**Epistemic Reasons I: Normativity**

Forthcoming in *Philosophy Compass*

**1. Introduction**

*Distinctions*. The theory of reasons is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it examines the nature of the reasons for which people act or form attitudes, which needn't be good; such *motivating reasons*, as meta-ethicists call them, are not the focus here. On the other hand, it examines the nature of *normative reasons*, which are considerations that count in favor of acts and attitudes. Normative epistemic reasons—our topic here—are a subset of the normative reasons for doxastic attitudes. Delimiting this subset is no easy task. Pieces of evidence are paradigmatic members, but it is controversial whether all normative epistemic reasons are evidence, as we'll see.

Outside of epistemology, it is common to distinguish between the normative reasons there are (“objective normative reasons”) and the normative reasons one has (“subjective normative reasons”). An illustration of this distinction in the practical case is Williams (1981)’s celebrated “petrol and tonic” case. Bernie walks into his favorite bar and orders a gin and tonic. His bartender has gone mad and serves Bernie a glass of petrol and tonic, which we’re supposed to imagine is superficially indistinguishable. In one clear sense, the fact that the glass contains petrol is a conclusive reason for Bernie not to drink from it. But given the deceptive appearances, Bernie does not yet *possess* a conclusive reason not to drink.

Objective reasons have received little attention in epistemology. This is perhaps because it is unclear how they bear on epistemic justification, the status epistemologists most often associate with reasons. But they might bear on other epistemic statuses, such as knowledge. And as we'll see, if one account of subjective normative reasons is true, then in investigating these reasons, epistemologists just are investigating a special case of objective reasons. Accordingly, this article takes objective reasons seriously as candidate grounds for epistemic normativity.

*Structure*. The article is structured around the following questions:

1. *Ontology*. Are normative epistemic reasons mental states, facts, propositions, or what?
2. *Subjective vs. Objective and Possession*. How should we understand the subjective/objective distinction among normative epistemic reasons? What is it to “possess” a reason?

1. *Relation to Evidence*. Are all normative epistemic reasons evidence? If not, in virtue of what does a consideration count as an *epistemic* reason?
2. *Reasons and the Rest of Epistemology*. How do normative epistemic reasons relate to other epistemic standings like justification, rationality, and knowledge? Do they require reasons? Should they be analyzed in terms of reasons?

The list is hardly exhaustive, but covers many central questions, which §2-5 address in order.

**2. The Ontology of Normative Epistemic Reasons**

What sorts of things are normative epistemic reasons? Many epistemologists believe they are mental states.[[1]](#footnote-1) This view—*mentalism*—is diametrically opposed to the standard view about normative reasons in meta-ethics. The common meta-ethical view—*non-mentalism*—holds that normative reasons are either facts or apparent facts, typically but not necessarily about the world.

One could hold the same view in epistemology.[[2]](#footnote-2) Epistemologists' resistance to non-mentalism may owe to the concern that it is unclear how a bare fact about the world could justify one in believing anything, as non-mentalism might seem to suggest. The response is (i) to agree that reasons must be *possessed* to justify and (ii) to agree that mental states *help us to possess* (or “*provide*”) these reasons, but (iii) to refuse to conclude that mental states *are* the normative epistemic reasons. Williamson (2000: 197) put this well: “Experiences provide evidence; they do not consist of propositions. So much is obvious. But to provide something is not to consist of it.”

While this point levels the playing field between mentalists and non-mentalists, it hardly settles the debate. So, how should we decide between these views? Some commonly listed advantages of non-mentalism include:

1. *Explanatory Power*. Non-mentalism explains why we ordinarily treat as true claims of the form, “The fact that p is a good reason to believe q”, and it also enables us to do more analytical work by acknowledging objective reasons.

1. *Phenomenology*. Non-mentalism fits better with the phenomenology of good reasoning: when engaging in good reasoning, our attention is directed at the relevant facts, which often aren't facts about our mental states.

1. *Unity*. Because non-mentalism is the standard view in meta-ethics, adopting non-mentalism in epistemology yields a unified ontology of reasons.

