

# Proceduralist Subjectivism and the Phenomenology of Practical Life: A Critique of Jurjako

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ABSTRACT: In *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View*, Marko Jurjako takes on the philosophical challenge, as his title intimates, of reconciling the existence of normative reasons with a naturalistic worldview. In this essay, I raise two objections to Jurjako's positive naturalistic, subjectivist, idealized agent account of normative reasons. First, a simpler, more elegant form of subjectivism is able, I argue, to resolve the puzzle that drives Jurjako to idealized agent subjectivism. Second, I argue that Jurjako's realist opponent has substantive grounds for concluding that Jurjako doesn't truly address the particular intuitions (about the phenomenology of normative life) that best motivate normative realism. In the process of raising these objections, I attempt to clarify the basic theoretical commitments of realism, constructivism, and subjectivism about normative reasons.

KEYWORDS: constructivism, normative reasons, phenomenology of action-guiding normativity, process of idealization, rational advisability vs. rational virtuosity, realism, subjectivism

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I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act.  
But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a *problem*. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act?  
(Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 1996: 93, emphasis mine).

What counts as a good explanation depends heavily on  
an understanding of what it is that has to be explained.  
(Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 2012: 102)

This is where our innate knowledge leads us.  
If it be not true, there is no truth in man;  
and if it be true, he finds therein great cause for humiliation,  
being compelled to abase himself one way or another.  
(Pascal, *Pensees*: Idea #72)

## I. Our Topic

Let's take a normative *practical* reason, hereafter 'a normative reason,' to be a consideration in favor of *doing* something,<sup>1</sup> a proper input into practical deliberation, a normative entity that ought to be counted in the process of deciding what to do. A normative reason is, let's also suppose, a *pro tanto* consideration: it does supply a positive consideration in favor of some act, a consideration that ought to be weighed with and against whatever other normative reasons an agent happens to have, though it could conceivably be outweighed by one or more of them. For example, I might have a normative reason to head straightaway to bed after an energy-sapping day, but a weightier normative reason to tuck my dear toddler in first.

In *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View*, Marko Jurjako takes on the philosophical challenge, as his title intimates, of "reconciling" the existence of normative reasons "within a naturalistic worldview" (Jurjako 2024: ix).

Very sensibly, Jurjako regards the concept of a normative reason as an "indispensable" element of every day practical reasoning, and of our philosophical theorizing about it. We simply can't do without this idea. We all "think thoughts that use" this concept (Jurjako 2024: 46; Parfit 2011: 32); normative reasons are objects of "a certain type of conscious experience with which we we're all intimately familiar" (Jurjako 2024: 46-47; Street 2017: 126). Certainly, to make sense of what it *means* to engage in practical decision-making, we must posit the existence of the items that are deliberated *about*—identified, weighed, and contrasted—within the process of deciding what we ought to do.

Things that exist should be accounted for, at least by philosophers. Accordingly, the central goal of *Normative Reasons from a Naturalistic Point of View*, hereafter 'NRNPV', is to "explore" the nature, as well as the "origins and sources," of normative reasons (Jurjako 2024: 2). This leads Jurjako to broach questions about the *ontology* of a normative reason: Does this type of entity exist, *necessarily*, in every possible world? Or, alternatively, if this sort of entity is an item that happens to come into being in some possible worlds (such as our own), *by what process* does it emerge? Also, crucial *normative* questions call out to be addressed: How does this sort of "consideration in favor of doing something" come to *deserve* a positive voice in our decision-making—about, for instance, whether to make a beeline for my own sleeping chambers or to duck, first, into my drowsy toddler's room?

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<sup>1</sup> I don't deny there are also considerations in favor of desiring, feeling, or being a certain way. But for the sake of keeping my prose simple, I will speak of normative reasons as considerations in favor of acting.

Formulating an account of normative reasons is, Jurjako believes, a particular instance of an overarching philosophical conundrum for thinkers with a naturalistic worldview. ‘Naturalists’ confront the very general “puzzle” to articulate how the “phenomena of normativity *as a whole*” fit “within a naturalistic worldview” (Jurjako 2024: 2–3, emphasis mine). Jurjako doesn’t happen to specify what other species of normativity, beyond the practical, he’s thinking of. But as Jurjako is absolutely correct to emphasize, normativity utterly “pervades” our lives (Jurjako 2024: 1). Certainly, we all confront ‘oughts’ when doing mathematics, when solving logical puzzles, and when thinking about epistemological questions, as well as when considering the demands of etiquette and the expectations of grammar and proper usage. How, we might sensibly ask, should a naturalist account for the normative authority of these various sorts of ‘do’s and ‘don’t’s?

In NRNPV, Jurjako chooses to limit his philosophical attention to how best to account for normative *practical* reasons. That’s a sufficiently arduous task for a single book. So, absolutely no criticism from me on that point. On the contrary, I commend Jurjako’s *argumentative posture* within his book. As I read within the philosophical literature, I occasionally find myself with a sneaking suspicion that this or that philosopher is overly eager to foist each and every theoretical burden onto her opposition. (Sorry, I don’t intend to name names!) That’s most definitely not the *dialectical pose* Jurjako strikes. Quite admirably, instead of seeking out slivers in other philosophers’ eyes, Jurjako promises to take up, especially in his final chapter, his own philosophical crosses. This certainly makes for a sufficiently Herculean chore.

## II. Specifying the Puzzle

So, how does Jurjako characterize the *particular* philosophical puzzle he aims to solve?

Jurjako begins from an observation. We behave *as though* our countless and sundry judgments about normative reasons can be judged “reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, good or bad” (Jurjako 2024: 1).<sup>2</sup> When we go about the quotidian, personal business of identifying and weighing normative reasons, and choosing which of them ultimately to act upon, and when we go about the social, interactive business of proposing normative reasons to others, nudging or cajoling them to act in one way or another, we behave *as though* there are, as Jurjako puts it, “ought-facts” (Jurjako 2024: 1). This same point is canonically made in terms of the “grammar” of normative

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<sup>2</sup> This is a quotation from Onora O’Neill, from her introduction to Christine Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity* (Korsgaard 1996: ix). As context makes clear, Jurjako means to be quoting O’Neill favorably.

discourse. The sentence “I ought to put my toddler to bed first” has the same grammatical construction as a garden-variety factual assertion; and it’s not hard to imagine both the relevant agent’s spouse (who has a vested interest) and a bystander (who doesn’t, particularly) nodding in agreement with the remark, as though they regarded it—like ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ and ‘water boils at 100 degrees Celsius’—as being *true*.

In this same vein, Jurjako endorses a claim about the phenomenology of practical life. The Kantian philosopher Christine Korsgaard speaks of the “fact of value.” In her view, it is a “striking” fact of human experience that (at least some) values *seem* to have a compelling, magnetic quality; they “call out to us, telling us that things should be like them . . . and that we should make them so” (Korsgaard 1996: 1). Similarly, Plato’s *Republic* suggests the central task within a human life is for a person to turn her head upwards and out of the cave, so as to discern what the Good is, and—once discerned—to strive to exemplify the Good. Iris Murdoch expresses the fact of value in this way: “what we are *irresistibly* inclined to say” is that at least some moral and aesthetic values have “an *authority structure* that [rightly] commands [our] respect” (Murdoch 2001, emphasis mine). In summary, phenomenologically speaking, the direction of fit between the relevant values and our choices *seems* to be *from* those particular values *to* our practical decisions. In the very least, it feels *as though* values exist, we’re to learn about them, and we’re to strive to live up to what they ask of us.

If granted, the fact of value raises profound ontological and epistemological questions: Are there ought-facts? Should you and I trust the phenomenology of practical life? Does our natural habit of acting as though some values, in and of themselves, bear normative authority give us strong, or even philosophically compelling, grounds to adopt an ontology—even a broader worldview—that posits ought-facts (or something analogous)?

