

Good Reason for Good Reasoning

Christopher Blake-Turner

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Suppose Jill reasons **from** her *belief that it's Monday* and her *belief that if it's Monday, then it's trivia night* **to** a *belief that it's trivia night*. And suppose Jack reasons **from** their *intention to adopt Scruffles* and their *belief that going to the shelter is necessary for adopting Scruffles* **to** an *intention to go to the shelter*.

There are at least two different ways we can evaluate Jill and Jack's reasoning. On the one hand, we can ask whether they reasoned competently. That is, we can pay attention to the particulars of each episode of reasoning and how it was performed. For instance, if Jill reasoned competently, then she knows that it's trivia night. On the other hand, we can abstract away from the particulars and ask whether Jill's reasoning and Jack's reasoning exhibit good *patterns* of reasoning. An agent's reasoning can be good in this sense even if the agent does not reason competently. Jill's reasoning and Jack's reasoning both exhibit good reasoning, regardless of performance; an agent who reasons by affirming the consequent does not exhibit good reasoning, no matter how diligently they so affirmed. Good reasoning in this sense is thus roughly analogous to propositional justification: we're concerned not with what the agent does but with the structure of their normative situation.¹

¹I say "roughly" because the analogy is merely in service of homing in on the target notion: good reasoning. There may well be important points of disanalogy between the good/competent-reasoning and the propositional/doxastic-justification distinctions (Worsnip 2019). For discussion of propositional and doxastic justification, see Turri (2010), Silva (2015).

This paper is about the second way of evaluating reasoning. It answers the question “What is good reasoning?” taken in the sense of “What is a good pattern of reasoning?”² Good reasoning is important because reasoning is important. Exhibiting good or bad reasoning can be the difference between knowing a claim or not, or between an intention’s being creditworthy as opposed to blameworthy. Giving an account of good reasoning is thus important for a range of important issues in epistemology, ethics, and other subfields of philosophy.

The account of good reasoning that I’ll defend starts from the intuitive claim that a pattern of reasoning is good because the premises provide good reason for the conclusion. In a slogan: good reasoning stems from good reason. This needs to be made more precise, but for now it’s worth noting that my account is version of what I’ll call the *Reasons Approach*. According to the Reasons Approach, good reasoning is explained in terms of reasons. This is a natural way of theorizing about good reasoning, because, although the details are controversial, reasons and reasoning are importantly related (Way 2017; McHugh and Way 2022; Asarnow 2025). When an agent is reasoning, her reasons are what she should be thinking about (Schroeder 2007, 26). Moreover, reasoning can establish the basing relation: by reasoning, an agent can base her conclusion on the premises.³

Despite this, the Reasons Approach has few explicit defenders.⁴ This is perhaps in no small part because two of most important recent contributions to the literature on good reasoning have roundly criticized various versions of the Reasons Approach (McHugh and Way 2018; McHugh and Way 2022, chap. 1).⁵ In defending a particular version of the

²I take these questions to be about reasoning in general, including practical reasoning as well as different kinds of theoretical reasoning (deductive, inductive, and so on). Harman (1986, 5–6) famously doubts that there is such a thing as deductive reasoning. But it’s hard to object to the following: sometimes an agent’s reasoning exhibits a pattern that accords with a deductively valid argument schema, such as disjunctive syllogism.

³I mean to take no stand here on the ontology of bases or of basing. See Blake-Turner (2022a) for a survey.

⁴Dancy (2014) is an exception. The problems with his view are brought out nicely by McHugh and Way (2022, 33). Pollock (1987), Grice (2001), and Horty (2012) seem sympathetic, but are not directly trying to answer the question of what good reasoning is, in the sense that’s being asked here.

⁵Another reason is that those interested in the question of good reasoning have often sought to explain reasons in terms of good reasoning (Way 2017; McHugh and Way 2022; Asarnow 2025). If that is one’s larger project, then of course it doesn’t make sense to account for good reasoning itself in terms of reasons. But good reasoning is important irrespective of any particular metanormative ambitions.

Reasons Approach I thus seek not only to offer what I take to be an attractive account of good reasoning in its own right, but to revitalize the Reasons Approach more broadly.⁶

After a few further clarifications (§1), I develop my account (§2) and then argue that it is not vulnerable to the objections that have been raised against the Reasons Approach by McHugh and Way (§3). I end, in §4, by arguing that McHugh and Way’s own account fails to capture the sense in which an account of good reasoning should concern the transition from premises to conclusion. This is important partly because McHugh and Way’s account is the most developed account in the literature, and partly because my account is especially well situated to avoid the problem.⁷ But it’s also important because the problem arises for *any* account which seeks to understand good reasoning in terms of the preservation of some property (such as truth or correctness) across premises and conclusion.

1 Clarifications

First, let’s get a bit more precise about how to talk about patterns of reasoning. “Premise” and “conclusion” are ambiguous, and can refer either to the attitudes involved in a pattern, or to the contents of those attitudes. Henceforth, I’ll use “premise-attitude” and “conclusion-attitude” to refer to the attitudes, and locutions like “content of the premise-attitude” to refer to the contents. It’ll be useful to represent a pattern of reasoning from some premise-attitudes, $P_1 \dots P_n$, to a conclusion-attitude, C , as: $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$. Hence, we can represent the good pattern that Jack’s reasoning exhibits as:

Means-End. $\{intention\ to\ \phi, belief\ that\ \psi\ is\ necessary\ for\ \phi\} \Rightarrow intention\ to\ \psi$.⁸

⁶If you end up not liking my particular version to the Reasons Approach, ask Julio Silva-Cespedes about his version, which he’s defending in his MA thesis. Julio will be at MEW.

