

Why Endorse Response-Dependent Theories?

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ABSTRACT: Marko Jurjako’s book, *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View*, defends a response-dependent account of normative reasons in a way compatible with a broadly naturalistic approach. In this commentary, I raise two general concerns about the sophisticated project presented in this book. My first concern is that, in this book, more work should probably be done to clarify why response-dependent views are superior to response-independent ones. My second concern is that, given the original purpose of engaging in normative discourse, further justification is needed for endorsing a revisionary response-dependent theory. By addressing these concerns, I believe the project presented in this book can be made more compelling, thereby alleviating the doubts of those who are skeptical of this approach.

KEYWORDS: evolutionary debunking arguments, folk moral objectivism, normative reasons, response dependence

1. Introduction¹

“Normative reason” is a central concept embedded in normative discourse. In the practical domain, where we are mainly concerned with reasons for action, asking for a normative reason is typically asking for a consideration that counts in favor of an action in a way that reveals its practical importance. There may not be a non-circular way of explaining these interrelated normative notions associated with normative reasons, but our intuitive grasp of these notions makes it natural to think that normative reasons should be intimately related to a certain class of mental states. This motivates some philosophers to endorse response-dependent theories of normative reasons, according to which the nature of normative reasons is partly understood in terms of the responses we would have under appropriately specified conditions.

Marko Jurjako’s book, *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View* (2024), is a comprehensive survey of the nature of normative reasons. It provides a sophisticated defense for a response-dependent view of normative

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reasons and offers insights into how normativity might fit into a broadly naturalistic worldview. I generally agree with Jurjako's view that normative reasons should be response-dependent, and I find his project appealing. Nevertheless, given my role as a commentator, I would like to highlight some potential problems with Jurjako's arguments. These potential issues should be addressed to make a response-dependent view more convincing to those who are skeptical of this approach.

I have two general concerns regarding Jurjako's project. First, although Jurjako has addressed some important objections to response-dependent theories, it is unclear whether he has provided sufficient reason for favoring them over response-independent views. There should be further clarification of the genuine tension between response-independence and the action-guiding nature of normativity. Meanwhile, more effort should be made to clarify why the ontological implications of evolutionary debunking arguments count against response-independent views. Second, even if we grant that response-independent theories are implausible, we may not have good reason to revise the commitment to response-independence embedded in our normative discourse. Furthermore, we can undermine *prima facie* evidence that supports the prospects of the non-revisionary response-dependent theory.

2. Arguments against Response-Independence

2.1 The Initial Reason against Response-Independence

Response-independent theories have not been adequately challenged in Jurjako's book. In Chapter 2, Jurjako presents a puzzle created by "object-based theories of reasons," regarding how mind-independent normative facts could be intrinsically action-guiding. However, this challenge to normative realism should be formulated more convincingly.

First, it is unclear what is puzzling about the idea that mind-independent facts "have as outputs actions and attitudes that are paradigmatically mind-dependent" (Jurjako 2024: 41). If the puzzle concerns the motivational influence of normative beliefs, it does not directly challenge the existence of normative facts. That is, what makes normative beliefs peculiar may not pose any problems for normative facts (Dreier 2010; Olson 2014). In addition, the connection between normative beliefs and motivation is confusing only if we accept a strong version of motivational internalism, which is a controversial view rejected by many normative realists. In contrast, if the alleged puzzle concerns the motivational efficacy of normative facts, we may reasonably doubt whether anything is puzzling in the first place. Given that normative properties are usually viewed as causally inefficacious, it is

questionable whether our commonsense understanding of normativity implies that normative facts can play a role in producing motivation.

Second, I do not find it mysterious that “we get such a nice fit between the problems that we happen to need to solve and the pre-packed and pre-weighted reasons that necessarily solve them” (Jurjako 2024: 42). Jurjako’s concern is that there are no necessary solutions to the practical problems encountered in contingent situations. However, normative realism can accommodate the contingency of normative reasons. Most normative realists do not believe that, when one has a normative reason to do something, the reason is independent of one’s contingent situation. I may have a normative reason to call my mother when she looks forward to my call, but that reason certainly does not apply when she takes a nap. This is because a normative reason counts in favor of an action only in certain circumstances (Scanlon, 2014). The necessary condition for something to be a normative reason should include the presence of “enablers” and the absence of “disablers” (Dancy 2004; Bader 2016; Fogal and Risberg 2023); normative realists and anti-realists can both agree with this claim.