Realism, which answers these profound philosophical *cum* existential questions affirmatively, is the viewpoint that there are irreducible ought-facts.<sup>3</sup> To provide a few contemporary examples, Thomas Nagel postulates that—though the ‘do’s and ‘don’t’s of etiquette and grammar are grounded in nothing more than human need and convention—certain states of affairs, such as the flourishing of an innocent child and the health of the natural

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<sup>3</sup> Jurjako describes realism thusly: it is the view that a normative reason is “a normative fact that exists independently of the mind or subject that responds to it” (Jurjako 2024: 37; also, 144–145). One question, though, is whether a realist is committed to thinking that *all* normative reasons are mind- and subject-independent, or merely that there exist normative reasons that are. Presumably, a realist is able to regard *some* of an agent’s normative reasons as grounded in her particular desires and preferences, those, say, that do not conflict with irreducible ought-facts.

environment, are intrinsically valuable (Nagel 2012). And Derek Parfit, whom Jurjako treats as a prime representative of realism, believes that at least some facts have the normative authority to demand that we change our very hearts: there are “certain *facts* that give us reasons both to have certain desires and aims, and to do whatever might achieve these aims” (Parfit 2011: 45, emphasis mine). That is, the proper direction of fit is from discerning authentic, irreducible values to making proper decisions about what to desire and how to act.

Jurjako pits himself against realism in NRNPV. Taking the phenomenology of practical life at face value is a philosophical bridge too far for him. Jurjako’s commitment to naturalism, he supposes, powerfully inhibits, perhaps even intellectually forbids, him from positing ought-facts or intrinsically normative states of affairs (or anything analogously realist). Instead, in Jurjako’s ‘subjectivist’ view, normative reasons are invariably “agent-relative.” Each person’s various normative reasons derive from, as Bernard Williams has famously said, “elements” within her own personal “motivational set” (Williams 1996). Thus, my normative reasons to put my toddler to bed and to go to bed myself are ultimately grounded in my own basic desires, such as my heartfelt concern for the welfare of both my child and myself, as well as the brute fact of my sleepiness, which is pressing me to throw myself down upon the pillow.

What, we might wonder, makes Jurjako think that a belief in ought-facts is *inconsistent* with naturalism?<sup>4</sup> In NRNPV, Jurjako generally characterizes things in the following way. Naturalists favor (surprise, surprise) “naturalistic explanations.” In her general theorizing, a naturalist will treat the existence of physical objects, such as rocks and trees and buildings and fleas, as (sufficiently) uncontroversial,<sup>5</sup> and when it comes to “explaining” the goings on in our universe, a causal ‘because’, a naturalistic explanation, is the paradigmatic explanation: Why did the apple fall from the tree? *Because* of the gravitational force imposed upon it by the earth’s mass.

Thus, we arrive at Jurjako’s puzzle. If a naturalist grants the phenomenology of action-guiding normativity, how does she best fit this “striking”

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<sup>4</sup> Few readers will be surprised, of course, that Jurjako sees subjectivism as fitting within naturalism. Within the philosophical literature, subjectivism is sometimes considered the default position in theorizing about normative reasons (Nozick 1993: 133; Hubin 1996; Millgram 2001). Likely, this is, at least in part, because naturalism is a prevalent worldview within philosophical and intellectual circles.

<sup>5</sup> Jurjako does make a brief nod to the possibility of skepticism, even skepticism about our knowledge of the physical world. But it would seem that, at least in Jurjako’s general naturalistic outlook, it is sensible for us to go on believing ordinary empirical claims, even if we do happen to suffer from an inability to answer all of the “frameable questions” the skeptic can ask (Nagel 1972).

and “irresistible” phenomenon into her worldview, which privileges causal ‘because’s? How might a naturalist best account for the grammar of normative discourse, as well as the apparent truth-bearing, magnetic, and authoritative qualities of (at least some) values? As Jurjako alludes, we don’t encounter “purported ought-facts” (Jurjako 2024: ix) in the standard way we encounter rocks and trees, that is, by perceiving them with our sensory apparatus. And, as Jurjako suggests from time to time, the epistemology to which normative realists are implicitly committed could seem mystifying. Do we have a built-in physical or mental mechanism, analogous to physical eyesight, that discerns these purported facts? Jurjako says no. In consequence, in his final chapter he sets out to provide an account of normative reasons and the fact of value that better coheres with a naturalistic worldview.

In summary, to sketch the dialectic of NRNPV at a high level of abstraction, Jurjako resolves to do philosophical justice to the relevant phenomenology, but without endorsing any realist outlook. Instead, his subjectivist outlook *reverses* the direction of fit between values and reasons, on the one hand, and desires and decision-making, on the other. Our own desires are the ultimate well-springs of each and every one of our normative reasons.

### III. My Essay’s Aims

So, how sturdily does Jurjako bear his hefty philosophical cross? That is, how strong is the positive naturalistic, subjectivist account of normative reasons Jurjako formulates? Do the novel features of Jurjako’s general account resolve, or at least make progress in resolving, the puzzle he himself has sketched? In this essay, I intend, as I attempt to describe Jurjako’s central arguments in more detail, to raise two broad objections, one to the particular species of subjectivism about normative reasons Jurjako chooses to formulate, and one to the explanatory power of his naturalistic analysis of the phenomenology of practical life.

My first objection is that Jurjako overcomplicates subjectivism. The subjectivist theory, which (in the very least) treats desire-based, means-end, instrumental reasoning as the *paradigmatic* form of practical reasoning, is sometimes accused of being overly simple, even crude. In chapters 2 and 3, Jurjako attempts to develop (what he takes to be) a sufficiently sophisticated conception of subjectivism, a “dispositionalist” theory that treats a “process of idealization” as a crucial element within the best “rational procedure” for determining what “decisive” normative reasons each particular agent truly has. In my view, the basic question that leads Jurjako to develop his more

complex form of subjectivism can be answered by a simpler, more elegant form. That's the basic shape of my first objection.

Unlike my first objection, which is about identifying or constructing the best possible subjectivist theory, my second objection engages the philosophical debate between subjectivists and realists. In his final chapter, Jurjako attempts to explain, and so to explain away, our striking and irresistible intuitions about the nature of value. Realists such as Nagel sometimes charge such attempts of being guilty of postulating implausible "epicycles" (Nagel 2012: 100). Does Jurjako do better? I'll suggest that Jurjako's realist opponent has substantive grounds for judging that he doesn't address the particular intuitions that best motivate normative realism.

I do have one more quibble with NRNPV. To raise objections to Jurjako's central arguments and its ultimate aims, it'd be helpful, of course, to have a clear understanding of what they are. I don't wish to be peevish, but at various points I found myself wishing that Jurjako were clearer about both the framework of his book's main dialectic and the theory-defining commitments of viewpoints (such as naturalism, subjectivism, and constructivism) crucial to this dialectic.

Over the course of the next several sections, I'll explain what prompts me to say this. Readers can decide for themselves whether my quibbling is fair-minded or pedantic and cranky.

#### **IV. The First Framework Question: Who's to be Convinced?**

We might naturally ask how "competitive" Jurjako intends to be. How many hearts and minds does Jurjako hope to change, and whose? Does NRNPV have significant evangelical aspirations, aiming to bring his realist opponents into the naturalist fold? Or is the book meant, first and foremost, to preach to the choir of self-professing naturalists? Would Jurjako's own soul be sufficiently satisfied if (at least many of) his fellow naturalists were to agree that he's resolved the relevant philosophical puzzle for anyone *within* their shared outlook?

In this vein, consider the work of Nagel, who has often raised the question how objective, third-person reflection properly relates to subjective, first-person experience. If it proves difficult to square our intuitions from the first-person perspective with, say, the standard commitments and methods of modern science, which perspective (if either) should we privilege: first or third? To borrow Jurjako's own language, qualia represent a "certain type of conscious experience with which we're all intimately familiar." If it proves difficult to understand various mental phenomena, such as qualia, from a

third-person, scientific perspective, how should we best respond to this sort of puzzle (which presents an *additional* conundrum for naturalism<sup>6</sup>)?

