

## Social Relations and Constructivist Publicity of Reasons

Christine Korsgaard and R. Jay Wallace have each, in their own way, defended a version of the thesis that reasons are public – that by their nature practical reasons are not limited in authority and application to particular agents.<sup>1</sup> As Wallace puts it, a reason’s “normative force . . . extends across different agents. Thus if considerations C provide me with reason to do X, then they equally provide other people with corresponding reasons for action.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I defend a “constructivist” version of the publicity thesis, in the sense that I argue for an explanation of publicity in terms of Michael Bratman’s model of shared intentions<sup>3</sup> and *grouped reasons* – reasons that meet Wallace’s condition of arising from the same considerations. I do not try to defend the thesis that private reasons are in any sense impossible. I only argue for an explanation that can account for the pattern of grouped reasons that Wallace describes and emphasizes, and that accounts for the social and public nature of such reasons in terms of shared intentions. This explanation is supported by a reciprocity constraint, holding that reasons only extend to others in the way Wallace describes under conditions of presumed reciprocity, which Wallace’s view does not explain. This explanation also has the virtues of not being limited in the ways that the approaches of Korsgaard and Wallace are, and of connecting the idea of publicity of reasons to substantive social relations, which moves the notion of publicity of reasons to a conception of social normativity. My difference with Korsgaard and Wallace is not necessarily deep, in that they do not seem completely forced by their

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<sup>1</sup> Korsgaard 2009, 1996a, 1996b; Wallace 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace 2009, p. 471.

<sup>3</sup> Bratman 2009, 1999.

own views to deny what I say here, but, I think the issue is very important, in the sense that the potential difference in the direction the publicity-of-reasons line of inquiry takes going forward is substantial.

The approaches of Korsgaard and Wallace seem limited in their explanatory potential. Korsgaard's account seems to be limited to cases where people are directly trying to interact, cases of *explicit* joint deliberation, negotiation or agreement. If anything, Korsgaard establishes that all reasons are, in principle, *shareable*. For any reason of mine, it might have normative force for you as well because of your attitudes regarding me, my projects, or the particular end that my particular reason concerns. If I have a reason to eat a sandwich, this could give you reason to buy me one, if you are committed to my end of keeping myself fed. According to Korsgaard, any reason is shareable in this sense.

To argue for a more literal understanding of the publicity thesis, Wallace points to a general pattern, which he calls the "justified interference pattern" in which the projects of one agent give rise to reasons of non-interference from other agents insofar as the pursuit of the project is itself justified.<sup>4</sup> The more reason you have to perform a given action, the more reason I have not to interfere with that action. Further, the very considerations that give you reason to perform an action seem to, at the same time, provide me with reasons not to interfere. This is a very interesting pattern and it does seem to exhibit a form of publicity. Wallace's argument for the publicity thesis is that the justified interference pattern is best explained by the supposition that reasons are

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace 2009, p. 485.

public – reasons have a kind of open-ended normative relation to everyone, not just to one agent in particular.

### **Analysis of Social Relations and the Justified Interference Pattern**

My explanation of the justified interference pattern (and any similar patterns) and the grouped reasons that arise from it has three main parts. (1) I appeal to an intention to respect a person's projects, which, if held in the appropriate way, would account for the grouped reasons in question concerning a case of potential interference. (2) I appeal to a shared intention, in Michael Bratman's sense, to explain the general pattern. Bratman has laid out a "constructivist" account of shared intentions that makes sense of shared intentions in terms of individual attitudes and dispositions. Roughly speaking, shared intentions involve intentions by participants that all participants perform the action, where this intention is sensitive to the intentions of others in a context of common knowledge among the participants. I argue that we all have shared intentions with each other that we respect one another's projects of kinds that are recognizably important to all. This explains why we have general reasons to not interfere with others' projects whose strength co-varies with the strength of the reasons to pursue those projects. For example, although we might not have thought of it this way before, you and I have a shared intention to respect one another's pursuit of the well-being of oneself and those we care about. Because of this, we have reasons to not interfere with these pursuits. (3) I appeal to a notion of commitments that accounts for the strength of the grouped reasons and the co-variation in strength between the original reason for an agent to pursue something and the corresponding reasons for others not to interfere.

As stated, my explanation of the justified interference pattern appeals to the notion of reasons stemming from an agent's intentions and agents having related kinds of intentions concerning one another's projects. An intention to respect your projects means that I will have instrumental reasons not to interfere with your recognized attempts to further these projects. An intention to help you or to play a secondary role in your endeavors means that I will have reasons to help you with your projects, and, to an extent, to take them on myself. Such intentions will explain the relevant reasons in a way that meets Wallace's condition that the reasons spring from the very same considerations. If reading in the park would be a way to help you improve yourself or pursue your well-being, for example, then, just as observing this would give you a reason to read in the park, it would give me a reason not to interfere with your reading in the park, on the assumption that I have an intention to respect your projects of self-improvement or pursuing your well-being.

