Reasons and Luck: Comments on Bazargan-Forward's *Authority, Cooperation, and Accountability*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In *Authority, Cooperation, and Accountability,* Saba Bazargan-Forward advances a novel view of authority-based accountability. Such an account is meant to explain the division of moral accountability in cases in which people granting authority to another agent—for example, police officers or commanders giving orders—are held accountable for outcomes. Both the "deliberator" (for example, a police chief) and the "executor" (for example, the police officer giving the orders) are to be held accountable according to the circumstances.

Bazargan-Forward aims to provide a theory of moral accountability when there is group cooperation—including cooperation between individuals, and cooperation between individuals and larger institutions. According to Bazargan-Forward, when Person 1 is an authority and Person 2 is their agent, Person 1's motivating reasons for instructing Person 2 to ϕ constitutively determine the purpose of Person 2's conduct (Bazargan-Forward 2022, 43)[1].

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1 Reference to Bazargan-Forward (2022) will be shortened to page number only throughout this paper.

In a division of agential labor, a deliberator (roughly, an agent who supplies the reasons and purpose for ϕ-ing) can be accountable for the actions of an executor (roughly, an agent who carries out the ϕ-ing). In some cases, the executor can also be responsible for ϕ-ing in virtue of enacting the deliberator's motivating reasons. Morally evaluating conduct requires adverting to the actor's motivating reasons in favor of that conduct (15). The deliberator's motivating reasons constitutively determine the executor's purpose (45). Reasons and purposes are connected.

In this short discussion, I will focus on two main points. First, I will suggest that there are more sources of authoritative reasons and purposes than the sorts of deliberators that are Bazargan-Forward's focus. If the aim of the theory is to give a comprehensive picture of cooperative accountability, some aspects of accountability will be missing without considering these extra sources of reasons. Second, I will suggest that the connection between causation and moral accountability implied by Bazargan-Forward's view undergenerates results in some cases and overgenerates in others. Consequently, the view has trouble accounting for various forms of moral luck, including forms related to the wide variety of sources of reasons.

2. SOURCES OF REASONS

Bazargan-Forward focuses on specific deliberators (chapters 2-5), and later institutions (chapter 8) as sources of motivating reasons of actions for which both deliberators and executors can be held accountable. Typical cases include authority figures and their executors in the military and in police forces, as well as corporate firms and their employees. The view is meant to capture cases of group agential labor, broadly construed—including cases as disparate as war, corporate employment, and neighborhood associations. Typically, a deliberator is accountable for an outcome by conferring authoritative reasons on an executor. "Deliberator" and "executor" are technical terms, and are widely applicable to a variety of joint agential situations. According to Bazargan-Forward, person x qualifies as a deliberator and person y qualifies as an executor if person x possesses practical authority over y. Drawing on Raz's (1978) idea of a protected reason, Bazargan-Forward holds that "We place others under our authority by soliciting promises, by forming agreements, by making requests, by issuing demands, and by undertaking shared action" (6).

My first comment is that there are many other sources of authoritative reasons and purposes which fit the structure of Bazargan-Forward's view than he discusses. Here I articulate and elaborate on a few of them. Either the scope

of Bazargan-Forward's view of who can be a "deliberator" in the relevant sense is too narrow, or we must account for many other sources of motivating reasons and purposes as structuring moral accountability.

Consider the following example:

> **Parents.** Meena, an Indian woman, was brought up to be a vegetarian. She declines to eat meat and poultry into adulthood because of her upbringing.

Here, the source of reasons is Meena's upbringing by her parents as a vegetarian. The executor is Meena. Even though Meena is no longer under the direct moral authority of her parents, their attitudes towards meat-eating still exert a kind of psychological and moral authority over Meena—arguably, authoritative reasons similar to the ones discussed in Bazargan-Forward's central cases. Bazargan-Forward also admits that "the sort of authority a deliberator has over an executor is not limited to regimented, formal relationships" (6). That this sort of case shares key features in common with Bazargan-Forward's other *explananda* is not necessarily a problem for his view. But one consequence is that there are many more sources of authoritative reasons than are covered by his discussion. If Bazargan-Forward seeks to develop a comprehensive theory of group cooperation, these sorts of instances should also be accounted for.

This challenge can be stretched to other sorts of examples. Social categories often furnish authoritative reasons for actions:

> **Social Categories.** Jamal, an African-American man, knows that being pulled over by police is statistically more dangerous for him than for others. Consequently, he always drives at the speed limit due to fear of being pulled over.

