
- the fittingness-first approach to normativity: Fittingness is not explained in terms of anything else normative, and everything else normative is explained in terms of fittingness.

They also understand fittingness in a particular way:

For attitude A toward object X to be fitting is for X to satisfy A’s internal standards of correctness.

Although they are officially silent on the internal standards of correctness for various attitude types, they suggest that the following are plausible possibilities (and assume them in the ensuing discussion):

- Believing that p is fitting if and only if it is true that p.
- Intending to φ is fitting if and only if it is permissible to φ.
- If X is humble and has concern for others, then (other things being equal) admiring X is fitting.
- If X would be pleasant and not unhealthy, then (other things being equal) desiring X is fitting.

McHugh & Way argue that their fittingness-first version of the fitting-attitudes account of value can easily be shown to possess the first two central attractions of the buck-passing account:

- accounting for the first attraction: Their proposal also demystifies goodness simpliciter, since “[t]here doesn’t seem to be any particular difficulty in making sense of talk of what is fitting to value” (“Fittingness First,” p. 584).
- accounting for the second attraction: Their proposal can also be generalized to other value properties such as goodness-for and attributive goodness, along the following lines:

  - What it is for X to be good for Y is for it to be fitting for anyone for whom it is fitting to care about Y to value X, because it is fitting for them to care about Y.
  - What it is for X to be a good Z is for it to be fitting for anyone for whom it is fitting to want a Z to value X, because it is fitting for them to want a Z.

But showing that their proposal possesses the buck-passing account’s third central attraction is more difficult.

- accounting for the third attraction: McHugh & Way employ a three-step strategy: (i) they analyze reasons in terms of fittingness together with good reasoning; (ii) they analyze good reasoning in terms of fittingness; and (iii) they argue that the resulting analysis of reasons in terms of fittingness together with their previous analysis of value in terms of fittingness entail both the linking principle and Scanlon’s observation.

III. A Fittingness-First Account of Reasons (and Good Reasoning)

Here is McHugh & Way’s initial account of reasons in terms of fittingness and good reasoning:

\[ R_1: \] For that \( p \) to be a reason for a response is for that \( p \) to be a premise of a good pattern of reasoning from fitting responses to that response.

They understand reasoning to be “a certain kind of transition in which a set of responses, which we can call premise responses, leads to some (further) response, which we can call the conclusion response” (ibid., p. 586).
Moreover, when we engage in a piece of reasoning, “the conclusion response counts as based on, or held in the light of, the premise responses” (ibid., p. 586; see also “What Is Good Reasoning?” p. 155).

Examples of responses: belief, intention, desire, admiration, supposition, maybe action, maybe perceptual states, and the state of lacking any of these. Theoretical reasoning, for them, is reasoning whose conclusion-response is a belief, and practical reasoning is reasoning whose conclusion-response is an intention (or maybe an action).

The connection between premises and premise-responses: “That \( p \) is a premise of a pattern of reasoning when the belief that \( p \), or some other appropriate representation of the consideration that \( p \), is among the premise responses of that pattern of reasoning” (“Fittingness First, p. 586).

Note that in order to make \( R_i \) compatible with standard forms of foundationalism about epistemic reasons for belief, we will need to (a) allow that transitions from a perception (or perceptual seeming) that \( p \) to a belief that \( p \) count as a form of reasoning, (b) allow that perceptual states can be fitting, and (c) be fine with that \( p \) being a reason to believe that \( p \).

Some examples of good patterns of reasoning, according to McHugh & Way:

| Belief | It’s sunny. |
| Belief | If it’s sunny, the match will go ahead. |
| Belief | The match will go ahead. |
| Intention | I shall go to the match. |
| Belief | In order to go to the match, I must catch the 37 bus. |
| Intention | I shall catch the 37 bus. |
| Belief | Jennifer said that it’s raining. |
| Belief | It’s raining. |
| Belief | I promised to meet my friend for lunch. |
| Intention | I shall meet my friend for lunch. |

So in cases in which all the premise-responses in these patterns of reasoning are fitting, the content of each premise-belief is a reason for the conclusion-response, according to \( R_i \).

But this seems to me to be a mistaken way of individuating reasons. I don’t think [If it’s sunny, the match will go ahead] is, on its own, a reason to believe that the match will go ahead, and [It’s sunny] is, on its own, a separate reason to believe this; rather, the two together are a reason for the belief.

The basic idea behind McHugh & Way’s account of good reasoning in terms of fittingness is that good reasoning is fittingness preserving, other things being equal. They cash out this idea as follows:

\[ GR_i: \] For a pattern of reasoning to be good is for it to be the case that, other things being equal, if the premise-responses are fitting, then so is the conclusion-response.

