Contrastive Reasons and Promotion*

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1 Introducing Contrastivism

Frequently, whether a consideration is a reason to perform some action depends on what we are comparing that action to. Consider the following case.\(^1\) Today is my friend Julia’s birthday. This is a reason for me to bake her a chocolate cake rather than bake her a meatloaf. But it’s not a reason for me to bake her a chocolate cake rather than a lemon cake. Similarly, the fact that the library book is due back today is a reason for me to take it back to the library rather than leave it sitting on my shelf. But this fact is not a reason for me to take it back to the library rather than send it with you on your trip to the library.

The traditional view that considerations are reasons for actions independently of what we’re comparing the actions to has trouble explaining this observation. If the fact that it’s Julia’s birthday is a reason to bake her a chocolate cake simpliciter, why isn’t a reason to bake her a chocolate cake rather than a lemon cake? And if it’s not a reason to bake her a chocolate cake simpliciter, why is it a reason to bake her a chocolate cake rather than a meatloaf? Of course, we can try to analyze these ‘rather than’ ascriptions in terms of non-contrastive reasons. But, as I argue in Snedegar (fc), several initially promising ways to do this are problematic.

These kinds of cases motivate the view I will be concerned with in this paper, which I’ll call contrastivism about reasons.\(^2\) Contrastivism about reasons (just ‘contrastivism’ from now on) is the view that considerations are only reasons for things

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\(^1\) This case comes from Sinnott-Armstrong (2006), chapter 5.

\(^2\) Other authors who have endorsed contrastivism more or less explicitly include Norcross (2005), Ross (2006), chapter 9, and especially Sinnott-Armstrong (2004, 2006, 2008).
relative to sets of alternatives, instead of reasons for things *simpliciter*, as has been traditionally assumed. For example, the fact that it is Julia’s birthday is a reason to bake her a chocolate cake relative to \{(bake her a chocolate cake, bake her a meat-loaf)\}, but not relative to \{(bake her a chocolate cake, bake her a lemon cake)\}. This provides a straightforward explanation of the otherwise puzzling cases like those presented above. The solution to this problem depends on the fact that, according to the contrastivist, reasons relative to different sets of alternatives may be *independent* of one another, in the following sense. Some consideration may be a reason to \(A\) relative to one set without being a reason to \(A\) relative to some other set.\(^3\)

This is just one simple application for contrastivism about reasons, and there are several others.\(^4\) However, while contrastivism solves some problems, it creates others. In particular, other contrastivists have not recognized that the independence of reasons relative to different sets—the key to securing the advantages of contrastivism—leads to a serious problem. The problem is simply that the contrastivist threatens to make reasons relative to different sets *objectionably* independent of one another. There should be some constraints on this independence: knowing about the reasons relative to one set should tell us something about the reasons relative to certain other sets. For example, if some consideration is a reason for \(A\) rather than \(B\), and a reason for \(B\) rather than \(C\), then surely it should be a reason for \(A\) rather than \(C\). But for all that has been said so far, nothing about contrastivism constrains the independence of reasons relative to different sets in any way. Thus, contrastivism seems to lack a principled way to rule out this kind of intransitivity.

In the next section, I will present this problem in detail, describing other constraints that the contrastivist seems unable to provide. In the remainder of the paper, I develop a version of contrastivism that solves this problem. My solution is to appeal to the widespread idea that (at least many) reasons involve the *promotion* of various kinds of objectives, including desires, goals, and values. This idea itself independently motivates a particular version of contrastivism, because, as I argue in section 3, the best way to make sense of the relationship between reasons and promotion is on a contrastive framework. And this independently motivated version of contrastivism straightforwardly generates an elegant solution to the problem from section 2 by providing just the right constraints on the independence of reasons relative to different sets of alternatives. I develop the theory in section 4, providing

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\(^3\)We can make perfectly legitimate non-contrastive reason ascriptions, like ‘The fact that it’s Julia’s birthday is a reason to bake her a chocolate cake’, of course. But according to the contrastivist, we have to understand these as implicitly contrastive. See Snedegar (fc).

\(^4\)For others, see Snedegar (ms).
analyses of reasons for and against in terms of promotion, and show that this view provides the constraints in section 5. The moral is that a compelling independent source of motivation for contrastivism leads directly to a version of the theory that solves a pressing problem for the contrastivist.

2 A Problem for the Contrastivist

The independence of reasons relative to different sets of alternatives posited by the contrastivist seems like a good thing. But for all I’ve said so far, and for all other contrastivists have said, learning what reasons there are relative to one set doesn’t tell us anything about what reasons there are relative to other sets. Reflection on this point shows that the contrastivist may have gone too far, and made reasons relative to different sets objectionably independent of one another. Intuitively, there should be constraints on this independence: reasons relative to one set should bear some kind of relation to reasons relative to certain other sets. The problem for the contrastivist is simply that there seems to be nothing about the theory to constrain the independence in the right ways. Further, the contrastivist has to be careful in trying to provide these constraints. Otherwise, she might lose the advantages over non-contrastive theories. In this section I’ll make this problem sharp by describing a couple of different kinds of intuitive constraints that we should want, and that the contrastivist seems unable to provide, for all that’s been said so far.

2.1 Intransitivity

Suppose I want to get in shape. Then the fact that physical exertion helps one get in shape is a reason to jog to Cafe 101 for my daily milkshake, rather than walk there. Similarly, it’s a reason to walk there rather than drive. Is it a reason to jog rather than drive? Of course. And any plausible theory of what makes some consideration are as of one thing rather than another will say so.

