

# Jason Kay

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## AREAS OF INTEREST

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AOS: Ethics, Metaethics, Philosophy of Action

AOC: Metaphysics, Political Philosophy

## EDUCATION

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PhD	<b>University of Pittsburgh</b> , Philosophy	<i>April 2025</i>
BA	<b>Stony Brook University</b> , Philosophy H. Lee Dennison Valedictorian <i>Summa cum laude</i>	2017
	<b>University of Oxford</b> , St. Catherine's College Visiting Student	2016-17
	<b>Nassau Community College</b> Garden City, New York	2013

## DISSERTATION

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*When Reasons Run Out: Essays on Normativity*

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

My dissertation seeks to reconcile objectivism—the view that normative reasons stem from objective values—with our intuition that subjective factors like desires and commitments often play a role in determining what we ought to do. While it seems to many that wanting vanilla ice cream or being committed to gardening are reasons to choose vanilla and to garden, I argue that philosophers have been misled by the prominence of desire and commitment in our practical lives to embrace the problematic view that they supply us with normative reasons. The basic idea behind my treatment of favoring attitudes is that matters of taste raise a practical problem to which reliance on these attitudes is the solution. I argue that when practical circumstances conspire against us in the way that matters of taste do, rationality permits us to choose something just because we favor it. I account for the apparent normativity of commitments, on the other hand, by reconceiving them as deliberative constraints rather than reasons for action in their own right. Thus, the practical upshot of your commitment to some project like gardening is that you must, on pain of irrationality, give reasons to garden a place in your relevant deliberations insofar as you remain committed. Having shown that objectivism can account for the undeniable practical relevance of our desires and commitments, I develop interlocking accounts of reasons and reasoning. I take as a starting point that there are objective facts about how values like fairness bear on practical questions like ‘how should we divide this pizza between us?’ I then analyze normative reasons as the factors which *make* an agent’s reasoning sensitive to the values at stake in her choice situation. These essays present new and compelling accounts of reasoning, normativity, and the role of subjective factors in our practical lives.

## RESEARCH

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### [When Reasons Run Out](#)

*forthcoming*, Philosophical Quarterly

The Normative Insignificance of the Will

*R&R*, Philosophical Studies

A New Theory of Normative Reasons

In Preparation

What the Cluster View Cannot Do

In Preparation

Can Unalterable Attitudes Be Structurally Irrational?  
(w/ Sophia Arbeiter)

In Preparation

## REFEREED PRESENTATIONS

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“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

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Comments on Thomas Schmidt

“Contrastive Normativity Without Contrastivism”

*Chapel Hill Normativity Workshop*

Mar 2024

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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### **University of Pittsburgh, Independent Instructor**

Where Should I Stand? (Ethical Theory)

SP 2025

Equality (Political Philosophy)

SU 2021

### **University of Pittsburgh, Teaching Assistant**

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**

Philosophy of Science	SP 2017
selected 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
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DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

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

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

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**Ethics**

Ethics (Thompson & Lewinsohn)	Practical Reason (Engstrom)
Rationality (Dorst)	Political Philosophy (Lewinsohn)
Topics in Value Theory I (Theunissen)	Freedom* (Pallikkathayil)
Topics in Value Theory II* (Theunissen)	

**Metaphysics & Epistemology**

Metaphysics and Epistemology (Gallow)	Laws of Nature (Shumener)
Rationality (Dorst)	Time Bias (Shumener)

## Science

Causal Cognition (Woodward)

Cause and Explanation in Biology  
(Woodward)\*

Epistemology of Experimental Practices\*  
(Machery)

Foundations of Cognitive Science (Allen)

Parallel Distributed Processing (Plaut)

Introduction to Philosophy of Science\*  
(Norton)

Cognitive Neuroscience (Olson)

## History

Aristotle (Lennox)

Leibniz (Rescher)

Wittgenstein\* (Ricketts)

Hume (Lewinsohn)

## Logic & Language

Advanced Logic (Caie)

\* indicates audited coursework

## PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

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Referee for: *Noûs*, *Synthese*

## REFERENCES

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### **Nandi Theunissen**

Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Rice University  
[nt36@rice.edu](mailto:nt36@rice.edu)

### **Japa Pallikkathayil**

Associate Professor of Philosophy  
University of Pittsburgh  
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### **James Shaw**

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University of Pittsburgh  
[jrs164@pitt.edu](mailto:jrs164@pitt.edu)

### **Hille Paakkunainen**

Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Syracuse University  
[hpaakkun@syr.edu](mailto:hpaakkun@syr.edu)