However, what is viewed as necessary is the truth that r is a normative reason for x to do a under circumstance c . It might be a contingent fact that x is in circumstance c , but the truth that x has a normative reason r to do a in this particular circumstance c is necessary. Despite the contingency of one’s situation, it is still plausible to claim that the relevant non-normative features of one’s situation necessitate what one has normative reason to do. If the normative status of an action should remain constant when all relevant non-normative facts remain unchanged, then response-dependent theorists may have no reason to deny the necessity of normative truth.

Certainly, the genuine concern motivating Jurjako’s objection might be that normative reasons for action should not be completely detached from contingent subjective concerns (Jurjako 2024: 53). Response-independent theorists can agree with their opponents that one’s normative reasons for action are necessitated by their contingent situations. By contrast, a disagreement regarding this concerns whether normative reasons are determined solely by the mind-independent features of one’s situation or are at least partially dependent on one’s contingent subjective concerns in that situation. Here, I agree with Jurjako in that even if normative reasons are always facts about the mind-independent features of one’s situation, it is one’s motivational state that makes it the case that such facts are normative reasons (Jurjako 2024: 59). However, further research is still required to support this claim. Even if we intuitively believe that facts about what we would be motivated to do under idealized conditions can ground facts about normative reasons, it is still difficult to tell exactly how this metaphysical explanation

works. If we lack a complete explication of the nature of idealized motivational states and normative reasons, it is unsurprising that some philosophers believe subject-based reasons are just as “queer” as object-based reasons (Bedke 2010; Cline 2018; Shaver 2022).

Admittedly, we can propose a revisionary theory of normative reasons to fill this explanatory gap. However, some scholars view response-dependent theories as being supported by non-revisionary, commonsensical understanding of normative reasons, and this still calls for an explanation. If our pre-revision intuition suggests an intimate relationship between what practically matters to us and what we desire under appropriate conditions, then we still need a non-revisionary theory of normative reasons to explain the origin of this intuition.

2.2 The Ontological Implications of Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

In Chapter 5, Jurjako explores the ontological implications of evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs), hoping to formulate a certain version of EDA challenging the existence of “stance-independent” normative facts. However, the version of EDA proposed by Jurjako in its current form has not succeeded in undermining normative realism.

As noted by Jurjako, the most typical version of EDA targets the justifiability of normative beliefs rather than the existence of normative facts. Since our dispositions to form normative beliefs are fundamentally shaped by our evolutionary history, and evolutionary processes would select such dispositions irrespective of whether they reliably track stance-independent normative truths, we do not know whether our normative beliefs are reliably true. While this renders our normative beliefs unjustified, it does not imply that there are no stance-independent normative facts.

Nevertheless, Jurjako claims that we can formulate an ontological version of EDA that counts against the existence of stance-independent normative facts. The basic idea is that our normative beliefs can be explained by evolutionary mechanisms “without appealing to normative facts that exist independently of and prior to agents’ responses or attitudes” (Jurjako 2024: 115). Here, Jurjako seems to assume that if stance-independent normative facts are explanatorily redundant in the non-normative domain, then there is no reason to believe that they exist.

However, this argument is usually framed as challenging normative non-naturalism rather than normative realism. The claim that normative facts do not figure in the best explanation of empirical phenomena is plausible only under the assumption that they are not reducible to natural facts, which means that normative facts are viewed as explanatorily impotent not

because they are stance-independent, but because they are irreducible.² The distinction between reducible and irreducible cuts across the distinction between stance-dependent and stance-independent, meaning that being irreducibly normative is different from being stance-independent. Therefore, an argument against irreducibility is not automatically an argument against stance-independence.

For instance, let us follow Jurjako in assuming that a normative reason for an action is a fact based on which an agent is disposed to act when rational (Jurjako 2024: 69). This provides an account of normative reasons that incorporates the normative notion of rationality. We may have a set of non-normatively specified criteria for assessing practical rationality, but the property of being rational is still possibly an irreducibly normative property. It seems that the property of being rational, when understood as an irreducibly normative property, is explanatorily redundant in the non-normative domain because we can fully explain one's disposition to act by one's non-normative psychological features without invoking irreducibly normative facts about practical rationality. This suggests that the problem of explanatory redundancy may also threaten the response-dependent theory of normativity.

Moreover, it is questionable whether we can find an ontological version of EDA that specifically challenges the stance-independence of normative facts. If we assume a naturalist version of normative realism, according to which normative facts are stance-independent natural facts, it is undeniable that such facts can play a role in the best explanation of some of our normative beliefs.