But the important thing to notice for my purposes here is that we shouldn’t have to think about this at all, once we know it’s a reason to jog rather than walk, and a reason to walk rather than drive. It should just follow that it’s a reason to jog rather than drive. More generally, if $r$ is a reason for $A$ rather than $B$ and a reason for $B$ rather than $C$, it should simply follow that $r$ is a reason for $A$ rather than $C$. To deny this is to allow for a very troubling kind of intransitivity.\(^5\)

\(^5\)This isn’t the same kind of intransitivity that receives a lot of attention in the literature, the
The problem for the contrastivist is that nothing about the theory, for all that’s been said, seems to rule out this kind of intransitivity. Since reasons relative to different sets can be independent of one another—as they need to be for contrastivism to gain advantages over non-contrastive theories—we have no reason to think that the reason relation will guarantee that reasons for $A$ rather than $B$ and for $B$ rather than $C$ will be reasons for $A$ rather than $C$. Ruling out this intransitivity is one important constraint.

### 2.2 Other entailment relations

The fact that Bill has high blood pressure is a reason for him to order fish out of \{order fish, order pork, order beef\}.\(^6\) If the waiter comes back to the table and tells Bill that the restaurant is out of pork, that obviously shouldn’t change this: the fact that he has high blood pressure is still a reason to order fish out of \{order fish, order beef\}. And again, any plausible theory about what makes a consideration a reason for an action out of a set of alternatives will say so.

But again, the important point is that we shouldn’t have to think about this at all. It should just follow that, in general, when $r$ is a reason for $A$ out of $\{A, B, C\}$, it’s also a reason for $A$ out of $\{A, B\}$. Even more generally, reasons for an alternative out of one set should also be reasons for that alternative out of arbitrary subsets that include the alternative. If $r$ is a reason for $A$ when some other option $B$ is relevant, making $B$ irrelevant should not change this.

Similarly, suppose the fact that Bill has high blood pressure is a reason against ordering beef out of \{order fish, order pork, order beef\}. If the waiter comes back and informs Bill that the restaurant also has a salad, he shouldn’t have to reconsider whether the fact that he has high blood pressure is a reason against ordering beef. Adding a new relevant alternative shouldn’t change this. In general, reasons against an alternative out of one set are intuitively reasons against that alternative out of supersets of that set.

These, and other, intuitive entailment relations should hold between reasons relat-intransitivity of ‘better than’ or ‘more reason than’. (See especially Temkin (1987, 2012); Rachels (1998, 2001); Friedman (2009) for advocates; see, for example, Broome (1991) for defense of the much more common view that intransitivity is impossible.) But if the considerations that are reasons for $A$ rather than $B$ and for $B$ rather than $C$ need not be reasons for $A$ rather than $C$, then it seems that we might have a case in which there’s more reason for $A$ than $B$ (out of $\{A, B\}$) and more reason for $B$ than for $C$ (out of $\{B, C\}$), but not more reason for $A$ than for $C$ (out of $\{A, C\}$). Further, this seems to be an independently troubling kind of intransitivity.

\(^6\)I’m assuming that these alternatives are mutually exclusive—Bill can order at most one of the dishes.
ative to different but related sets. In general, as we shift between contexts in which different sets of alternatives are relevant, we shouldn’t have to start all over in figuring out what reasons there are. But for all that has been said, contrastivism cannot deliver these entailment relations, since reasons relative to different sets can be independent of one another—and they need to be for contrastivism to have an advantage over non-contrastive theories.

This is the problem facing the contrastivist that I’ll attempt to solve in the remainder of the paper. As a preview, my strategy will be to appeal to the popular idea that reasons involve the promotion of something—a desire or an objective value, for example. Once we see how to give the most plausible contrastivist analyses of reasons for and against in terms of promotion, I’ll show that the right entailment relations straightforwardly follow. First, though, I’ll argue that the idea that at least many reasons involve promotion itself provides independent support for contrastivism.

3 Promotion

In this section I’ll argue that the popular idea that reasons are intimately related to the promotion of some kind of objectives—desires, values, and so on—itself supports contrastivism. After introducing this idea, I’ll consider non-contrastive views about the relevant kind of promotion and argue that they are problematic. Then I’ll show that a contrastive understanding of promotion, which generates a version of contrastivism about reasons, avoids the problems that face the non-contrastive theories. It is not my goal here to show conclusively that all non-contrastive theories are false. Rather, I want to show that they face problems that a contrastive theory avoids, in order to independently motivate the version of contrastivism I develop in the rest of the paper.

3.1 Promotion in the theory of reasons

Several writers with importantly different views about the nature of normative reasons accept something like the following schema:

**Promote:** There is a reason for $s$ to $\phi$ iff $s$’s $\phi$-ing would promote some $X$ of the relevant kind.

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7I’ll say more about entailments between sets that differ in resolution in section 5.
Some writers, like Moore (1903, 1912); Wedgwood (2009); Parfit (2011) take the Xs to be objective values, like happiness or justice. Others, like Schroeder (2007), take the relevant kind of X to be desires of the agent. And others, like Finlay (2006, ms), take the relevant kind of X to be contextually-specified ends. Nagel (1970) also analyzes reasons in terms of promotion, though his view is importantly different. Still, there is a plausible view in the neighborhood of Nagel’s which explicitly fits Promote.9

We might follow writers like Scanlon (1998) and Anderson (1993), and make a distinction between the promotion of values and the respect for values.10 If we make this distinction, we might worry that some reasons will not be explained in terms of the promotion of anything. But everyone should recognize that at least some reasons are tied to promotion.11 And if I’m right that these reasons are contrastive, that is some pressure to adopt contrastivism about all reasons. It is theoretically unattractive to posit two separate reason relations, one of which is tied to promotion and is contrastive, and one of which is tied to respect, and is non-contrastive. If there is a plausible unified view of reasons on offer, that would be preferable. If this sort of disjunctive view of normative reasons appeals to you, though, feel free to read me as only discussing the reasons that involve promotion.

3.2 Promotion as probability-raising

The idea that reasons involve promotion is an attractive and widespread one. But what does it take for an action to promote some objective? A natural initial idea is that an agent’s φ-ing promotes X when her φ-ing raises the probability of X. Of course, this is not yet very precise. Promoting a desire is making it more probable that the desire is satisfied—where the object of the desire is a proposition p, promoting the desire is raising the probability of p. It’s harder to see what it would be to promote a value. I’ll follow Wedgwood (2009) and say that to promote a value is to promote a state of affairs in which the value is instantiated.12 On the probability-raising view, to promote a value is to make it more probable that the value is instantiated.