⁷Broome’s (Broome 2013, especially chapters 12-14) rational requirements account of good reasoning is also vulnerable to the problem that I’ll raise. I set Broome’s view aside here, because it faces several serious problems (McHugh and Way 2018, 156–59); Worsnip (2018), 83-90.

⁸Although it’s common to italicize propositional contents, I’ll instead italicize attitudes, as they’re more important to keep track of here.

I'll assume that the conclusion-attitudes of patterns of practical reasoning are intentions, as in Means-End, rather than actions.⁹

Second, I will assume that a piece of reasoning is good because it exhibits a pattern of good reasoning (McHugh and Way 2018, 155; McHugh and Way 2022, 40–41).¹⁰ Jill's reasoning is thus good because it exhibits the *Modus Ponens* pattern. I'll use "exhibit" in a way that is neutral on whether the agent's performance *followed* that pattern, or whether the agent merely reasoned in accordance with the pattern. For all I've said, even though Jill's reasoning exhibits Modus Ponens, it might be that Jill followed the bad *Modus Profusus* pattern: $\{belief\ that\ p, belief\ that\ q\} \Rightarrow belief\ that\ r$ (Turri 2010, 317).¹¹

Third, I use "reason" and "reasons" unqualified to pick out *normative* reason(s), rather than operative reasons. A normative reason for S to ϕ counts in favor of S 's ϕ ing. S 's operative reason for ϕ ing is the reason for which S ϕ s, which may or may not be a normative reason for S to ϕ . I'll assume, as is common, that normative reasons are facts: at the very least, a normative reason cannot be a falsehood or otherwise fail to obtain.¹² I'll take facts to be true propositions: doing so is convenient for exposition and does not affect the argument.

Finally, I will appeal to the notion of *sufficient reason*. I intend my account to be compatible with a variety of ways of making that notion more precise, so I'll rely on an intuitive understanding coupled with the following, I hope uncontroversial, claim: if there is sufficient reason for S to ϕ , then it is permissible for S to ϕ .

⁹See Dancy (2014) for the latter view. Nothing turns on this here.

¹⁰This contrasts with a particularist approach, according to which the goodness of a particular piece of reasoning is not to be explained by its falling under a general pattern (Dancy 2014). I'm in fact sympathetic to the particularist approach and think it's an advantage of the account of good reasoning that I develop that it can be easily adopted by the particularist. It simplifies exposition considerably, however, to assume with the literature that the task of giving an account of good reasoning is the task of giving an account of good patterns of reasoning.

¹¹I'll use "bad" to mean "not good". Any pattern of reasoning is not good, is thereby bad. This is a slight departure from how it's natural to deploy "good" in English, but I follow McHugh and Way's terminology of "good reasoning".

¹²For surveys of these issues see Sylvan (2016b, 2016a).

2 The Sufficient Reason Account

Here's a first pass of the account.

Sufficient Reason (First Pass). A pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, is good if and only if, and because, the contents of $P_1 \dots P_n$ are sufficient reason for C .

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the parenthetical qualification, Sufficient Reason (First Pass) suffers from several problems. Before getting to them, however, it's worth stressing that First Pass gets right something important. Good reasoning concerns the *transition* between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude (McHugh and Way 2018, 155; Worsnip 2019, 131). A good pattern of reasoning is one that captures something good about an agent's moving *from* the premise-attitudes *to* the conclusion-attitude. This is the first of three desiderata that I'll impose on an account of good reasoning. Call it *Transition*.

First Pass nicely accommodates Transition. According to First Pass, a pattern of reasoning is good because the premise-attitudes' contents are sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude. So moving from the former to the latter is moving along a path that begins in a place that provides sufficient reason for the terminus. The tweaks I'll make to First Pass won't affect this good-making feature. That will be important in §4. For now, though, let's consider some problems.

First Pass is formulated in terms of the contents of premise-attitudes, which works well for belief, but much less well for attitudes like intention and desire. It is the fact that Jack intends to adopt Scruffles, rather than the content of that intention, that favors Jack's going to the shelter. One fix would be to insist that reasoning is always from beliefs. So, even though I formulated Jack's reasoning in terms of moving from a means-end belief and an intention, that was imprecise. Really, the thought goes, the reasoning is from the means-end belief and Jack's *belief* that they intend to adopt Scruffles. Rather than restricting the relation of reasoning this way, however, I prefer to draw on a notion introduced by Asarnow (2016,

159; 2025, 40). Some proposition, p , is *appropriately related* to an attitude, A , if and only if: if A is a belief, then p is the content of A , otherwise p is the proposition that the agent As (e.g. the proposition that the agent intends to ϕ , or the proposition that the agent desires to ϕ). So the appropriate relatum of a belief is its propositional content. And the appropriate relatum of a nondoxastic attitude is the proposition that an agent has the attitude.¹³ Because talking in terms of appropriate relata can be cumbersome, I'll use "the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reason for" as shorthand for "the appropriate relata of the premise-attitudes are sufficient reason for".

