

Précis of the Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View

MARKO JURJAKO

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Department of Philosophy and Division of Cognitive Sciences, Sveučilišna avenija 4,
51000 Rijeka, Croatia
mjurjako@ffri.uniri.hr

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a brief overview of the main topics covered in *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View*. It offers the conceptual background for understanding the central argument that normative practical reasons, when considered within the framework of methodological naturalism, cannot be understood as wholly mind-independent facts. In addition, the paper prepares the ground for my responses to the symposium commentaries by Attila Tanyi, Yifan Sun, Voin Milevski, and Regan Reitsma.

KEY WORDS: normative reasons, methodological naturalism, subject-based and object-based theories of reasons

Introduction: What the Book is About

My book *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View* (2024) offers a discussion on how normative reasons can be understood from a naturalistic perspective. Normative reasons are those reasons that are supposed to provide justifications for how we should think and act. Importantly, the goal of the book is not to adopt some form of the reasons-first approach to normativity and try to provide a wholesale naturalistic reduction of the normative (see, e.g., Schroeder 2021). The approach I take is to start with normative *practical* reasons, examine the general theories of them, and apply the framework of methodological naturalism to determine how best to make sense of their nature.

My fascination with normative reasons begins with the thought that, on the surface, they appear to be a peculiar kind of entity—facts that seem to have a central authority over us, telling us what to do or think. At the same time, they are so intimately absorbed into our mental and social lives that we treat them as inseparable from our practical standpoint. In this regard, I find congenial Christine Korsgaard’s (2011) claim that, if there were no normative reasons, we would have to invent them. Without thinking in terms of reasons, we would lack the conceptual resources to articulate our practical and

deliberative standpoints—those moments in which we are confronted with decisions about what to do, what to think, and how to proceed with our lives. For this reason, in the book I do not dwell on the feasibility or infeasibility of eliminativist approaches to normative reasons (for recent discussions, see Khuramy and Schulz 2026; Taccolini 2024). Instead, I focus directly on how the nature of such entities might be illuminated within a naturalistic worldview.

Methodological naturalism that shapes the project of the book has both an ontological and an explanatory dimension (see Papineau 2023). On the ontological side, I draw on naturalism to argue for a choice between two broadly construed opposing views about the nature of normative reasons—objectivist and subjectivist accounts. On the explanatory side, the aim is to offer an account of how reason-relations could emerge from natural facts, and why organisms at different levels of cognitive complexity would come to treat certain facts as reasons.

These topics are, in some ways, intertwined across the chapters. However, the progression of the discussion moves from considering normative reasons in general terms, to examining their ontological accounts and asking which of them is most compatible with the adopted methodological naturalism.

Overview of the Chapters

In the introduction, I lay out the methodological background. The idea is to consider what kind of account of normative reasons can be provided that is compatible with, and non-mysterious within, our worldview as manifested in the natural and social sciences.

Chapter 1 does not offer philosophically substantive claims. Instead, its goal is mostly to lay out some of the common features attributed to normative reasons that provide grounds for further discussion.

Chapter 2 turns to more substantive issues regarding the nature of normative reasons. Following Derek Parfit's (2011) seminal discussion, I confront two types of ontological perspectives on normative reasons: object-based theories and subject-based theories.¹ As I see it, the most important feature of object-based theories is that they ground the normativity of reasons in objective, mind-independent facts. In contrast, the most important feature of subject-based theories is that they ground the normativity of reasons in facts about intelligent agents. For this reason, I understand such

¹ Across the précis and my responses to the commentaries (this issue), I will use subjectivist and objectivist theories interchangeably with subject-based and object-based theories of normative reasons.

views as involving some form of mind-dependence: the existence of normative reasons, as normative, is somehow constituted or grounded in the nature of intelligent agents. In this regard, I also see myself as following the tradition in which this idea of agent-based reasons is spelled out in terms of the capacities of rational agents and facts about what they would do or want under conditions of being rational and well informed.

The main claim of the chapter is that, from a naturalistic point of view, subject-based theories of reasons are much more plausible than object-based theories. For this reason, a large part of the chapter is devoted to responding to Parfit's (2011) objections to subjectivist views, with the aim of showing that these theories are conceptually coherent and can provide the ontological basis for a naturalistically acceptable account of normative reasons.

