

# Our subjective perspective on objective reasons

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In many respects, how things subjectively seem to us is distinct — and may diverge — from how they objectively are. My goal in this research project is to illustrate that this is in particular true of reasons, and to highlight some of the main metaphysical, epistemological and normative consequences of this truth. My central claim is that objective facts constitute reasons for us by speaking for or against certain beliefs, actions, evaluations or emotions; and that we recognise such facts as reason-constituting by experiencing our awareness of them as reason-providing. The first two parts of my project address the subject-relative nature of, and our subjective access to, objective reasons; while the third part applies the gained results to more specific issues concerning the relation between experience and reasons.

## I. Metaphysical issues

**Objectivity.** My first aim is to argue that having a — or most — reason to believe, do or feel something is an objective matter. There are two dimensions to this issue (Dorsch (2007)): (a) whether a reason applies to some or all rational subjects; (b) whether the recognition of a reason is a genuine cognitive achievement, transcending our actual subjective perspective (Wright (1994), McDowell (1998b)). I aim to show that reasons are objective in sense (b) (I return to (a) in section III). One motivation for this view is that it best explains the fact that it is part of our shared practice and concepts that we take our reasons to be objective (Hume (2008), Kant (1999)). For instance, we argue with others about whether we have reason to be jealous or to help someone. Another motivation is the observation that we can err about which reasons we have (Kolodny (2005)). The evidence available to us may wrongly suggest the presence of infidelity or need (see part III for further examples).

**Relationality.** Some have thought that objective reasons are identical with facts (e.g., that someone is hurt — Parfit (1997), McNaughton and Rawling (2004)). However, it is essential to reasons that they are reasons for subjects. Inaccessible facts do not satisfy this condition (Williams (1981)). And a world without subjects would not contain any reasons (McDowell (1998b)). In accordance with these observations, I intend to defend the view that reasons are relations of speaking for or against, which obtain between particular objective facts and potential subjective attitudes (Kolodny (2005)) and require both elements for their presence. They are therefore more like colours than like shapes in their relationality and subject-dependence (McDowell (1998b), Dorsch (2009a)).

## II. Epistemological issues

**Normativity.** In theoretical or practical deliberation, we should aim to conform to epistemic and practical norms. Accordingly, what we objectively have most reason to believe or intend depends on, say, what puts us in a position to know or act morally or prudently (Velleman (2000), Williamson (2000)). However, the best we can do when deliberating is to respond to what we subjectively take our reasons to be. I want to argue that this method is reasonable and, in cases where everything goes well, leads to our satisfaction of the norms only if which reasons we take

ourselves to have when deciding what to believe or do is transparent to, and determined by, which reasons we actually have (McDowell (1998b), Kolodny (2005)).

**Reasonableness.** But the possibility of a divergence between subjective perspective and objective reality raises two difficulties for the view that our reasonableness to respond to reasons is just a matter of being related to objective reasons. First, when judging or acting against what we (rightly) take our overall reason to be, we count as akratic even if we end up being in line with what we objectively have most reason for (Owens (2000)). Even if it is prudent to buy a Toyota rather than a Nissan, it is unreasonable for us to buy the Toyota if our evidence favours the Nissan. Second, when believing or doing what we (wrongly) take ourselves to have most reason for, we are not entirely at fault, despite possibly violating some objective norm (Dorsch (2010a)). Even if the phone is not ringing, there is still some reasonableness in believing that it is ringing in response to unknowingly hallucinating the respective sound. My conclusion is that the reasonableness of our subjective take cannot simply be a matter of whether it puts us into a position to know or act morally or prudently.