So as not to unduly proliferate passes of Sufficient Reasons, let's consider a second, and more substantive, problem before incorporating appropriate relata. The problem is that First Pass can't accommodate the second desideratum for an account of good reasoning. An account of good reasoning should allow for good reasoning from bad starting points: false beliefs, irrational beliefs, and irrational or otherwise inappropriate nondoxastic attitudes (McHugh and Way 2018, 160–63.) Call this desideratum *Bad Starting Points*. To see that First Pass fails to meet Bad Starting Points, recall Jill's reasoning to the *belief that it's trivia night* from her *belief that if it's Monday, then it's trivia night* and her *belief that it's Monday*. Jill's reasoning is good, even if she's confused about which day it is and it's in fact Tuesday, rather than Monday. Since her *belief that it's Monday* is false, however, its content is not a fact and so cannot be a reason for anything. Even if her conditional belief is true, the contents of her premise-attitudes are not sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude. Hence, according to First Pass, Jill's reasoning does not exhibit good reasoning. But the Modus Ponens pattern is a paradigm of good reasoning.

The solution is to require that the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude *only in the good case*, that is when they're true.¹⁴ Incorporating that thought, and rephrasing in terms of appropriate relata, yields a second pass of the account.

Sufficient Reason (Second Pass). A pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$,

¹³I treat locutions like " S intends to ϕ " and " S has the intention to ϕ " interchangeably.

¹⁴The good case will also require that the premise-attitudes are undefeated. We'll get to that shortly.

is good if and only if, and because, if the appropriate relata of $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true, they are sufficient reason for C .

Although an improvement, Second Pass struggles to meet the third of our three desiderata for an account of good reasoning. Good reasoning is defeasible, in the sense that adding premise-attitudes to what otherwise would've been good reasoning can render the reasoning bad. More precisely, there is at least one pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, such that that pattern *is* good reasoning but the following pattern is *not* good reasoning: $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \cup D \Rightarrow C$, where D is a (possibly singleton) set of premise-attitudes. Consider an example from Horty (2012, 7–8).

Tweety Bird Can Fly. $\{\text{belief that Tweety is a bird}\} \Rightarrow \text{belief that Tweety can fly.}$ ¹⁵

Tweety Penguin Can Fly. $\{\text{belief that Tweety is a bird, belief that Tweety is a penguin}\} \Rightarrow \text{belief that Tweety can fly.}$

Tweety Bird Can Fly is a good pattern of reasoning, but it is defeasible, because Tweety Penguin Can Fly is not a good pattern of reasoning. Call the desideratum that good reasoning is defeasible in this way *Defeasibility*.

Second Pass struggles to meet Defeasibility because the potential for defeat means that the premise-attitude in Tweety Bird Can Fly might not provide sufficient reason for believing that Tweety can fly. Even if it's true that Tweety is a bird, that is not sufficient reason for believing that Tweety can fly if it's also true that Tweety is a penguin, or that Tweety is too young to fly, or if any other defeater obtains. The point generalizes: Second Pass cannot count defeasible reasoning as good reasoning.¹⁶

Accommodating Bad Starting Points required modifying Sufficient Reason such that the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude only in the good case,

¹⁵This is still a pattern of reasoning, albeit a more fine-grained one than those we've considered to this point.

¹⁶McHugh and Way (2022) raise this objection against a similar version of the Reasons Approach.

that is when their appropriate relata are true. Accommodating Defeasibility requires thinking of the good case as one in which the appropriate relata of the premise-attitudes are not only true, but also undefeated.

Philosophers have distinguished many varieties of defeaters.¹⁷ For our purposes, a defeater with respect to ϕ ing decreases the total reason for ϕ ing. Let's make this more precise and focus on defeaters for premise-attitudes in particular.

Defeater for Premises-Attitudes. A *defeater for premise-attitudes* $P_1 \dots P_n$, with respect to some conclusion-attitude, C , is one or more attitudes, $D_1 \dots D_n$, such that the total weight of reason for C ing when $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true and $D_1 \dots D_n$ are true is less than the total weight of reason for C ing when $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true and $D_1 \dots D_n$ are false.

Three things to note. First, the definition allows a defeater of premise-attitudes to consist in more than one attitude. This is because some premise-attitudes might be defeated neither by D_1 on its own nor by D_2 on its own, but only by D_1 and D_2 together. However, to keep things simple we'll concern ourselves with single defeater attitudes. Second, a defeater of premise-attitudes is defined with respect to the relevant premise-attitudes collectively, rather than individually. This allows for the possibility that D defeats $P_1 \dots P_n$ collectively without defeating any of $P_1 \dots P_n$ individually.¹⁸ Third, defeaters for premise-attitudes, like defeaters more generally, are always with respect to some attitude: D might defeat $P_1 \dots P_n$ with respect to C_1 , but not with respect to C_2 . I'll leave that qualification implicit when doing so does no disservice to clarity.

Understanding defeaters in this way yields the final version of Sufficient Reason (I'll omit a parenthetical reference to its finality, and let the very lack of qualification speak for itself).