As his lengthy and distinguished scholarly career has progressed, Nagel's philosophical theorizing has become characterized by a certain openness to mystery. According to his mature view, we live in a philosophically confounding world. And in his 2012 book *Mind and Cosmos*, Nagel reports that he has (for lack of a better word) "chosen" not to subjugate first-person experience to the third-person perspective. (Instead, he aims, he tells us, to give them "equal standing" in his philosophical theorizing.<sup>7</sup>) Accordingly, Nagel says not only that critics of normative realism lose credibility because of the epicycles they generate in attempting to explain away the seeming irreducible reality of value, but that the reality of ought-facts strikes him as "glaringly" correct (Nagel 2012: 106, 100). In effect, Nagel treats the question "which vantage point to privilege?" as an existential flashpoint or depth charge. A person's whole stripe of mind and broader worldview will hinge, considerably, on whether she's willing to attune her ontology to her subjective, first-person (aesthetic, moral, conscious) experience, or not.

Here's a useful question: How would Jurjako react to Nagel's philosophical *cum* existential *cum* worldview "choice"? Of course, Jurjako *disagrees* with Nagel's realist outlook, as well as with the broader anti-materialist, Darwinist-tweaking, teleological worldview Nagel develops in light of his more fundamental commitment to normative realism. But—more to the current point—would Jurjako regard Nagel's decision as *intellectually credible*, though it's not the direction Jurjako himself takes in his own theorizing? Or, alternatively, would Jurjako regard Nagel as having made a *profound philosophical mistake* of some kind? For instance, in Jurjako's view is it philosophically suspect *not* to begin from, or *not* to operate from, a naturalistic standpoint? Does Jurjako think—though it's not especially consonant with his general *dialectical pose* in NRNPV—the weightier theoretical burden is always upon the theorist who's not a naturalist?

I can't quite discern this aspect of the book's dialectic. On the one hand, Jurjako often employs the highly non-confrontational language of "exploration," not of philosophical competition.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, in Chapters 2 and 3 Jurjako certainly engages and (thoughtfully) challenges realist ideas and arguments (constructed by Parfit and David Enoch). Then again, after some to and fro between realist and subjectivist arguments, Jurjako tends to

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<sup>6</sup> Jurjako himself alludes, at points, to the "problem of consciousness" for naturalists (Jurjako 2024: 40).

<sup>7</sup> It's not immediately clear what such a balance would look like when played out.

<sup>8</sup> At the very end of NRNPV, Jurjako does speak of having "presupposed" naturalism (Jurjako 2024: 174).

rely upon stock “objections” against realism: it is “hyper-objectivist”; it posits a form of “magic” or a “piece of serendipity” when it supposes our minds are somehow—“lo and behold”—fit to discern irreducibly ought-facts (Jurjako 2024: 40–41; Korsgaard 2011: 6).

At this juncture in the dialectic, we have one theorist’s “glaringly correct” commitment being the other thinker’s non-starter.<sup>9</sup> If we were to construe Jurjako as attempting to talk realists out of their substantive outlook and into his naturalist worldview, his stock, non-realist judgments would take on a question-begging feel, as they clearly *reflect* Jurjako’s naturalism: more or less, they are exactly what a science-minded naturalist thinker is predictably going to say. Otherwise put, need Nagel grant that his view is “hyper-objectivist”? Or could he simply retort that Jurjako’s is “hyper-subjectivist”? And would a theist, such as the Christian thinker Blaise Pascal, be guilty of some form of philosophical error if he were to treat the fact of value as reflecting, neither magic nor serendipity, but the work of divine providence? (As the quotation at the beginning of this essay intimates, Pascal himself is deeply aware that, in choosing to trust the dictates of his “heart”—that is, various striking intuitions about the reality of the external world and of God, about the veracity of sense experience, and about the intrinsic value of each human being—he is taking an epistemic risk: if these basic intuitions “be not true,” his entire belief system stands, humiliatingly, upon the creakiest of epistemic foundations. Such epistemological self-awareness at least mitigates against the judgment Pascal is making an intellectual *mistake* of some kind.)

This sort of question—about how competitive Jurjako means to be—will become especially relevant when we evaluate Jurjako’s final-chapter heave-ho at giving a positive naturalistic account of reasons. Who, it’d be good to know, does he himself hope to convince by it?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jurjako signals that normative realism simply strikes him as “implausible” (Jurjako 2024: 143).

<sup>10</sup> In general, I find Jurjako fair-minded. But perhaps this writerly virtue briefly exits stage right when Jurjako levies an accusation of philosophical “bias” against Parfit (Jurjako 2024: 53). Is this accusation even-handed? If Jurjako does happen to treat naturalism (however, precisely, he conceives of it) as his philosophical starting point, why can’t Parfit—or Nagel, or Pascal, for that matter—treat his own “perspectives and intuitions regarding the nature of reasons” as his starting point? An accusation of bias implies the alleged offender is making an acknowledged partisan assumption or a tendentious logical move. Has Jurjako done anything to reveal Parfit is guilty of something such as that?

## V. The Second Framework Question: What Theory-Defining Commitments?

As said, I occasionally find myself wanting a firmer grip upon the central tenets of the competing outlooks in NRNPV. Less crucially, I think it's fair to say Jurjako isn't *especially* chatty about what naturalism commits a theorist to. Far, far more crucially, it's tricky to pin down how Jurjako conceives of subjectivism and constructivism, two of the major combatants in the historical debate about how best to conceptualize normative reasons. Unfortunately, it'll take some time to articulate what, precisely, I find problematic. Consider yourself, then, as holding a promissory note from me.

Let's begin by considering what Jurjako takes naturalism to be. As discussed, Jurjako explicitly articulates that naturalism privileges causal explanations, which is the idea that prompts the question how to account for normative 'ought's within a naturalistic worldview. But what else can helpfully be said? Jurjako speaks of naturalism as a *worldview*, which connotes an outlook including substantive tenets about the nature of reality, and not merely a methodological practice.<sup>11</sup> But what, precisely or roughly, are a naturalist's beginning assumptions, its articles of faith? Is a naturalist committed to some form of physicalism or materialism? (Or should taking the existence of normative reasons—and the existence of qualia, or consciousness more generally—seriously push us away from strict physicalism or materialism, though not away from naturalism?) Not to mention, even if Jurjako-style naturalism isn't merely a form of methodological naturalism, what methodological limits *do* happen to accompany the relevant (in my view, under-described) substantive tenets of this worldview?<sup>12</sup> Is a naturalist, by definition, committed to a form of *evidentialist empiricism*<sup>13</sup> tantamount to restricting what can be treated as a legitimate source of evidence to the dictates of sense observation?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the book's penultimate page, Jurjako construes himself as having adopted the "perspective of methodological naturalism" (Jurjako 2024: 173), but he frequently speaks of his naturalistic "worldview."

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion, see David Papineau, "Naturalism" (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Pascal famously, though tersely, argues against empiricist evidentialism as he defends the intellectual credibility of Christianity (*Pensees*: 230-234).

<sup>14</sup> Important naturalistic themes are scattered throughout the text. A reader can infer what Jurjako-style naturalism entails by identifying what he regards as untenable. A few examples: Not only is he suspicious of "in-built mechanisms" and seemingly too-good-to-be-true "serendipitous truths," and not only does he favor an abstemious ontology, he also expresses general skepticism about *a priori* reasoning, while arguing that the instrumental principle ("an agent has a reason to take the means to his desired ends") is not known by *a priori* reasoning (Jurjako 2024: 160). His discussion of the phenomenology of practical life is, understandably, chockablock with Darwinist thought.

In fairness to Jurjako, it's easy for me to ask a deluge of highly general interpretative questions. It's difficult for any thinker to lay bare each of her underlying assumptions, at least in a book of manageable length. That said, even if it's acceptable for Jurjako to be less chatty about naturalism, it's crucial he provide his reader with a clear conception of what he takes subjectivism to be, and how it differs from its main competitors. So, let's turn to that variety of interpretative question.

## VI. Realism, Constructivism, Subjectivism

Cullity and Gaut helpfully describe contemporary debates about normative reasons as a perduring dispute between three poles: (Hume-inspired) subjectivism, (Kant-inspired) constructivism, and realism (with Aristotle as representative) (1997). As I see it, this three-pole framework—which treats debates about normative reasons as a dialectic between subjectivism, constructivism, and realism—operates in the background of Jurjako's arguments.

As we've seen, Jurjako treats realism as a non-starter, and one of his central, self-appointed tasks is to explain away the arresting intuitions about the fact of value that motivate the realist perspective. That much is exceedingly clear.

