

Jason Kay

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AREAS OF INTEREST

AOS: Ethics, Metaethics, Philosophy of Action

AOC: Metaphysics, Political Philosophy

EDUCATION

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

DISSERTATION

Essays on Reasons, Rationality, and Normativity

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

Intuitively, the fact that you want vanilla ice cream is a reason to buy some. Likewise, your commitment to gardening strikes us as a good reason for you to garden. These claims threaten an otherwise plausible view called objectivism, on which reasons derive from the objective value of the things we choose and do, rather than from the attitudes we take toward them. But 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. I offer an objectivist framework which allows us to preserve what is intuitive about the above cases without burdening us with the tempting philosophical baggage. I begin by arguing for the idea that our practical attitudes can rationalize actions without being reasons for them and leverage this idea to offer a novel account of the role that desire and commitment play within our practical lives. On my view, desires function as a reason of last resort, but one to which we are entitled when our reasons run out. On the other hand, the practical upshot of your commitment to gardening is that you must conduct your deliberation in a gardening-friendly way insofar as you remain committed. Having shown that objectivism can account for the undeniable practical relevance of these attitudes, I develop interlocking accounts of our reasons and reasoning. These accounts take for granted that there are attitude-independent facts about which values bear on some practical question. I then define good reasoning as that which is properly sensitive to these values, and finally, understand reasons as the factors which *make* reasoning good in this way. Together, these chapters establish objectivism as a viable and attractive conception of normativity.

RESEARCH

When Reasons Run Out	<i>forthcoming</i> , Philosophical Quarterly
The Normative Insignificance of the Will	Under Review
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

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

INVITED COMMENTS

Comments on Thomas Schmidt “Contrastive Normativity Without Contrastivism” <i>Chapel Hill Normativity Workshop</i>	Mar 2024
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Pittsburgh, Independent Instructor Equality (Political Philosophy)	SU 2021
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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
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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

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

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

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)
Rationality (Dorst)

Laws of Nature (Shumener)
Time Bias (Shumener)

Science

Causal Cognition (Woodward)
Cause and Explanation in Biology (Woodward)*
Epistemology of Experimental Practices*
(Machery)
Foundations of Cognitive Science (Allen)

Introduction to Philosophy of Science* (Norton)
Parallel Distributed Processing (Plaut)
Cognitive Neuroscience (Olson)

History

Aristotle (Lennox)
Leibniz (Rescher)

Wittgenstein* (Ricketts)
Hume (Lewinsohn)

Logic & Language

Advanced Logic (Caie)

* indicates audited coursework

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Referee for: *Noûs* (2022)

REFERENCES

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Stephen Engstrom

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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 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 disfavours—reasons *just are* 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. I recognize that objectivists need a story here. How do our favoring attitudes bear on these 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. 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 this way, 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 choosing in this way allows us to preserve our capacity for rational action in the face of situations which are otherwise rationally un navigable.

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 have claimed that my commitment to gardening is a further reason to garden, over and above the reasons which uncommitted agents have. 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 garden, though I could have entirely ignored the sale were I not such a committed gardener. Likewise, I am committed to my fiancée, but my commitment to her is not a *further* reason to promote her welfare; rather, the practical upshot of my commitment is that I am obliged to regard her welfare as providing me with an *especially* weighty reasons for action. These requirements are strict. I must regard the people to whom I am committed as giving me reasons on pain of incoherence. 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, it avoids well-known ‘bootstrapping’ problems which hound the view that commitments just are reasons. Together, these views about the practical relevance of our practical attitudes allow 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 substantive and structural 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. I then define reasons as facts whose inclusion in some reasoning *make* that reasoning substantively good. Understanding an agent's reasons as the factors that make reasoning responsive to what matters in her practical situation attractively expresses the guiding idea that reasons are the stuff of which reasoning is made.

The views I develop in my dissertation have implications for many debates in ethics and in the theory of practical reason. My theory of commitment, for example, points to a new, more encompassing form of perspectivism about rationality. Perspectivists say that what an agent can do rationally turns on facts about her beliefs or her evidence. Thus it might be rational for Ann to garden if she has strong evidence that it would be worthwhile, even if in fact it would not be. If I am right that commitments function by placing us in a distinctive practical relationship to certain facts, then specifying an agent's epistemic relationship to the facts about gardening may not be enough to determine what is rational for her to do. We also need to know the *practical* relationship in which she stands to these facts.