

## The Importance of Being in a Position to Know

Errol Lord's *The Importance of Being Rational* is a tour de force treatment of the relationship between reasons, rationality, knowledge, and what Lord calls *creditworthiness*, the kind of achievement where you don't just do what is right, but do it for the right reasons. The main thesis of the book is that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons – or more precisely, in correctly responding to objective, normative, possessed reasons. Though I wouldn't myself accept this precisification of the thesis in its entirety, I also think that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. Yet the word over which I would quibble – *objective* – makes a large enough difference to how Lord and I each understand this thesis as to make the book as a whole an illuminating glimpse, for me, into an intriguing alien landscape. In what follows I'll explore some of the deepest joints in what is at stake between us.

### Objective and Subjective Reasons and the Reasons Program

Lord sees his defense of the top-level thesis of his book not only as a kind of first-order justification of being rational, but as an attempt to carry out one of the hardest and most significant steps in any defense of or attempt to carry out what he calls the *Reasons Program*, according to which reasons are the sole most fundamental normative property or relation. Lord believes that unless rationality consists in something about reasons, we must choose between the Reasons Program and the conclusion that rationality is not a normative property – a conclusion that he takes to be absurd on any pre-theoretic characterization of what meta-normative inquiry is supposed to be about.

I, too, think that it is absurd to conclude that rationality is not normative. So if the Reasons Program is to be carried out, as I hope it can, then rationality must indeed be constitutively characterized in terms of reasons – there must be something about reasons in which rationality consists. But whereas Lord interprets the Reasons Program in meta-normative theory as devoted to the view that objective, normative reasons are uniquely normatively fundamental, I myself worry that this builds far too much into the Reasons Program.

It is true that it is taken for granted in many discussions of reasons that objective normative reasons are the most interesting notion of reason. It is true in particular, that with the notable exception of Jonathan

Dancy,<sup>1</sup> proponents of the Reasons Program in meta-normative theory have been explicit that they intend their view to be that objective, normative reasons are normatively fundamental. And it is true that many who have argued that rationality is not itself normative because it cannot be backed up in the right way by reasons, have done so by arguing that rationality cannot be backed up by objective, normative reasons.

But careful work on reasons over the past two decades in particular has unpacked I think a wide variety of closely related relations that could be potentially characterized as normatively fundamental, each of which might loosely be picked out as a ‘reason’ relation in an appropriate context. None of the motivations that I know of for the Reasons Program distinguish successfully between these closely related ‘reason’ relations, and so my view is that we should not hold fixed the assumption that we know which ‘reason’ relation is fundamental, if any is – even though we know that some such assumptions have been pervasively taken for granted. Instead, we should hold open the possibility that theorists correctly latched onto the idea that reasons are fundamental, but mistook which ‘reason’ relation was the fundamental one.

That is the possibility that I accept. On my picture, which owes much to Dancy, objective normative reasons – reasons that can typically be characterized by citing relevant facts about the situation, regardless of whether anyone knows them or is in a position to know them – are not normatively fundamental, but are just what we get when the things that stand in a more fundamental, *non-factive*, ‘reason’ relation are *true* (or on Dancy’s version, which has a slightly different ontology, when they *obtain*). On my picture, as on Dancy’s, objective normative reasons are just one manifestation of fundamental reasons, if you will.<sup>2</sup>

For example, suppose that you become convinced – on the basis of what appears to be compelling evidence – that everyone is out to get you. On one way of thinking about things, becoming so convinced should count in favor of not trusting anyone. But on a quite different way of thinking about things, it should count in favor of seeking counseling. These are two very different ways of thinking about the significance of this state of mind – of being convinced that everyone is out to get you. But both seem normative. Very loosely and intuitively, the first is a way of thinking about it from the inside, and the second is a way of thinking about it from the outside. The first way of thinking about it is paradigmatic of thinking about what it is rational for you to do, while the second is paradigmatic of thinking about what you have objective normative reasons to do. Lord’s project is to reconcile the first to a kind of special case of the second. Whereas my thought is that these are separate and only confusion can arise from taking only the second way of thinking seriously in its own right.

