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Naturalism and Normativity: A Critical Examination of the Subject-Based Model of Reasons

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines Marko Jurjako's naturalistic, subject-based theory of normative reasons. Grounded in the idea that reasons arise from evolutionarily shaped cognitive capacities that regulate behaviour, Jurjako aims to account for normativity without invoking robust realism. Four related concerns are highlighted: (1) explaining reasons via adaptive utility does not settle the open question argument; (2) the biological dual-function model leaves open how it captures the pragmatic and semantic variety of normative language; (3) the subject-based framework could clarify how it distinguishes correct from mistaken reasoning within an idealised perspective; and (4) the naturalistic account explains detection but not how this capacity meets standards of epistemic justification. Overall, while Jurjako's approach convincingly shows why we believe in reasons and how they function motivationally, it remains incomplete as an account of their evaluative force and linguistic complexity.

KEYWORDS: cognitivism, epistemology of normativity, evolutionary functionality, naturalism, normative error, normative reasons, open question argument, semantics of normative language

1. Introduction

According to the standard tripartite classification, reasons can be normative, motivating, or explanatory (see Alvarez 2010). A normative reason *R* for an agent *A* to φ is a fact or consideration that, in some sense, counts in favour of *A*'s φ-ing (see Scanlon 1998: 17; Parfit 2011: 31; Gregory 2017, 2021: 8); in other words, this type of reason provides support for carrying out the action.[1] Put differently, a normative reason presents the action φ in a positive light; it supplies a *pro tanto* justification for *A* to φ; it makes φ the right action for *A*; and, based on this reason, it follows that *A* ought to φ. Taken together, these features explain why normative reasons are often referred to as justificatory reasons. Motivating reasons can be understood in a psychologistic sense,

[1] Jurjako adopts this understanding of normative reasons as well (2024: 2–7).

where they are identified with the agent's relevant psychological states (Davidson 1963; Smith 1994), or in a non-psychologistic sense, where they are construed as facts, considerations, or propositional contents of intentional states in light of which the agent in fact acts (Alvarez 2010; Dancy 2000; Miller 2008).[2] Finally, although some motivating reasons can explain why an agent acted in a particular way, not all explanatory reasons for action are motivating. For instance, the fact *x* that *A* is a psychopath explains their action (e.g., committing a certain crime) and thus constitutes an explanatory reason for it; yet *x* does not constitute a reason in light of which *A* acts, nor does it motivate *A*'s action—in other words, *x* is not *A*'s motivating reason (see Shaw 2021; Milevski 2022: 17).

In his engaging and informative monograph *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View* (2024), Marko Jurjako develops a coherent and theoretically ambitious version of naturalistic cognitivism about normative reasons. His central thesis is that normative reasons are neither supernatural entities nor elusive evaluative properties, but facts that can be explained in terms of naturalistic properties—specifically, as facts that "count in favour" of certain actions from the perspective of a rational subject. Crucially, these facts are not normative by virtue of some inherent ontological peculiarity, but by virtue of their functional role within the psychology and behaviour of agents. In Jurjako's model, normative reasons are defined through their capacity to be recognised as relevant by agents who possess the requisite cognitive capacities (see Jurjako 2024: 10), and their normative force is accounted for in light of their evolutionary function: to facilitate behavioural coordination, regulate social interactions, and enhance the adaptive success of collective action (2024: 112). Accordingly, Jurjako adopts the stance of methodological naturalism, which holds that philosophical explanations of normativity must align with the scientific worldview and be articulated in terms of entities and processes that have a place in scientific explanation (2024: 13–14, 173). He explicitly rejects any appeal to "supernatural" normative entities, and seeks to demonstrate that naturalism can account not only for why we hold normative beliefs but also for what makes them justified in the practical context of rational deliberation (2024: 10–11). At the heart of his approach lies the so-called subject-based model of reasons, according to which an agent has a normative reason to do something if, from their own perspective and given the information available, they recognise a fact as one that favours a certain course of action (2024: 17).[3] This introduces

[2] See also Shaw (2021, fn.1) for a concise discussion of this ontological contrast.