Obviously, there loom questions of why we would have such intentions, what they concern, what kind of strength they have, and how serious the reasons are that follow from them. Part of addressing such questions is handled by seeing them as fundamentally social intentions. Michael Bratman's account of shared intentions gives an excellent model on which to understand these intentions.

The idea I am putting forward is that we have a shared intention that we respect one another's projects of kinds that are recognizably important to all. For example, it is plausible that most socially-minded, rational people intend that we respect one another's projects of the following kinds: the pursuit of well-being for oneself and those one cares about, the pursuit of self-perfection or self-improvement, and the pursuit of fairness or

justice. Because we are social creatures and because of our social commitments, which I discuss more below, we have shared intentions that *we* respect one another's projects that are recognizably important to all of us. This is a shared intention in a fundamentally social sense, because we each intend that we respect each other's projects because we both intend that we do so. We take up the commitment together. We can import these ideas into Bratman's scheme as follows. Here, I keep Bratman's outline, but insert my public reasons material.

- 1) I intend that we respect each other's projects of recognizably important kinds and you intend that we respect each other's projects of recognizably important kinds.
- 2) I intend that we respect each other's projects in accordance with and because of (1) and meshing subplans of our intentions; you intend that we respects each other's projects in accordance with and because of (1) and meshing subplans of our intentions.
- 3) (1) and (2) are common knowledge between us: it is common knowledge that we each intend that we respect each other's projects and that we do so in accordance with and because of our mutual intentions and meshing subplans.

To summarize, the intention for respect is *mutual* and *reciprocal*. It is mutual, because the intention is that we both have the respect. It is reciprocal, because we both have the intention. Condition (1) is straightforward: we each intend that we both do it. I intend, not just selflessly that I respect projects by myself, but that we respect each other's projects together.

Regarding condition (2), it is in accordance with and because of the fact that we both intend that we both do it, that I have the intention (that we both do it). This means that if I discover that you no longer so intend, then my intention dissolves. I would not intend that we do it (either of us) if we both did not so intend, and neither would you. I intend that we respect each other's projects, because I believe that we both intend that we do this in cooperation; if we did not both intend that we respect each other's projects in cooperation, then neither of us would intend any of it. I come back to this topic later.

So far, we have an account of how grouped reasons – corresponding reasons stemming from the same considerations – can be explained by instrumental reasons that come from intentions to respect someone's projects. We also have an account of how shared intentions between all that we respect one another's projects of recognizably important kinds can provide general instrumental reasons that fit the pattern of grouped reasons that Wallace describes – the justified interference pattern. Further, the analysis provides for how these reasons are a part of our social relations.

However, we do not yet have an account of how we can expect these instrumental reasons to have any particular strength, especially strength that is supposed to vary in proportion to the strength of the original reasons to which they correspond. It is an important part of the pattern Wallace describes that the stronger your reason to X, the stronger my reason for not interfering with X. This is not only something that seems, at least in general, to be clearly true, but it is also a large consideration that is supposed to lead us to infer the publicity of reasons as an explanation of it. If I have more reason to not interfere with activities that you have more reason to do, and less reason to not interfere with activities that you have less reason to do, then, apparently, that must be

because your reasons for those activities have a kind of open-endedness that extends to me and others. This extension of the reach of the reason somehow proportionally preserves the force of the reason. This is, apparently, the literalist publicity interpretation of Wallace.

My account of this begins with an appeal to commitments of a certain kind. As I understand them, commitments do not have to derive from actual decisions, although they certainly can. In addition to being committed to following through on one's actual decisions, one can be committed to doing things that one should decide to do because it would make more sense of other decisions one has made or is disposed to make. So, while I maintain that one can only be committed to things that have some concrete tie to one's actual decisions and decision-making ways, there is more to commitments than one's actual past decisions. I claim that we, in general but as individuals, are committed to our individual parts of shared intentions that we respect each other's projects of kinds that are recognizably important to all of us.