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<sup>1</sup> Especially Dancy [2000].

<sup>2</sup> Schroeder [2018].

I use the terms ‘subjective reason’ and ‘objective reason’ to mark this pre-theoretical distinction. Some people believe that subjective reasons are more fundamental. It is far more common to believe that of the two, objective reasons are more fundamental, and I myself have endorsed this view in the past. But I now say something simpler: subjective reasons, like objective reasons, are manifestations of an underlying, more fundamental, notion of *reason*: fundamental reasons. Whereas objective normative reasons are just fundamental reasons plus some further conditions including truth, subjective normative reasons are just fundamental reasons plus some further conditions including (at a minimum) an epistemic condition.

### **The Price of Objective Reason Fixation**

If we go down my road, then accounting for rationality in terms of reasons will mean accounting for rationality in terms of *subjective* normative reasons. This will leave many puzzles – many of them brought out beautifully in Lord’s book – about the exact relationship between objective and subjective reasons, and what further practical conditions on subjective reasons may be required, over and above their epistemic conditions. Lord’s book is agenda-setting in opening up a rich area of inquiry here that is deep and important. The idea that subjective reasons must satisfy a practical condition, as well as an epistemic condition, is important, cogently argued, and shockingly the first time that anyone has written so clearly and explicitly about this issue.

In contrast, going down Lord’s road leads us to require that rationality always turns on the subject’s epistemic relation to some *truth*. Since Lord holds that accounting for rationality in terms of objective reasons is what it takes both to justify rationality and to carry out the Reasons Program without denying the normativity of rationality, he cannot explain the rationality of anything without adverting to some truth to which the subject has the right sort of epistemic relation. It follows fairly immediately, then, that he is forced to choose between the conclusion that internal duplicates can differ in the rationality of the very same actions, beliefs, or attitudes, and needing to develop a creative story about why even though they do not in fact possess the same objective reasons, the objective reasons that they do possess suffice to justify exactly the same actions, beliefs, and attitudes.

Lord devotes a whole chapter of his book – chapter seven – to addressing this challenge, known in its most extreme form as the *new evil demon* problem. And much of the structure of his work developing a positive account of what it is to respond to a normative reason in chapters five and six is devoted to converging on an account of *basing* an action or belief on reasons that allows his solution in chapter seven to work not only for what Lord calls *ex ante* rationality, but also for what he calls *ex post* rationality, which depends not only on what reasons you possess, but also on how your action, belief, or attitude is based on

them. Lord calls this second challenge, which is both underappreciated and much more important and difficult, the *new new evil demon* problem.

Lord's solution to the *new new evil demon* problem, grounded in his liberal account of basing from chapter six, is one of the most creative and resourceful out of the many creative and resourceful moves in the book. If anything, he undersells how important this contribution is to his total contribution in the book. By liberalizing our conception of what is involved in basing a belief or an action on a reason, and motivating this move with the focused puzzle of knowledge from ignorance, Lord makes the most serious run at defending the conclusion that *if* his view has no problem with *ex ante* rationality (the *one-new* problem), then it has no problem with *ex post* rationality, either (two *news*). My worries about this strategy, serious though they are, still pale in comparison to my admiration for it.

But the original problem about *ex ante* rationality is itself a much harder problem than even Lord's sensitive treatment makes it out to be. For example, Lord follows the original expositions of the *new evil demon* problem as a problem for externalist views in general, by comparing cases of normal agents to agents in deeply deceived environments, and in using this name for the problem. But this fails to appreciate the respect in which the form of the *new evil demon* problem faced by externalist views like his is much more severe than the similar problems faced by traditional, 1980's-style, forms of epistemological externalism. This is because on Lord's view two agents can differ in their possessed reasons even if they have identical pasts, are in identically reliable environments, and are merely diverging in what they are in a position to know for the very first time.