\( GR_i \) deems all of the above patterns of reasoning to be good, if we assume the following (in addition to taking truth to be belief’s standard of correctness and permissibility to be intention’s standard of correctness):

\[(*) \quad \text{If it is permissible for me to } \phi, \text{ and I will } \phi \text{ only if I } \psi, \text{ then it is permissible for me to } \psi.\]
\[(**) \quad \text{Other things being equal, if someone says that } p, \text{ then } p.\]
\[(***) \quad \text{Other things being equal, if I promised someone I would } \phi, \text{ then it is permissible for me to } \phi.\]

Following Nickel, McHugh & Way prefer to understand ‘other things being equal’ here to mean ‘normally’. They include this qualifier because they think good reasoning is defeasible, which they understand to be the claim that sometimes adding extra premises turns good reasoning into bad reasoning, like so:

| Belief | I promised to meet my friend for lunch. |
| Belief | If I meet my friend for lunch, I won’t be able to save someone’s life. |
| Intention | I shall meet my friend for lunch. |
Some objections to the combination of $R_1$ and $GR_1$:

- **the problem of necessarily fitting attitudes:** The following pattern of reasoning is fittingness preserving:

  Belief  Grass is green.
  Belief  79 is prime.

But this is not a good piece of reasoning, nor is [Grass is green] a reason to believe that 79 is prime.

**McHugh & Way’s reply in “Fittingness First”:** They propose revising $GR_1$ as follows:

$GR_2$: For a pattern of reasoning to be good is for it to be the case that, (i) other things being equal, if the premise-responses are fitting, then so is the conclusion-response, and (ii) one can come to hold the conclusion-response (for the first time) by competent reasoning from the premise-responses.

For them, competent reasoning is good reasoning in which one is sensitive to the fittingness preservation of the transition one is making (where sensitivity here can be cashed out in causal, counterfactual, or other terms).

They then claim that it is impossible to competently reason in the above way without already believing that 79 is prime. But is this really so? And what motivates the crucial ‘for the first time’-clause in (ii)?

**McHugh & Way’s reply in “What Is Good Reasoning?”**: They propose revising $GR_1$ instead as follows:

$GR_3$: For a pattern of reasoning to be good is for it to be the case that, (i) other things being equal, if the premise-responses are fitting, then so is the conclusion-response, and (ii) clause i holds in virtue of a relationship between the premise-responses and the conclusion-response.

$GR_3$ handles the above counterexample, because that pattern of reasoning is fittingness preserving entirely in virtue of the conclusion-response being necessarily fitting.

However, there are other, related counterexamples that neither $GR_2$ nor $GR_3$ handle, which shows that neither patch addresses the underlying worry (which isn’t about necessarily fitting attitudes, but rather about patterns of reasoning being fittingness preserving for merely accidental reasons):

Belief  Grass is green.
Belief  Grass is green, and 79 is prime.

Belief  Grass is green.
Belief  There are beliefs.

Belief  $p$.  
Belief  If I fittingly believe that $p$, then $q$.
Belief  $q$.

(This example I owe to Megan Entwistle.)

- **the problem of testimonial evidence:** The following pattern of reasoning is fittingness preserving:

  Belief  Reliable Jane told me that Jill is admirable.
  Admiration  Jill.

But [Reliable Jane told me that Jill is admirable] is not a reason to admire Jill.

**McHugh & Way’s reply:** They propose revising $R_1$ as follows:

$R_2$: For that $p$ to be a reason for a response is for that $p$ to be a premise of a good basic pattern of reasoning from fitting responses to that response

where for a pattern of reasoning to be a good basic pattern is for it to be the case that one can come to hold the conclusion-response directly (i.e. with no needed intermediate steps) by competent reasoning from the premise-response.
They then claim that one can only competently reason from the belief about Jane’s testimony to admiration of Jill by making two separate steps, like so:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Reliable Jane told me that Jill is admirable.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Jill is admirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Jill is admirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>Jill is admirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Jill.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But I wonder whether moving from $R_1$ to $R_2$ excludes too many things from being reasons. For instance, now we can’t say that [Reliable Jane told me that Jill is admirable] is a reason to believe that someone is admirable.

- **Brunero’s counterexample:** Brunero notes that the following pattern of reasoning is fittingness preserving, given (*) and the other assumptions McHugh & Way are making:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention</th>
<th>I shall get to the airport on time.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>It is not permissible for me to speed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>It is not necessary for me to speed to get to the airport on time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But it is not plausible, insists Brunero, that this transition is good reasoning. Moreover, he does an impressive job fending off potential replies on McHugh & Way’s behalf to this counterexample.

**How $R_1 + GR_1$ can account for the linking principle:**

Suppose [X is F] is a respect in which X is good. Then, insist McHugh & Way, the following is fittingness preserving, other things being equal, and hence, by $GR_1$, a good pattern of reasoning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>X is F.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valuing</td>
<td>X.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, since it is true that X is F, the premise-response in this transition is fitting. So, by $R_1$, it follows that [X is F] is a reason to value X.

**How $R_1 + GR_1$ can account for Scanlon’s observation:**

If [X is good] were an additional reason to value something over and above [X is F1], . . . , [X is Fm], where F1, . . . , Fm are the non-evaluative features of X that make it good, it would need to be the case that there is a set of opposing reasons [X is G1], . . . , and [X is Gn] against valuing that thing such that the transition on the left is good reasoning whereas the one on the right is not:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>X is F1.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>X is Fm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>X is G1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>X is Gn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing</td>
<td>X.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But, insist McHugh & Way, this can never be the case: adding a belief in <X is good> never turns the right-hand side transition from a bad into a good piece of reasoning.