¹⁷See, for instance, Pollock (1987, 484–85) on rebutting and undercutting defeaters, and Dancy (2004, 38–43) for disablers and attenuators

¹⁸*Example.* Consider the pattern $\{\text{belief that Jill is home, belief that Jack is home}\} \Rightarrow \text{belief that exactly two people are at home}$. The *belief that Jez is home* is a defeater for the premise-attitudes collectively, but for neither of them individually with respect to the same conclusion.

Sufficient Reason. A pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, is good if and only if, and because, if the appropriate relata of $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true and any defeater for premises-attitudes $P_1 \dots P_n$ (with respect to C) is false, $P_1 \dots P_n$ are sufficient reason for C .

Sufficient Reason now handles cases of defeasible reasoning smoothly, and so meets the Defeasibility desideratum. For instance, it correctly counts *Tweety Bird Can Fly* as good reasoning because, if it's true that Tweety is a bird and that no defeaters obtain, then the premise-attitude does provide sufficient reason for believing that Tweety can fly.

Sufficient Reason not only meets Defeasibility, but also explains it. The defeasibility of good reasoning stems from the defeasibility of reasons themselves. A pattern of good reasoning is defeasible because: (i) the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reason in the good case—when they're undefeated and their appropriate relata are true; but (ii) the premise-attitudes expanded to include a defeater do not provide sufficient reason in the good case.¹⁹

Sufficient Reason thus meets the three desiderata for an account of good reasoning: it captures the sense in which good reasoning is concerned with the transition between premises and conclusion, it allows good reasoning from bad starting points, and it accommodates and explains the defeasibility of good reasoning. Arriving at the final form of Sufficient Reason involved some tweaks and technical machinery, such as the notion of appropriate relata and the definition of a defeater of premise-attitudes. But those amendments are by no means ad hoc. They are rather ways of making precise the intuitive thought that a pattern of good reasoning is good because, in the good case, the premises-attitudes provide good reason for the conclusion-attitude.

¹⁹Note that I'm using "the premise-attitudes are undefeated" in a somewhat stipulative way to mean "there are no defeaters for the premise-attitudes".

3 Objections

Sufficient Reason is a version of the Reasons Approach. So it is worth considering the most important objections that have been raised against various versions of the Reasons Approach. These are all due to McHugh and Way, in a paper (2018, 159–64) and a book (2022, 33–36).

3.1 Not So Fast: Defeasibility

McHugh and Way (2022, 36) object that a similar view to Sufficient Reason cannot meet the Defeasibility desideratum. The view they consider does not include defeaters, however. I argued that Sufficient Reason can meet Defeasibility, precisely because it incorporates defeaters. Still, one might have two lingering worries about the role of defeaters in an account of good reasoning.

First, one might worry that defeaters make the account overpredict. If we exclude defeaters from the good case, won't every pattern of reasoning be good? Fortunately, no. For instance, the pattern that corresponds to the affirming the consequent fallacy, $\{\textit{belief that if } p \textit{ then } q, \textit{ belief that } q\} \Rightarrow \textit{belief that } p$, is not a good pattern of reasoning, according to Sufficient Reason. Even in the absence of any defeaters, the contents of the premise-attitudes, when true, need not be sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude.²⁰

Sufficient Reason does, however, entail that patterns of reasoning from weak reasons are good, at least in the practical case.²¹ Consider one such pattern.

Mild Enjoyment. $\{\textit{belief that } \phi \textit{ing would be mildly enjoyable}\} \Rightarrow \textit{intention to } \phi$.

According to Sufficient Reason, Mild Enjoyment is a good pattern of reasoning because the premise-attitude, in the good case, provides sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude. The

²⁰I say “need not be” rather than “are not”, because q might so happen to be sufficient reason for believing that p . But that's not a problem, as we're concerned with the goodness of the pattern as a whole not with any particular instances of it.

²¹The corresponding patterns are not good in the theoretical case because a weak normative reason for believing that p is not, on its own, sufficient reason for believing that p .

good case bars any defeaters, including any reasons against ϕ ing.²² But this is as it good be. Mild Enjoyment is a good pattern of reasoning, it's just very easy for a defeater to obtain. It's tempting to confuse the ease with which Mild Enjoyment can have defeaters and its goodness. But they should be distinguished.

Second, one might worry that it is not good reasoning to reason in the face of glaring defeaters. Suppose that I'm looking right at Tweety in all his penguin magnificence but, ignoring that, I reason in accordance with Tweety Bird Can Fly, from his avian nature to his being able to fly. Isn't this bad reasoning? It certainly isn't reasoning done well, that but should not be conflated with reasoning in accordance with a bad pattern. Tweety Bird Can Fly is a good pattern of reasoning, whether or not an agent reasoning in accordance with it reasons well. That I ignored the obvious defeater doesn't undermine the goodness of the pattern.

3.2 Not So Fast: Bad Starting Points

An account of good reasoning must meet the Bad Starting Points desideratum. A pattern of reasoning can be good even when the premise-attitudes are bad: false, irrational, or otherwise deficient. Sufficient Reason does well with false beliefs, because in the good case those beliefs will be true. But I haven't yet considered irrational attitudes, which McHugh and Way (2018, 160–62) argue prevent many versions of the Reasons Approach from meeting Bad Starting Points. Consider Ronnie, who reasons in accordance with the following pattern.