[3] In contrast to this model, which holds that normative reasons are facts or considerations that explain what an agent ought to do from their epistemically limited perspective, the objective model claims that normative reasons are facts or considerations that explain what an

a subjective dimension to normativity, while normative judgements are understood as claims about facts that are relevant for the agent in their practical context.

While I am generally sympathetic to the core thesis that Jurjako articulates, the purpose of this paper is to critically assess his position by highlighting four key objections that, in my view, require further clarification or refinement. The first objection notes that, although his account convincingly explains the functional and genealogical role of normative beliefs, it leaves open how the distinction between adaptive utility and evaluative justification is to be addressed, thus giving renewed relevance to the well-known open question argument. The second objection observes that, while his theory uses a biological model of dual function to illustrate how normative judgements can be both descriptive and directive, it leaves open how this analogy maps onto the rich semantic and pragmatic variety of normative language in actual discourse. The third objection raises the question of how the distinction between merely endorsing a reason and actually having a justified reason is secured through the idea of an idealised perspective—a point that could benefit from further specification, especially regarding how disagreement and error are to be adjudicated in practice. The fourth and final objection concerns epistemic incompleteness: while Jurjako's account explains how agents are evolutionarily disposed to detect reasons, it leaves open how this detection process secures truth-conducive justification, rather than merely adaptive belief. Taken together, these objections indicate that although Jurjako's theory offers a coherent and innovative explanation of the psychological and functional role of normative beliefs, it still does not deliver a complete answer to the deeper epistemic and semantic questions that are crucial for understanding normativity as a philosophical category. Let us now examine these objections in turn.

2. The Reduction of the Normative to the Adaptive

One of the central aims of the naturalistic project that Jurjako develops is to offer an account of normative reasons without relying on *robust realism*.[4] He rejects the assumption that there are objective, autonomous values that must be accepted due to their inherent normative force, and instead proposes that reasons should be understood as entities whose existence and

agent ought to do from the standpoint of an omniscient perspective—that is, an agent in an ideal epistemic position (see Williams 1981: 102).

[4] In this context, Jurjako explicitly engages with Enoch's (2011) robust realism as a paradigm of metaphysically heavyweight normativity, arguing instead for a naturalistic variant of realist cognitivism more akin to Railton's (1986) moderate naturalism or Street's (2006) evolutionarily grounded realism (see Jurjako 2024, esp. ch. 5).

function can be accounted for within the framework of scientific naturalism.[5] Although he makes it clear that he does not carry out a semantic reduction of normative terms to descriptive ones—preserving their evaluative dimension—Jurjako holds that their motivational and coordinative functions can be consistently explained through an evolutionary genealogy and their adaptive utility for individuals and communities. According to this position, an agent has a normative reason to do something if, from their perspective, they perceive a particular fact as one that contributes to the stable regulation of behaviour and the maintenance of cooperation among rational agents. In other words, the claim that a fact "counts in favour" of a given action is genealogically explained by its functional value for the adaptive dynamics of the group or species.

Such a naturalistic strategy is, without doubt, theoretically appealing: it allows normative beliefs to be regarded as part of a cognitive apparatus shaped by evolution for the sake of survival, behavioural alignment, and long-term cooperation. However, insofar as the genealogy of the normative relies on adaptive utility, this position encounters a well-known philosophical objection, often formulated as the so-called "open question argument". In its classic form, this argument emphasises that no normative term—such as "good", "right", or "having a reason"—can be claimed to be semantically equivalent to any description of a natural or functional property (see Moore 1993 [1903]: 91).[6]

Indeed, even if we were to assume that "having a normative reason to φ" means that "φ is adaptively useful", it remains perfectly meaningful to ask: "Should I really φ merely because φ is adaptively useful?" Such a question is clearly not logically meaningless, nor is it self-answering in the way that closed questions are (e.g., "Is a bachelor an unmarried man?"). This very capacity to rationally question any proposed definition of a normative concept demonstrates that the normative force of the term "reason" does not exhaust its meaning in its adaptive function: it retains an evaluative component that resists reduction to mere description.