In this example, the source of reasons is the social category *African-American man,* and the executor is Jamal. The authority arises from the enforcement mechanism of stereotypes of African-American men. It is not the same sort of "authority" as one finds in a police chief or in a military operation, or even in a parental relationship, but it is still a form of authority that behaves similarly in furnishing authoritative reasons for action. Sometimes there is a deliberator or deliberators associated with social categories, but there need not be. A natural interpretation of the case is that the police are the enforcement mechanism of Jamal's behavior. But this need not be the case in order for the social category to enforce stereotypes that function as authoritative reasons. In recent work, I suggest that social categories confer reasons on individuals for acting, and thus

impact their agency.[2] For example, the category "womanhood" confers socially authoritative reasons on the individuals who belong to the social category. Even attempting to defy the conventions and contours of a social category is a response to reasons furnished by the category.

If this case seems like too much of a stretch in terms of what can confer an authoritative reason, consider an example in which a person willingly enters a social category like *professor:*

> **Assistant Professor.** Cordelia is a first-generation assistant professor of biomolecular science. Because she is insecure about how to act in a lab setting, she relies on stereotypes of professors to judge how she should act. She adjusts her ways of speaking and her mannerisms to conform to stereotypes of professors.

Here, the conventions of the category confer a kind of authoritative reason or reasons on Cordelia. They are distinct from legal or institutional reasons of the type Bazargan-Forward discusses late in his book.

Finally, consider that reasons can be conferred by even more nebulous sources, as in the following case:

> **Social Media.** Alexia, an American nineteen-year-old, regularly scrolls through TikTok. TikTok heavily exposes her to anti-Balkan propaganda urging people to be wary of people from the Balkans; consequently, she forms anti-Balkan beliefs and discriminates against people from the Balkans.

In this case, the source of reasons is TikTok and its algorithm.[3] The executor is Alexia.

Now, to what extent are agents accountable for their actions in these cases in the same way that they are in the sorts of cases that are Bazargan-Forward's focus? There are many obvious differences. In Bazargan-Forward's case, there is often a specific individual or group of individuals with institutional power ordering an executor into action. Thus one potential route for distinguishing between cases where there is genuine authority versus where there is not is to appeal to specificity of the deliberating entity.

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2 See Bernstein (2024) for an argument that social categories confer reasons.

3 If Bazargan-Forward's view requires that a human or humans be the source of reasons, one can causally trace the TikTok algorithm back to the programmers and company founders.

But note that in each case provided above, there are groups of deliberators furnishing the reasons for action. In *Social Categories,* the causal profile and conceptual content of the category "African-American" is collectively created by groups of individuals. In *Parents,* Meena's parents supply the reasons for action. And in *Social Media,* the programmers of TikTok supply the reasons via the algorithm.

One might worry that a susceptible teenaged user of TikTok has not entered into a typical authoritative arrangement, so the reasons furnished by the algorithm are not authoritative in the relevant sense. But one lesson of these cases, I suggest, is that the line between authoritative and non-authoritative reasons is thinner than one might think: propaganda can be coercive in much the same way that individuals or groups can be coercive. Minimally, people can *de facto* grant authority to things like TikTok algorithms or social categories in a way that parallels granting authority to individuals and groups.

One possible response to these sorts of examples is that we should just focus on cases in which agents directly transmit their reasons to other agents. In Bazargan-Forward's most discussed cases, there is a clear chain of transmission from the deliberator to the executor. There are also clear *relata* of transmission, as in the case of a commander ordering a soldier to act.

The problem is that it is hard to draw a principled line between direct transmission and other sorts of cases, either on the basis of the directness or the *relata* of the transmission. Admitting that institutions can provide reasons and purposes, for example, already opens the door for all sorts of other sources of reasons. If one wants to hold that corporations (*qua* employers) can furnish reasons and purposes directly but that TikTok cannot, one is already taking a principled stand on what counts as the correct sort of institution and the right kind of transmission. But the structure of the cases is very similar. Each of the above cases involves agents who are causally upstream of the sources, including: those responsible for the social construction of social categories; those responsible for a particular person's upbringing; and those responsible for designing the TikTok algorithm and the videos that display as a result. Attempting to draw a line also incurs an extra explanatory burden for the theory.

An alternative strategy is to admit that the above cases should indeed count as cases of authorities directing agents—that the above entities exercise authority in the way that the deliberators in Bazargan-Forward's more central cases do. In this case, a more detailed explication of the moral accountability of deliberators and executors would be helpful. For example, are people collectively implicated in the formation of oppressive social categories

which furnish authoritative reasons? Are corporations like TikTok, as well as the software programmers and the social media posters, implicated in the imparting of reasons? A further avenue of investigation would include either drawing a principled line between these sorts of cases and others, or developing a fully fleshed out theory of accountability in these cases.

3. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CAUSATION AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this section I focus on several related worries centering around the relationship between causation and moral accountability in Bazargan-Forward's view. At the outset, Bazargan-Forward suggests that agents have authority-based accountability "beyond their causal reach" (1). In part, this is because executors can carry out activities imbued with a deliberator's purpose but beyond what executors can control. For example, if a military officer orders a soldier to charge, there are still a wide range of outcomes resulting from the charge that the officer cannot control.