Concerning the question of the strength or authority of the non-interference reasons, we can find this in our background commitment to our part in a shared intention of mutual and reciprocal respect of projects. It is important to recognize that instrumental reasons do not carry their own relative authority with respect to other reasons, since they depend on the authority of the ends from which they derive. For one thing, the reasons have no particular weight relative to other reasons stemming from other ends. This is even more problematic given that the ends or intentions may be given up. Our shared intention that we respect each other's recognizably important projects is not a joint

“decision” in the sense developed by Margaret Gilbert,<sup>5</sup> but rather it is an intention that any one of us could simply drop. So, the instrumental reasons that arise from it could, from this standpoint, always be defused by dropping the intention. However, I claim that we are committed to these shared intentions, because of rational pressures, in the form of background decisions we have made and regularly make and our decision-making processes that stem from our social nature. We are social creatures and, as such, we need to live in social cooperation. We do not need cooperation just because it is in our individual interest to live cooperatively, but rather, we need it because we need such social, cooperative norms to make sense of our practical lives. We don’t know how to live without living in a world of social cooperation, wherein we have shared intentions, among which is a shared intention that we respect each other’s recognizably important projects.

If what I just claimed is right, then the instrumental reasons for non-interference are real and have some real strength. The co-variance of strength of shared reasons can then be explained in the following way. We should think of the strength of my commitment to the shared intention *as setting a maximum* strength for the instrumental reasons that come from it. My reasons can only be as strong as the commitments they stem from (at least for instrumental reasons). The instrumental reasons can, however, vary in strength up to this maximum point depending on how essential the means are or how well they serve the end. Consider the following illustration. You could have reason to buy a cup of coffee and reason to buy a certain house. Both of these reasons could stem from your pursuit of your own well-being. Lets say that you have much stronger reason to buy the house than to buy the coffee. Correspondingly, as Wallace would point

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert 2006



out, I have much stronger reason not to interfere with your purchase of the house than not to interfere with your purchase of the coffee. The explanation of this, given my analysis, is that not interfering with your purchase, either one, is a means to my end of respecting your pursuit of well-being, but they are not equally good or essential means. To put the point more intuitively, it is more disrespectful to interfere with the purchase of the house than to interfere with the purchase of a coffee. Thus, interfering with the purchase of the house is more detrimental to my own aim. So, considered simply as instrumental reasons concerning the same end, my reason not to interfere with the purchase of the house is greater than my reason not to interfere with the purchase of the coffee. The co-variance holds because my respect for your projects tracks the strength of the connection between your project and what would serve your project. If some activity serves your project more, then it also does more for my respect of that project not to interfere with that activity.

### **Assessment of this Analysis**

The claim that we have such shared intentions is supported by a reciprocity constraint on the justified interference pattern. This constraint consists in the fact that those who show that they do not share the intention of mutual respect are not seen as standing in the same relation to us with regard to justified interference. If we know that someone, Bill, does not respect other's projects and interferes as it pleases him, then we do not have the same reasons against interfering with his projects that we have with respect to others.

If, as Wallace seems to hold, the nature of the reason itself is such that its open-ended structure attaches to me, the bystander, just by how the reason is structured, then the reciprocity constraint would be entirely mysterious, or at least in need of some other, unrelated explanation. Imagine Bill is known not to respect my pursuit of well-being or that of others, while Dave is very respectful of others' pursuit of well-being. Say that Bill and Dave both have good reason to buy something – a house, a car, a computer, or a sandwich – in pursuit of their own well-being. According to Wallace's suggestion that there is some open-ended, public structure to each of their reasons to buy a sandwich, then this applies to me and gives me reason not to interfere, just as much for Bill as for Dave. So, Bill and Dave are not equally respectful of others' projects in their intentions, but, according to Wallace's analysis, we should be equally respectful of their projects. Intuitively, however, this seems to me, mistaken. At the very least, I have far less reason to not interfere with Bill than to not interfere with Dave. Dave's participation in a practice of mutual and reciprocal intended respect makes a great difference in my reasons not to interfere with his pursuits. On the other hand, if I have reason to not interfere with Bill's pursuits, it seems plausible that they would be reasons of a different kind than those most directly relevant to my non-interference with Dave, and that they would not stem from any public nature of reasons. The reciprocity constraint is well-explained by my account, but completely unexplained by Wallace's account.

Finally, this is not just an explanation of the pattern that bypasses the publicity of reasons. These grouped reasons that arise from shared intentions are public in two senses: 1) They are public because they meet Wallace's condition: the reasons mutually arise from some set of considerations that is the same for all parties. The fact that buying

the house would serve your pursuit of well-being gives you a reason to do it and it gives me a reason not to interfere with your doing it. 2) They are public because they arise from social relations that ground (1), which means that they have a kind of general mutuality between all participating agents. Reasons are public, because our social relations make them so. Reasons that arise for all because of our social relations are public reasons in an intuitive sense that builds off of Korsgaard's original line of argument. Thus, this is rightly considered a constructivist theory of the publicity of reasons.

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