1. *The Job Description*. Evidence must consist in propositions to do its job—e.g., to be a potential input to inferences to the best explanation, something that can rule out hypotheses by being inconsistent with them, something on which we can conditionalize, etc.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One can imagine a mentalist response to each purported advantage. Mentalists might dismiss the appeal in (1) to reasons talk as mere ordinary language philosophy and insist that we can do all the work “objective reasons” might do with different concepts. Similarly, mentalists might chalk up (4) to loose talk: strictly speaking, they might say, it is the fact that we have certain evidence that is the input to abductive arguments, and the content of the evidence that is inconsistent with hypotheses and the input to conditionalization. In reply to (2), mentalists could follow objective consequentialists like Railton (1984) and claim that good reasons are not things to which good reasoners must attend or even necessarily can attend. Finally, mentalists could either insist in response to (3) that a disunified ontology of reasons isn't so bad or pursue a unified mentalist ontology instead.

Is there any reason to prefer mentalism? Most defenses have been negative, suggesting that the costs of non-mentalism are too steep. Let’s consider some.

One argument from Turri (2009) is the *Argument from Circularity*,[[4]](#footnote-4) which targets the non-mentalist's treatment of perceptual justification. Suppose I have a visual experience as of the fact that p and form the belief that p. If the reason that justifies me is a fact, what is it? The obvious candidate, Turri suggests, is the perceived fact that p. But, Turri worries, to form the belief that p on the basis of the fact that p is circular. So, he concludes, non-mentalism cannot be right.

Non-mentalists may reply by denying that such basing must be viciously circular. Note that believing that p on the basis of the fact that p seems fine in some cases. Consider being in pain. What justifies one's belief that one is in pain? Plausibly, the sheer fact that one is in pain. Even if one does not adopt this model, it is a natural model. It couldn't be if Turri were right.

The example of pain suggests a deeper response to the argument. Not all responses to reasons are inferential. When one comes to believe one is in pain upon encountering that fact, one forms the belief in direct, non-inferential response to the fact. One does not move in a circle because one's process of belief-formation doesn't have inferential steps. If a fact can be one's reason in this way rather than via inference, non-mentalists needn't permit moving in a circle.

One might then follow McDowell (1995) in thinking that visual experience can “make manifest” certain facts or apparent facts, which can be non-inferential reasons for our beliefs. Of course, some will deny that we are “open to the facts” in this way. But this isn't a complaint about non-mentalism but rather about direct realism. Unless the view is uncharitably defined, there is no in-principle reason why a non-mentalist cannot see the relevant reasons in epistemology as facts about one's mental life (see Millar (2014)) or facts about the looks of things (see McGrath (forthcoming)).

Another argument of Turri's turns on justified agnosticism. He considers a case where Nevil withholds judgment on whether there is unnecessary suffering in the world, believes that God exists only if there is not, and so withholds judgment on whether God exists. What is Nevil’s reason for the second instance of withholding? Turri thinks the non-mentalist must say it includes the consideration that there is unnecessary suffering in the world, which makes Nevil look irrational.

But non-mentalists are not forced to paint this picture. They might say that Nevil’s ultimate rationale is that the evidence that there is unnecessary suffering in the world is insufficient. If Nevil is rational, this fact is surely the rationale for his first instance of withholding, and so, indirectly, for the second instance. Perhaps Turri assumes the non-mentalist must still regard the proposition that there is unnecessary suffering in the world as *part* of Nevil's rationale. But this does not follow from non-mentalism alone, which just says that reasons are (apparent) facts.

Turri might reply: “But mustn't the mentalist say that the contents of the causally active doxastic attitudes are the reasons?” The answer is: “No.” There is a clear rationale for treating belief and withholding asymmetrically. Just as part of the functional role of belief is to treat its objects as eligible premises for reasoning, so part of the functional role of withholding is to treat its objects and their negations as ineligible premises for reasoning. So it is obvious why a non-mentalist would count contents of causally active beliefs as reasons but refuse to count contents of causally active withholdings as reasons. Any satisfactory story about the enabling conditions on a proposition's being a reason will entail this asymmetry. And it is only the *conjunction* of bare-bones non-mentalism and the non-mentalist's further theory about these enabling conditions that tells us anything about *which* contents are reasons.

A third argument is what Littlejohn (2012) calls the “Subtraction Argument”, which he summarizes as follows: “[I]f you subtract the subject's belief, the fact or proposition believed could not justify anything. Thus, the reasons that justify belief are the subject's mental states.” His response is that this argument ignores the distinction between reasons and enabling conditions: one could hold, he suggests, that mental states enable facts or propositions to be reasons without themselves being reasons. While I agree that the argument wrongly ignores this distinction, I'd rephrase the alternative and say that being in a certain mental states is only a necessary condition for a normative reason's being *possessed*.

