

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 12: Evidence, Persuasion & Diversity

Jun 3rd, 8:01 AM - 9:01 AM

In search for a balance between experimental research and the theory of reasoning: Commentary on José Ángel Gascón's "Why did you really do it? Examining the distinction between kinds of reasons"

Marcin Koszowy

Warsaw University of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Koszowy, Marcin, "In search for a balance between experimental research and the theory of reasoning: Commentary on José Ángel Gascón's "Why did you really do it? Examining the distinction between kinds of reasons"" (2020). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 4.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA12/Wednesday/4>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

In search for a balance between experimental research and the theory of reasoning: Commentary on José Ángel Gascón's "Why did you *really* do it? Examining the distinction between kinds of reasons"

MARCIN KOSZOWY

Laboratory of The New Ethos
Warsaw University of Technology
Plac Politechniki 1, 00-661 Warsaw, Poland
marcin.koszowy@pw.edu.pl

1. Introduction: Psychological experiments and theoretical accounts of reasoning

Among a number of issues related to the overlap between experimental research in psychology and the study of argumentation that have been raised in José Ángel Gascón's insightful paper, two questions seem to be of key importance: (i) what do some psychological experiments about giving reasons really tell us about our reasoning?; and (ii) how can philosophical distinctions between kinds of reasons help us understanding these experiments along with their implications for argumentation theory? Gascón's point of departure is the observed gap between how we usually justify our decisions and what the results of psychological experiments tell us about our ability to give good reasons. Those experiments seem to suggest that people are very bad at pointing to 'real' reasons for their actions. In this respect, Gascón's contribution can be interpreted as combining results of research in cognitive psychology with the tools of analytical philosophy, specifically with the conceptual framework that captures normative, motivating, and explanatory reasons.

I am sympathetic to this approach, especially because of the Authors's clear and systematic attempt at finding a proper balance between (i) the experimental research that, by collecting empirical material may help us focus on some so far unexplored communication phenomena (which should be further informed by the theory of reasoning); and (ii) sketching possible research directions for developing theoretical accounts that would be driven by empirical research. Keeping in mind that Gascón emphasises that his paper provides the reader with just initial answers to questions pointing to that overlap, what I find particularly important is the answer to the question of which conclusions drawn from empirical research on giving reasons can, to some extent, remodel some basic claims and distinctions in the philosophy of argument? In order to outline an answer, in section 2 I will discuss some issues related to one of the key distinctions made in the paper, namely the one between reasons and causes. Next, in section 3, I will briefly focus on the issue of worries that argumentation theorists may have once they have learnt about some results of experiments. This discussion will lead to section 4, devoted to the issue of the place of argumentation theory within the proposed approach. I will sum up in section 5 with an initial attempt at answering the question about a possible linkage between the future research on the topic and the replicability problem in behavioural sciences.

2. Reasons and causes for actions

Gascón formulates the main problem of the paper by asking a series of questions that address Nisbet and Wilson's experiments (1977) and their impact on studying reasons: "As a first step, however, it would help to be clear about what exactly Nisbett and Wilson's experiments uncovered. Did they identify our *real* reasons for action? Or did they show us simply the *causes* of our actions? Are they the same thing?" (p. 4). Having formulated this purpose, Gascón develops his considerations in a clear and analytical manner, step-by-step defining

terms and identifying issues that help explaining the standard description of the experiment using claims and distinctions about the types of reasoning taken from the analytical tradition (e.g., from the works of Audi, Davidson and Parfit).

What may draw readers' attention in Gascón's initial description of the experiments conducted by Nisbett and Wilson is that causes for our actions seem to be at first glance misleadingly associated with reasons for our actions. For example, the stockings experiment in which the participants were asked to evaluate four pairs of stockings (which in fact were identical) and then to justify their choices (the experiment has shown that the participants were likely to choose the pair of stockings situated on the right hand side) Gascón states: "However, when the participants were asked about the reasons for their choices, the position of the article was never mentioned. In fact, when the researchers suggested that possibility to the participants, they denied it" (p. 3). What may strike the reader of this passage is the fact that the participants couldn't point to the reason (associated here to a cause) if they weren't aware of it. To make this point more explicit, the reason I have given in order to justify my action may be different from what caused that action. This confusion disappears as it is further shown that the explanations of experiments start making more sense once we have distinguished between *reasons* people give with the notion of *factors* that in fact influence actions. Gascón shows that such confusions can be dealt with once the first ones can be in some cases treated as motivating reasons, and others – as explanatory ones.

In other words, Gascón's work helps us understand that, on the one hand, the experiments may tell us something about our dis(ability) to give reasons, especially when we don't have the access to what really influenced our decision, and on the other hand, the very description of these experiments seems to be lacking the application of basic types of reasons (such as, in this case, our justifications for our actions and the causes of our actions). The clear and detailed way in which Gascón identifies these gaps and shows concrete applications of the philosophical distinction between the kinds of reasons, is itself a valuable contribution.