What about constructivism? Jurjako often mentions constructivism and treats Korsgaard as his favored mouthpiece of constructivist thought. Korsgaard herself has described Kantian constructivism as “the only” viewpoint about the normative authority of normative reasons “consistent with the [broadly materialist, naturalistic] metaphysics of the modern world” (Korsgaard 1996: 5).<sup>15</sup> Jurjako appears to agree with Korsgaard that constructivism, in the very least, doesn't obviously violate the central, ontologically abstemious tenets of naturalism (Jurjako 2024: 146). Accordingly, he treats constructivism as *a more plausible* school of thought than realism. Though Jurjako ultimately takes his stand with subjectivism,<sup>16</sup> for much of NRRNPV he treats constructivism as a fellow combatant of realism.<sup>17</sup> An enemy of your

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<sup>15</sup> Presumably, contrary to Korsgaard's remark, subjectivism (which is the theory of normative reasons implicit in what Korsgaard calls a “reflective endorsement” view) is also consistent with “modern metaphysics.” Jurjako, the subjectivist, doesn't happen to take Korsgaard's bait in this moment.

<sup>16</sup> For an argument that subjectivism should endorse a constructivist-sounding item—an act of ‘brute opting’, which is a type of choice that imparts normativity—see Section VI of Reitsma (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Jurjako objects to constructivism on the grounds that, in his view, it threatens to make practical deliberations an overly intellectualist practice (Jurjako 2024: 153).

enemy can sometimes, at least for a time and for the right strategic purposes, be your friend.

Here is one example of this temporary friendship. Jurjako describes realism as the view that there are “procedure independent” normative reasons, reasons which exist *necessarily* (in every possible world) and “*independently* of the mind or subject that responds to” them (Jurjako 2024: 37, emphasis mine). Jurjako notes that he and the Kant-inspired constructivist, such as Korsgaard, join each other in their rejection of such normative reasons; they agree that normative reasons exist only in worlds in which there are desiring, choosing agents.<sup>18</sup> As Jurjako puts things, his own particular form of subjectivism shares with the constructivist a commitment to the claim that normative reasons emerge only from the exercise of a rational procedure, a “sound deliberative process” (Jurjako 2024: 50). Since this is a major constructivist theme, Jurjako presumably intends to indicate, at some juncture, how to square his belief in procedure dependent normative reasons with his commitment to subjectivism’s desire-based normative reasons.

So, what is constructivism? To get at the crux of this outlook, let’s consider Korsgaard’s own Kantian view. In *The Sources of Normativity* (1996), Korsgaard construes her constructivist outlook as committed, at its very heart, to the idea that the formal rules of practical reasoning are sufficiently robust that any rational agent who attempts to act, *on the basis of any intention whatsoever*, is rationally committed to certain, identifiable, substantive normative reasons. For instance, every rational agent, no matter what she happens to desire (or what “practical identities” she happens to adopt), has a decisive normative reason always to treat other people as ends in themselves. Otherwise put, Korsgaard posits—*contrary* to subjectivism, and *in agreement* with realism—normative reasons that are not agent-relative. Whatever theoretical virtues Jurjako happens to see within constructivism, as a subjectivist he is committed to rejecting any *such* constructivist account. His subjectivism, by definition, commits him to an agent *agent-relative* conception of normative reasons. And so, whatever rational procedure he himself ultimately endorses, it will need to treat the normative reasons that emerge from it as fundamentally desire-based.

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<sup>18</sup> Jurjako is willing to entertain a “capacity first approach” according to which, beginning with a naturalistic outlook, normativity emerges through the operation of a mental faculty within a world otherwise entirely describable in naturalistic terms. He describes Korsgaard’s outlook as having “naturalistic credentials” (146), and he recognizes that if normative entities exist (and they aren’t a fundamental aspect of reality), they need to emerge. More, he sees the constructivist as providing an account of how they emerge that isn’t “peculiar” (145–146).

This makes it quite puzzling—here’s one of my quibbles—when Jurjako identifies Korsgaard as a subjectivist, a remark that’s hard to square with the general thrust of the *three-pole* debate (Jurjako 2024: 50). Not to mention, at another point Jurjako construes his own “capacity first approach” to be a constructivist account, which—again—threatens to blur the lines between these two, competing schools of thought (Jurjako 2024: 142–146). Is Jurjako guilty of conflating subjectivism and constructivism? Later, I’ll suggest an explanation for these unhappy muddles.

In any case, let’s turn to subjectivism, the school of thought Jurjako favors. Once we understand its basic, underlying commitments, we can play out more of NRNPV’s debate: its contest between realists (the targeted enemies), constructivists (the for-a-while friends), and subjectivists (the fellow believers).

## VII. What Is Subjectivism about Practical Reasons?

As I’ve said, subjectivism is, among other things, a theory about the ultimate *source* of normative reasons. As Jurjako puts it, it claims that an agent’s normative reasons, all of them, ultimately derive from among the “elements” of “his subjective motivational set” (Williams 1996)—or, put more commonsensically, from among his own desires. This claim has usefully been called “the desire-based reasons thesis” (Kagan 1992; Hubin 1999).<sup>19</sup> To give a stock subjectivist example, your thirst—your *basic, unmotivated* desire for something to drink—gives you a normative reason to take the means to satisfy it, walking to the drinking fountain or to the soda machine, say. We might put the subjectivist’s defining idea in this way. (I often will.) In the stock example, your thirst is “rationally potent”: it generates normative reasons. The desire, along with facts relevant to its satisfaction, is the source of normative reasons for you.

Cut at its joints, subjectivism is committed, alongside the desire-based reasons thesis, to a second tenet, an instrumental principle that *communicates* normativity from a (rationally potent) basic desire to the (effective) means to its satisfaction. Together, these two elements make up the “core elements” of the subjectivist theory.

Another characteristic of subjectivism—more difficult to define, but crucial to understanding this theory—is its theoretical modesty. Given its commitment to the desire-based reasons thesis, subjectivism regards practical reasons as (as I’ve been saying) *agent-relative*: the considerations

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<sup>19</sup> Whether Williams himself is an advocate of the desire-based reasons thesis has been questioned. Dancy argues we should be careful to distinguish between the desire-based reasons thesis and Williams’ internalism about practical reasons (2000: 18–19).

relevant to answering the question “What, rationally speaking, should this particular agent do?” ultimately derive from among her own subjective, contingent, conative states—from among her own whims, impulses, desires, wants, cares, loves, intentions, pro-attitudes, and the like—and from nowhere else. Accordingly, subjectivism rejects any appeal to extra-subjectivist practical reasons or extra-subjectivist constraints upon practical reasons. That is, a subjectivist cannot regard any purported normative standard, whether a realist standard of objective worth, a robust Kantian (constructivist) rule of practical reason such as the Categorical Imperative, or some other standard, as rationally binding upon an agent regardless of what she happens to want.<sup>20</sup> Subjectivists believe, as Hume puts it, that practical reason’s proper task—the only “office” to which it should “pretend”—is to “serve” ends the agent herself already desires.<sup>21</sup>

Subjectivists often describe their view in the following way. When we ask an agent for a rational justification of his behavior, a chain of practical justifications properly “bottoms out” in an appeal to a basic desire, such as “because I was thirsty” or “because I care intrinsically about my child’s welfare.” In the subjectivist’s view, practical rationality doesn’t require that the agent have some further justification for why he should treat these basic desires as reason-giving. Motivational states such as these are *the ultimate grounds* of legitimate practical reasoning. (Reversed direction of fit, indeed!)