Some final arguments flow from arguments for mentalism about motivating epistemic reasons. Davidson (1980) famously maintained that rationalizing explanation is a species of causal explanation and hence that motivating reasons must be causes. To get from here to the conclusion that normative reasons are mental states, one needs two assumptions. One is that motivating reasons and normative reasons are the same kind of thing.[[5]](#footnote-5) A second assumption is that only mental states can be causes. As Littlejohn (2011) notes, one might naturally enough view facts as causes. So if normative reasons are facts, there is no argument for mentalism from the causal efficacy of motivating reasons and the assumption that motivating and normative reasons are the same kind of thing. Alternatively, one might deny that reasons themselves are causes (see Dancy (2000)) or deny that normative and motivating reasons are the same kind of thing (see Mantel (2015)).

The arguments for mentalism rest, it seems, on overlooking certain distinctions and other oversights. But if we should prefer non-mentalism, which version should we prefer? One version is *factualism*, which says that normative epistemic reasons are facts. Another version is *abstractionism*, which says that normative epistemic reasons are propositions, including false ones. Unfortunately, there is not just one question to answer, since one could accept factualism about objective normative reasons while accepting abstractionism about subjective normative reasons. We must consider the objective/subjective reason distinction to see which answers are best.

**3. Possession and the Objective/Subjective Distinction**

3.1. *The Factoring Account*

How should we understand the distinction between subjective and objective normative reasons? There are two kinds of answers. According to the *Factoring Account* (FA), subjective reasons are a special case of objective reasons: namely, the ones that we possess. Schroeder (2008) rejects FA and advocates a dualist view on which there are two equally fundamental reason-for relations, subjective and objective. Lord (2010) defends FA from Schroeder's critique.

The debate intersects with the ontology debate. Part of the reason Schroeder rejects FA is that objective normative reasons are facts but (or so he maintains) subjective normative reasons need not be facts. He thinks that this is clear in the aforementioned “petrol and tonic” case. The subjective reason Bernie has to drink from the glass is the *apparent* fact that the glass contains gin and tonic. Lord responds by noting that there are facts to which a defender of FA could appeal, such as the fact that the drink has a certain perceptual appearance.

There are worries about how the response extends to more extreme cases. If Bernie were just caused by a demon to have these experiences, he could still rationally intend to drink. Given FA, he would have to be forming this intention on the basis of an objective reason to intend to drink. But now two issues arise. The only candidate objective reasons are facts about Bernie's mental life, and it does not seem that *Bernie's* reason for intending to drink is any such fact. So, what is rationalizing his intention is not an objective reason, contrary to FA.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A second worry brings us back to epistemology. Not every fact is an objective epistemic reason to believe that p. Only facts that bear a certain relation to beliefs are objective epistemic reasons for them. One might have thought this relation must involve an objective connection to truth. Reliable indicators are the clearest examples of objective epistemic reasons, and they have an objective probabilistic connection to truth. But this connection is broken in the demon world. So even if defenders of FA can point to facts that could justify our beliefs, these facts may fail to be objective epistemic reasons.

3.2. *An Irenic Proposal and Some Questions*

The debate over FA may rest on a mistake. Perhaps there are important notions that proponents and opponents of FA are both latching onto, with distinct theoretical roles.

One important notion is tied to rationality. Rationality is an *overall* property determined by the balance of certain considerations. If it is also an *internalist* property, then the considerations whose balance determines it aren’t necessarily objective reasons. Opponents of FA are latching onto the considerations that play this role, which might be called *rationalizers*. Rationalizers are, I elsewhere argue, apparent facts that subjects can *competently treat* like objective reasons for responses.[[7]](#footnote-7) They need not be objective reasons, since our reasons-sensitive competences are fallible and entail reliability only relative to favorable conditions.

Now, it is better if the considerations we treat as objective reasons are objective reasons. We want justifications, not mere excuses. Perhaps proponents of FA are latching onto the considerations—justifiers—that satisfy this desire. Justifers are, I argue elsewhere, facts that we can correctly treat as objective reasons as a manifestation of our reasons-sensitive competence.[[8]](#footnote-8) Extending Sosa (2007)'s language, justifiers are facts that we can *aptly* treat as objective reasons. Since apt treating entails competent treating, justifiers are also rationalizers. But not all rationalizers are justifiers, since competent treating doesn't entail apt treating. Even if one dislikes the terminology, the underlying distinction is clear.