**Experienced reason-provision.** Instead, I propose to take our canonical subjective perspective on reasons to be intentional, while also holding on to the relational element.<sup>1</sup> Taking ourselves to have a reason consists fundamentally in experiencing one of our mental episodes as reason-providing, that is, as relating us to a reason-constituting fact. Part of the difference between seeing and visualising an injured person, or between being moved to help or remaining unmoved by seeing an injured person, is whether we experience our episode as relating us to a reason for belief or action. This experience is intentional and part of what it is like to perceive, feel, think, and so on.<sup>2</sup> In the good cases, our episodes do relate us to reason-constituting facts and therefore put us into a position to know or act morally or prudently. In the bad cases, they do neither. But since they still intentionally present themselves as relating us to a reason, it is not entirely unreasonable to rely on them in deliberation. This, I intend to show, is due to the intentional and, hence, normative nature of the awareness concerned (Dorsch (2010a)).

### III. Application to specific issues

**Rationality and access.** Some of the potential advantages of the resulting view, which I aim to spell out during my research, are that: (i) it accommodates both externalist and internalist intuitions (similar to McDowell (1998a)); (ii) it accommodates both empiricist and rationalist intuitions (similar to Burge (2003)); (iii) it helps to elucidate the sense in which we recognise reasons as *our* reasons (similar to Williams (1981)); (iv) it leaves room for reason-responding animals or infants by requiring only conscious experience, but not any conceptual capacities, for the recognition of reasons (contrary to McDowell (1998a) and Burge (2003)); (v) it avoids the ‘Myth of the Given’ by accepting that experience is already rational (McDowell (2009)); (vi) it avoids bootstrapping by reference to intentional normativity (contrary to Kolodny (2005)); (vii) it explains the non-

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<sup>1</sup>See Dorsch and Soldati (2010) and Dorsch (2010a) for a defense of the combination of intentional and relational elements in the case of perception-like hallucinations and their power to render perceptual judgements at least partially reasonable.

<sup>2</sup>The presence of such experiences of reasons as part of the phenomenal character of mental episodes is already defended in Dorsch (2009b) in application to mental actions and judgemental thoughts.

inferentiality of our recognition of reasons; and (viii) it leaves room for the recognition of reasons to be practical, rather than theoretical (Anscombe (1957), Moran (2001)).

***Privileged access.*** The proposed view also helps to illuminate in which sense we possess privileged access to our own mental states, while acknowledging that self-knowledge is fallible and that it involves first-order commitments (Moran (2001)). Attending to what we are believing, doing or feeling amounts to attending to what we have most reason to believe, do or feel (Moran (2001), Shah and Velleman (2005)). We recognise reasons for belief, action or affection by recognising facts and experiencing our recognition of them as reason-providing. Accordingly, our canonical access to our own mental states is first-personal. But although others do not have the same experiential access, they may imagine having it (Mellor (1993), Currie and Ravenscroft (2003), Dorsch (2010c)). They may imagine what it is like for us to become aware of the reason-constituting facts by using their knowledge of our expressive behaviour and context. Accordingly, they may come to know that we are angry about someone, despite our own conviction that we treat that person with indifference.

***Evaluation.*** A similar explanation applies to why it is better to rely on our own acquaintance than on the testimony of others when evaluative matters are concerned (Kant (2009), Hopkins (2007)). My suggestion is that testimonial knowledge of the values and the underlying features of objects often does not suffice to experientially (rather than merely intellectually) recognise the latter as reasons for ascribing the former. Moreover, this fits well with the observation that our canonical access to objective values can be neither perceptual, nor emotional, but instead involves some non-deductive form of reasoning in response to non-inferentially recognized reasons (Dorsch (2007), Dorsch (2010b)).

***Relativism and faultless disagreement.*** But it also leaves room for reasons and values to be relative to (groups of) subjects or contexts (see (a) in section I). In some cases, this seems clear: due to our different preferences, me, but not you, may have a reason to regularly go hiking (Scanlon (1999)). However, the situation is more complicated with respect to aesthetic and moral reasons or values. My claim is that we should treat them both (a) as applying to all rational subjects and (b) as being truth-apt and open to genuine cognition (Budd (1999), McDowell (1998b)). If they none the less allow for faultless disagreement, truth in these matters should be understood in relativist terms (MacFarlane (2010), Dorsch (2007)).

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