Roulette. *{belief that the next spin will land on 17, belief that I've bet on 17}*
 $\Rightarrow$ *belief that I'll win the next spin.*

Roulette is a good pattern of reasoning, but we can suppose that Ronnie does not perform it well. His belief that the next spin will land on 17 is based on nothing more than a desperate

²²I'm assuming that, at least for practical reasons, if r is a reason for ϕ ing in the good case (where r is undefeated, including there being no reasons against ϕ ing), then r is sufficient reason for ϕ ing. If one rejects that principle, then Mild Enjoyment might not be a good pattern of reasoning.

hunch. Nonetheless, the potential irrationality of a premise-attitude should not preclude Roulette from being good reasoning. The fault is Ronnie’s, not Roulette’s.

One might worry, however, that Sufficient Reason struggles to accommodate the goodness of Roulette, because irrational attitudes cannot provide sufficient reason. Even if Ronnie’s hunch happens to be true and the next spin will in fact land on 17, that does not provide sufficient reason for believing that he’ll win. While I grant that irrational attitudes cannot provide sufficient reason, there is no problem for the Sufficient Reason account. When a set of premise-attitudes includes irrational attitudes, there is a defeater for that set. In Ronnie’s case, the belief that he has no good evidence for believing that the next spin will land on 17 is a defeater for Roulette: adding that belief to the premise-attitudes makes the pattern bad. Since Sufficient Reason only looks to the good case, where there are no such defeaters, the possibility of irrational attitudes do not threaten the goodness of patterns of reasoning.²³

3.3 The Point of Reasoning

McHugh and Way further object that accounts like Sufficient Reason do not mesh well with a common conception of the point of reasoning. It’s worth quoting them at some length.

[A] theory of good reasoning should fit with the point or aim of reasoning...
 A theory of good reasoning tells us what we can achieve, if we reason well...
 it is common to think that there can be sufficient reason to believe falsehoods.
 Yet a standard and very plausible claim is that theoretical reasoning aims at truth. If so, then the point of reasoning is not to get attitudes for which there is sufficient reason. More plausibly, the point of reasoning is to *get things right* in our attitudes” (McHugh and Way 2022, 35–36, original emphasis).

²³A similar reply undercuts a version of this objection about practical reasoning. The pattern *{belief that the plane will crash} ⇒ intention not to board the plane*, is good reasoning even though the belief might be irrationally held, as by someone who has a phobia of flying (McHugh and Way 2018, 160–61). When the belief is irrationally held, there will be a defeater for the premise-attitude, such as the *belief that there is no evidence that the plane will crash* and the *belief that there is lots of evidence that plane travel is safe*.

There can be sufficient reason for falsehoods. But our beliefs do not get things right when they are false, hence the common thought that theoretical reasoning aims at truth. So, the objection goes, in understanding good reasoning in terms of sufficient reason, the Sufficient Reason account sits uneasily with the fact that the point of reasoning is to get things right.

It's not entirely clear what McHugh and Way mean by the claim that "[a] theory of good reasoning tells us what we can achieve, if we reason well". As McHugh and Way themselves stress, a theory of good reasoning is not a theory of reasoning well or competently. Here's one interpretation, however. Part of why we're interested in theories of good reasoning is because they are going to play a role in our theories of reasoning competently: reasoning in accordance with a good pattern of reasoning is not sufficient for reasoning competently, but it's plausibly necessary. Understood this way, the goodness of good reasoning should play a role in explaining competent reasoning, and reasoning competently involves getting things right.

I have two lines of response. First, Sufficient Reason does in fact do well with respect to getting things right. According to Sufficient Reason, a good pattern of reasoning is good because the premise-attitudes, in the good case, provide sufficient reason for the conclusion. As we've seen, the good case is such that the (appropriate relata of) the premise-attitudes are true and any defeaters are false. But in such a case, if the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reasons for the conclusion-attitude, then the conclusion-attitude gets things right. If the conclusion-attitude didn't get things right, that would be a defeater for the premise-attitudes. So Sufficient Reason has it that good reasoning gets things right in the good case.

Second, getting things right is not the only thing that competent reasoning involves. Reasoning competently also involves properly basing one's conclusion-attitude on one's premise-attitudes. A competence performance of theoretical reasoning not only results in a true belief, but a belief that is well founded on good bases. Sufficient Reason also fits well with this aspect of competent reasoning. According to Sufficient Reason, the premise-attitudes of a good pattern of reasoning are candidate good bases for the conclusion-attitude: in the

good case, the premise-attitudes provide sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude. Of course, to properly base a conclusion-attitude on some premise-attitudes an agent must reason competently, and not just in accordance with a good pattern. But identifying which patterns of reasoning yield candidate good bases is an important part of the larger project of theorizing about competent reasoning.²⁴

3.4 Wrong Kind of Reasons

Finally, McHugh and Way (2018, 163) point out that views like Sufficient Reason face a version of the wrong kind of reasons problem.²⁵ For instance, that believing that p will garner one practical benefit is the wrong kind of reason to believe that p . Consider the following pattern of reasoning.

Happiness. *{belief that believing that God exists will bring me everlasting happiness} $\Rightarrow$ belief that God exists.*

According to McHugh and Way, Happiness is not a good pattern of reasoning.²⁶ But Sufficient Reason seems to count it as good reasoning, because the consideration that believing that God exists will bring one everlasting happiness seems to be (when true and undefeated) sufficient reason for believing that God exists. What more reason could one want for anything than the vouchsafing of one's eternal beatitude? In general, however, it is not good reasoning to reason from premise-attitudes that provide reason of the wrong kind for the relevant conclusion-attitudes.