Lord's answer to the *new evil demon* problem is that whenever an agent is not in a position to know something that an internal duplicate is in a position to know, there is something else that both *are* in a position to know, that both *know how to use* as a reason, and that *in their situations* is an *equally good reason*, in the sense that it makes the very same impact on what it is rational for them to do. So, for example, if one agent knows something because she sees it to be true, and her internal, historical, and environmental twin is not in a position to know it because her apparent perceptual experience is instead an illusion, according to Lord both agents are in a position to know that they *seem* to have this perceptual experience, both know how to use this as a reason, and both count by his account of basing as sustaining their belief on the basis of this reason. Moreover, this reason, according to Lord, does just as well at rationalizing both of their beliefs.

This is a quite striking claim in this context. One of Lord's heroes in the book, Timothy Williamson, has been one of the leading proponents of the diagnosis that twentieth-century epistemology made a wrong turn when it tried to get by with seeming or appearance facts as the only evidential basis for external world beliefs. One problem with such evidence is that it leaves room for skeptical hypotheses. But a more general

way of putting the problem is that it is simply less good evidence – less good reason to believe – than the evidence possessed by someone who knows what she sees to be true. If seeming-facts are as good of reasons as Lord says, then it is hard to see why Williamson’s diagnosis is necessary.

The problem is even clearer with respect to the backup reasons for action. The fact that the glass looks like a gin and tonic is not remotely as good a reason to take a sip as the fact that it is a gin and tonic. Suppose that Bernie reasonably believes that his glass contains gin and tonic, but it does not. There are therefore two objective reasons in play, according to Lord – that the glass appears to contain gin and tonic, which counts in favor of taking a sip, and that it actually contains petrol, which counts against. This point is slightly delicate dialectically because Lord’s official view in chapter eight is roughly that unpossessed objective reasons don’t matter for anything interesting. But it sure looks to me like with respect to comparing the force of these two reasons, independently of worrying about which are possessed, there is a clear answer as to which should carry more weight.

Lord makes a very fast but crucial move in this chapter that is supposed to amount to a concession on this point. He distinguishes between *relative* weight and the *atomic* weight of reasons. This distinction is designed to allow that it could be that there is a sense in which the person who has the factive visual experience does have reasons that are better (atomically) than her internal, historical, and environmental twin who merely undergoes an illusion. He just claims that the agent undergoing the illusion will also have correspondingly (atomically) weaker *competing* reasons, and so their *relative* weight will still be the same.

It is important to note that this is indeed a very plausible thing to say about the cases of massive deception on which Lord focuses, which are the subject of the original new evil demon case in arguments against traditional forms of externalism. But it is *not at all*, I contend, a plausible thing to say about cases of minimal difference, like the one that I’ve just described. In these cases all of the agent’s other reasons are the normal good ones that come from being in a position to know things about her real environment. Lord is not unaware of this possibility – his official position, described at the bottom of page 193, is to bite the bullet on any such cases. But the point that I want to make is that the idea that people who are internal *and* historical *and* environmental twins but differ only in the truth of one of their beliefs should not differ in their rationality is way more compelling – indeed, it is consistent even with several forms of 1980’s-style hardcore epistemological externalism – than the original strongly internalist intuitive judgment that internal duplicates must be equally rational, that Lord works so hard to capture. So all of his hard work is really going to capture the cases that are *less* persuasive counterexamples, while leaving the more persuasive counterexamples untouched.

And this still just scratches the surface of the problem. On Lord's view, differences in reasons can arise because Gettier conditions for knowledge apply, not just because of falsity. And indeed, since Lord's official view is that the epistemic condition on possessed reasons is merely *being in a position* to know, on his view, differences should arise because Gettier conditions for knowledge apply to a proposition that neither agent has even considered.

So I think that despite his valiant efforts, Lord still seriously underappreciates the depth and breadth of the problems in this area. But even if his efforts are successful on their own terms, the more important point that I want to emphasize is that all of this looks like completely *unnecessary* work, to me. If we simply start with a fundamental non-factive 'reason' relation that is more fundamental than and hence not beholden to objective reasons, we can respect the symmetry between more objective and more subjective perspectives on evaluating agents without requiring any fancy tightrope walking of this kind.