This is illustrated in the following example. Suppose that I witnessed someone torturing an innocent baby—an act that caused unnecessary harm—and acquired the normative belief that this was morally wrong. Considering a naturalistic version of normative realism, according to which the property of being morally wrong is identical to the property of causing unnecessary harm, the normative fact that torturing an innocent baby is morally wrong can be reduced to the fact that it causes unnecessary harm. Now, we have a normative fact that partly explains a normative belief: I believed that this act was morally wrong partly because I recognized that it caused unnecessary harm. The fact that this act caused unnecessary harm is stance-independent, in the sense that it is independent of any moral appraiser's mental state. Therefore, there is no doubt that stance-independent

² It should be noted that some philosophers deny that the existence of normative facts should be tested by their explanatory potency in the non-normative domain. See Shafer-Landau (2003), Enoch (2011), Parfit (2011), and Scanlon (2014). For a discussion, see Zhong (2019).

normative facts under the assumption of normative naturalism are explanatorily potent in the non-normative domain.

I do not deny that a full explanation of my normative beliefs should invoke facts about my psychology. If I did not possess an evolved disposition to respond to unnecessary harm, I would not have formed a relevant normative belief. Nevertheless, this only implies that normative beliefs are partly explained by the contingent features of my psychology. This is compatible with the claim that a full explanation for the emergence of this belief should still appeal to the stance-independent fact that torturing an innocent baby causes unnecessary harm. An analogy between normative beliefs and perceptual experiences may be helpful: Without the evolved human perceptual system, we cannot perceive the world in this specific way. This does not lead us to deny that a complete explanation for why we perceive the world in this way should incorporate mind-independent facts about stimuli from the external world. Therefore, it remains unclear how an ontological version of EDA could challenge the existence of stance-independent normative facts within the framework of normative naturalism.

Jurjako faces a dilemma; if he supports a non-naturalist version of the response-dependent theory, this theory faces the same threats from the ontological version of EDA as any other non-naturalist theory of normativity. If he instead adopts the naturalist response-dependent theory, then it is challenging to see why the ontological EDA supports his position over response-independent theories. The ontological implications of EDA are insufficient to demonstrate the superiority of response-dependent theories.

3 Why Endorse a Revisionary Theory

3.1 The Justifiability of Revision

Even if we grant that response-independent theories of normative reason are implausible, we may not have good reasons to revise the original normative discourse, which appears to constitutively commit to response-independence. In Chapter 3, Jurjako answers Enoch's (2005) "Why idealize" question. He claims that idealization can be incorporated into a response-dependent account of normative reasons to make it an acceptable revisionary account (Jurjako 2024: 79–82). He states that a revisionary response-dependent theory can avoid the epistemological and metaphysical problems typically associated with normative realism, while preserving the possibility that our normative judgments are true. However, even if the commonsensical belief in response-independence is mistaken, I believe that further justification is needed for endorsing a revisionary response-dependent account.

I am not generally against revising a region of discourse that appears to be defective; my concern lies in the justifiability of revising our normative discourse in particular. I assume that we all agree that the practice of revising folk concepts always requires justification, meaning that we should not revise them in whatever way we want. A challenge to the justifiability of conceptual engineering is that it risks changing the subject matter associated with a certain concept, instead of providing an improved way to think and talk about the relevant subject matter (Strawson 1963; Kauppinen 2007). Certainly, there is controversy over what defines the subject matter of a certain area of discourse and whether it has significant importance in conceptual engineering (Koch 2023), but this objection to conceptual engineering is motivated by a deeper concern that should be taken seriously. The concern is that we should not revise a certain region of discourse in a way that undermines our original reasons for participating in that discourse.

Concerning our normative discourse, a response-dependent theorist and an error theorist can both agree that it is fundamentally flawed while disagreeing on whether we should revise how we think and talk about normativity. The issue here is that adopting the revisionary response-dependent theory may undermine part of the original reason for engaging in normative discourse. Our commonsense understanding of the normative domain seems to involve a commitment to the existence of mind-independent moral reasons (or, to follow Jurjako's terminology, categorical reasons),³ but why do we need the concept of moral reason in the first place? It is familiar to us that many of our moral beliefs are formed based on a distinctive "moral experience." The phenomenology of this kind of experience involves the feeling that something holds practical importance to me in a mind-independent way as well as the feeling that I must pursue it regardless of any subjective concerns (Joyce 2006; Rini 2020; FitzPatrick 2022). There is no space to fully explore how this distinctive experience relates to our moral beliefs, but it is reasonable to assume that we need the concept of moral reason because we want to ascribe mind-independent practical importance to things in the world. This is because without the need to characterize mind-independent practical importance, the concept of hypothetical reason alone would be adequate for practical deliberation, and it would be challenging to see why we still need a distinctive concept of moral reason.