I agree that Happiness, and other patterns from reasons of the wrong kind, are not good patterns of reasoning.²⁷ In reply, I appeal to extant solutions to the wrong kind of reasons problem. I find especially promising solutions that argue that reasons of the wrong kind

²⁴This does not entail that for an attitude to be properly based just is for it to be based on considerations that provide sufficient reason for it. See Lord and Sylvan (2022) for discussion.

²⁵See Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017) for an overview.

²⁶They raise a similar issue for practical reasoning by considering a pattern that accords with Kavka's (1983) toxin puzzle.

²⁷For dissent, see Rinard (2015, 2017) and McCormick (2018, 2020).

are not in fact normative reasons at all. Hence, there is no genuine normative pressure to believe that p when doing so will make you happy, even eternally so. Fortunately, there are several promising solutions with the right shape. Cosker-Rowland (2015), for instance, offers a solution that stems from a widely held constraint on normative reasons: r is a normative reason for S to ϕ , only if S can ϕ on the basis of r .²⁸ Since, Cosker-Rowland argues, agents cannot in general ϕ on the basis of reasons of the wrong kind, reasons of the wrong kind are not normative reasons at all. According to any solution like this, on which reasons of the wrong kind are not normative reasons, there is no problem for Sufficient Reason.²⁹ The premise-attitude of Happiness, for instance, provides no reason at all, even in the good case, and so the pattern is not good.

4 No Transition without Connection

In §2, I argued that Sufficient Reason meets the Transition desideratum. In this section, I argue that this is a significant consideration in the account’s favor, because many accounts struggle to meet Transition. In fact, the desideratum fails to be met by any account that construes good reasoning as the preservation of some property across premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitudes.³⁰ This will include McHugh and Way’s own account, which understands good reasoning in terms of the preservation of fittingness. But first, let’s consider Transition a little more carefully.

According to Transition, an account of good reasoning concerns the transition from premise-attitudes to conclusion-attitude. Good reasoning isn’t about where one starts or where one ends up, considered independently of one another. It’s about the journey from one to the other. The Transition desideratum is not the same as Bad Starting Points, according

²⁸See Raz (2011, 27–28) and Asarnow (2025, 96) for other discussions of this constraint. See Sharadin (2016) for another solution that argues that reasons of the wrong kind are not normative reasons.

²⁹What if one thinks that reasons of the wrong kind are normative reasons, however (compare Schroeder 2021, chap. 7.)? Then one can draw the right/wrong kind distinction in one’s preferred way and reformulate Sufficient Reason in terms of providing sufficient reason of the right kind.

³⁰At least when preservation is understood conditionally, as we’ll see.

to which good reasoning can stem from deficient premise-attitudes. This is worth stressing, because the two desiderata are sometimes run very close together. McHugh and Way, for instance, summarize a paragraph explaining the Bad Starting Points desideratum as follows.

To say that some reasoning is good, in our sense, is to say something about the *transition* between attitudes, rather than something about the attitudes you begin from (McHugh and Way 2018, 155, original emphasis).³¹

Bad Starting Points and Transition should be sharply distinguished, however. An account could meet one and not the other. For instance, the first pass of Sufficient Reason that we considered in §2 met Transition but not Bad Starting Points. Many accounts fail in the other direction, however, by meeting Bad Starting Points without meeting Transition.

To see this, consider a toy account of good theoretical reasoning.

Preserving Truth. A pattern of theoretical reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, is good if and only if, and because, if the contents of $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true, then the content of C is true.

According to Preserving Truth, theoretical reasoning is good because it preserves truth. Moreover, it understands truth-preservation conditionally: if the premise-attitudes' contents are true, then the conclusion-attitude's content is true.

Preserving Truth will obviously do not, as it renders bad any good, but defeasible, theoretical reasoning. But its construal of truth-preservation leads to another problem: Preserving Truth does not meet the Transition desideratum. If truth-preservation is understood conditionally, the account guarantees no connection between the premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude in good reasoning.

³¹See also Worsnip (2019, 131, original emphasis): “the general, intuitive notion of correct reasoning ... focuses specifically on *transitions* between states. So, in the sense we’re interested in, one can be reasoning correctly even if one starts with unjustified premises, and so ends up with an unjustified conclusion”. To be fair both to Worsnip and to McHugh and Way, I don’t think that anything that they say entails that Transition and Bad Starting Points are the very same desideratum. But, given the importance of keeping them separate, we should be wary of language that even hints at conflation.

Consider a piece of reasoning from the *belief that cows moo* to the *belief that 79 is prime*.³² This reasoning exhibits the following, bad pattern of reasoning.

Necessary Conclusion. $\{belief\ that\ p\} \Rightarrow belief\ that\ n$, where n is a necessary truth unrelated to p .

The pattern is bad because the premise-attitude has nothing to do with conclusion-attitude. Cows do indeed moo, but it's not good to transition thence to the conclusion that 79 is prime.