### Disjunctivist Cred

At some points in the book, Lord seems to suggest that his fundamentally disjunctivist treatment of the *ex post* rationality of belief and of action in cases that differ with respect to what each agent is in a position to know is just what we should expect. For example, at the top of page 207, Lord seeks to use Williamson against me in defense of his disjunctivist treatment of the rationalizers in the good case and the bad case. My complaint against Williamson was that his view that possessed reasons are both true and inconsistent with skeptical hypotheses leads to an unnecessarily disjunctivist treatment of the source of the rationality of belief in good and bad cases of perceptual experience.<sup>3</sup> Lord says that this can't be a fair complaint, because Williamson "thinks that making this move is a key component of responding to a certain type of skeptic" [207].

But this gets things the wrong way around. What I've shown in my own work is that it is only against the background of the assumption that possessed evidence or reasons must be *truths* that Williamson's response to the skeptic requires any sort of disjunctivism at all. Speaking for myself, I am completely on board with the core of the Williamsonian response to the skeptic – that skeptical scenarios are not, after all, consistent with all of our sensory evidence. Indeed, I think that this is one of the most important lessons of the last hundred years of epistemology. The costs of Williamson's view arise from his independent and unnecessary assumption that possessed evidence must be true – which is completely unargued-for anywhere

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<sup>3</sup> Schroeder [2011].

in his corpus so far as I am aware of except to assert that the alternative is “hardly an attractive view” [Williamson 2013, 92].

So if we hold fixed that we want to respond to the skeptic in Williamson’s way and in mine, we simply have to make a choice – factivity and a disjunctive treatment of the good and bad cases or non-factivity and no such problems. Lord does better than Williamson’s bald assertion that the alternative is “hardly an attractive view”, offering an argument in favor of factivity in chapter 3, that is based on linguistic reports of what reason someone has acted for. But I’ll rest my case against it on the grounds of the deep and pervasive puzzles surrounding the new evil demon problem and its even more compelling relatives. It is far easier, I think, to explain how linguistic reports could come apart from what is explanatorily fundamental, than to explain tremendous coincidences in what is explained by what is explanatorily fundamental, as Lord seeks to do.

### **Being in a Position to Know**

One of my central, longstanding concerns about the role of reasons in epistemology is that if we appeal to a demanding epistemic condition in order to explain which reasons are possessed, then we will no longer be able to appeal to possessed reasons in order to explain that epistemic condition, thus restricting the scope of what Lord calls the Reasons Program. And in fact, I think we see that consequence in Lord’s book. Having embraced the position to know condition on possessed reasons, Lord appears to go on to take knowledge itself as something that falls outside the scope of the Reasons Program. It is co-first, if you will, along with reasons, in grounding and explaining both what is rational and what we ought to do, as well as many other interesting normative phenomena.

Speaking for myself, I find this incredibly striking. One of the most illuminating and rich features of the book is the way in which Lord draws out how many rich and important kinds of creditworthiness are best understood in terms of correctly responding to reasons. When you are *ex post* rational in some action or belief that is because of the possessed reasons that you are correctly responding to. Similarly, there may be other forms of creditworthiness – specifically moral worth, grounded in correctly responding to moral reasons, prudential creditworthiness grounded in correctly responding to possessed prudential reasons, and more. By Lord’s own lights, the concept of being in a position to know is most illuminatingly introduced by analogizing it to the relationship between *ex ante* and *ex post* rationality – being in a position to know stands to knowing as *ex ante* rationality stands to *ex post*. Indeed, the analogies run deep, I think.

Lord, I believe, *does* want to say that there is a kind of knowledge that consists in a kind of creditworthiness, is analogous to *ex post* rationality, and is a normative property. It is consistent with his view,

after all, that we can follow Sosa [2009] in distinguishing between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge, and treat reflective knowledge as a normative property to be explained in terms of responding to possessed reasons, even though animal knowledge is appealed to in order to explain possessed reasons.

But if we carve things up in this way, it is the kind of knowledge that is *not* analogous to *ex post* rationality that his account appeals to being in a position to have. Yet the way that he introduces the concept of being in a position to know is precisely by means of this analogy! Is this a fatal problem? Of course not. The analogy could be merely a prop, or there could still be a less close analogy to be made. But it is, I think, telling.

## References

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