If this explains the emergence of the concept of moral reason, then we may question whether it makes sense to endorse a revisionary theory that

³ Here, I assume that the concept of moral reason is equivalent to that of categorical reason, but some might hold the view that prudential reasons are also categorical. For a discussion, see Worsnip (2018).

renders moral reasons mind-dependent. Suppose that we have been convinced by error theorists that nothing in this world can matter to us in a mind-independent manner; why not simply abolish the systematically flawed moral discourse? What is the point in retaining the revised concept of moral reason, which no longer has anything to do with mind-independent practical importance? I do not hold a strong claim that there is a decisive reason against endorsing a revisionary response-dependent theory, but I do think further justification is needed for the revision.

3.2 The Prospects of the Non-revisionary Theory

Jurjako has also suggested the possibility of the response-dependent theory being a non-revisionary account of normative reasons (Jurjako 2024: 82–88). Many metaethical theorists believe in the truth of “folk moral objectivism,” which suggests that it is part of our commonsense understanding of morality that moral facts are mind-independent. However, an increasing number of empirical studies have challenged this widely accepted belief. As noted by Jurjako, contrary to what many metaethical theorists believe, the empirical findings indicate that non-philosophers’ answers to metaethical questions sometimes imply a commitment to the mind-dependence of morality. Therefore, there remains an open possibility that a response-dependent account of normative reasons is non-revisionary.

Nevertheless, another possible interpretation of such empirical findings makes them metaethically neutral. Empirical studies of people’s metaethical beliefs often test their intuitions about moral objectivity by employing what Bush and Moss (2020) call “the disagreement paradigm.” Participants are often presented with a scenario of two parties disagreeing on a moral issue and are then asked to consider whether both of them can be correct or at least one of them must be mistaken. The problem is that it is possible to interpret the participants’ answers to this question in a way that has no meta-ethical implications. For instance, as indicated by Bush and Moss (2020), when replying that both disagreeing parties can be correct, what the participant has in mind might be that the moral status of an action can vary in different situations, making it correct to say that the action is morally permissible in situation A but impermissible in situation B. However, the metaethical debate over moral objectivity is not about whether the moral permissibility of an action can vary across different situations, but about what makes it the case that an action is permissible or impermissible in a certain situation. Therefore, a “both can be correct” answer may not imply anything about the participant’s metaethical commitments.

The empirical findings exhibit an interesting pattern that can be better explained by a metaethically neutral interpretation. I have defended the plausibility of the metaethically neutral interpretation in a separate manuscript, which is briefly sketched here. It has been observed that participants are more inclined to judge that at least one of the disagreeing parties is mistaken when the moral issues in question are about actions that are viewed as seriously wrong (e.g., racial discrimination, hitting someone, robbing a bank, and selling children) (Beebe et al. 2015; Beebe and Sackris 2016; Heiphetz and Young 2017; Wright 2018). However, whether an action is seriously wrong is a first-order moral question with no implications for second-order meta-ethical questions about the objectivity of moral wrongness. Therefore, it would be challenging to explain why the perceived seriousness of moral wrongness can influence one's judgment of the objectivity of moral wrongness.

In contrast, if we interpret the "at least one of them must be mistaken" answer in a metaethically neutral way, assuming that the participant believes that the action is morally wrong in every situation, we can easily understand why people are more inclined to give this answer when they recognize more serious moral wrongness. The explanation is that, when an action is an instance of more serious wrongdoing, there must be weightier considerations against taking that action. Since it is difficult to imagine how such weighty considerations can be outweighed by other considerations in different situations, it is reasonable to assume that the action remains morally wrong in every situation. Therefore, participants are inclined to judge that even if the two disagreeing parties are in different situations, at least one of them must be mistaken. Believing that an action is morally wrong in every situation does not entail any metaethical commitment about the nature of moral facts. Therefore, a better interpretation of the participants' responses is metaethically neutral. Thus, the relevant empirical findings do not constitute evidence against folk moral objectivism.

4. Concluding Remarks

It should be emphasized that I raise these concerns not because I believe response-dependent theories of normative reasons are generally implausible. On the contrary, I largely agree with the view that the intrinsic nature of normative reasons is response-dependent. Jurjako's book makes a significant contribution to contemporary discussions on the nature of normativity, and I believe its philosophical impact could be further strengthened by addressing these potential issues.

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