The point here is not primarily one about extensional adequacy. Preserving Truth is a toy account, and so it's not surprising that it has counterexamples. The point is rather that Preserving Truth has no hope of meeting the Transition desideratum, because it explains good reasoning in terms of the preservation of some property (truth) and it understands preservation conditionally. Conditional property-preservation allows for the property to be preserved even when, as in Necessary Conclusion, the premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude are unrelated. But good reasoning is concerned with the transition between attitudes precisely because good reasoning involves some *connection* between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude. In good reasoning, it is not the case that the starting point and terminus of a transition just so happen to share a property, like truth. Good reasoning involves a transition *from* some premise-attitudes *to* a conclusion-attitude that has a connection to the premise-attitudes. To meet the Transition desideratum, then, an account must meet the following:

Connection Constraint. Good reasoning involves a connection between the premise-attitudes and the conclusion-attitude.

Any account that both (a) explains good reasoning solely as the preservation of property, and (b) construes preservation conditionally violates the Connection Constraint and so cannot meet Transition. An adequate account of reasoning must, therefore, go beyond conditional property-preservation in at least one of two ways: (i) appealing to something else, either in

³²This example is adapted from one of McHugh and Way's (2022), 50.

addition to, or instead of, conditional property-preservation; or (ii) understanding preservation other than conditionally.

Sufficient Reason does (i) and in doing so it easily meets Transition. It appeals directly to a connection between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude: the former provide sufficient reason for the latter in the good case. Sufficient Reason also easily explains why Necessary Conclusion is bad: the belief that p does not, in the good case, provide sufficient reason for believing that n , where n is unrelated to p . In general, premise-attitudes do not provide sufficient reason for arbitrary conclusion-attitudes.

By contrast, the most well developed extant account of good reasoning has conditional property-preservation at its heart and so struggles to meet Transition. McHugh and Way (2018, 164–72; 2022, 42–46) explain good reasoning in terms fittingness-preservation.³³ For an attitude to be fitting is for it to be correct. For instance, a belief that p is fitting if and only if p is true. And an intention to ϕ is fitting, if and only if ϕ ing permissible.³⁴ Here’s the core of McHugh and Way’s account; we’ll consider a more complicated version of it shortly.

Preserving Fittingness. A pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, is good if and only if, and because, other things equal, if $P_1 \dots P_n$ are fitting, then C is fitting.³⁵

I won’t be concerned here with the “other things equal” clause, other than to say that McHugh and Way’s understanding of it doesn’t help with the Connection Constraint.³⁶

Preserving Fittingness incorrectly renders Necessary Conclusion good, and for just the same reason that Preserving Truth does: both views understand good reasoning solely in terms of conditional property-preservation. Moreover, just as with the failure of Preserving Truth, the deeper problem for Preserving Fittingness is that violates the Connection Constraint. For

³³See also Worsnip (2019, 145–49), who explores a similar account.

³⁴McHugh and Way (2018, 165) understand the fittingness of intention this way. In the book, they are less committal and rely on an intuitive notion of choiceworthiness (2022, 27). The difference does not matter here.

³⁵I’ve changed some minor details to fit with my terminology.

³⁶McHugh and Way cash out “other things equal” in terms of normality. I think there are issues with their proposal, but that’s for another occasion. I’ll leave implicit the relevant “other things equal” clauses going forward.

all Preserving Fittingness says, the fittingness of the premise-attitudes and of the conclusion-attitude can be entirely independent of one another, as in Necessary Conclusion. For this reason, Preserving Fittingness does not meet the Transition Desideratum.

Being the excellent philosophers that they are, McHugh and Way are aware that Preserving Fittingness gets wrong patterns like Necessary Conclusion. But their proposed solution does not resolve the underlying issue with respect to meeting the Transition desideratum.

McHugh and Way (2022, 53) revise Preserving Fittingness by adding a second condition on good reasoning.³⁷

Fittingness View. A pattern of reasoning, $\{P_1, \dots, P_n\} \Rightarrow C$, is good if and only if, and because: (i) other things equal, if $P_1 \dots P_n$ are fitting, then C is fitting; and (ii) one can competently follow the pattern in reasoning to C as a new attitude.

According to Fittingness View, Necessary Conclusion is not a good pattern of reasoning because, even though it preserves fittingness, the pattern is not one that an agent can competently follow. Being able to competently follow a pattern involves being able to be sensitive to the fact that the pattern preserves fittingness when forming new a attitude by reasoning with the pattern.

There are three problems with Fittingness View’s appeal to competent following. First, it rules out certain patterns of reasoning that should not be ruled out. Consider:

Unobvious Entailment. $\{\text{belief that } p_1 \dots \text{belief that } p_n\} \Rightarrow \text{belief that } q$, where q is entailed, but extremely unobviously, by $p_1 \dots p_n$.

³⁷In the earlier paper, they stipulated that “good patterns of reasoning... preserve fittingness (other things equal) in virtue of a relationship between the premise-responses and the conclusion-response” (McHugh and Way 2018, 167–69). This is not very satisfying on two counts. First, it is a stipulation that a connection obtains without offering any suggestion of what such a connection might be. Second, leaving the connection so loose threatens to classify bad reasoning as good. For instance, in the later book, McHugh and Way (2022, n. 20) themselves note that the earlier revision classifies as good the following bad pattern of reasoning: $\{\text{belief that } p\} \Rightarrow \text{belief that } p \text{ and } 79 \text{ is prime}$, where 79’s being prime is unrelated to p .