Henceforth I will speak more neutrally of the distinction between subjective reasons and possessed objective reasons. My view multiplies our questions. We now must ask (Q1) what relation one must bear to R to have R as a subjective reason, and (Q2) what relation one must bear to an objective reason to possess it. We can break (Q2) down into two questions, because there are two distinct conditions on possession. One condition is the condition of *access to reason-giving facts*, which tells us that only facts to which one has access can be objective reasons one possesses. One key question is what such access involves.

Now, one can have access to a fact F that is an objective reason to believe that p without possessing that very objective reason. Imagine F is an objective reason to believe that p because F entails p via an arcane deductive route one lacks the logical competence to follow. Plausibly, one doesn't possess F as an objective reason to believe that p. Hence, there is a second condition on possession that I'll call *sensitivity to the reason-for relation*.[[9]](#footnote-9) A second key question is what such sensitivity involves.

3.3. *Access*

One could try to understand access in epistemically normative terms—say, in terms of justified belief or, if it is normative, knowledge. But if we do understand access in epistemically normative terms, we may have to abandon the project of analyzing all epistemic normativity in terms of reasons. After all, possessed reasons would do most of the analytical work in epistemology. If they must be analyzed via further epistemically normative notions, we arguably cannot understand those in terms of possessed reasons on pain of circularity or regress.

A different approach would be to understand access in non-normative terms. There are superficially non-normative notions to which we could appeal as modes of access—seeing that p, remembering that p, intuiting that p, etc. But whether appealing to them gives us a non-normative grip on access will turn on two further questions—viz., (i) whether all factive mental states are determinates of knowledge and (ii) whether knowledge is itself normative. Williamson (2000) gives a positive answer to (i). And many epistemologists have believed that knowledge is normative because it entails justification, a paradigmatically normative notion.

Now, we might deny that knowledge is normative even if it entails justification. Knowledge could entail justification without being constituted by it. Non-normative conditions can entail (metaphysically, at least) normative conditions. Perhaps one can justifiably believe that p in virtue of knowing that p, reversing the traditional order of explanation. Alternatively, we could deny that all factive mental states are determinates of knowledge. Fake barn cases and cases of defeat raise doubts. Since I cannot resolve these issues here, I'll just note the choice points: if we want to analyze all epistemic normativity in terms of reasons, we face pressure to analyze access in non-normative terms, and if we don't want to analyze all epistemic normativity in terms of reasons, we are free to analyze access in normative terms.

If we turn to subjective normative reasons, it is easier to opt for the first choice. Since subjective reasons can be merely apparent facts, the analogue of the access condition will be non-factive. And there are uncontroversially non-normative, non-factive conditions to which we can appeal—e.g., seemings.

3.4.  *Sensitivity to Reason-For Relations*

What does it take to be attuned to the objective reason-for relation between a consideration r and the belief that p? Some might say that the subject must be in a position to see that r is an objective normative reason to believe p. But this is an overintellectualization. To possess reasons, subjects don’t need the concept of a normative reason. Even subjects who have this concept do not need to deploy it to possess reasons. Some subjects are, for example, sufficiently competent that they can cleave to good deductive patterns without representing these patterns to themselves.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Now, it is possible to *treat* a consideration like a normative reason of some kind without having or deploying the concept of a normative reason. To treat r like a normative reason of some kind is to be disposed to think in the ways that would be appropriate if r were a normative reason of that kind. Such treatings can display a familiar pattern of properties. A subject’s treating a consideration r like a normative reason of kind k to believe p is

* correct, if r is a normative reason of kind k to believe p,
* competent, if the treating manifests the subject's competence to treat r-like considerations like objective reasons of kind k to believe p-type propositions only if they are, if true, objective reasons of kind k to believe p-type propositions
* apt, if the correctness of the treating manifests competence.

To possess an objective reason r of some kind to believe that p, one must *aptly treat* p like an objective reason of this kind to believe p. This is the kind of sensitivity possession requires.