Subjectivism is sometimes considered the default position in theorizing about normative reasons (Nozick 1993: 133; Hubin 1996; Millgram 2001). It’s often touted as having a significant theoretical virtue. The agent-relative normative reasons it posits seem to have the compelling force we expect from normative reasons. Since according to subjectivism your normative reasons derive from among your own basic desires, you cannot “shrug off”

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<sup>20</sup> Except for the instrumental principle itself. If by ‘categorical imperative’ we mean a rule rationally binding upon an agent independent of the content of his contingent, subjective basic desires, the instrumental principle is such a principle (Dreier 2001). In my construal of subjectivism, even the principle of prudence gains whatever rational normativity it happens to have for a person only and ultimately from her own basic desires, whether directly from her intrinsic concern for her own (long-term) welfare, indirectly from an instrumental need to take care of herself if she hopes to successfully pursue the satisfaction of her other (long-term) desired ends, or both (Hubin 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Jurjako endorses the claim that “the faculty of reason constitutes a fundamental source of normativity,” which he calls a “capacity first approach” (Jurjako 2024: 143). Like other remarks Jurjako makes, this threatens to count as a rejection of the subjectivist’s theory-defining contention that all normative reasons are desire-based. To count as a subjectivist, it’s not sufficient to think our basic conations supply input for practical deliberation, which is a view Kant himself holds. They need to be treated as the generative source of normative reasons.

these considerations; you can't properly say you don't care about, aren't moved by, the *perspective* from which they are generated (Hubin 1996).<sup>22</sup>

In the next section, I'll evaluate Jurjako's preferred proceduralist and dispositionalist form of subjectivism. But first, let's notice an important, conceptually illuminating, and highly intuitive distinction available to subjectivists (as well as to other theorists). When a subjectivist evaluates what a particular agent ought to do in his particular circumstances, she might naturally ask at least two, distinct questions: First, what is it most *advisable* for the agent to do? And second, how well—or how “virtuously”—did the agent perform *as a practical reasoner*?

As I've characterized subjectivism, it's committed, at its very core, to the desire-based reasons thesis, along with an instrumental principle that communicates normativity from rationally potent basic desires to the effective means to their satisfaction. Imagine a traveler named Reisenger, who is in a hasty, hasty hurry to get to his journey's end. Let's suppose that, counterintuitively, taking a lengthier route in terms of distance would get Reisenger to his desired destination sooner than taking the shortest, most direct route, perhaps because there's road-jamming traffic or flooding on the more direct path. According to the central tenets of subjectivism, since taking the lengthier route is the most effective means to the satisfaction of his weightiest, rationally potent desire, it'd be *rationally advisable* for Reisenger to take the lengthier route. Taking the long road represents Reisenger's final 'ought' of rational advisability.

That said, if, through absolutely no fault of his own, Reisenger is unaware of the traffic or flooding on the most direct route, he has a fully justified (though mistaken) means-end belief that the shorter route would be quicker. In this example, when Reisenger is slowed by obstacles along his chosen route, he isn't guilty of any mistake in practical reasoning: he isn't mistaken (we're supposing) about *what* his desired end *is* (a maximally quick arrival); he doesn't have *poorly grounded* instrumental beliefs; and he's not “*means-end irrational*,” that is, he doesn't fail to come to desire the seemingly most effective means to his truly desired end. In terms of his performance as a practical reasoner—in terms of his rational virtuosity—Reisenger's thinking, desiring, and behavior is impeccable. This is true despite the fact that the normative reason Reisenger *judges* to be “decisive” (as Jurjako would put it) doesn't represent his final 'ought' of rational advisability.

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<sup>22</sup> This idea represents a theoretical advantage for subjectivism. Though Jurjako doesn't happen to put things in that way, he does make the same basic point, from the opposite direction. He construes it as a theoretical *disadvantage* that normative realism has to indicate how the ought-facts it posits have motivational force (Jurjako 2024: 40–41).

If you think about it, much of our quotidian practice of practical deliberation is characterized by the pursuit of identifying, with as much rational virtuosity as possible, what our final ‘ought’ of rational advisability happens to be in some given circumstance. As fallible creatures, dark clouds can hover over our most thoughtful and earnest attempts to discern our decisive normative reasons of rational advisability. As any sensible person recognizes, we often lack full information about what the most efficient, effective means to satisfying our (weightiest, rationally potent) conations are. Several other important questions can make us brood. I might ask, “Do I truly understand what it is that I currently (most) desire?” Or more existentially, “Do I truly understand what my heart, my very heart of hearts, most deeply yearns for?” (As anyone who’s had a midlife crisis can attest, this is something a person can, for quite some time, be mistaken about.) Not to mention, yet another existential possibility can discomfit us as practical reasoners. If the fact of value is true—that is, if, as Jurjako admits, our natural habit of treating some things as normative *at least intimates* the existence of (irreducible, authoritative) ought-facts—an agent can always find herself wondering, “Do such ought-facts exist?<sup>23</sup> And, if so, am I apprehending them accurately?”

Note, as this discussion makes clear, the concept of rational advisability is *more* fundamental than the concept of rational virtuosity: the decisive normative reasons we would like to discover are our normative reasons of rational advisability, and we have a most profound, practical incentive to seek them out with as much rational virtuosity as we can. It’s worth keeping this direction of fit in mind.

### VIII. Is Subjectivism, So Construed, Jurjako’s View?

So, when Jurjako speaks of subjectivism, is the theory I’ve sketched the one he’s operating with?

It certainly seems to be. In good, subjectivist fashion, Jurjako is deeply suspicious of “extra subjectivist” reasons and often overtly endorses an agent-relative conception of normative reasons. Even more, though he doesn’t happen to *name* the desire-based reasons thesis, Jurjako explicitly endorses Williams’ claim that all normative reasons ultimately derive from an agent’s “subjective motivational set” (Jurjako 2024: 140).<sup>24</sup> As we’ve clearly seen, Jurjako displays the form of theoretical modesty characteristic

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, an ordinary person wouldn’t phrase the question in such a way. She’d more likely say, “Is beauty real?” or “Does morality really have authority?”

<sup>24</sup> Does Jurjako ignore this core element of subjectivism—the desire-based reasons thesis—when he says, “the principle of instrumental rationality suffices to explain” which normative reasons we have (Jurjako 2024: 140)?

of subjectivist thinking. In fact, subjectivism's theoretical modesty is, no doubt, the central feature that endears it to Jurjako, who strongly desires to maintain an abstemious ontology. Perhaps Jurjako can even be seen as alluding to the "unshruggability" of subjectivist-style, desire-based normative reasons when he criticizes normative realism for positing normative reasons that aren't obviously motivating, that is, that aren't clearly "unshruggable" in the way I've described (Jurjako 2024: 40–42).

Even more, as I've construed it, subjectivism fits very tightly within a philosophical guardrail Jurjako imposes upon himself. Jurjako explicitly aims to construct a naturalistic account that isn't, as it were, "overly" reductionistic, a form of naturalism that ultimately *endorses* normativity, even if only a "minimal" form of it (Jurjako 2024: 40). If we don't regard some "considerations in favor of doing something" as *truly* reason-giving—that is, as truly *normative*—then the very concept of life-pervading practical normativity slips through our fingers. Accordingly, Jurjako regards the concept of a normative reason as, in some sense, "irreducible." In any case, he resists any reduction of normative reasons to, say, "psychological claims" about how we happen to be motivated to act (Parfit 2011: 452).

The subjectivist theory I've sketched has precisely this character. It self-consciously chooses not to reduce a normative reason to any psychological entity. The desire-based reasons thesis is a *normative* thesis, *not* a claim about psychological facts. It treats, and encourages each of us to treat, any given (satisfiable) basic, unmotivated desire as (perhaps defeasibly) rationally potent. (As I see it, subjectivism is committed, in the very least, to this idea: with respect to any given satisfiable basic, unmotivated desire, the *default* position is that it is rationally potent, and such a desire can be rendered rationally impotent only for "desire-based" reasons.<sup>25</sup>) From this, it's clear that subjectivism does have its own fundamental, theory-defining *normative* commitments. Otherwise put, though subjectivism has a powerful philosophical incentive to "explain away" important aspects of the phenomenology of practical life, it manifestly doesn't aim to "explain away" practical normativity itself. And if you happen to like Jurjako's phrasing, you can say that subjectivism is committed to a "minimal" (that is, an agent-relative, desire-based) form of normativity.

All that said, does Jurjako's thinking ever diverge from the form of subjectivism I've sketched?