Fittingness View precludes Unobvious Entailment from being good reasoning, because agents cannot competently reason immediately from, for example, the Peano axioms of arithmetic to Fermat’s Last Theorem.³⁸ McHugh and Way (2022, 55) take this to be a feature, but I think it is a bug. We should separate clearly the issue of whether a pattern of reasoning is good, from questions about whether it can be followed. Part of the theoretical payoff of the notion of good reasoning is precisely to abstract away from issues of competence performance.³⁹ It’s one thing to ask whether a pattern of reasoning is good or not, just on the merits of the pattern alone; it’s quite another thing to ask whether the pattern can be competently followed. That’s not to say that the question of whether a pattern of reasoning can be competently followed or not is a bad question. It’s an excellent question.⁴⁰ But it’s a different question from the question of what good reasoning is.

Second, there is dilemma with respect to competent following. Either an agent can competently follow a pattern of reasoning only if they can be guided by the goodness of the pattern, or an agent can competently follow a pattern of reasoning even if they need not be guided by the goodness of the pattern. The first horn of the dilemma threatens circularity. In order to competently follow a pattern of reasoning, an agent needs to be able to be guided by the goodness of the pattern, but the goodness of the pattern is what we’re trying to explain. The second horn threatens to allow agents to competently follow the patterns that the condition has been introduced to preclude. If an agent can competently follow a pattern of reasoning without being guided by the pattern’s goodness, it’s hard to see why an agent cannot follow a bad pattern of reasoning, like Necessary Conclusion.

Third, and most importantly, the appeal to competent following incorrectly explains the badness of patterns of reasoning like Necessary Conclusion. Suppose that, per impossible, some agent could in fact competently follow Necessary Conclusion.⁴¹ The pattern would not

³⁸The case is from Boghossian (2014, 6).

³⁹I’m indebted in this paragraph to Worsnip’s (2019, [145–149]) discussion of what a theory good reasoning is for.

⁴⁰Compare the literature on whether reasoning must involve some kind of taking state: Boghossian (2014), McHugh and Way (2016), Siegel (2019), Blake-Turner (2022b).

⁴¹McHugh and Way (2022, 55–56) note that Fittingness View relativizes patterns of good reasoning to

thereby be rendered good. It would still be a transition from an irrelevant premise-attitude to a conclusion-attitude that just so happens to be necessary. The problem with Necessary Conclusion is not that it can't be competently followed. It's that premise-attitude is irrelevant to the conclusion attitude and so does not involve a connection between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude. Necessary Conclusion, then, would still be a bad pattern of reasoning even if it could be competently followed.

Fittingness View thus struggles to meet the Transition desideratum. Fittingness View introduces a connection between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude, but it is not a connection of the right kind. The right kind of connection explains the badness of patterns like Necessary Conclusion, and underwrites the goodness of patterns like Modus Ponens and Means-End. Sufficient Reason posits a connection that does both of those things. Premise-attitudes that are irrelevant to a conclusion-attitude make for bad patterns of reasoning because the former cannot provide sufficient reason for the latter. Moreover, transitioning from the premise-attitudes to the conclusion-attitude of a good pattern of reasoning is, at least in the good case, transitioning in the direction of sufficient reason: from the premise-attitudes, to the conclusion-attitude.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I've aimed to revitalize the Reasons Approach to the question "What is good reasoning?" I did so by developing and defending a particular version of the Reasons Approach. Sufficient Reason captures the intuitive idea that a pattern of reasoning is good because the premise-attitudes, in the good case, provide good reason for the conclusion-attitude. More precisely, a pattern of reasoning is good if and only if, and because, if the appropriate relations of the premise-attitudes are true and any defeaters for the premise-attitudes are false, the appropriate relations of the premise-attitudes are sufficient reason for the conclusion-attitude.

different kinds of agent, depending on what patterns they can competently follow. So the case might not even be an impossible one.

Sufficient Reason meets three key desiderata for an account of good reasoning. First, it lets good reasoning stem from bad starting points and, second, it allows for defeasible reasoning. It also explains the defeasibility of good reasoning in terms of the defeasibility of reasons. Third and most importantly, however, Sufficient Reason properly captures the sense in which good reasoning concerns the transition from premise-attitudes to conclusion-attitude. The Transition desideratum is sometimes run together with Bad Starting Points, but they should be distinguished. Accounts of good reasoning that rely on conditional property-preservation can meet Bad Starting Points without meeting Transition, because conditional property-preservation requires no connection between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitude. This includes McHugh and Way’s Fittingness View, which relies on conditional fittingness-preservation. McHugh and Way’s appeal to competent following faces several problems, because whether an agent can competently follow a pattern of reasoning is a different matter from whether that pattern of reasoning is good.

The topic of good reasoning is an important one that deserves more attention than it has been given. I hope that future discussions take away three things in particular from mine. First, the Reasons Approach, at least in its Sufficient Reason guise, is a viable way of theorizing about good reasoning. Second, it’s harder than it seems to meet the Transition desideratum. Doing so involves securing a connection between premise-attitudes and conclusion-attitudes, and not just allowing good reasoning from bad starting points. Third, because conditional property-preservation accounts are both prominent and struggle to meet Transition, the Reasons Approach might not just be viable—it might be the only game in town.

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