3.5.  *Subjective : Possessed Objective :: Competence : Aptness*

Accordingly, we can understand possessing a good reason r to believe p as involving both access to R and sensitivity to the reason-for relation between r and p. The distinction between subjective and possessed objective reasons then owes, I suggest, to a competence/performance distinction with respect to our sensitivity to objective reasons. Subjective reasons are apparent facts that we competently treat like objective reasons. Competences are reliable only relative to favorable conditions, and unfavorable ones don’t destroy competence. A skilled golfer retains the competence to sink putts even when unexpected tricksters keep blowing the ball off course. Similarly, one can competently treat considerations like objective reasons even if they wouldn't, if true, be objective reasons. All that is required are misleading appearances.

Hence, subjective reasons can fail to be potential objective reasons. Nevertheless, the capacities that subjects who heed subjective reasons display are the capacities that yield responsiveness to objective reasons in favorable, non-misleading conditions. In such conditions, subjective reasons coincide with possessed objective reasons.

**4. Epistemic Reasons and Evidence**

Let's turn to a new question: which normative reasons for doxastic attitudes are *epistemic* reasons? One answer is:

**Strong Evidentialism (SE)**: Epistemic reasons bearing on whether to believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment on p consist in evidence for or against p.

I call SE “Strong” because it is stronger than the evidentialism of Conee and Feldman (2004), who only claim that epistemic reasons supervene on evidence. The supervenience/grounding distinction aside, a point from Clayton Littlejohn shows why SE is stronger.[[11]](#footnote-11) If one's total evidence for p is insufficient, then one has a conclusive epistemic reason to suspend judgment on p. This epistemic reason is not, however, further evidence for or against p. Hence Strong Evidentialism is false. It doesn't follow, however, that supervenience fails. If the sufficiency of a total body of evidence is a necessary property of that total body of evidence, then the epistemic reason just mentioned supervenes on total evidence and is no counterexample.

Viewing the sufficiency of a total evidence set as a necessary property is controversial. Pragmatic encroachment is a key source of resistance.[[12]](#footnote-12) While pragmatic encroachment is most familiar as a view about knowledge,[[13]](#footnote-13) it is natural enough to extend it to the sufficiency of evidence: one could claim that even if some total evidence is sufficient in one practical environment, it could be insufficient in another with higher stakes.[[14]](#footnote-14) This claim conflicts with both SE and the weaker supervenience thesis.

It does not straightforwardly conflict with the following claim:

**Weak Evidentialism (WE)**: Epistemic reasons are (perhaps higher-order) evidence.

Facts about the sufficiency of the evidence could be viewed as higher-order evidence. While some pragmatic encroachers (e.g., Schroeder (2012)) might maintain that facts about the stakes can be properly epistemic reasons, not all would. Some (e.g., Owens (2000)) would insist that the epistemic reason for withholding in a high-stakes context must be higher-order evidence, not any practical consideration.

WE remains controversial for other reasons. Sometimes opposition to SE rests on the ordinary use of “evidence”, noting that it can be odd to speak of evidence in cases where we want to say that there is an epistemic reason. Perhaps for this reason, Skorupski (2010: 210) suggests that epistemic reasons for normative propositions are not evidence, and that “[e]vidence involves the notion of inference, and, in particular, *a posteriori* inference” (2010: 211).[[15]](#footnote-15) The second claim renders all non-inferential epistemic reasons non-evidential, and also implies that if traditional foundationalism is true, WE is false. These implications recommend a wider use of “evidence”.[[16]](#footnote-16)

There are other interesting challenges to WE. One emerges from the possibility of requirements that generate epistemic reasons without being grounded in independent epistemic reasons. Examples include wide-scope coherence requirements like the requirement not to both believe p and disbelieve p. While some are uncertain (see Broome (2013)) or skeptical (see Kolodny (2007))) about whether these requirements generate normative reasons, other argue that they do (see Reisner (2012)). It would be odd to call these wide-scope reasons *evidence* against certain combinations of mental states, so these may yield counterexamples to WE.

Another challenge is raised by the possibility of epistemic permissions that aren't grounded in prior epistemic reasons. Wright (2004) argues that we have non-evidential epistemic entitlements to believe hinge propositions. Some (e.g., Jenkins (2007)) have questioned, however, whether these entitlements are genuinely epistemic.

