

Dissertation Summary:
Groups Have Aims & That Gives Us Reasons

I present and defend a novel theory of the nature and origins of normative reasons – including moral reasons, self-interested practical reasons, epistemic reasons, and reasons of additional kinds. The view seeks to remain consistent with two of the main motivations that generally attract philosophers to antirealist views of normativity, including moral relativism and subjectivism about normative reasons. These are considerations regarding the epistemology of moral judgments and the prevalence of intercultural moral disagreement.

These meta-ethical arguments have considerable appeal. Yet I also argue in the dissertation that well-known forms of moral relativism and subjectivism have difficulty accommodating three commonsense claims about the relationship between our moral reasons and reasons of other kinds. The first such claim is that the authority of one's moral reasons cannot be outweighed by the force of reasons that arise in connection with one's self-interested desires. This is a claim with which subjectivist views are incompatible. Another intuitive claim is that the content of our moral reasons is not determined exclusively by social custom or convention, since we can have moral reasons to reform our customs. This is a claim with which certain moral relativist views are incompatible. The final claim is that our moral reasons and our self-interested practical reasons are distinct in kind; they may count in favor of different or even radically opposed actions. Subjectivists as well as certain moral relativists have difficulty accounting for the distinctness of these reasons.

I show how we can develop a fruitful new theory that vindicates these intuitions by invoking the idea of *group agency*. That is, whole groups of people, such as societies, can be genuine, unified agents in their own right. I hold that the different kinds of normative reasons that we recognize intuitively are distinguished by the fact that they apply directly to different sorts of agents. For each kind of reason, the content of those reasons – what it is in particular that they call upon the agent to *do* – is fixed in connection with the aims of the relevant agent. I take moral reasons to be a kind of reason that applies directly to societies in light of the societies' aims. These moral reasons, which also apply derivatively to each member of the society, are distinct from self-interested practical reasons, which apply directly to persons in light of their own individual interests. I take epistemic reasons to apply directly to groups, as well.

For example, in a society that aims at protecting its natural resources, we each might have moral reasons to refrain from littering. Our practical reasons, such as our reasons to live in one city rather than another, or to shop at one supermarket rather than another, are determined exclusively by our own personal aims, such as the goals of living near family members or of saving time on our commute.

My view seeks to overcome those important objections to subjectivism and moral relativism as follows. First, according to the view I propose, a person possesses moral reasons simply so long as she is a member of a society. The content of her moral reasons is fixed by the aims held by the society as a whole. This means that no individual person can exempt herself from the authority of moral reasons simply by preferring to do something else on that occasion. The subjectivist, on the other hand, must concede that one's desires could give rise to normative reasons that outweigh one's reasons to behave morally. The view I propose is not subject to this same worry.

Nor is the view committed to the claim that the content of our moral reasons is wholly determined by social convention. I propose that what a society has moral reason to do is determined by what would in fact most effectively achieve the aims of the society in context. This view recognizes that a society's present customs need not represent the most effective way of achieving fundamental social aims.

Finally, the view can easily accommodate the distinctness of moral and self-interested practical reasons, since on this view, these different kinds of reasons are fixed by the different aims attributed to distinct agents, viz. societies or individual persons. It will come as no surprise, then, that these reasons may counsel different behaviors.

In summary, this appeal to a variety of agents (some of which are groups), and to their different aims, allows for the articulation of a novel, unified account of the many different kinds of normative reasons that we possess. This theory seeks to avoid some of the major challenges faced by existing forms of normative relativism, while still holding out the promise of fulfilling many of the same philosophical motivations.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1. Introducing a Novel Antirealist Theory of Normative Reasons (pp. 1-37)

CHAPTER 2. Epistemological Arguments as Evidence for Normative Antirealism (pp. 38-59)

CHAPTER 3. From Normative Disagreement to Normative Antirealism? (pp. 60-95)

CHAPTER 4. Three Problems for Existing Forms of Relativism (pp. 96-126)

CHAPTER 5. The Proposal: Groups Have Aims & That Gives Us Reasons (pp. 127-175)

CHAPTER 6. Concluding Remarks and Answers to Objections (pp. 176-213)