Though this probability-raising view is a natural one, it is also controversial. One

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8Moore didn’t talk about reasons explicitly, but rather rightness. But his view of rightness would extend straightforwardly to this kind of view of reasons.

9The complication with Nagel’s view is that he thinks what we have reasons to do is to promote valuable states of affairs, whereas the other theories hold that the fact that performing certain actions would promote certain objectives is what explains why we have reasons to do those actions.

10See also Pettit (1991) and Pettit’s contribution to Baron et al. (1997).

11For example, instrumental reasons to take the means to our ends seem to be clearly tied to the promotion of those ends. See Kolodny (ms); Bedke (ms) for relevant discussion.

12Wedgwood does reject the probability-raising view of promotion, however.
important problem concerns the promotion of values like justice. It is true that
we have reasons to do things that would promote justice, in some sense. What is
more problematic, though, is the claim that promoting justice involves making it
more probable that justice is instantiated, because it seems that justice is already
instituted. If that’s right, then the probability that justice is instantiated, no
matter what we do, is 1. So we can’t make it more probable.\textsuperscript{13} I think there are
things to be said in defense of the probability-raising view.\textsuperscript{14} But for now I want to
put these worries aside, and work with this view. I do this in order to have a concrete
version of the idea that reasons involve promotion to work with. Moreover, existing
views about the relationship between reasons and objectives like desires, goals, or
values are often framed in terms of probability-raising.\textsuperscript{15} I show in section 6, though,
that this probability-raising view of promotion is not necessary for my purposes.

So, according to this view, you have reasons to φ when your φ-ing would make
some relevant objective more probable. But this leaves an important question: more
probable than what? I’ll consider two attempts to answer this question, and argue
that both of them are problematic. Then I’ll sketch a contrastivist version of the
view, which I’ll develop in the next section, that avoids the problems.

3.3 Doing nothing

The first view I’ll consider is offered by Schroeder (2007), p. 113:

\textbf{Doing Nothing: } s’s φ-ing promotes X iff \( P(X|s \ φs) > P(X|s \ does \ nothing) \)

An important question about this view is the following: what is it for me to do
nothing? Evers (2009), in a paper objecting to Schroeder’s account, considers two
ways to answer this question, but shows that both suffer from the same basic problem.

\textsuperscript{13}Thanks for Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Jacob Ross for discussion of this point.

\textsuperscript{14}For example, we may try specifying more fine-grained values, like ‘I increase the amount of
justice in the world’ or ‘I do the most just thing I can’. A further reason to be careful in specifying
the objectives is the following kind of case, raised by Fabrizio Cariani in conversation. Suppose
there are two objectives, X and Y, but that promoting X without promoting Y is worthless. Since
promoting X when we also promote Y is valuable, it seems that X can provide reasons to do the
things that would promote it. But it does not seem that it should provide reasons to do the things
that would promote it in cases in which we will not also promote Y. In this kind of case, I want to
say that the reason-providing objective is something like ‘X when you also promote Y’, rather than
just ‘X’.

\textsuperscript{15}See, for example, Bedke (ms); Finlay (2001, 2006, ms); Kolodny (ms); Schroeder (2007). Bedke’s
and Kolodny’s discussions concern instrumental reasons; Finlay’s and Schroder’s concern all reasons.
reading is that doing nothing is just doing what you’re already doing. For example, if I’m walking to the store for milk, and realize I forgot my wallet, I have a reason to turn around and get it. That’s because, on this account, the probability that I get milk is higher given that I turn around and get my wallet than the probability that I get milk given that I keep walking to the store without my wallet.

The problem Evers points out for both of these readings, and for Doing Nothing in general, is that I can have reasons to do nothing, however we understand it, but this account rules that out. Suppose doing nothing is sitting absolutely still. Well, suppose that I’m out in the woods and a predator has spotted me. Fortunately, the predator can only see me if I move. So I have a reason to sit absolutely still. Next, suppose that doing nothing is doing what I’m already doing. And suppose that I’m waiting at a restaurant for an important client who’s just informed me that he’ll be there in five minutes. Well, then I have a reason to keep doing what I’m doing—that is, to keep waiting. So I can have reasons to do nothing, no matter how we understand it. But for me to have a reason to do nothing on this account, the following must hold: \( P(X|\text{I do nothing}) > P(X|\text{I do nothing}) \). But that’s impossible. Since I can have reasons to do nothing, Doing Nothing is not the right way to understand promotion, in the sense relevant for Promote.

3.4 Not \( \phi \)-ing

The second view I’ll consider is offered by Finlay (2006, ms):

**Not \( \phi \):** \( s \)’s \( \phi \)-ing promotes \( X \) iff \( P(X|s \, \phi s) > P(X|s \, \text{does not } \phi) \)

This account avoids the problem for Doing Nothing: for you to have a reason to do nothing on this account, doing nothing just has to raise the probability of \( X \) more than not doing nothing would. But to evaluate this account, we need to know what not \( \phi \)-ing is. I’ll consider three different versions of this view and argue that all three are problematic.

3.4.1 Possibilism

The first proposal, call it Possibilism, is that \( \phi \)-ing promotes \( X \) whenever \( \phi \)-ing raises the probability of \( X \) more than anything else the agent could do that is incompatible with \( \phi \)-ing. The problem with this suggestion is that it makes it too hard to have reasons to do things. For \( X \) to give you a reason to do, \( \phi \)-ing has to make \( X \) more likely than anything else you could do. Suppose I want to eat Thai food for dinner,
and that there are two Thai places around, RCA and Thai Patio. Suppose that there is a very slight chance that RCA will be too crowded so that I’ll have to go home without having Thai food if I go there. So I have a slightly better chance to get Thai food if I go to Thai Patio than if I go to RCA. Thus, according to this proposal, my desire for Thai food gives me no reason at all to go to RCA.