3. Should we be worried about the results of psychological experiments?

Gascón makes some general statements about possible worries we can have about the results of this kind of experimental research. For example, on p. 2, he asks: "How worried should we be by this conclusion?" (in this case about Sperber and Mercier's statement that humans are rationalization machines). The Author builds the whole line of argument around this question by stating that the goal of the paper is to give a tentative answer to this question. Gascón seems to interpret Nisbet and Wilson's experiments (1977) as evidence proving that "we lack introspective access to the reasons that guide our behaviour" (p. 3). One worrying implication for critical thinking theorists could be that if that conclusion is typically true, then it would be extremely difficult to train critical thinkers because we could never be sure that the reasons such thinkers will be giving will be merely guesses.

Although I would not say that a result of a certain experiment related to giving reasons should be immediately treated as a worry for argumentation scholars, in case of Gascón's contribution this does not seem to affect the results because the experiments are here, as far as I can recognise, treated rather as an inspiration to propose a theoretical contribution that concerns mostly the applicability of the distinction between the kinds of reasons. As I have pointed out in Section 2, the very description of the experiments that mixes up kinds of reasons without introducing basic distinctions is a very good reason itself to bring this issue into attention in order to show that an argumentation theorist (with the help of some distinctions taken from analytical philosophy) is capable of making sense of experimental research. This observation may lead us to discussing in a slightly greater detail the question about what is the place of argumentation theory within this approach.

4. And Where's Argumentation Theory?

As the challenge for argumentation theory would be to answer the question of how the existing taxonomies of reasons relate to what cognitive psychology has to offer in terms of conclusions drawn from some key experiments. Do they reveal anything new about the nature of reasoning that should make the argumentation scholars adjust their taxonomies of reasoning? Gascón's paper clearly seeks for the balanced approach that would be both theoretically informed by analytical philosophy and empirically driven by the results of experimental research. However, in line with Section 2, an issue could be here raised about the gap between our declared reasons and the genuine causes for our choices ruled by the principles of social influence (e.g., Cialdini, 2001). Let us consider, as an example, the rule of consequence, according to which I would follow the commitment I have made in the past and I would try to rationalise this objectively bad decision by giving some other reasons. I agree with Gascón that the distinction between motivating reasons (here: being consequent because I think that acting consequentially is a value in the social interaction with others) and the explanatory reasons (here: the psychological mechanism of consequence bases on the rule of influence I am not fully aware of). But how could this explication on my 'consequent' behaviour affect argumentation studies? In other words: in which way, and to which extent, the fact learnt from empirical research in psychology that we sometimes neglect real reasons for our actions should have impact on a theoretical account of giving reasons in argumentation research?

Despite a detailed discussion of problems arising from the experimental research, what I believe has not been made explicit in the paper are the detailed conclusions for argumentation theory such as those related to answering questions like: given this particular result of the experiment, do argumentation theorists have to change their conceptual framework? Hence, I think that what could be made more explicit in the future inquiry is indicating how exactly the conclusions drawn from experimental studies tell us about redefining (if necessary) some particular tasks of argument analysts and evaluators. As Gascón is well aware of the fact that he has just outlined some initial answers, this work, by 'translating' the results of psychological experiments into the language of the philosophy of argument and reasoning, is a valuable source of inspiration for providing argumentation scholars with a detailed instruction about how to apply the existing distinctions in philosophy of reasoning to analytically approach the empirical data.

5. Methodological issues in experimental psychology and the empirical evidence for giving reasons

Let me indicate yet another research perspective with posing a general question which is related to the idea of treating experimental research in cognitive psychology as an inspiration for developing some areas of argumentation theory. The discussions about the 'replication crisis' in experimental social psychology and computational neuroscience (see. e.g., Hüffmeier et. al, 2016; Miłkowski et. al. 2018), along with other disciplines, thanks to the critical assessment of reproducibility, have revealed some key methodological issues related to experimental research. Although I do not think that the replication problem is the main concern from the point of view of this paper, the following question about the general line of the future inquiry into kinds of reasons may here arise: would such issues as the replication crisis affect the research direction Gascón is proposing? If, for instance, it would be difficult to replicate the results of a given experiment about giving reasons, would that make us to hold on with drawing conclusions that could be crucial for the philosophical theories of reasoning and argumentation studies until the results are replicated?

If I correctly understood the core of Gascón's contribution, the fact of whether or not results of a particular experiment would be replicable is, at least at this stage of inquiry, less important than giving an answer to the question: to what extent may the experiments *inspire* argumentation theorists to incorporate their analytic conceptual framework for capturing possible implications for the study of reasoning and thus to focus on some unexplored theoretical issues? My view is that the first necessary step made in the direction initiated by Gascón would be to collect most urgent issues that could serve as a valuable source of inspiration for developing a more robust theoretically informed and empirically driven taxonomy of kinds of reasons.

Acknowledgements

The work reported in this paper has been supported in part by the Polish National Science Centre under Grant 2015/18/M/HS1/00620.

References

- Cialdini, R.B. (1991). *Influence: Science and practice* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hüffmeier, J., J. Mazei, & T. Schultze (2016). Reconceptualizing replication as a sequence of different studies: A replication typology. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 66, 81-92.
- Miłkowski, M., W.M. Hensel, & M. Hohol (2018). Replicability or reproducibility? On the replication crisis in computational neuroscience and sharing only relevant detail. *Journal of Computational Neuroscience*, 3(45), 163-172.
- Nisbett, R. E., & Wilson, T. D. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84(3), 231–259.