Another aspect of agential accountability beyond causal reach involves *resultant moral luck.* Roughly, there is a case of resultant moral luck where luck makes a difference to moral responsibility for an outcome. Moral luck is a threat to Bazargan-Forward's view because there are many cases in which an executor confers a purpose on a deliberator, but in which the executor is not causally related to the outcome in the right sort of way. Bazargan-Forward admits that the authority-based view of accountability has trouble accounting for moral luck (which he calls "outcome luck"). Consider his example:

> **Double Promise.** Mastermind puts out an ad for a hitman to kill Politician but offers only paltry remuneration. Assassin takes the job, but only because she has already agreed to kill Politician for someone else who promised to pay much more. The first promise was sufficient motivation for Assassin to kill Politician. By the time she took on the second promise, Assassin had already settled on a plan for murdering Politician; the second promise has no effect on that plan. Indeed, after accepting the promise from Mastermind, Assassin promptly forgets doing so.

According to Bazargan-Forward, Mastermind is to be held accountable for Politician's murder even though he is not a difference-maker to the outcome, because Mastermind conferred a purpose on Assassin's act. The fact that Mastermind is not directly causally related to the outcome does not mitigate

Mastermind's responsibility for the outcome. Whereas if one were to accept that the case involves moral luck, Mastermind would only be accountable for an attempt rather than the murder itself—it is simply lucky that Mastermind's ad is not causally necessary for Assassin to kill Politician.[4]

Bazargan-Forward admits that denying moral luck in this case is controversial:

> Given the contentious status of moral luck, I believe we ought to take the argument for authority-based accountability at face value: Mastermind does indeed bear authority-based accountability for the murder. Even though Assassin forgot that she made a promise to Mastermind, she still retains that purpose so long as their agreement remains normatively in effect [...] Insofar as Assassin successfully serves as an executor and Mastermind successfully serves as a deliberator, Mastermind bears authority-based accountability for what Assassin does by furnishing him with a purpose to act. (66-7)

The implication here is that agents can be morally accountable for outcomes to which they do not causally contribute.

Accepting this result, and ones like it, divorces causal contribution from moral responsibility in a worrisome way. Intuitively, causal contribution to an outcome is a condition of being held accountable for that outcome. But being held accountable for a non-difference-making act amplifies the problem of moral luck, since there are many instances in which someone confers a purpose on an executor's act but where they are not a difference-maker for a particular outcome. Such a theoretical commitment overgenerates cases in which a deliberator furnishes a purpose for an executor, but the executor turns out not to be causally responsible for an outcome. It is bad moral luck that the outcomes in these cases still occur. Many more people would be held accountable for outcomes than are causally related to those outcomes in the right kind of way.

What it is to be causally related to an outcome in the right sort of way is a messy matter. Without a requirement that an agent be causally connected to an outcome in the right sort of way, there is a risk that a deliberator conferring a malevolent purpose on an executor is sufficient for responsibility. In cases of causal preemption, for example, there are multiple sufficient causes for an

4 Yaffe's (2010) definition of an attempt involves a causal chain that begins with an agent's intention which plays the right sort of causal role and ends with the world matching the content of the intention.

outcome, but one cause preempts the other from bringing about the outcome. Consider the following variant on Bazargan-Forward's case:

> **Dual Masterminds.** Mastermind 1 pays Suzy to kill Politician, and Mastermind 2 independently pays Billy to kill Politician. Suzy shoots at Politician, and Billy shoots at Politician very shortly after. Suzy's bullet kills Politician, whereas Billy's bullet flies through the space where Politician was just standing.

In this case, only Mastermind 1 is causally upstream of Politician's actual death, since Suzy's bullet is the cause of it. But Mastermind 2 has also conferred a purpose on Billy, whose action is individually sufficient to cause Politician's death.

Bazargan-Forward has two paths for handling this sort of case. The first path is just to deny that Mastermind 2 is accountable for Politician's death, since intuitively, Mastermind 1 is the one causally upstream of the death. But Bazargan-Forward already admits that agents can be accountable without an appropriate causal link to an outcome. So, drawing a principled line between Mastermind 1 and Mastermind 2, given that they each confer a purpose onto a causally sufficient executor, is tricky given this theoretical commitment. The second path is to accept that both Mastermind 1 and Mastermind 2 are accountable for Politician's death. But this move essentially gives up on a link between actual causation and moral accountability. Not requiring a link between the two overgenerates accountability, since there are prolific purpose-conferrals without direct causal chains to outcomes.