Chapter 3 continues with a defense of the plausibility of a form of subject-based theory of reasons. There I formulate a version of subjectivism that I label as a response-dependence view of normative reasons. The central idea is that what makes some fact a normative reason is that an agent, under conditions of rationality, would perform mental or physical actions on its basis. This type of view includes an idealization condition, according to which not every fact a person takes to be relevant—such as their current desires or wants—grounds a normative reason for performing an action or making a decision.

David Enoch (2005) raises a well-known challenge to such views by asking why we should introduce idealization into our account of normative reasons at all. The objectivists who hold that normative reasons are grounded in mind-independent objective facts have a straightforward response: the point of idealization is to capture the conditions under which we would have epistemic access to such facts. Subjectivists who ground reasons in facts about rational agents, do not seem to have such a straightforward answer available. In the chapter, I discuss several ways in which a response-dependence account can be defended against Enoch's "Why Idealize?" challenge. Since this is a prominent topic in several of the commentaries, I will address these issues in greater depth in my responses.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to expanding the response-dependence view developed in the previous chapter. It provides a more substantive discussion of the concerns, needs, and wants of rational individuals that ground their reasons. Moreover, it situates the discussion within an explicitly interpersonal setting, where the idea is that people's reasons will often be interlocked given their shared concerns and relationships. Emphasizing this communal aspect of interpersonal relations is often absent from subject-based accounts, which can lead to apparent implausibility, since what often

intuitively characterizes normative reasons is their authority, which seems to be detached from the perspective of individual rational agents. By situating the rational agent within a social context, the aim is to dispel such worries.

Chapter 5 changes gears and, unlike the more defensive previous chapters, this one develops a more direct critique of objectivist theories. In particular, drawing on Sharon Street's (2006) seminal discussion, I defend an evolutionary debunking argument according to which object-based accounts of normative reasons do not sit well with a plausible naturalistic-evolutionary account of how our evaluative judgments developed and why we find certain normative claims intuitively plausible. These include claims such as that we should take care of our children, that we should shun social defectors, and that we should help one another when in need. The argument is that objectivists must construe such claims as reflecting mind-independent normative reality. However, given that we can explain our endorsement of these claims from an evolutionary perspective—as social dispositions that ultimately promoted fitness—a more plausible account of their truth is that they are considerations we would endorse under conditions of rational deliberation about these issues.

The argument I propose has an explicit ontological dimension. Unlike typical evolutionary debunking arguments, which are usually understood as undermining the epistemic grounds of normative realism, my aim is also to argue that this type of argument supports adopting a subject-based view of normative reasons. Several commentators have noted my ontological construal of the evolutionary debunking argument and have raised questions about its plausibility. I discuss these issues further in my responses.

Chapter 6 provides an additional naturalistic-genealogical explanation of why we experience some facts as counting in favor of something, and specifically why we come to think of some reasons as categorical—that is, as independent of our subjective concerns. The chapter attempts to do this by developing a naturalistic account of how basic normative reason-relations could be established, drawing on the notion of an affordance and an analogy with the establishment of basic semantic relations associated with communicative acts that have both descriptive and imperative content. Moreover, in this chapter, I develop a discussion of normative reasons that is explicitly based on what is often called a capacity-first view of reasons (see, e.g., Schafer 2018). This approach seems more amenable to, and consistent with, methodological naturalism, because once we associate the normativity of reasons with the normativity of our cognitive capacities, we are in a better position to draw on cognitive science and other relevant disciplines in providing a naturalistically plausible characterization of those capacities.

Another Perspective on the Book

This summary follows the book's forward-looking linear progression. However, the background line of thought guiding the reasoning in the book can also be brought out in reverse order. If we think about the world and the agents that inhabit it—most notably human beings—from a naturalistic point of view, it seems to me, we are naturally led to something like the following amazing, but in many respects disenchanting worldview. As far as we know, we live in a world that originated in the Big Bang and has since developed in largely contingent ways constrained by the laws of nature. Human beings are part of this natural world. We are natural creatures shaped by biological and cultural evolution over tens of thousands of years. From this perspective, the world and our place within it appears disenchanted: there is no inherent value in this world, only facts about its development (Rosenberg 2011).