### **Stephen Finlay**

Adjunct Professor of Philosophy  
University of Southern California  
[finlay@usc.edu](mailto:finlay@usc.edu)

### **Stephen Engstrom**

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy  
University of Pittsburgh  
[engstrom@pitt.edu](mailto:engstrom@pitt.edu)

It is agreed on almost all hands that we have reasons for action, but there is a long-running disagreement concerning the source or ground of these reasons. According to objectivists like Scanlon, Parfit, and Raz, reasons are independently significant facts about 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, objectivism struggles to recognize the undeniable relevance of an agent’s preferences and desires to the question of how she ought to act and choose. By contrast, subjectivists maintain that what an agent has reason to do turns entirely on what she favors and disfavors—all of an agent’s reasons ultimately depend on facts about what she wants, likes, finds appealing, and their opposites. If you have a reason to eat veggies or go to the spa, that is simply because you like spas or desire health. Objectivists need a story here. How do our favoring attitudes bear on our everyday choices, if not by grounding reasons to do this or that? My dissertation provides the objectivist with a new answer to this question.

I distinguish between genuine reasons and considerations on which it can be rational to act, even if they are not reasons strictly speaking. The two often come apart, and by placing our favoring attitudes in the latter category I explain how favoring the spa can rationalize your choice to go to the spa without being a reason to go there. The basic idea behind my treatment of favoring attitudes is that matters of taste raise a practical problem to which reliance on these attitudes is the solution. I argue that when practical circumstances conspire against us in the way that matters of taste do, rationality permits us to choose something just because we favor it. On my view, favoring attitudes are a basis of last resort, but one to which we are entitled in matters of taste. But here’s the kicker: Rationality licenses choosing what we favor not because favoring attitudes are reason-giving, but rather because rationality allows us to choose in whatever way we must to act rationally in situations of this sort. Choosing what appeals to us allows us to preserve our capacity for rational action in situations which are otherwise rationally unnavigable.

Favoring attitudes are not the only stumbling block for objectivism. Other practical attitudes, like our commitments to certain projects and people, also seem practically relevant. If I am a committed gardener, then intuitively, I am related to gardening in a way that the uncommitted are not. A number of prominent scholars such as Ruth Chang (and possibly Christine Korsgaard) have claimed that my commitment to gardening is a further reason to garden, over and above the reasons possessed by some arbitrary person who is not committed to gardening. Here again, I argue that commitments rationalize my decision to garden without being a reason to garden. On my view, commitments function by requiring us to conduct our deliberation in a way that is friendly to the projects and people to whom we are committed. In my particular circumstances, being a committed gardener may oblige me to regard the sale on gardening tools as a reason to buy the tools I need, though I could have entirely ignored the sale were I not such a committed gardener. This is a genuinely novel account of the practical relationship

in which we stand to the projects and people to whom we are committed, and it has several payoffs. For example, there is widely thought to be an asymmetry in the practical import of our commitments; scholars like Chang and Korsgaard must explain why an agent's commitment to some innocent hobby provides her with a reason to pursue that hobby, though a commitment to something sinister does not have the same reason-giving force. Reconceiving our practical attitudes along structural lines is not only independently motivated, but it also allows objectivists to recognize the truth in subjectivism without compromising on the nature of reasons.

Underlying both of the above accounts is the idea that attitudes and reasons shape our action in distinct, separable, and complementary ways. But I have said little about the role of reasons in our normative thought, only that our attitudes do not play that role, whatever it is. Hence the final task of my dissertation is to offer objectivist accounts of normative reasons and reasoning. I distinguish between two kinds of goodness, which I call structural and substantive goodness, parallel to the distinction between structural and substantive rationality, and use the former to analyze good reasoning. Reasoning is substantively good to the extent that it is responsive to the objective values that bear on some practical question at issue, and structurally good insofar as it is conducted logically and directed at relevant aims. So for example, fairness ordinarily bears on the practical question of how to divide pizza between us. I then analyze reasons as facts whose inclusion in some reasoning make it sensitive to the relevant values in the right way; in other words, an agent's reasons to divide a pizza in this or that way are reasons in virtue of the role they play in making her reasoning responsive to the value of fairness.

Together, these essays represent a new and attractive perspective on reasoning, normativity, and the role of subjective factors in our practical lives. Reconceiving the practical importance of subjective factors in the way I do allows us to retain an objective and externalist conception of normativity without compromising our intuitions about the relevance of what we like, want, and aim at. What's more, the views I develop in my dissertation can enrich many debates in ethics, moral psychology, practical reason, and philosophy of action. I am already beginning to pursue these lines of thought, about which I say more in my research statement.