Jason Kay

jason.kay@pitt.edu
itsjasonkay.com
(+1) 516-512-1608
ORCID: 0000-0003-2257-8113

TEACHING & RESEARCH

AOS Ethics (esp. Normativity), Philosophy of Action, and Value Theory

AOC Political Philosophy, Metaphysics

EDUCATION

PhD **University of Pittsburgh,** Philosophy — April 2025

BA **Stony Brook University,** Philosophy — 2017

H. Lee Dennison Valedictorian
Summa cum laude

University of Oxford, St. Catherine's College — 2016-17

DISSERTATION

When Reasons Run Out: Essays on Normativity

Committee: Nandi Theunissen (chair), Japa Pallikkathayil, James Shaw, Stephen Finlay (external), Hille Paakkunainen (external)

Does wanting vanilla ice cream give you a reason to choose it? Objectivists about reasons say no: all reasons stem from the value of the things we want, not from our wanting them. My research reconciles this intuitive idea with the apparent normativity of desires and personal commitments. My treatment of desire begins with the idea that everyday choices pose a practical problem which we can solve by deferring to our desires. When practical circumstances give us several perfectly good options, rationality permits us to choose something just because we want it. Hence desires function as a kind of 'reason of last resort', to be used only when our objective reasons run out. Desires derive their central role in our practical lives from the necessity of resolving choices of this kind. Commitments are a separate matter. On my view, commitments regulate our practical thought from the outside, stacking the deliberative deck in favor of our commitments rather than by providing reasons for action. Though my commitment to some project is not a reason, it makes itself felt by obliging me to give a fixed (and perhaps elevated) place to the objective reasons which my project already provides. Having shown that objectivists can explain the apparent normativity of these subjective factors, I develop a value-based account of what reasons do and how they do it. What reasons do is help us figure out what to do, think, and feel. They do that by highlighting the way objective values bear on our circumstances. To invoke the value of fidelity, for example, I need only point out that you promised Smith you'd pick him up from the airport. In important respects then, promises are just like commitments and desires. All three derive their normative credentials from the ways we can wield them to invoke objective values. This account not only makes room for desire and commitment within a theory of reasons, but it also provides a compelling framework for future research on normativity.

PUBLICATIONS

When Reasons Run Out — Philosophical Quarterly

The Normative Insignificance of the Will — Philosophical Studies

WORK-IN-PROGRESS

Reasons as Representatives of Value	Final Preparation
The House of Reason (w/ Sophia Arbeiter)	In progress
Two Kinds of Commitment	In Progress
Arbitrariness and Authority	In Progress
On the Personal Character of Well-being (w/ Nandi Theunissen)	In Progress

INVITED TALKS

"A New Theory of Normative Reasons" *Central APA, Colloquium*	Feb 2024
"When Reasons Run Out" *Eastern APA, Colloquium*	Jan 2024
"Belief in Free Will is Self-Conception as Intervention" *Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and Agency Conference* *Florida State University*	Feb 2021
"The Best Systems Account of Laws" *Philosophy of Science Association Biennial Meeting*	Nov 2018
"Why The Humean Needs Natural Properties" *"Humeanisms" Workshop* *Hungarian Academy of Sciences*	Jul 2018

INVITED COMMENTS

Comments on Thomas Schmidt "Contrastive Normativity Without Contrastivism" *Chapel Hill Normativity Workshop*	Mar 2024

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Pittsburgh, Independent Instructor (2 semesters)

Where Should I Stand? (Ethical Theory)	SP 2025
Equality (Political Philosophy)	SU 2021

University of Pittsburgh, Teaching Assistant (7 semesters)

Introduction to Ethics	FA 2023, SP 2023, SP 2020
Concepts of Human Nature	FA 2020, FA 2018
Philosophy and Public Issues	FA 2024, SP 2019

Stony Brook University, Teaching Assistant (1 semester)

Philosophy of Science	SP 2017

AWARDS

Stony Brook University

H. Lee. Dennison Valedictorian Award	2017
Researcher of the Month	2017
Award for Academic Excellence	2017
Stony Brook Honors College	2016
Outstanding Academic Achievement Award (3x)	2015
Dean's List	2016

Oxford University

Book Prize for Excellence in Academic Studies (3x)	2016

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Referee for: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Journal of Value Inquiry, Noûs*, *Synthese*

PhilPapers Category Editor: Values and Norms	2025-
Research Assistant to Nandi Theunissen (Welfare, Needs, & Health)	2025-

DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

Practical Philosophy Hiring Committee, Member	2022, 2023
Graduate Student Organization, Representative	2017, 2022
Mentoring Program, Organizer	2022-25
Undergraduate Student Mentor	2018-25
Department Librarian (Grünbaum Collection)	2023-24

REFERENCES

Nandi Theunissen
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Rice University
nt36@rice.edu

Hille Paakkunainen
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Syracuse University
hpaakkun@syr.edu