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[5] It is instructive, in this context, to compare Jurjako's stance on robust realism with Mackie's (1977) classic position. As I understand it, Mackie serves as a critical contrast rather than a positive model: while Jurjako accepts Mackie's "argument from queerness" as highlighting a problem for robust realism, he rejects Mackie's eliminativist conclusion (error theory). Instead, he seeks to naturalise normative facts by embedding them within the explanatory framework of evolutionary psychology and scientific naturalism, thus avoiding Mackie's radical scepticism without endorsing a metaphysically heavyweight realism (Jurjako 2024: 74, 105).

[6] For a detailed presentation of Moore's open question argument and an overview of its historical background, see Sayre-McCord 2006: 45–47.

Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that one may question how directly this objection applies to the position that Jurjako develops. He does *not* claim—nor even imply—that the meaning of normative terms can be fully equated with or translated into non-normative terminology. In this respect, his line of argument does not fall within the scope of what is typically called analytical or semantic naturalism; rather, it resembles what some contemporary accounts would describe as a form of metaphysical naturalism: the idea that two terms may differ in meaning yet refer to the same property or phenomenon (cf. Miller 2003: 18).

This, however, does not eliminate the basis for critical examination: even if the naturalistic genealogy is not taken as a strict semantic definition, the question remains whether a functional account of a normative reason can provide a sufficiently robust criterion for evaluative justification. This issue becomes apparent once one attempts to draw a clear line between utility and justification. Even if a given practice successfully stabilises a society—for instance, the repression of minorities in authoritarian regimes—it remains an open question whether such a practice is normatively acceptable. If functional efficiency and moral correctness are treated as identical, then such questions become redundant—yet precisely these questions are central to philosophical reflection on normativity.

Furthermore, this type of explanation introduces serious epistemic difficulties. The mere fact that a normative belief is evolutionarily advantageous does not mean it is simultaneously justified. Evolution, as empirical research shows, has produced numerous cognitive mechanisms that promote survival but do not guarantee the formation of true beliefs. Our tendency to perceive patterns even where none exist may increase our chances of avoiding danger but can equally lead to superstition or pseudoscientific conclusions. Similarly, normative beliefs grounded solely in functional utility may be adaptive, but this alone does not answer the question of whether they are rationally justified. It is therefore crucial to distinguish between explaining the origin of a normative belief and justifying its content. However persuasive the naturalistic genealogy may be in accounting for why people hold reasons, it does not, by itself, resolve the question of whether those reasons are good. In this regard, Jurjako's project successfully covers the motivational and coordinative function of normative reasons but leaves open the question of their evaluative justification. Put differently, the naturalistic model can explain why we believe in reasons, but not why we ought to believe in them.

In this sense, the open question argument remains relevant: not because it refutes the empirical explanation of the origin of normative beliefs, but because it reminds us that normative terms retain an evaluative

autonomy that may resist full reduction to adaptive functionality. Of course, Jurjako does not commit himself in his book to providing a complete account of evaluative justification, instead deliberately remaining within the bounds of genealogical and functional explanation. Nevertheless, although the naturalistic framework is conceptually robust and methodologically disciplined, it remains incomplete until it clarifies how to move from explaining functional benefit to grounding rational normative justification.