But this seems like a problem. After all, my desire for Thai food certainly gives me a reason to go to RCA rather than go to Zankou Chicken, which doesn’t even serve Thai food. But how could this desire give me a reason to go to RCA rather than Zankou Chicken if it doesn’t give me any reason at all to go to RCA? So this proposal makes it too hard to have reasons to do things.

3.4.2 Actualism

A second version of Not φ, call it Actualism, holds that not φ-ing is doing whatever it is you would actually do if you didn’t φ. This view would seem to make it easier to have reasons, since your φ-ing doesn’t have to raise the probability of X more than anything else you could do, but only more than whatever it is you’ll actually do, if you don’t φ.

But now consider this case from Behrends and DiPaolo (2011). Debbie desires that \( p \). She is given a choice to push one of three buttons, A, B, or C. If she pushes either A or B, \( p \) is guaranteed to be true. But if she pushes C, \( p \) will not be true. Debbie in fact pushes A, and if she hadn’t pushed A, she would have pushed B. It turns out, according to the view under consideration, that she had no reason to push button A, since \( P(p|Debbie\ pushes\ A) = P(p|Debbie\ pushes\ B) \). But this is counterintuitive. After all, she certainly had a reason to push A rather than push C. So this proposal also seems to make it too hard to have reasons to do things.

3.4.3 Probabilism

Finally, consider the following Probabilist view. Rather than thinking of not φ-ing as doing anything incompatible with φ-ing, or with doing whatever it is you would actually do, if you didn’t φ, we can just appeal to a probability distribution over the things you might do. So for example, if you don’t go to RCA, there might be a 60% 

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16 The distinction between this version and the last version, and the corresponding names, are familiar from the debate between actualists and possibilists about obligation. See Jackson and Pargetter (1986).

17 Behrends and DiPaolo point out a more basic problem. It turns out, according to this view, that Debbie didn’t even promote her desire by pressing A.
chance you go to Thai Patio, and a 10% chance you go to Zankou Chicken. This view will give us some value for \( P(\text{you don’t } \phi) \), and let us calculate one for \( P(X|\text{you don’t } \phi) \) by weighting \( P(X|\text{you } \psi) \) by the probability that you \( \psi \), for all different ways \( \psi \) of not \( \phi \)-ing. What we end up with is something like the expected value, as far as \( X \) is concerned, of not \( \phi \)-ing. Then to determine if you have a reason to \( \phi \), we can straightforwardly check to see if \( P(X|\text{you } \phi) > P(X|\text{you don’t } \phi) \).

This theory also makes it too hard to have reasons to do things. Suppose again that I want some Thai food, that the only two Thai places around are Thai Patio and RCA, and that the only other dinner option is Zankou Chicken, which doesn’t serve Thai food. But now suppose that RCA is very likely to be so crowded that I’ll have to go home without having Thai food if I go there. In particular, suppose that \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to RCA}) = .2 \), while \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to Thai Patio}) = .9 \), and of course \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to Zankou}) = 0 \). And finally, as above, suppose \( P(\text{I go to RCA}) = .3 \), \( P(\text{I go to Thai Patio}) = .6 \), and \( P(\text{I go to Zankou Chicken}) = .1 \).

With some calculation, we end up with the result that \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I don’t go to RCA}) \) is roughly .77 (where not going to RCA is just either going to Thai Patio or going to Zankou Chicken), which is greater than .2. So according to this view, my desire for Thai food doesn’t give me any reason at all to go to RCA. But as before, surely this desire gives me a reason to go to RCA rather than Zankou Chicken. So it must give me some reason to go to RCA.

It’s also worth pointing out, I think, that if we’re going to assign probabilities to the various ways of not \( \phi \)-ing, we need some way of distinguishing one way from another. That is, we need some way of dividing up the alternatives. Different ways of doing this will lead to different answers about what you have reasons to do. And, as I pointed out in section 1, this kind of resolution-sensitivity is characteristically contrastivist. So spelling out this theory may require contrastivism after all.

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18In defending this sort of view, Finlay (2006, ms), makes the following assumption, which he calls the ‘symmetry of choice’: in making judgments about what reasons you have (or what’s good, or what you ought to do, on his theory), we ignore your dispositions to take one option over another. So in figuring out which reasons I have, we would just assume that I am equally likely to go to each of the three restaurants. But we can still construct a case on which, according to this view, my desire for Thai food gives me no reason at all to go to RCA. Let \( P(\text{I go to } x) = 1/3 \), for all three restaurants, \( x \), so that the symmetry of choice is satisfied. And, as above, let \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to RCA}) = .2 \), \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to Thai Patio}) = .9 \), and \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to Zankou}) = 0 \). Then by some simple calculations, \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I don’t go to RCA}) \) is roughly .38, which is greater than \( P(\text{I get Thai food } \mid \text{I go to RCA}) = .2 \). Thus, according to this modified Probabilist view, my desire for Thai food gives me no reason at all to go to RCA. But surely it gives me a reason to go to RCA rather than go to Zankou Chicken, and it’s hard to see how it could do this unless it gave me some reason to go to RCA.
3.5 Contrastive promotion

I think we can give a simpler contrastive view that avoids the problems I’ve discussed so far. This view does not rule out reasons to do nothing. And it does not need to come up with some way to understand not $\phi$-ing. Instead, the idea is that $X$ can give you a reason to $\phi$, relative to a set of alternatives $Q$, when your $\phi$-ing raises the probability of $X$ more than the all of the other alternatives in $Q$.\footnote{I’ll defend this claim in the next section.} Thus, in the Thai food case, my desire for Thai food gives me a reason to go to RCA rather than Zankou Chicken, even though it doesn’t give me a reason to go to RCA rather than Thai Patio, since going to RCA raises the probability that I get Thai food more than going to Zankou, but less than going to Thai Patio. Similar remarks hold in the button-pressing case from Behrends and DiPaolo (2011). The key to these solutions to the problems facing non-contrastive theories is that, for the contrastivist, the sets of alternatives that reasons are relativized to need not be exhaustive of all the options open to the agent.