Japa Pallikkathayil
Associate Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh
japa@pitt.edu

Stephen Finlay
Professor of Philosophy
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
finlay@usc.edu

James Shaw
Associate Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh
jrs164@pitt.edu

Stephen Engstrom
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh
engstrom@pitt.edu

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My dissertation makes novel interventions in a longstanding debate about the nature of normativity. Objectivists like Parfit, Raz, and Scanlon claim that normativity arises from the value of the things we choose and do: facts like 'the spa is pleasant' and 'veggies are good for health'. Objectivism boasts of a long pedigree, confirms commonsense, and delivers the verdict that everyone has reasons to act morally. What's not to like? Well, Objectivists struggle to recognize the practical relevance of 'subjective factors,' like our desires, tastes, and commitments. By contrast, Subjectivists like Mark Schroeder and David Sobel have no trouble at all vindicating the practical relevance of these factors, since Subjectivists hold that an agent's reasons derive from those very attitudes.

To put the problem starkly: Objectivists rule out from the start that subjective factors are reasons for action. But it seems intuitive that what we like and want can be of the utmost importance for action, and this is clearest when we face several perfectly good options. In the ice cream parlor, for example, I have a policy of choosing whatever appeals to me in the moment: I just feel like vanilla today, so I choose vanilla. Deferring to desire in this way is perfectly rational. But if my desire for vanilla is not a reason to act, then how can it possibly be rational to defer to desire? And what of the fact that you are committed to a diet, while I'm not? It's quite natural to think that your commitment is a further reason to avoid the ice cream parlor, a reason I don't have. How is the objectivist to account for these commonplaces? My dissertation provide the Objectivist with new answers to these pressing questions.

"When Reasons Run Out" (*Philosophical Quarterly*) begins with the idea that everyday choice presents us with a difficult practical problem to which reliance on desire is the solution. Return to the choice between several good flavors of ice cream. No option enjoys the support of a preponderance of reasons, and there are no further reasons to consult. Our reasons have run out. Lest we perish between two perfectly good options, we have to find some basis on which to choose. I argue that when our reasons run out, rationality permits us to choose something just because we like or want it. That is, desires serve as a kind of 'reason of last resort'. Rationality licenses deferring to desire not because desires are good reasons, but because they can be used to make choices which would otherwise confound us.

Desire is not the only stumbling block for objectivism. In "The Normative Significance of the Will" (*Philosophical Studies*) I confront the intuition that our personal commitments to projects, people, and principles are reasons in their own right. This claim is popular among voluntarists, including Ruth Chang and Christine Korsgaard, but I draw out one of its inevitable consequences: that agents can create reasons to act in sinister or irrational ways merely by resolving to act in those ways. I demonstrate that we can overcome this problem by understanding commitments as a source of rational requirements rather than reasons. On my view, commitments structure our practical thinking from the outside, stacking the deliberative deck in favor of committed actions rather than by speaking in favor of them directly. Though my commitment to some project is not a reason, it makes itself felt by obliging me to give a fixed (and perhaps elevated) place to the objective reasons which my project already provides. But crucially, my commitment is not, in itself, a reason to act in any particular way, and only seldom can it oblige me to act on a particular occasion. This latter feature explains both why I cannot give myself a reason to do something sinister just by

intending to do it, and for the widely acknowledged fact that we often enjoy discretion in how, when, and where we carry out our commitments. Hence reconceiving commitments as a structuring principle is not only independently motivated, it paints a truer picture of their role in our daily life. Commitments emerge as self-imposed deliberative constraints rather than magical acts of will. And of course, it does this while allowing objectivists to recognize commitment's import without compromising on the nature of reasons.

The main concern of "Reasons as Representatives of Value" (in preparation for publication) is to articulate a value-based theory of normative reasons. I start with the idea that reasons have a triple function: they *guide* deliberation, *justify* behavior, and *explain* why some actions are right and others wrong. But these points of agreement raise more questions than they answer. Why should reasons play exactly these roles? What makes a fact qualified to play them? I contend that reasons earn their normative credentials by doing one more basic thing, namely bringing objective values to bear on an agent's practical or epistemic situation. Reasons are fit to guide, justify, and explain just insofar as they can be used to invoke values.

There are many theoretical merits to this proposal. Not only does it unify reasons' apparently diverse functions by revealing their common source, but it also fits our intuitive judgments about which facts are reasons and makes good sense of our ordinary ways of speaking. For example, many philosophers think that the fact that you promised is a reason to do what you promised. If my previous chapter is correct, promises are neither conjuring acts nor normative bedrock. But promises are reasons, and my account illuminates why. Promising is a practice humans invented to protect and advance certain objective values, including fidelity, honesty, and reciprocity. The association between promising and fidelity is so clear, and so well-known, that the mere mention of a promise is sufficient to bring fidelity to bear on the question of what to do, think, or feel. Appealing to practices in this way not only helps us make sense of the fact of giving reasons, but it also provides a compelling framework for future research on normativity.