3. The Semantic Multifunctionality of Normative Judgements

In his effort to naturalise the concept of a normative reason, Jurjako presents normative judgements as cognitive attitudes whose central function is to represent facts relevant for practical reasoning—that is, facts that count in favour of a particular course of action. In his model, the content of normative judgements consists of propositions about such facts, which are understood to guide and regulate behaviour within a scientifically naturalistic framework.[7] As previously noted, he is careful not to endorse a naïve form of semantic reductionism: rather, he employs an analogy with natural signals (the so-called primitive content) that simultaneously fulfil an indicative and a directive role—conveying information about a state of affairs while also guiding behaviour. Drawing on Harms (2004) and Millikan (1989), he argues that normative reasons can be conceived as a type of cognitive representation that evolutionarily integrates both descriptive and motivational dimensions (Jurjako 2024: 162).

Nevertheless, within his account, this dual functionality appears to serve primarily as an illustrative biological analogy, rather than, at least in my reading, a fully developed pragmatic account of how normative language functions in complex discourse. His naturalistic perspective has the advantage of theoretical economy: it enables normative judgements to be analysed within a unified epistemological and ontological framework as truth-apt statements. Yet, it leaves open some well-known challenges regarding the pragmatic diversity of normative expressions.

As is widely noted, empirical observation shows that normative terms such as "good", "bad", "duty", "right", "reason", and "justified" appear in a variety of contexts and perform functions that go beyond merely representing facts. Evaluative expressions often work gradably, allowing for degrees ("more or less good"), while deontic expressions like "duty" or

[7] In this respect, Jurjako explicitly aligns with what is often termed a realist or cognitivist conception of normative judgements: they are treated as belief-like states that aim to represent facts and, accordingly, have truth conditions (see Jurjako 2024: 105).

"obligation" operate categorically.[8] Moreover, in everyday moral discourse, utterances such as "You ought to help that person!" often function as moral directives, appeals, or expressions of empathy—not simply as statements about factual reasons.

These well-established features illustrate a general point in metaethics: normative language is pragmatically multifunctional. To fully capture this, any naturalistic account must clarify how descriptive and directive aspects interact in actual use, especially in moral, legal, and social contexts. Of course, Jurjako's model does not purport to provide such a comprehensive pragmatics, nor does it need to; but it highlights how a naturalistic explanation of reasons invites further questions about how normativity is expressed and negotiated in discourse. In this sense, his framework is conceptually clear and parsimonious, yet arguably leaves space for future work to clarify how its biological and cognitive underpinnings connect with the rich pragmatic and semantic flexibility of real-world normative discourse.

4. Subject-Based Reasons and the Problem of Error

One of the core elements of Jurjako's naturalistic position is the claim that normative reasons are internally constructed: their existence depends on whether the agent, from their own perspective, recognises them as relevant under conditions of idealised rational deliberation (Jurjako 2024: 17). He emphasises that this perspective does not reduce reasons to whatever belief the agent happens to hold at a given moment but rather to what the agent would accept as an adequate reason under conditions of adequate information and reflection. In this way, he aims to ensure that normative reasons are not trivially reducible to subjective error but remain connected to an idealised standpoint that secures their deliberative and motivational role. At first glance, this formulation offers a plausible solution to the well-known motivational problem: how to explain that normative beliefs motivate action without appealing to robust values. By conceiving reasons as response-dependent elements anchored in an agent's evolved cognitive capacities, Jurjako provides a naturalistic account of their practical force while preserving space for fallibility. He explicitly draws an analogy with colour perception and other response-dependent properties: reasons are not

[8] Some authors have defended a unified view of normative terms, most famously Richard Hare, who understood them as instruments of prescription (see Hare 1952: 79; Tappolet 2013: 1791). In contrast, contemporary theory usually distinguishes evaluative (axiological) from deontic terms (von Wright 1963; Wiggins 1976; Mulligan 1998; Dancy 2000; Thomson 2008). For an overview of this distinction and its implications, see Milevski 2022: 13–16.

objective entities independent of agents, but neither are they arbitrary beliefs—they are relational facts sensitive to the conditions under which a competent agent would recognise them (see e.g. Jurjako 2017: 265–268, 2024: 77–82).