3.6 Motivating resolution-sensitivity

So the arguments against the non-contrastive accounts of reasons in terms of promotion illustrate the advantages of non-exhaustivity. But when I introduced contrastivism in section 1, I pointed out a second feature of the view, namely resolution-sensitivity. The arguments I’ve given so far don’t motivate this feature of contrastivism.\footnote{I did mention that spelling out Probabilism may require resolution-sensitivity, but since I rejected that view—for reasons having to do with non-exhaustivity—I can’t appeal to that argument in motivating resolution-sensitivity.} But I think we can motivate it. Once we relativize reasons to sets of alternatives, there are cases in which whether or not something is a reason for an action seems to depend, not just on what possibilities are covered by the alternatives in the set, but also how we split up those possibilities.

Consider the following version of the famous Professor Procrastinate case from Jackson (1985); Jackson and Pargetter (1986). Professor Procrastinate has been asked to write a review an important new book, because she is the most qualified person to write it. But she is a terrible procrastinator. If she accepts the invitation, she is very unlikely to actually write the review. And if that happens, the author’s career and the field at large will suffer. If Procrastinate just declines the invitation, someone else—less qualified, but more reliable—will be asked to write, and will do so. In this case, the fact that Procrastinate is a procrastinator is a reason for her
to decline the invitation rather than accept. That is, it’s a reason to decline out of \{\text{decline, accept}\}, plausibly provided by the objective of doing what’s best for the profession. But it is intuitively not a reason to decline out of the more fine-grained set, \{\text{decline, accept and write, accept and don’t write}\}. So whether or not this fact is a reason to decline seems to depend on the resolution at which we divide up the alternatives. Thus, once we relativize reasons to alternatives, there’s good reason to allow the sets to vary in resolution, rather than, say, making them all maximally fine-grained.

4 Contrastive Reasons and Promotion

I’ve argued that promotion, in the sense relevant for \textit{Promote}, is best understood contrastively: your φ-ing promotes \(X\) only relative to some set of alternatives. It does so when it raises the probability of \(X\) more than all the other alternatives in the set. In this section I’ll begin to develop a contrastivist account of reasons based on this account of promotion.

\textit{Promote} tells us what has to hold for you to have a reason to φ, or for there to be a reason for you to φ. But it would be nice to have an account of when some fact is a reason for you to φ. Philosophers who appeal to promotion to analyze the reason relation frequently appeal to \textit{explanation} here. If you have a reason to φ because φ-ing promotes some objective, then some fact is a reason for you to φ when it \textit{explains why} (or is part of the explanation for why) φ-ing promotes the objective.\footnote{For analyses of reasons partly in terms of explanation, see Toulmin (1950); Broome (2004); Searle (2001); Finlay (2001, 2006, ms); Schroeder (2007). Like these other writers (with the possible exception of Finlay), I take the relevant sort of explanation here to be a non-epistemic notion. For \(r\) to explain why your \(\phi\)-ing would promote \(X\) is for \(r\) to be part of what makes it true that your \(\phi\)-ing would promote \(X\).} I have a reason to go to the store because doing so would promote the objective of my having breakfast in the morning. The fact that I’m out of milk is part of the explanation for why going to the store would promote this objective. So according to this idea, the fact that I’m out of milk is a reason to go to the store. I’ll adopt this strategy here.

So what we want is a contrastivist analysis of reasons for and reasons against in terms of promotion. So far I’ve said that \(r\) is a reason for you to φ when it explains why your φ-ing would raise the probability of some relevant objective \(X\) more than other relevant alternatives. Conversely, it’s natural to think that \(r\) is a reason against φ-ing when it explains why your φ-ing would raise the probability of \(X\) less than other relevant alternatives. So what we need to know is, \textit{how many} of the other alternatives
does your φ-ing have to raise the probability of X more/less than, for X to give you a reason for/against φ-ing?

First a quick note about reasons against. It is often thought that a reason against some action φ is just a reason for not-φ. On this view, we can just have one kind of reason, reasons for. But the contrastivist cannot accept this view because, given non-exhaustivity, the sets of alternatives reasons are relativized to need not be closed under negation: just because φ is in a set, it does not follow that not-φ is also in the set. So if we want to talk about reasons against an alternative φ relative to a set Q, we can’t just talk about the reasons for not-φ out of Q, since not-φ might not even be in Q. Thus, the contrastivist needs to define reasons against—reasons not to φ, instead of reasons to not-φ—separately.

So start (for expositional purposes) with reasons against. I suggest the following analysis:

Against: r is a reason for you not to φ out of Q iff there’s some X of the relevant kind and r explains why $P(X | \text{you } \phi) < P(X | \text{you } \psi)$, for some $\psi \neq \phi$ in Q.

If you could do better, as far as X is concerned, by doing something other than φ-ing, then X very plausibly gives you a reason against φ-ing. The most natural alternative to Against would say that your φ-ing has to raise the probability of X less than all the other alternatives. But this misses out on some intuitive reasons against. For example, suppose I can travel the 15 miles to campus by jogging, biking, or driving. The fact that I want to get there in under an hour intuitively gives me a reason against biking, even though I have a better chance of getting there in under an hour if I bike than if I jog—it’s still quite unlikely that I get there in under an hour if I bike.

Once we accept Against as an analysis of reasons against, I think we should accept the following analysis of reasons for:

For: r is a reason for you to φ out of Q iff there’s some X of the relevant kind and r explains why $P(X | \text{you } \phi) > P(X | \text{you } \psi)$, for all $\psi \neq \phi$ in Q.

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22See Nagel (1970), footnote 1 on p. 47, for example.

23Again, by 'some X of the relevant kind', I mean the following: there’s some set of objectives that are the things to be promoted, according to our theory of reasons. A desire-based theory will say that this set contains desires of the agent; a value-based theory will say that it contains some independent values. X is an objective of the relevant kind when it is in this set. By existentially quantifying here, we allow that there are multiple objectives that can give you reasons in any individual case.