However these debates are resolved, it is clear that we cannot uncontroversially define “epistemic reasons” in terms of evidence. Is there a more neutral way to get a grip on which normative reasons for doxastic attitudes are epistemic reasons? One suggestion begins with the observation that incentives for having intentions, desires, or emotions are just as hard to treat as reasons for these attitudes as incentives for having beliefs are hard to treat as reasons for belief. One would like a general account of why this is so. Some (e.g., Hieronymi (2005, 2013)) take up this task under the rubric of “right kind” vs. “wrong kind” distinction among reasons for attitudes. So one possibility is to identify epistemic reasons with right-kind reasons for doxastic attitudes and to leave it up to general meta-normative theorizing to explain this distinction.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**5. Reasons and the Rest of Epistemology**

What role do normative epistemic reasons play in epistemology? The most ambitious positive answer is given by:

**Strong Reasons Thesis** **(SRT)**: All epistemic standings (e.g., knowledge, justification, rationality...) are analyzable in terms of reasons.

Friends of SRT include Schroeder, Lord, and perhaps defenders of the view of that reasons are the sole basic ingredients of normativity.[[18]](#footnote-18) I say “perhaps” because defenders of the latter view never mention the possibility that not all epistemic standings are normative. Some epistemologists hold this view about knowledge,[[19]](#footnote-19) but no defenders of the stronger view except Schroeder (2015) explicitly take a stand on whether knowledge is normative. Given the popularity of viewing knowledge as normative, it seems likely that defenders of the stronger view would accept SRP.

Nevertheless, because one could deny that some epistemic standings are normative, we should distinguish SRP from:

**Less Strong Thesis (LST)**: All epistemic normativity is analyzable in terms of reasons.

LST should be distinguished from an even weaker view on which one central kind of epistemic normativity is analyzable in terms of reasons (e.g., the kind associated with deontic notions like permissibility, justification, and obligation), while another is not (e.g., the kind associated with competences). This view is held by Sylvan and Sosa (forthcoming), who defend a novel “bi-level” epistemology.

Three kinds of objections to SRT and LST are worth distinguishing:

1. *Necessity Objections*. Reasons are unnecessary for some epistemic standings.

2. *Fundamentality Objections*. Even if reasons are necessary for all epistemic standings, reasons are not the fundamental normative constituents of these standings.

3. *Sufficiency Objections*. Some epistemic standings cannot be understood just in terms of reasons and non-normative factors.

Reflection on (1-3) will suggest the following upshots. Necessity Objections tend to presuppose a mentalist ontology and aren't conclusive given non-mentalism. However, non-mentalist replies to Necessity Objections invite a forceful Fundamentality Objection. The moral to be drawn from these objections is not that we should pursue “reasons eliminationism”,[[20]](#footnote-20) but rather (i) a bi-level epistemology or (ii) the view that some epistemic standings aren't normative.

5.1. *Necessity Objections*

Lyons (2009) argues against the “Grounds Principle,” which is the claim that all beliefs are justified by reasons. The argument proceeds as follows:

 1. Experiences, if understood as non-doxastic states, cannot be reasons.

 2. If (1) is true, then only beliefs can be reasons.

3. But not all beliefs are justified by other beliefs.

 4. So, not all beliefs are justified by reasons.

In defense of (1), Lyons claims that experiences are either *sensations* or *percepts*, in the senses of these terms used in psychology. Sensations cannot evidentially ground all justified perceptual beliefs, because it is doubtful that they have representational content. Even if they did, Lyons thinks it would be too low-level to justify most perceptual beliefs. Yet percepts, according to Lyons, cannot be reasons for perceptual beliefs in the key cases, because he thinks they are *identical* to perceptual beliefs in these cases by occupying all the same functional roles.

One problem with Lyons's argument is that it assumes mentalism. If non-mentalism succeeds, (2) fails. Non-mentalism enables us to claim that perceived facts themselves can be grounds of perceptual beliefs. Granted, such reasons cannot justify you unless possess them. But that does not mean that the factors in virtue of which you possess reasons are the real reasons. They are simply enabling conditions on the justificatory force of antecedently existing reasons. When you possess a reason, and it is hence properly enabled, it can serve as a justifying ground.

While this response answers the Necessity Objection, it invites a different objection. The natural reaction is to say that the reasons aren't doing the fundamental justificatory work anymore. The real work is being done by whatever relation a mind must bear to a fact to possess that fact as a reason. So we face a Fundamentality Objection. Hence, even if the Necessity Objection is answerable, it gives way to a different objection.