Nonetheless, in my reading, this construction raises an important philosophical question: how precisely is the line drawn between correct and mistaken normative judgements if their justification remains grounded in the agent's idealised perspective? While the response-dependence strategy helps to secure room for error in principle, it remains open how determinate this standard is in practice, especially in complex or ideologically loaded cases. Namely, if one interprets the account too narrowly, there is a risk of conflating an agent's idealised endorsement with the truth of having a normative reason. Yet this distinction—between merely endorsing a reason and genuinely having a justified reason—is crucial for any realist or cognitivist treatment of normativity. If not maintained with sufficient clarity, there is a risk that even an idealised subjective stance could be treated as constitutive of correctness, blurring the normative boundary.

Subject-based models are compelling in explaining why agents act in line with their perceived reasons. But the question of error remains pressing: how can we determine that an agent has misjudged what genuinely counts in favour of φ-ing if the ultimate standard is the agent's idealised viewpoint alone? Without a robust, operationalisable criterion, the risk is that rational scrutiny could collapse into a descriptive account of how a psychologically competent agent would respond—but without an independent anchor for justification.

A well-known illustration of this tension appears in the so-called paradox of the subject-based reason. Consider the statement: "I have a reason to φ, but I recognise nothing that counts in favour of φ-ing". If "having a reason" simply means "recognising a fact that favours φ-ing under idealised conditions", then this statement comes close to contradiction—much like Moore's paradox: "It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining" (Moore 1944: 203–204). In both cases, the first clause logically implies the second while simultaneously denying it. In everyday and philosophical contexts, we consistently distinguish between good and bad reasons, justified and unjustified judgements. It is common for someone to believe they have a good reason for an action that does not survive rational scrutiny. If one interprets the response-dependent standard too loosely, the mere fact that an agent would endorse a reason under certain conditions might be taken as sufficient for justification—which risks circularity.

Jurjako's analogy with colour perception demonstrates an important insight: that reasons can be real and yet dependent on our cognitive makeup.

However, the question remains how fine-grained and resilient this standard is in messy normative practice. As long as the model does not fully specify how to adjudicate contested cases—for instance, when different agents disagree about what their idealised selves would recognise—a legitimate philosophical concern persists that the account may drift too close to a sophisticated form of subjectivism. In sum, Jurjako's formulation of subject-based normativity is motivationally robust and epistemically refined by the response-dependence analogy, but arguably invites further elaboration regarding how precisely it secures a normatively binding distinction between justified and unjustified reasons. This is not to attribute to Jurjako a view he does not hold, but to indicate where his naturalistic approach invites further development to clarify the limits and criteria of normative error within a subject-based framework.

5. The Epistemic Incompleteness of the Naturalistic Approach

Jurjako's attempt to account for normative reasons within a naturalistic framework is explicitly grounded in the principle of methodological naturalism. As he explains, this approach holds that normative facts should be explained by appeal to entities, properties, and processes that have a place within scientific explanations (Jurjako 2024: 10–11). On this view, normative reasons are not taken to stem from a metaphysical realm of objective values but rather are understood to emerge from evolutionarily shaped cognitive capacities that stabilise behaviour, support cooperation, and enhance the long-term viability of social agents. In this sense, our capacity for normative thought is accounted for in terms of its biological function: we endorse normative reasons because such beliefs increase our adaptive fitness.

This explanatory focus convincingly addresses the question of *why* humans have normative beliefs and *how* they motivate action in a coordinated social environment. However, as I use the term here, the problem of epistemic incompleteness concerns a deeper layer: even if the naturalistic account explains the origin and practical function of normative beliefs, it leaves open how an agent knows that these beliefs are epistemically *justified* and truth-tracking—rather than merely evolutionarily useful.

This distinction between genesis and justification is well-known in metaethics.[9] That a belief evolved because it promoted survival does not, by

[9] A clear articulation of this distinction between the evolutionary genesis of moral beliefs and their normative justification can be found in the works of Joyce (2006), Street (2006), and Harman (1977). These authors emphasise that explaining why we hold certain moral beliefs

itself, show that it is true or normatively warranted. Evolutionary psychology can illuminate why we tend to believe, for instance, that helping others fosters cooperation or that theft undermines social trust. But it cannot establish that such beliefs are adequate reasons in the normative sense—it shows their utility, not their epistemic credibility.