24Or is part of the explanation of why—I’ll ignore this qualification from now on.

25Interestingly, though I reject Finlay (ms)’s non-contrastive account of reasons, this contrastive account of reasons for closely mirrors his contrastive analysis of ‘ought’. According to that analysis,
This makes reasons for harder to come by than reasons against. But I think this is a very plausible analysis of reasons for. If you could do better, as far as $X$ is concerned, by doing something other than $\phi$-ing, it would be strange if $X$ gave you a reason to $\phi$ out of a set of alternatives that includes that other thing. The most natural alternative would say that $X$ can give you a reason to $\phi$ relative to some set when your $\phi$-ing would raise the probability of $X$ more than some other alternative in the set. But if we accept this in addition to Against, some consideration $r$ could be both a reason for and a reason against all the alternatives in the middle—that do not do the best and that do not do the worst, as far as $X$ is concerned. For example, in the case I introduced above, the fact that campus is fifteen miles away would be both a reason to bike and a reason not to bike, both provided by my desire to get to campus in under an hour. But it’s implausible that one and the same consideration can be both a reason for $\phi$ and against $\phi$, both provided by some single objective $X$.\textsuperscript{26}

One potential objection to this view is that it gives too liberal a treatment of reasons against. A reason against some alternative, you might think, has to “imply a significant criticism” of that alternative, in the sense of Greenspan (2005, 2007), and merely being a reason for an incompatible alternative isn’t enough. But other philosophers seem to agree with me that a reason for one alternative is in fact a reason against other incompatible alternatives, for some relatively weak notion of incompatibility, like physical or psychological incompatibility.\textsuperscript{27} I think this is very plausible: if some consideration $r$ is a reason for $A$—if it highlights some benefit for doing $A$—and if doing $B$ precludes doing $A$, then it is very plausible that $r$ is a reason against $B$, since doing $B$ would keep you from getting that benefit.\textsuperscript{28}

Note, though, that we can draw an interesting distinction between two types of reasons against on this view. A reason against some alternative that does imply a roughly, you ought to $\phi$ just in case your $\phi$-ing makes the contextually salient end more likely than any other relevant alternative. By allowing multiple objectives—the analog of Finlay’s ends—to provide reasons in a single context, my analysis is better suited to the pro tanto notion of a reason.\textsuperscript{26} I think that one consideration can be both a reason to $\phi$ and a reason not to $\phi$ (relative to the same set of alternatives). But I don’t think that both of these can be provided by the same objective (desire, end, or value). See Snedegar (fc), section 2, for more thorough discussion of this point. This argument also tells against a revised version of Possibilism, according to which an objective provides a reason for you to $\phi$ when $\phi$-ing raises the probability more than something—instead of everything—else you could do.

\textsuperscript{27} Compare the discussion of ‘General Substitutability’ in Sinnott-Armstrong (1992), section 1.

\textsuperscript{28} Sinnott-Armstrong (2008) says that a reason “favors one thing and disfavors others” (p. 258). Ruben (2009) says that when doing $A$ is incompatible with doing $B$, “a reason to do an act of type $B$ must also be a reason not to do an action of type $A$” (p. 63). And Broome (ms) cites nice features of one alternative—which are reasons for taking that alternative—as reasons against incompatible alternatives. See the Montreux-Marrakesh example on p. 63.
significant criticism of that alternative—like the fact that Zankou Chicken is really crowded at this time of day—often won’t turn out to be a reason for any other particular alternative. That’s because these sorts of facts are often irrelevant for differences between other alternatives in the set. For example, the fact that Zankou Chicken is really crowded doesn’t really tell us anything about the relationship between going to Thai Patio and going to Spicy Thai BBQ. So it doesn’t explain why either $P(\text{I don’t have to wait | I go to Thai Patio}) > P(\text{I don’t have to wait | I go to Spicy Thai BBQ})$, or vice versa. So by For, it won’t turn out to be a reason for either of these, though it’s still a reason against going to Zankou Chicken. Reasons against an alternative that do not imply a significant criticism, on the other hand, will often be reasons for other particular alternatives. So, even on this view, we can capture Greenspan’s insight: some considerations merely count against certain alternatives without counting in favor of others.

5 Providing the Constraints

In this section, I’ll show that the theory I developed in the last section, independently motivated by considerations about the relationship between reasons and promotion, straightforwardly provides the constraints on the independence of reasons relative to different sets of alternatives I motivated in section 2, as well as some other plausible constraints.

5.1 Transitivity

The first constraint we need on the independence of reasons relative to different sets is one that rules out intransitivity. That is, we want it to turn out that whenever $r$ is a reason for $A$ rather than $B$ and for $B$ rather than $C$, it is also a reason for $A$ rather than $C$. In fact, we need an importantly but subtly different constraint, once we adopt a view on which we explain reasons in terms of the promotion of various kinds of objectives or ends. We don’t just want reasons for $A$ rather than $B$ and for $B$ rather than $C$ to be reasons for $A$ rather than $C$; we want them to be provided by the same objective. A case in which my desire for Thai food gives me a reason $r$ for $A$ rather than $B$ and for $B$ rather than $C$, but not for $A$ rather than $C$ is counter to the transitivity intuition, even if, say, my desire to spend lots of money explains why $r$ is a reason for $A$ rather than $C$.

So what we need is the following kind of constraint:
Transitivity: If \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) rather than \( B \), provided by \( X \), and a reason for \( B \) rather than \( C \), provided by \( X \), then \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) rather than \( C \), provided by \( X \).

Fortunately, it’s easy to see that this follows straightforwardly from the framework I developed in the last section. If \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) rather than \( B \), and a reason for \( B \) rather than \( C \), both provided by \( X \), then we know that \( r \) explains why \( P(X|A) > P(X|B) \) and why \( P(X|B) > P(X|C) \). Since these facts about conditional probability don’t depend on the comparisons we’re making, and since the greater than relation is transitive, it follows that \( P(X|A) > P(X|C) \). And given plausible assumptions about how explanation works in these cases—namely, that if \( r \) explains why \( P(X|A) > P(X|B) \) and \( r \) also explains why \( P(X|B) > P(X|C) \), then it will explain why \( P(X|A) > P(X|C) \) (at least in cases in which this is true)—\( r \) explains this.  

