ABSTRACT. This paper considers the connection between the three-place relation, \( R \) is a reason for \( X \) to do \( A \) and the two-place relation, \( R \) is a reason to do \( A \). I consider three views on which the former is to be analyzed in terms of the latter. I argue that these views are widely held, and explain the role that they play in motivating interesting substantive ethical theories. But I reject them in favor of a more obvious analysis, which goes the other way around.

1. INTRODUCTION

Consider the following sentences:

1. The fact that Katie needs help is a reason to help Katie.
2. There is a reason to help Katie.
3. The fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go to the party.
4. There is a reason for Ronnie to go to the party.

Each sentence uses the word “reason” to express some relation, but the relation expressed by each is different. In 1 it expresses a dyadic relation between a consideration and an action, in 2 it expresses a monadic property of an action, in 3 it expresses a triadic relation between a consideration, an agent, and an action, and in 4 it expresses a dyadic relation between an agent and an action. But it is natural, nevertheless, to think that these senses of “reason” are not unrelated.

It is natural, for example, to take the “there is” in 2 and 4 at face value, as an existential quantifier. After all, 2 is a consequence of 1 and 4 of 3, in the same way that we would expect if it were. And if someone tells you that there is a reason to help Katie, it is perfectly fair game for you to ask,
“well, what is it?” So the relationship between 1 and 2, and between 3 and 4, ought not to be particularly mysterious. I’m going to take the view that this is correct. So in order to understand 2 we have to understand 1, and in order to understand 4 we have to understand 3. What I’ll be interested in, in this paper, is therefore the relationship between 1 and 3. How are they related?

A little bit of vocabulary, then. Because they differ with respect to whether they have an agent as one of their relata, I’m going to say that the dyadic relation expressed by 1 is the agent-neutral reason relation, and that the triadic relation expressed by 3 is the agent-relational relation. So the reason referred to in 1, because it stands in this relation, counts as agent-neutral, and similarly that in 3 counts as agent-relational. And again, I will use these same categories to refer to the sentences that ascribe agent-neutral and agent-relational reasons. So 1 itself is an agent-neutral ascription, while 3 is an agent-relational one. The question before us is: what is the relationship between agent-neutral and agent-relational reasons?

This is not, exactly, the same question as that of what the relationship is between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons. According to the official definition, an agent-relative reason is a reason that is a reason for some people, but not for everyone, while an agent-neutral reason is one that is a reason for everyone. On this official definition, the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons is one among agent-relational reasons. So according to the official usage, a reason cannot be both agent-relative and agent-neutral. Agent-relative reasons, then, are by definition merely agent-relational reasons.

2. THE QUANTIFICATION STRATEGY

The official definition takes a stand on the relationship between agent-relational and agent-neutral reasons. It claims that agent-relational reasons are basic, and that agent-neutral reasons arise when something is an agent-relational reason for