Something seems to change with the advent of creatures that are capable of sufficient behavioral flexibility, especially those capable of standing back from their immediate motivations and representations and confronting the question of what to do—creatures for whom ascriptions of reasons make sense (Korsgaard 2011). Thus, ascriptions of states and processes, and their normative evaluation begin to make sense only with the emergence of creatures capable of acting for reasons and caring about things, and especially creatures like us, who have developed the conceptual capacities to articulate these concerns in terms of considerations that “favor” certain actions or attitudes over others.

This naturally leads to the thought that if there is any value or normativity in the world, it must be grounded in the nature and capacities of such creatures. Hence the idea that, within a naturalistic worldview, the most congenial theories of normativity will be subject-based ones; that is, theories that connect normativity to facts about agents, their capacities, and their relations with other agents. The bottom line is that without agents capable of rationality, it is hard to see how anything could count as a normative reason.²

² By “capable of rationality” I mean possessing psychological capacities such as behavioral plasticity, learning, and representations that enable rational behavior (see Okasha 2018: 155). In the book, I try to flesh out this point in Chapter 6, among other things, by developing the idea that, from a naturalistic-evolutionary perspective, reason-relations get established in a way analogous to semantic relations, on the background of fitness-enhancing processes that correlate certain states of affairs with the performance of certain actions (see Jurjako 2024: 162–73). Because of this adaptive correspondence between states of affairs and actions, we naturally come to perceive or experience certain states of affairs as “favoring” certain actions. But, of course, this is not the whole story, because it is common opinion that through evolution people have started to develop concerns and interests that are detached from their narrow biological

This way of thinking about a disenchanted world is probably at least as old as the emergence of modern science with its mechanistic explanations, and repeating such a story in my book would not be especially interesting. Since we still live in a period in which these ideas are most often discussed in the context of evolutionary debunking arguments, and since I found these arguments particularly compelling, I chose to situate the main line of argument of the book within that framework. This is why Chapter 5 plays a central role, where I argue in favor of subject-based theories of normativity by employing evolutionary debunking considerations. This also explains why I prefer an ontological construal of these arguments rather than a purely epistemic one. What the most interesting versions of these arguments suggest, in my view, is that there is no value without agents for whom things can be valuable, and no reasons without agents capable of rational action or thought.

The Role of Naturalism in the Book

There are several additional points worth mentioning here that are not explicit in the book but may help situate and hopefully rationalize the form of naturalism I adopt. One aspect that shapes the naturalistic project developed in the book is my implicit adherence to a kind of metanormative *Humean* constructivism, which I think is largely embedded in the political liberal tradition in which I work (see Gaus 2011, 2013).

The other aspect of my naturalistic approach is more factual and aims to identify the grounds of, or at least to offer an explanation of, why some facts are perceived as normative reasons. In one sense, this aspect can be seen as naturalistic in the traditional sense of the term, on which normative truths are grounded in or reduced to non-normative truths (for discussion, see Väyrynen 2021). That being said, in the introduction to the book I make it explicit that the project is not intended to provide reductions of normative truths to purely naturalistic, non-normative facts. This is partly because I was not primarily interested in pursuing such a project, but also because I was not sure how it is supposed to proceed. One would need a clear conception of what reduction amounts to and how exactly to conceive its relation, in this case normative and purely descriptive natural facts—issues on which there is no obvious consensus.