A standard version of this challenge is sometimes called the *epistemic problem of detecting the normative*. If normative reasons are facts that genuinely count in favour of certain actions, then it must be explained how agents reliably come to know which facts have this normative force. For example, if another's suffering is a reason to help, what cognitive capacity enables an agent to perceive that fact as normatively salient, and how is this capacity epistemically reliable? A purely genealogical account does not fully answer this: it explains motivation and coordination but does not unpack the conditions under which the resulting beliefs can be trusted as true or correct.

An analogy with perception clarifies the issue. Evolution shaped our visual system so that we can distinguish food from poison, yet the fact that this system evolved does not guarantee that its representations are infallible. We assess the reliability of perception through consistency, testability, and coherence with other information. Likewise, even if moral or practical beliefs are evolutionarily functional, this alone does not show that they are epistemically sound. The naturalistic story must be supplemented with an account of the standards that make a normative belief not just adaptive but rationally justified.

In this sense, any theory that treats normative judgements as truth-apt must address both the ontological status of reasons and the epistemic route by which agents access them. Saying "*A* has a normative reason *R* to φ" entails both that *R* is a fact with normative force and that *A* recognises it through a process that is truth-conducive. Jurjako's position gives a functional answer to the first condition—for instance, that a fact about harm has social-regulatory importance—but remains relatively silent about the second: how do we know that the agent's recognition of that fact as a reason is epistemically warranted rather than an adaptive illusion?

In sum, this is the sense in which Jurjako's otherwise compelling naturalistic account may be seen as epistemically incomplete: it explains why normative thinking exists and why it motivates, but not fully how it tracks normative truth. Of course, Jurjako explicitly confines his project to a naturalistic genealogy and does not claim to provide a complete

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does not by itself establish that these beliefs are epistemically warranted or normatively justified.

epistemology of normativity. Nevertheless, for any theory that aspires to treat normative reasons as truth-apt facts, clarifying the standards for justified recognition remains an essential next step.

6. Concluding Remarks

Jurjako's subject-based naturalistic account represents a sophisticated and theoretically ambitious attempt to explain normative reasons within a naturalistic ontological and methodological framework. Drawing on evolutionary psychology and a functional analysis of rational agency, this approach clarifies how normative reasons can be understood as facts that motivate action and regulate behaviour without appealing to metaphysically independent values or supernatural entities. In this respect, Jurjako's theory offers a compelling account of how reasons can be both practically effective and naturalistically grounded.

However, as the preceding sections have argued, several philosophical issues remain unresolved. Most importantly, the naturalistic explanation of how reasons contribute to behavioural stability and coordination does not clarify how the boundary between adaptive utility and evaluative justification should be drawn — thus giving renewed relevance to the classic open question argument. While the biological model of dual function provides an illuminating analogy for how reasons can be both descriptive and directive, it leaves open how this idea extends to the complex semantic and pragmatic variety of normative language in practice. Furthermore, grounding the existence of reasons in an agent's idealised perspective raises questions about how disagreement and error can be settled, and how a clear standard of correctness is to be specified. Finally, although the framework explains how agents are disposed to recognise certain facts as reasons, it does not fully clarify how this capacity satisfies standards of epistemic justification, rather than merely yielding adaptively useful but possibly unreliable recognition.

Taken together, these unresolved issues suggest that while Jurjako's subject-based naturalism convincingly explains the motivational and functional role of normative reasons, it remains an open-ended project when it comes to showing how such reasons are not only practically effective but also evaluatively justified and pragmatically articulated in human discourse. Providing a more detailed account of how to bridge this gap between naturalistic genealogy and normative justification remains, in my view, an important direction for future work.

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