Another morally relevant feature of Bazargan-Forward's *Double Promise* example is that it is a case of *deviant causation.* Cases of deviant causation occur when a particular planned outcome is brought about in an unplanned, or deviant, manner. For example, if an assassin intends to kill Victim by shooting him, but instead the bullet misses Victim but awakens a flock of angry birds who then peck Victim to death, Victim's death has still occurred, even if not in the way planned by the assassin. The assassin is morally lucky because she planned and caused Victim's death to occur, but since it occurred much differently than intended, her moral responsibility is less than if everything had gone according to plan. The "deviance" in the case is thought to mitigate the assassin's moral responsibility for an outcome. More generally, cases of deviant causation raise questions about how well-defined a causal relationship must be between an agent and a planned outcome in order for the agent to be held

morally accountable.[5]

There is a distinctive moral problem with cases of deviant causation, since an agent has both the poor intention and has performed an act that is sufficient for the outcome, without being causally related to the outcome in the right sort of way. It is an additional open question what counts as "the right sort of way." Exactly how much the causal process must hew to the initial plan is difficult to capture via broad principle. As we have seen above, denying that causation is necessary for moral accountability risks overgenerating accountability.

Bazargan-Forward primarily focuses on cases in which deliberators are to be held accountable for the actions of their executors. But Bazargan-Forward also admits that there are cases with the opposite structure, in which executors are responsible for the reasons and purposes of their deliberators. This sort of case generally occurs when one is acting on behalf of an immoral deliberator, as in the case of an employee working for a morally corrupt corporation or even manager. One of Bazargan-Forward's cases, *Performance Review,* involves this sort of structure. In this example, Owner seeks to promote men rather than women at the firm. Manager promotes Senior, who independently warrants promotion, for good reasons. The fact that Senior was a man was not the reason that Manager promoted him, rather, it was Senior's stellar performance (46). According to Bazargan-Forward, Owner's reasons transmit a sexist purpose to Manager's action; thus, Manager is accountable for a morally bad action even if Manager had morally permissible reasons for performing the action. According to Bazargan-Forward: "The moral here is that in a division of agential labor the purpose that a deliberator furnishes for an executor can affect the deontic status of what the executor does even if the executor's reasons oppose that purpose" (46). Bazargan-Forward holds that employers *qua* deliberators can morally "infect" the actions of their employees *qua* executors. Even if the employee does not subscribe to the reasons of the employer, she can be held morally accountable for the action via the employer-furnished reasons for action.

This sort of case also involves an intuitive mismatch between causal responsibility and the outcome. Bazargan-Forward seems to deny the relevance of moral luck to his view at various points, but in these cases, it is morally unlucky that the executor is furnished with the deliberator's reasons. There are many cases in which a person does the right thing apart from a deliberator-furnished purpose. And in many cases, these people are doing the right thing for their own morally praiseworthy reasons. Are we to hold that a person is

5 See Bernstein (2019, 2021) for extended discussion of these cases.

accountable for the deliberator-furnished purpose in each of these cases, even purposes that do not provide bases for their actions?

If Bazargan-Forward answers this question affirmatively, cases in which a person or persons try to "change the system from within" come out as morally wrong. Consider the following variant on *Performance Review:*

> **Rebel.** Sangheeta goes to work as a manager for a firm that she knows to have sexist policies and practices, with the goal of improving the system from the inside. The firm seeks to promote a few women with the purpose of avoiding the appearance of sexist discrimination, but Sangheeta promotes the women because they are well-qualified for their new roles. Consequently, the firm's attitudes and policies begin to change.

In this example, Sangheeta is working for a firm that has morally bad reasons for doing what it does. But she is carrying out morally praiseworthy actions, and for the right reasons. According to Bazargan-Forward, what non-sexist employees do on behalf of their sexist employers is still sexist.[6] Working on behalf of a corrupt organization is a morally complicated situation, but holding conscientious rebels accountable for trying to change these systems from within is a worrisome result. This worry is amplified in even more morally serious cases, such as operatives working against a terrorist organization by sabotaging them from within, or even some senators working on behalf of the United States government in one of its lesser eras. Practically speaking, one would not want to call these sorts of situations morally impermissible, even if they are imperfect.

Finally, my two broad worries about extra sources of reasons and moral luck can be connected: an individual's authoritative reasons, as well as the reasons available to them, are shaped by constitutive and circumstantial luck. Even the availability of cooperative activities in which one has agreed to participate—war, robbery, charitable giving—are products of circumstance. Denying the relevance of luck to moral accountability generates problematic results not only for the individual cases under discussion, but for a broader view of moral accountability that takes into account individual circumstances. Bazargan-Forward's book is ambitious and detailed and valuable contribution to theories of accountability. Perhaps in future work he can address the role of luck in shaping the reasons and activities available to individuals.

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6 Here I have adapted Bazargan-Forward's racism example from pages 218–20.

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