This dialectical pattern repeats if we consider other Necessity Objections. Consider Goldman (1999)'s forgotten evidence objection to evidentialism. Once one has forgotten one's original evidence for a stored belief, the reasons that originally justified it no longer do. While could try to appeal to memory seemings as reasons, they aren't sufficient for justification. Someone who acquired the beliefs from a manifestly unreliable source could have the same memory seemings but be unjustified. Moreover, if memory seemings are just inclinations to believe, they can be assessed as (in)competent. While a non-mentalist might reply that competence is merely what enables one to possess remembered facts as reasons, her opponent can again respond insist that competence is doing the fundamental epistemic work.

5.2.  *Fundamentality Objections*

A deeper worry raised by Necessity Objections is that possession must be understood in distinct normative terms. One way to see this worry is to consider the following argument against a purely reasons-based analysis of justification:

1. Reasons must be possessed to play a role in the analysis of justification.

2. Possession must be understood in normative terms.

3. So, reasons are not the only normative constituents of justification if they are constituents at all: the normativity that accompanies possession is a further constituent.

Some go even farther and say that because possession must be analyzed in terms of *justification*,[[21]](#footnote-21) justification cannot be analyzed in terms of possessed reasons at all on pain of circularity.[[22]](#footnote-22) But this thought is too quick: there are normative notions distinct from justification to which one could appeal in understanding possession—e.g., the virtue-theoretic notion of competence.

There are two problems with this argument. One is that (3) doesn't clearly follow from (1) and (2). Recall how I appealed to reasons-sensitive competences in analyzing possession. Reasons-sensitive competences aren't reasons. But it doesn't follow that we need some non-reasons-based ideology to understand justification. The competences to which we are appealing are understood in terms of reasons! One might reply that we are also using the term “competence” and that because there are competences that aren't reasons-based (e.g., chicken-sexing skills), this is a further piece of normative ideology. But in reply, we could just replace “competence” with some non-normative terminology, such as “reliable ability”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

A second problem is that (2) is questionable. While my account of possession vindicates (2), it does so only by invoking reasons-sensitive competences to explain the sensitivity condition on possession. Most writers on possession have only discussed the access condition. And one can understand the access condition non-normatively. Schroeder (2011), for example, understands this condition in terms of mere beliefs and other presentational mental states. This approach makes sense given that Schroeder rejects the Factoring Account. If we are interested in understanding the possession of objective epistemic reasons, we will probably want to appeal to factive mental states. But as noted in §3.3, we could either (i) appeal to knowledge and argue that it is non-normative and prior to justification or (ii) argue that factive mental states like seeing that p are not species of knowledge and are non-normative, and appeal to them.

Although the Fundamentality Objection rests on questionable arguments, we learn something important from it. If the access condition must be understood by appeal to factive mental states, we arguably must move from SRT to LST or a bi-level epistemology. Admittedly, option (ii) isn't obviously appealing to epistemic standings and hence may seem consistent with SRT. But even if factive mental states like seeing that p aren't species of knowledge, they are suspiciously close to being epistemic standings. Indeed, one plausible analysis of seeing that p is virtue-theoretic: to see that p is to have an *apt visual seeming* as of the fact that p. If seeing that p ought to be analyzed in terms of a special class of seemings, those seemings will need to pass muster from the epistemic point of view to put us in contact with the facts.

5.3.  *Another Sufficiency Objection*

The Fundamentality Objection itself amounts to a Sufficiency Objection. But there is a different kind of sufficiency objection raised by Turri (2010). He argues that believing for sufficient epistemic reasons is insufficient for doxastic justification and draws the conclusion that there is a normative dimension to doxastic justification that reasons do not illuminate.

Consider one of Turri's examples.[[24]](#footnote-24) Proper and Improper are jurors at Mansour's trial. They both know that (P1) Mansour intended to kill the victim, (P2) Mansour threatened to kill the victim, (P3) multiple eyewitnesses saw Mansour at the crime scene, and (P4) Mansour's fingerprints were all over the murder weapon. So both Proper and Improper have sufficient reasons for thinking that Mansour is guilty. And both come to believe he is guilty. Proper comes to this conclusion by using inference to the best explanation. Improper, by contrast, uses a bad inference rule to derive this conclusion from (P1-P4). Improper's belief is not doxastically justified. Still, Improper does, Turri insists, believe for sufficient reasons (viz., (P1-P4)).

One might conclude that something more is needed for justified belief than belief for sufficient reasons. What else? One answer is *inferential competence*.[[25]](#footnote-25) If it is a normative property distinct from reasons, one might conclude that we need some normativity that goes beyond reasons to understand doxastic justification. Indeed, Turri argues that we should take doxastic justification to be more fundamental than the propositional justification generated by sufficient reasons.