Perhaps. Not only does Jurjako make "constructivist-sounding" remarks from time to time, at one juncture he speaks of a desire "as" a reason,

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<sup>25</sup> For an account of how a subjectivist can reject, in a "desire-based way," some basic desires as rationally impotent, see Reitsma (2014).

and as “constituting” a reason (Jurjako 2024: 140–141).<sup>26</sup> As I was arguing a moment ago, this way of conceptualizing the relationship between basic, unmotivated desires and normative reasons is theoretically infelicitous—for subjectivists in general, and for Jurjako in particular. First, a desire is a mental state, whereas a normative reason is a normative entity. Accordingly, no desire “constitutes” a reason, contrary to what the word ‘as’ intimates (Jurjako 2024: 140–141). As I’ve theorized, subjectivists should forthrightly “admit” that the desire-based reasons thesis is a fundamental, theory-defining, here-I-stand normative commitment.<sup>27</sup> And what it says is that basic, unmotivated desires are rationally *potent*. They *generate* normative reasons. Second, it would become more difficult to identify how Jurjako could live up to his own, self-imposed guardrail—his commitment not to reduce normativity to psychology—if he were to treat basic, unmotivated desires as *being*, rather than *generating*, reasons. In brief, it’s best for Jurjako to avoid “a desire is a reason” talk. And if he does resist it, he’s pressed in the direction of the form of subjectivism I’ve sketched.

### IX. First Objection: Why Not Go With a More Elegant Subjectivism?

At this point, I’m prepared to raise my first substantive objection about how Jurjako opts to develop the subjectivist theory he endorses. (About time, right?) In Jurjako’s view, the best subjectivist account of how to determine what decisive normative reasons an agent truly has adverts to a crucial “process of idealization.” Following Williams, Jurjako argues for the position—let’s call it “idealized agent subjectivism”—that what a person has “most reason to do” is what that person *would* most want to do if her practical deliberation *were* to follow the proper rational procedure, a “sound deliberative route” (Jurjako 2024: 44–45).<sup>28</sup>

What prompts Jurjako to adopt idealized agent subjectivism? In chapter 2, Jurjako raises the concern that within a simple, straightforward subjectivist theory, it’s possible for a person to have both a (seemingly) decisive reason to sip from the glass a waiter has handed him and, at the very same time, a (seemingly) decisive reason not to. Here, Jurjako relies upon William’s famous gin and tonic example. We’re to imagine a bar-goer—let’s call him Sippy—who has both a weighty (basic, unmotivated) desire for a gin

<sup>26</sup> This is a locution Korsgaard sometimes uses. Jurjako seems to borrow it from her.

<sup>27</sup> I do not mean to be saying that a fundamental, theory-defining commitment can’t be argued for.

<sup>28</sup> Jurjako also uses this argument to avoid a Parfit-inspired objection to this type of subjectivist account.

and tonic, and a well-grounded belief that he has this sort of cocktail in his hand, when in reality the glass is full of petrol (Jurjako 2024: 48).

At first glance, it might seem that Sippy has *competing* decisive normative reasons. Vast human experience tells us that waiters almost never hand out poisonous drafts. Let's suppose Sippy has a well-grounded belief, based upon the testimony of this veritable cloud of bar denizens, that he's holding the very type of drink he eagerly ordered. Given that Sippy desires to drink a gin and tonic and has a rationally justified belief that he's holding one, he has a decisive reason to 'sip away'. But we're also to suppose that Sippy has a relatively normal psychological profile. Sippy merely wants, at this moment in time, to eat, drink, and be merry. He desires neither to injure himself, nor to suffer excruciating throat and gut pain, nor tomorrow to die. And so, it follows that Sippy has a decisive normative reason to 'refrain from sipping'. The question emerges: how should a subjectivist handle such a seemingly tense case?

On the basis of these reflections, Jurjako judges that subjectivists should move beyond simple, garden-variety subjectivism. Jurjako opts to endorse idealized agent subjectivism (which has also been called, within the philosophical literature, a "hypothetical motivation theory").<sup>29</sup> Jurjako supposes that Sippy, if he *were* to learn the truth about his glass's contents, would *presumably* come to desire, even most intensely desire, not to sip from it. It is this "improved" (hypothetical, counterfactual, procedure-produced) desire, a desire to not to turn up the glass, that generates Sippy's *true* decisive normative reason. Otherwise put, to have a truly decisive normative reason *is* to have a normative entity generated by the proper, idealizing procedure.

We are meant to take special note that Sippy's decisive normative reason has emerged from a "sound deliberative route," one which corrects for his mistaken means-end belief. (One question: would Jurjako include, along with correcting an agent's false means-end beliefs, other mechanisms that would make the imagined agent a more ideal agent? If so, it's natural to ask, which? It turns out, though, we needn't hear Jurjako's preferred, all-in answer for us to be able to evaluate his general proposal.) And so, at least at a certain level of generality, Jurjako agrees with the Kantian constructivist's belief in "procedure-based" normative reasons, though presumably Jurjako, as a subjectivist, takes Sippy's normative reasons to be grounded in Sippy's own basic desires in a way that a Kant-inspired constructivist wouldn't.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As Donald Hubin puts it, in terms of *pro tanto* rather than decisive normative reasons, "one has a reason to perform an act, A, in some actual situation, S, because one would, in some hypothetical circumstance, H, be motivated to do A in S" (Hubin 1996: 33).

<sup>30</sup> If we are careful, we should recognize that a Kant-inspired constructivist theorist can grant that an agent's various basic desires do play a role in generating her normative reasons.

Is this the best way for a subjectivist to respond to the seemingly tensive case? I don't think so, for at least two reasons.

First, it's unnecessary to add any process of idealization to the subjectivist theory to analyze Sippy's case. Garden-variety subjectivism has a simple, elegant answer in the offing. Why not, as articulated in the previous section, distinguish between two vantage points from which to evaluate Sippy and his normative reasons? If we isolate the question "to what degree is Sippy deliberating in a rationally virtuous manner?" the answer is positive: through introspection, Sippy is aware of his occurrent (weighty, rationally potent, basic) desire for a gin and tonic; his belief that waiters almost invariably serve potable drinks is well-grounded in human experience. Accordingly, when Sippy forms the belief that he has a final 'ought' of rational advisability to sip the drink, he's justified in thinking so. As it turns out, same as Reisinger, he's mistaken about what it's most advisable for him to do; but this isn't because he's failed in any way by the standards of rational virtuosity. All that said, he lacks a final 'ought' of rational advisability, which is grounded in his *basic, unmotivated* desire for a gin and tonic and the *facts* relevant to the satisfaction of that occurrent, rationally potent desire. The instrumental principle, which is a principle that communicates normativity from a rationally potent desire to the *true* means to its satisfaction, would identify 'drinking a true gin and tonic' as the *truly* rationally advisable act.

In other words, there's no need to imagine that Sippy has undergone any process of idealization to provide the right response to the relevant question. Jurjako's judgment that Sippy has a decisive normative reason—a final 'ought' of rational advisability—not to imbibe the contents of his glass is the very same 'sip-not' judgment garden-variety subjectivism implies, when it applies its (core, theory-defining) instrumental principle to Sippy's (weightiest, rationally potent) desire for an actual cocktail.

Hubin articulates a second reason not to endorse a hypothetical motivation view. In appealing to counterfactuals, this type of viewpoint suffers from a standard problem,

what a given human being would be motivated to do under non-actual circumstances (as well as under actual circumstances) is dependent in part on brute physiological features of the agent. This particular agent, even when idealized in the ways we are imagining, may become motivated to put pebbles in his navel when he becomes vividly aware of some complex of facts about number theory. The awareness of the set of facts may produce physiological effects on the agent-effects that have nothing to do with the content of the facts—and these effects may produce

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For Kant, an agent's basic desires reflect maxims that are the "input" for the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative. If there is no "input" into this test, it cannot, of course, produce its (purportedly substantive, moral) "outputs."

other psychological states: desires, or some other psychological states taken to be motivating. (Hubin 1996: 37)

Note, Hubin's general objection doesn't depend on the peculiarity of his example. Were Sippy to go through whatever process of idealization Jurjako ultimately endorses, he might thereby end up, rather dramatically, losing altogether his current appetite for having a drink. Perhaps the very thought that there's a chance, however slight, that a waiter could be dishonest would spook Sippy, thereby creating in him—at least temporarily—an occurrent desire to “never order a drink in a bar again.” Let's imagine this counterfactual claim turns out to be true: “idealized” Sippy would be spooked in this very way. Why think real-life Sippy's decisive normative reason is determined by whatever desires he would come to have after being spooked? Given his present motivational set, Sippy wants to sip. And so, it's most natural and intuitive to think that Sippy, as he currently is, has a final ‘ought’ of rational advisability to get his hands on a *true* gin and tonic and imbibe it.<sup>31</sup>

We could choose to frame my objection as a question for Jurjako: Why not take what seems to be the more elegant solution? Is there a philosophically compelling reason to stick with an idealized agent (or hypothetical motivation) theory and the tricky, trouble-making counterfactual analysis implicit within it?<sup>32</sup> I don't happen to see one.