To avoid these issues, my strategy was to examine the available options for conceiving and understanding normative reasons and to ask which conceptions would be most coherent with a naturalistic worldview. As men-

fitness (see, e.g., Okasha 2018: 157–8). This is exactly why we are faced with the deliberative predicament about what to do, to which Korsgaard (2011) directs attention.

tioned, between the object-based and subject-based views, I take a naturalistic worldview to favor the latter. In addition, I take it that a subject-based theory is favorable from this perspective, because it leaves the account sufficiently open-ended to capture another aspect that, for me, makes it difficult to envisage a wholesale reduction of normative facts to natural facts. The idea is that normativity related to reasons is, to a large extent, not something prefixed and unchangeable that can be reduced to similarly fixed natural facts. Instead, I see the normative domain as being in flux, whether over longer evolutionary timescales or on shorter cultural and ontogenetic ones, and as susceptible to change, negotiation, and renegotiation. To capture this aspect of reasons, I find it useful to think in terms of what a rational person would do, think, or desire in a given context. This theme is somewhat examined in Chapter 4, where I rely on game-theoretic scenarios to provide an account of how shared reasons could emerge from interactions between agents, and why certain cooperative and other behavioral arrangements come to be perceived by agents as providing reasons to act or refrain from acting in particular ways.

It might be wondered why I do not go a step further and, like some naturalistically minded authors, simply identify substantive normative facts about what we should do with certain game-theoretic equilibria that are optimal from some perspective (see, e.g., Sterelny and Fraser 2017). Although I do not discuss this in the book, I would now say that this again connects with the background liberal tradition from which I implicitly develop my account. I can envisage a situation in which a person acquires knowledge about the circumstances in which a group of individuals live, the equilibria of strategies they share, and the way these equilibria ground their reasons and justificatory practices, and then asks whether these practices and facts really provide the reasons that we have assigned to those equilibrium points. It seems to me that in some cases the answer might be yes, because having a certain equilibrium about what counts in favor of what may simply define what it means for some fact to be a reason in favor of something. This seems clearest in social interactions constituted by explicit rules, such as the game of chess.

However, there will often be situations in which we can still ask whether we should participate in a given social interaction or institutional arrangement, and I am not sure that there will always be a clear and determinate—or even any—answer to this question (see also Milevski's commentary for similar considerations). This openness is for me captured by thinking of reasons and what they count in favor of as ultimately determined by what a rational person would do or think, while leaving it open what exactly rationality amounts to in a given context or whose conception of the

rational person is decisive. Again, this will be shaped by individual reasoning and interpersonal negotiation.

At the same time, this view allows that a rational person might conclude that they will proceed independently in their deliberations and will not conform to reasons endorsed by other rational agents. The problem with such a person, on my view, would not necessarily be normative—in the sense that they might be missing some fact that would make them irrational—but rather practical: if overly stubborn and powerless, they would probably not live long enough to tell the story or to leave descendants.

Concluding Remarks

The overall view expounded in the book is that naturalism favors a subject-based theory of reasons. This means that reasons—or, more precisely, the relation underpinning them, the counting-in-favor-of relation—are best explicated in terms of what rational agents are disposed to do and to want. In a sense, we do not have much choice here, because without agents and their goals, desires, needs, and concerns, there would be no facts that count in favor of anything. This naturalistic approach also allows us to explain in a non-mysterious way why we might think there are reasons at all, why they appear to have categorical authority over us, and why, at certain levels of cognitive sophistication, we are able to think about those reasons, scrutinize them, and either reject or endorse them. I believe that if a naturalistic perspective can provide such an account, this is a good enough reason to pursue it.

Before closing, I would like to address a question regarding the more general aim of the book. Regan Reitsma (this issue) asks what the aspirations of the book are: whether the aim is to convince philosophical opponents of the truth of my worldview, or rather to provide, within a naturalist framework, a satisfactory account of normativity that, if nobody else, I might at least find satisfying.

I would say that it is a little bit of both, with more emphasis on the latter. As explained in the previous sections, taking seriously a naturalistic worldview—including the evolutionary origins of human beings—seems to me to put considerable pressure on robustly realist views of normative truths. This, in turn, motivates the search for an adequate account of the nature of normative reasons that those of us working within a naturalistic framework could find satisfactory. But ultimately, I cannot hope for more than to provide a naturalistically friendly and coherent account that is plausible and robust enough to withstand the objections typically raised against such projects.

Of course, my critics are not convinced. In the following papers in this book symposium, the reader will have the opportunity to see what Attila Tanyi, Yifan Sun, Voin Milevski, and Regan Reitsma take to be the critical points in the book inviting further discussion, followed by my responses in which I address their worries and, along the way, clarify aspects of my view that require further explanation.³

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