So, by For, \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) rather than \( C \). Thus, by appealing to the idea that reasons are to be explained in terms of promotion, understood as probability-raising, we secure Transitivity.

5.2 Non-exhaustivity

The second constraint concerns entailment relations between reasons relative to certain kinds of related sets of alternatives. First I’ll discuss entailments between reasons relative to sets that differ in the alternatives they include—that is, sets that differ along the dimension of non-exhaustivity.

First, consider reasons for an alternative relative to one set, and reasons for that alternative relative to a subset of that initial set. I said above that intuitively, facts which are reasons for \( A \) relative to \( Q \) should also be reasons for \( A \) relative to subsets of \( Q \) that contain \( A \). Imagine that this were not true. Then there might be a case in which \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) rather than either of \( B \) or \( C \), but not a reason for \( A \) rather than \( B \). It’s implausible that there could be such a case, so we should rule it out.

Fortunately, the theory I developed in the last section—in particular For—delivers precisely this result. If \( r \) is a reason for \( A \) out of \( Q \), explained by end or objective \( X \), then by For, \( P(X|A) > P(X|B) \), for all the other alternatives \( B \) in \( Q \). Since the value of \( P(X|A) \) does not vary with the alternatives, \( P(X|A) \) will obviously be higher than \( P(X|B) \) for all the alternatives \( B \) in any subset of \( Q \). And since \( r \) explains why \( P(X|A) > P(X|B) \) for all of the other alternatives \( B \) in \( Q \), \( r \) will also explain this

\footnote{Remember that I’m using a non-epistemic notion of explanation here. Plausibly, the epistemic notion will not have this feature, but the sense I intend, on which \( x \) explains \( y \) when \( x \) is part of what makes it true that \( y \), does.}
for all of the other alternatives in a subset of $Q$. So $r$ will be a reason for $A$ out of any subset of $Q$ that contains $A$.

Next, consider reasons against. I said above that reasons against an alternative out of one set should also be reasons against that alternative out of supersets of the initial set. If this entailment did not hold, then we might have a case like the following. $r$ is a reason against $A$ when the alternative is $B$ alone, but not a reason against $A$ when we consider $C$ in addition to $B$. Again, this is implausible.

Fortunately, the theory delivers just the result we want. Suppose $r$ is a reason against $A$ out of $Q$, explained by $X$. Then, by Against, $P(X|A)$ must be lower than $P(X|B)$ for some other alternative $B$ in the set. Merely adding some new alternatives to $Q$ won’t change this fact. Thus, $r$ will also be a reason against $A$ relative to the new superset of $Q$. So the independently motivated version of contrastivism that analyzes reasons in terms of promotion delivers precisely the constraints we need, on the independence of reasons relative to sets and their subsets and supersets.

5.3 Resolution-sensitivity

I also introduced a second feature of contrastivism, resolution-sensitivity. Two sets of alternatives may cover the same possibilities, but do so at different levels of detail. For example, we might have reasons to $A$ relative to the more fine-grained set $\{A, B, C\}$ or relative to the more coarse-grained set $\{A, B \lor C\}$. Do we want a theory to deliver any relationships between reasons relative to sets related in this way?

I think there are some intuitive constraints here. Suppose the fact that I don’t have any vacation days left is a reason to go to work out of $\{\text{go to work, stay home and clean, stay home and watch TV, stay home and do something else}\}$, explained by my desire not to get fired. It also seems to be a reason to go to work out of the more coarse-grained set $\{\text{go to work, stay home}\}$. The intuitive thought here is that if doing $A$ is better, with respect to the objective $X$, than all of the (relevant) ways of doing $B$, then doing $A$ is obviously better than doing $B$, with respect to $X$. And the theory delivers this result. It’s a fact about conditional probability that $P(X|B \lor C)$ cannot be higher than both $P(X|B)$ and $P(X|C)$, and this secures the result: if $P(X|A)$ is higher than $P(X|B)$ for all the different fine-grained ways $B$ of doing some more coarse-grained option $D$, then $P(X|A) > P(X|D)$. That is, reasons for $A$ relative to more fine-grained sets entail reasons for $A$ relative to more coarse-grained sets that just group together other alternatives.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\)We might also wonder about the relationship between reasons for $A$ relative to one set and reasons for more coarse-grained alternatives that subsume $A$ (say, $A \lor B$) in more coarse-grained
Now consider reasons against. The fact that I’m out of vacation days is intuitively a reason against staying home out of the coarse-grained set \{go to work, stay home\}. And it also seems to be a reason against this alternative out of the more fine-grained set \{go to work by car, go to work by bus, go to work some other way, stay home\}. Again, the theory delivers the correct result here. Since \(P(X | B \lor C)\) can’t be higher than both \(P(X | B)\) and \(P(X | C)\) (it also cannot be lower than both) we know that, in general, reasons against an alternative \(A\) out of a coarse-grained set like \(\{A, B \lor C\}\) entail reasons against that alternative out of more fine-grained sets like \(\{A, B, C\}\), according to the theory. If \(P(X | A)\) is lower than \(P(X | D)\), for some coarse-grained alternative \(D\), then by this fact about conditional probability, \(P(X | A)\) must be lower than \textit{at least one} of the more fine-grained ways of doing \(D\). And so by \textbf{Against}, \(X\) will provide a reason against \(A\) relative to the more fine-grained set.