If Jurjako were to adopt my simple, straightforwardly, unmistakably subjectivist analysis, this would begin to free him from blurring the lines between subjectivism and constructivism. Even more, it would free him, as I see things, from making a conceptual mistake. Let me explain.

As I've said, garden-variety subjectivism treats the concept of a final ‘ought’ of rational advice as more fundamental than the concept of rational

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<sup>31</sup> Or consider another example. Imagine a person, Sappy, with a deep and long-standing commitment to helping out the underdogs in social life, who is presently suffering from a temporary lapse in moral motivation. He's drained of any desire to be helpful. Sappy sees a social outcast, but simply can't, at the moment, drum up an occurrent desire to do what he takes to be the right thing: to help him out. We might suppose, “Were Sappy to undergo a process that would make him a more ideal moral reasoner—say, by reviewing vividly-presented information about the suffering of the people being treated unjustly—then he would find within himself the desire to help the victims.” But, of course, not only do we not know what desires would or wouldn't emerge in Sappy, were he to take this ‘sound, deliberative route’, it's not implausible to think that a vivid awareness of the widespread suffering of human victims could either add intensity to an agent's moral motivation or lead to Sappy's hopelessness: “the problem is too big for me to fix.” Why pin our philosophical hopes on the process of idealization leading to the already-intuitive conclusion we're aiming for?

<sup>32</sup> In fairness, in some moments Jurjako himself appears to notice this insight. For example, he says, when deliberating “we are attempting to ascertain a fact that exists independently of the tracking process” (Jurjako 2024: 64). Right, but this remark tends to favor my analysis over Jurjako's; the tracking process isn't a crucial part of the concept of a final ‘ought’ of rational advisability.

advisability. The act that is rationally advisable for an agent is the act that truly represents the best means to the satisfaction of her actual weightiest rationally potent basic desire(s). This is the act she has, to use Jurjako's word, a "decisive" normative reason to do. And it's the work of practical deliberation to discern—best we can, through our best introspective and epistemic methods—what this decisive normative reason of rational advisability is.

Does Jurjako get this backwards? Listen to what he writes: "The primary role of idealization is to enhance our epistemic standpoint" (Jurjako 2024: 63). But the concept of a final 'ought' of rational advice is not an *epistemic* category, and it does not include epistemic elements. The truth 'the sleepy, but loving father has a decisive normative reason to tuck his toddler into bed before going to bed himself' isn't a claim about what the father is and is not, say, *justified in believing*. True, the concept of a *rationally virtuous* deliberator *does* include epistemic judgments: Did the loving father deliberate in an epistemically ideal, or in an epistemically acceptable, way? But these epistemic methods are attempts to get at the final 'ought' of rational advisability; they aren't part of the very definition of this sort of normative reason. In effect, Jurjako is adding "an idealizing process" to what it means to have a final 'ought' of rational advisability, when that's not where it belongs.<sup>33</sup>

Note, if Jurjako were to rescind his commitment to the thesis that a process of idealization is crucial to analyzing what (decisive) normative reasons of rational advice are, then—unlike Korsgaard, the Kantian-constructivist—he would not be a proceduralist about normative reasons. And so, we're now in a good position to understand why, as I mentioned earlier, Jurjako's friendly dalliances with Kant-inspired, procedural constructivism are unhappy.

Whatever you think of this attempt to diagnose Jurjako's (alleged) unhappy conflation, if my primary arguments in this section are correct, Jurjako hasn't supplied subjectivists with a compelling reason to believe decisive normative reasons (or every final 'ought' of rational advice) is, as a conceptual matter, "procedure dependent."

## X. Second Objection: Has Jurjako Cleared the Augean Stables?

In the remaining section of this essay, I'll raise (what I take to be) hard questions for Jurjako's central, philosophical-cross-bearing argument in Chapter

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<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Jurjako sometimes treats the instrumental principle not, first and foremost, as a principle that communicates normativity from desired end to effective means, but as a principle of deliberation (Jurjako 2024: 140). But the principle is, when it comes to determining the final 'ought' of rational advisability, not a principle of deliberation. It serves that purpose only in our attempts to be rationally virtuous.

6 of NRNPV. In this concluding chapter, we learn the basic contours of Jurjako's positive naturalistic account of normative reasons and how this account is meant to explain (away) the realist-intimating phenomenology of practical, action-guiding normativity (Jurjako 2024: 139).

In this context, we should recognize that most ardently committed realists are likely to believe that some of our (*pro tanto*, and even decisive) normative reasons are grounded in our basic, unmotivated desires.<sup>34</sup> I myself have a decisive normative reason, a final 'ought' of rational advisability, to accept most any offer of free tickets to Anfield, Liverpool Football Club's stadium, because I happen to be a massive fan of the team. My mom, who hates crowds and doesn't care about football, wouldn't have a normative reason to accept such tickets. In this sort of case, our distinct "motivational sets" play an obvious and crucial role in grounding distinct rational advice. In other words, at least some normative reasons of rational advice are agent-relative. Realists should grant this point.

The fact of value, though, posits that (at least some) values *seem* to bear, in and of themselves, an irreducible truth-bearing, magnetic, and authoritative quality. Accordingly, Jurjako aims to articulate, in particular, how his naturalistic theory of normative reasons is able to "explain the difference between reasons that we *experience as* depending on our conative and cognitive make-up and those we *experience as* transcending [our] particular occurrent desires, goals, and aims" (Jurjako 2024: 139; emphasis mine). Jurjako articulates his central question in several ways: are there, say, principles that "surpass" the instrumental principle, the transfer principle that communicates normativity from rationally potent basic desires to the effective means to their satisfaction (Jurjako 2024: 140)? Or are there "substantive" normative reasons that are—unlike 'Regan ought to accept tickets to Anfield'—irreducibly normative: "desire-independent," "categorical," "inescapable," "universal," "authoritative," and overriding (Jurjako 2024: 141–142)?<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the desire-based reasons thesis, some normative reasons, he admits, "seem to be such that" their authority is desire-independent.<sup>36</sup> And he says, "a

<sup>34</sup> To give one example, Susan Wolf treats realist norms as akin to guard rails. We can rationally act upon our various, idiosyncratic desires unless doing so would constitute acting in a (significantly) disvaluable way. And so, my desire to watch Liverpool survives; but extremely cruel desires would be ruled rationally impotent.

<sup>35</sup> Jurjako comments that, "If one embraces a subject-based theory of reasons, accommodating hypothetical reasons poses no inherent difficulty" (142). That surely goes without saying, as the desire-based reasons thesis is a part of the very definition of such a theory!

<sup>36</sup> In chapter 6, Jurjako happens to switch from realist to Kantian terminology. In this context, he calls a desire-based normative reason a "hypothetical" reason and any normative reason that seems to express an irreducible ought-fact a "categorical" reason. Of course, Kant uses the terms 'hypothetical' and 'categorical' to refer to principles—to rules, to imperatives—not to normative reasons. But never mind. The terminology isn't important. What's important is

robust theory of reasons should possess the capacity to delineate between these two types of reasons” (Jurjako 2024: 140). As a subjectivist, Jurjako’s basic aim is to argue that all normative reasons are “hypothetical” (i.e., desire-based) reasons and that any normative reasons that *seem* to be “categorical” (i.e. desire-independent) are merely “hypothetical” reasons (Jurjako 2024: 139).