There are many ways to respond to this Sufficiency Objection. One way is to insist that in a perfectly recognizable sense, Miss Improper does not believe for a sufficient normative reason.[[26]](#footnote-26) Another way is to agree that something else is necessary for doxastic justification but to claim that it isn't normative; process reliabilists like Goldman (2012: 7) have used the same cases to defend this moral. A third way is to agree that something else normative is necessary but to insist that it is analyzable in terms of reasons: inferential competence is just a reliable ability to heed normative reasons. So this Sufficiency Objection is not, I conclude, compelling.

**5. Conclusion**

The literature on normative epistemic reasons is young. All of the issues discussed in this article remain live. But we have encountered themes of which there is likely to be increasing recognition. Firstly, it is highly non-trivial to identify normative epistemic reasons with mental states. Secondly, giving an adequate characterization of what makes a reason *epistemic* is trickier than one might have imagined. Evidentialism is not obviously viable. Thirdly, reflection on the distinction between subjective and objective reasons raises serious difficulties for any attempt to account for all epistemic statuses in terms of normative reasons. But, finally, some doubts about the power of reasons to illuminate epistemic normativity rest on overlooking distinctions to which the broader literature on reasons has made us better attuned.

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1. See Conee and Feldman (2004), Davidson (1986), Huemer (2001), Lyons (2009), Pollock (1974), and Pryor (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fantl and McGrath (2009), Littlejohn (2012) and Williamson (2000) do. See Ginsborg (2006) for a compromise between mentalism and non-mentalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Williamson (2000) for this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Turri (2009: 498); cf. Brueckner (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ironically, the classic defender of this claim is Dancy (2000), who uses it to defend non-mentalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For responses to this worry, see Lord (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See [reference suppressed]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See [reference suppressed]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One might hold that there are not two conditions on possession but rather one stronger access condition. But I argue against this suggestion below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a further defense of these points, see [reference suppressed]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See this post: http://claytonlittlejohn.blogspot.com/2012/08/evidence-and-epistemic-reasons.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Indicator reliabilist views about the quality of evidence like Alston (1988)'s also support resistance, since reliable indicatorship relations are plausibly contingent. But opponents of reliabilism will see this feature as a defect. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An early example of pragmatic encroachment in Owens (2000) and Fantl and McGrath (2002) did concern the sufficiency of evidence. But through Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005) pragmatic encroachment came to be in the first instance a view about knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Schroeder (2012) defends this version of pragmatic encroachment. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Austin (1962: 115): “[A pig's] coming into view doesn't provide me with *evidence* that it's a pig, I can just *see* that it is....” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Conee and Feldman (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Skorupski (2010) and Parfit (2011) deny that there are wrong-kind reasons for attitudes, chalking apparent ones up to mere reasons for acts of causing ourselves to have these attitudes. If they were right, we could simplify matters by identifying epistemic reasons with reasons for doxastic attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Schroeder upholds the stronger view in his (2007) and has given reasons-based analyses of rationality and knowledge (cf. Schroeder (2008, 2011, Forthcoming)); Lord indicates his sympathies for this view in his (2014). Other friends of the stronger view include Parfit (2011), Scanlon (1998), and Skorupski (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Foley (1987, 2004) has long recommended this view. And some epistemologists (e.g., Goldman (1967), Armstrong (1973), and Dretske (1981)) deny that knowledge has justification as a constituent and analyze knowledge purely in terms of causal or informational relations between beliefs and facts. Kornblith (2008) recommends this broad approach. It would be natural on such views to deny that knowledge is normative, though one could conceivably hold such a view while claiming that it gives the naturalistic ground for the (putative) normativity of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This term is taken from Kornblith (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schroeder (2011) traces this view back to Feldman (1988: 90), who claims that there “is a good reason to include an epistemic acceptability constraint on evidence possessed.” This is a questionable interpretation, however, since Conee and Feldman are non-doxastic mentalists about evidence and think that evidence grounds justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Beddor (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, until recently, Sosa understood epistemic competences as dispositions to hit the mark of truth. In Sosa (2015), however, he suggests that competence is a more fine-grained notion and cannot be analyzed simply as a disposition to hit some potentially non-normative mark (e.g., truth). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Turri (2010: 315-6) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. Millar (1991: 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See [reference suppressed]. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)