5.4 Other entailments: unions and intersections

I’ll close by discussing other entailment relations delivered by the theory that involve unions and intersections of sets of alternatives. It is independently interesting that the theory delivers entailments in these cases. But it also may have some interesting applications. For example, when two agents who have been deliberating separately, using two different sets of alternatives, come together to deliberate jointly, it’s plausible that the relevant alternatives in this new context of joint deliberation will bear some relationship to the two separate sets the agents were using on their own. Either taking the union or the intersection of these sets would be reasonable.\(^{31}\)

First, note that the following two entailments follow as corollaries of the previous ones involving subsets and supersets. (i) Reasons for \(A\) out of both \(Q\) and \(Q'\), both provided by \(X\), will be reasons for \(A\) out of the intersection, \(Q \cap Q'\), provided by \(X\). This just follows from the result that reasons for \(A\) out of one set are reasons for \(A\) out of subsets of that set.\(^{32}\) (ii) Reasons against \(A\) out of both \(Q\) and \(Q'\) will be reasons against \(A\) out of the union, \(Q \cup Q'\). This just follows from the result that

\(^{31}\)This will often be more complicated, of course, since the resolutions of the two separate sets may cross-cut one another.

\(^{32}\)The limiting case here is when \(Q \cap Q' = \{A\}\). Technically, by \textbf{For}, everything will be a reason for \(A\) relative to this singleton set. But singleton sets will never be the relevant set—if there’s only one relevant alternative, then there’s no need for deliberation, and there won’t be reasons for or against the single alternative.
reasons against \( A \) out of one set are reasons against \( A \) out of supersets, as well.

We also get the following new result, which is not simply a corollary of a previous one. Suppose \( r \) is a reason to \( A \) out of \( Q \), provided by \( X \), and that \( r \) is also a reason to \( A \) out of \( Q' \), provided by \( X \). What about the union of these two sets, \( Q \cup Q' \)? By For, we can immediately see that \( r \) will be a reason for \( A \) relative to the union, as well. And this is plausible: if nothing in either set was better than \( A \), as far as \( X \) is concerned, then putting them all together in the same set should not make a difference. Interestingly, we don’t get the corresponding result for reasons against and intersections: it’s not true in general that if \( r \) is a reason against \( A \) out of \( Q \) and out of \( Q' \), then it’s a reason against \( A \) out of \( Q \cap Q' \), since we may lose all of the alternatives in either set that are ranked higher than \( A \), when we intersect.

6 Reconsidering Promotion as Probability-Raising

In section 3.2 I promised to reconsider my assumption of the probability-raising view of promotion in light of apparent problems with that view. I set those problems aside, since (i) existing discussions of these issues are often framed in terms of probability-raising, and (ii) the probability-raising view provided a concrete version of the idea that reasons involve promotion to work with. But now I want to show that this particular view of promotion is not crucial for my purposes here.

I have shown that the idea that reasons involve the promotion of objectives generates a version of contrastivism that provides important intuitive constraints on the independence of reasons relative to different sets of alternatives. The probability-raising view of promotion has two features that I used in proving that these constraints hold. First, it provides a ranking of options for each objective, in terms of how probable the actions make the objective. I used this ranking to generate the constraints involving non-exhaustivity: the transitivity constraint, as well as the constraints involving subsets and supersets. But any way of understanding promotion that provides a ranking of options for each objective in terms of how well the options promote the objective will generate these constraints, as long as the ranking itself is transitive.

The second important feature of the probability-raising view, which provides the resolution-sensitivity constraints, is that the rankings it provides have the following feature:

**Disjunction Boundedness:** For all actions \( A \) and \( B \) and for all objectives \( X \), \( A \lor B \) is ranked somewhere between (inclusive) \( A \) and \( B \), in terms of how well it promotes \( X \).
The fact about conditional probabilities, that when \( P(X|A) \geq P(X|B) \), \( P(X|A) \geq P(X|A \lor B) \geq P(X|B) \), secures this property for the probability-raising view. But I think that any plausible ranking of options in terms of how well they promote a given objective will have the Disjunction Boundedness property. Doing \( A \lor B \) can’t do worse than the worst of \( A \) and \( B \), and can’t do better than the best of \( A \) and \( B \), as far as the relevant objective goes.

My arguments against Doing Nothing, Actualism, Possibilism, and Probabilism motivating a contrastive account of promotion were framed in terms of the probability-raising view. But analogous arguments can be run against more general versions of the first three views, stated just in terms of how well actions promote various objectives. For example, in Behrends and DiPaolo (2011)’s button-pressing case, Debbie surely has a reason to press button A rather than press button C. But according to Actualism and Possibilism, Debbie has no reason at all to press button A, since pressing button A does not better promote her desire than pressing button B. It is hard to see how to give a non-probabilistic version of Probabilism. But if we are worried about the probability-raising view of promotion, the difficulty with formulating a non-probabilistic version of Probabilism should make us worry about this view, as well.

We can also see now that the probabilistic principles, For and Against, were special cases, in the probabilistic framework, of the following more general principles:

\textbf{For*}: \( r \) is a reason for you to \( \phi \) out of \( Q \) iff there is some \( X \) of the relevant kind such that \( r \) explains why your \( \phi \)-ing would better promote \( X \) than any of the other alternatives in \( Q \).

\textbf{Against*}: \( r \) is a reason for you not to \( \phi \) out of \( Q \) iff there is some \( X \) of the relevant kind such that \( r \) explains why your \( \phi \)-ing would not promote \( X \) as well as some other alternative in \( Q \).

So the probability-raising view of promotion is not crucial for the theory I’ve developed here. Any view of promotion which provides rankings of options in terms of how well they promote the objectives and which has the Disjunction Boundedness property will work.

\section{Conclusion}

In this paper, I’ve shown that an independent source of motivation for contrastivism—the relationship between reasons and promotion—leads very naturally to a version of
the theory that straightforwardly solves an important problem for the contrastivist. By appealing to this idea, we can capture intuitive relationships between reasons relative to different sets of alternatives without sacrificing the independence that lets the contrastivist solve problems facing non-contrastive theories. The upshot, then, is that one of the most compelling sources of motivation for contrastivism about reasons generates what I take to be the most attractive and most defensible version of the theory.

References