So, what is Jurjako’s favored naturalistic analysis? What, in his view, makes some desire-based reasons feel desire-independent?

In brief, Jurjako postulates that evolutionary history has imparted human populations with various “affordances,” psychological tendencies to “see” the world as “normatively imbued” (Jurjako 2024: 149). Quoting Korsgaard, Jurjako says that many a non-human animal

finds herself in a world that consists of things that are directly perceived as food or prey, as danger or predator, as potential mate, as child; that is to say, as things to-be-eaten, to-be-avoided, to-be-mated-with, to-be-cared for. (Jurjako 2024: 150; Korsgaard 2011: 10–11)

Likewise, human animals have a “susceptibility” to “directly see” certain things as “counting in favor of” doing, or not doing, something. As an example, Jurjako describes the widespread intuition—the intensely “strong feeling”—that incest, the act of sleeping with kin, has ‘ought-not-to-be-doned-ness’ about it (Jurjako 2024: 154). This intuition, he reports, has been found to be highly resistant to alteration. Even when pressed with a bevy of arguments against this proscription, and even when the intuition’s bearer finds himself left “dumbfounded”—unable to express any (further) arguments in support of his antagonistic reaction to incest—he often retains the intensely strong feeling he began with. ‘Incest is wrong’ continues to seem to him as though it is—“strikingly,” “irresistibly”—an irreducible and authoritative truth.

Jurjako says, “the explanation [for this resistance to reject the relevant, realist-lilting intuition] lies in the fact that,” for products of evolutionary history such as us, “the world is already presented as normatively circumscribed” (Jurjako 2024: 154). The feeling that incest is not-to-be-done is an affordance, a pre-reflective, evolution-generated psychological tendency. This “immediate perception” strikes its bearer as a “normative given,” a part of reality itself (Jurjako 2024: 148, 156). Generalizing this idea, Jurjako even speaks of the world as a whole as being, for creatures imbued by an

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that, for Kant, ‘categorical’ is a success term; if a principle (or what have you) is categorical, it does have normative authority, and the special form of authority that renders it exceptionless: as bearing the authority of rationality over any rational creature. For Jurjako, this is very much not the case!

evolutionary history (which is itself shaped by human social interaction) with manifold affordances, as a universe that is “teleologically organized” (Jurjako 2024: 150). (Aristotle, it seems, wasn’t wrong to *feel as though* the physical realm is replete, even chockablock, with teleology.)

In Jurjako’s viewpoint, the phenomenology that posits normative givens of a realist variety, of course, doesn’t track metaphysical reality. In stable populations well-adapted to their environment, affordances reflect the (sufficiently successful) strategies (instincts, behaviors, traits) that have been adaptive for the members of that particular community, or for the broader human community, as a whole. Presumably, antagonism to incest was effective in heightening human survival, the “organism’s overarching endeavor.”<sup>37</sup> At the phenomenological level, ‘don’t have sex with kin’ strikes the individual as simply, irreducible ought-fact. But it’s not.

In Jurjako’s outlook, even though affordances do not track metaphysical reality, our “perception of affordances” includes a “recognizable form of normativity” (Jurjako 2024: 148). In his view, such affordances should be treated, in the very least, as proper input into practical deliberation, though such intuitions can be challenged by higher-order reflection. An affordance might not survive this process of rational scrutiny. A non-human animal “might just ‘see’ that fighting [and not fleeing] is the appropriate response (148), but it could turn out that this “perception”—‘fighting is the thing to be done’—is suboptimal. Likewise, a particular affordance, felt by a human being, might founder within the sound deliberative process that Jurjako sees as a crucial part of practical deliberation and the generation of final ‘ought’s of rational advisability. Then again, presumably some affordances will survive this process and provide (weighty and even decisive) normative reasons. (Jurjako thinks that his theory, in giving a place within practical deliberation to affordances, avoids being overly intellectualist.)

Several important questions emerge:

First, is Jurjako’s appeal to affordances intended to be a *complete* (or only a partial) explanation of the fact of value? If there are a wide range of values that strike various thinkers (and ordinary people) as irreducible, magnetic, intrinsically authoritative values, is it likely that a single explanation

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<sup>37</sup> I’m not sure I would myself grant that each organism’s “overarching endeavor” is to “maximize inclusive fitness.” This seems to me to be a “to a hammer, everything seems a nail” moment. A Darwinian naturalist needn’t see each cognitive/motivational phenomenon as best and most directly explained in terms of maximizing the organism’s inclusive fitness. Presumably, in a subjectivist view, the central tasks of a person’s practical life is to take care of what she finds most cares about, even loves. As Fehige puts it, “Some things are dear to our hearts. To act rationally . . . means in essence: to look after these things, as best we can” (2001: 49). An agent might find some things more dear to her than her own life.

accounts for all of these intuitions? (Myself, I would think that it's unlikely that a single-factor explanation of the fact of value is the strongest explanation.)

Second, are affordances conations? That is, are they—or do they each necessarily include—basic, unmotivated desires? Presumably, for a subjectivist, affordances count as rationally potent well-springs of (*pro tanto*) normative reasons of rational advice only if the answer is 'yes'. (I think it's plausible for Jurjako to answer this question yes; but it would clarify his argument, and his argument's subjectivist credentials, if he were to address it.)

Third, let's say we were to identify the substantive intuitions that most often prompt a theorist, or an ordinary person, to entertain or even to adopt normative realism: intuitions about, for example, the intrinsic value of each person, the intrinsic beauty of the natural world, the intrinsic disvalue of suffering, the intrinsic beauty of a truly virtuous or loving character, and the like. What is the relationship between these particular substantive moral and aesthetic intuitions and the general concept of affordances that Jurjako discusses? Has Jurjako revealed that his general account is a powerful account of those *particular* intuitions? As mentioned, when Jurjako is speaking of affordances—various psychological tendencies to regard certain “considerations in favor of doing something” as “normative givens”—he brings up widespread revilement of incest (as well as implicit bias). He also discusses a human impulse to expect reciprocity from other agents. Is giving a strong account of the origins of these two intuitions (as affordances) sufficient support for the conclusion that the realist's particular value intuitions, which have distinct content, have also been explained away?

To put things punchily, I could imagine a normative realist judging that her particular normative intuitions—whether moral or aesthetic—haven't truly been addressed, and so haven't been explained away. Not to mention, is Nagel's judgment that it is “glaringly correct” to think that certain values are intrinsically normative analogous to instance of “dumbfounding”? Why not suppose he has put his initial intuitions through wide-ranging, rigorous, probing practical reflection, and they've managed to survive it? They continue to feel “glaringly” correct?

Fourth, given that any judgment of “dumbfounding” strikes me as uncharitable, at least when applied to thoughtful, sophisticated normative realists such as Nagel, doesn't a basic charge of the genetic fallacy apply? Being able to explain the origins of, say, a desire or a moral intuition doesn't imply anything about the goodness of that desire or the truth of that intuition.

Fifth, let's say we ask how *best* to explain the origins of the substantive intuitions that motivate normative realism. Isn't there a stronger *historical* explanation for Nagel-like intuitions about the intrinsic value of innocent

children and of the natural world? Our culture has been shaped by moral and religious traditions, such as Christianity, which teach that each human person is made in the image of God and that the natural world is His cherished creation. Nagel's moral and aesthetic intuitions could be seen as vestiges of such cultural teachings. Myself, I'm not claiming that this explanation successfully debunks Nagel's realist reasoning. But this explanation does have an advantage over Jurjako's appeal to affordances, as it accounts more directly for the exact content of his intuitions.

To summarize, what should a committed realist, or even a philosophical fence-sitter who feels the force of the realist's take on the fact of value, think of Jurjako's analysis? Of course, it's *possible* some such person will, once she's heard Jurjako's general, debunking analysis, come to think, "Oh, it's true that, initially, I felt as though my anti-attitude 'torturing innocent children is abhorrent and not to be done' was an 'ought-fact', but now I see that this is simply an affordance, or an affordance that has survived my inchoate reflections upon it."

But for reasons I've raised in this section, it's not clear to me that Jurjako's naturalistic analysis, which appeals to affordances, is sufficiently powerful to compel such a positive response from critical readers.

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