

What kind of perspectivism?

Benjamin Kiesewetter

Published in: *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15 (4): 415-443 (2018).

<https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-20170007>

This is a pre-print. Please cite the published version.

Abstract: According to perspectivism about moral obligation, our obligations are affected by our epistemic circumstances. But how exactly should this claim be understood? On Zimmerman's "Prospective View", perspectivism is spelled out as the thesis that an option is obligatory if and only if it maximizes what Zimmerman calls "prospective value", which is in turn determined by the agent's present evidence. In this article, I raise two objections to this approach. Firstly, I argue that spelling out the difference between perspectivism and anti-perspectivism in terms of value creates a number of problems that can be avoided by an account that proceeds in terms of reasons. Secondly, I argue that Zimmerman focuses on the wrong body of evidence, and that this commits him to an implausible solution to the problem that perspectivists face with regard to advice from better-informed sources.

Keywords: consequentializing, diachronic obligation, Jackson cases, objective vs. subjective ought, oughts and reasons, perspectivism, Michael J. Zimmerman

According to perspectivism about moral obligation, our obligations are affected by our epistemic circumstances, that is, they depend at least partly on what we believe, or know, or

what we are in a position to know or have justification to believe. To illustrate, consider the following example presented by Judith Jarvis Thomson:

Day's End: Billy always comes home at 9:00 P.M. and the first thing he does is to flip the switch in his hallway. He did so this evening. Billy's flipping the switch caused a circuit to close. By virtue of an extraordinary series of coincidences, unpredictable in advance by anybody, the circuit's closing caused a release of electricity (a small lightning flash) in Alice's house next door. Unluckily, Alice was in its path and was therefore badly burned.¹

Thomson and some other moral philosophers hold that Billy was morally obligated not to flip the switch no matter whether there was any way for him to come to know the relevant facts.² In contrast, T. M. Scanlon and others maintain that flipping the switch was permissible for Billy, given that he did not know or could not have known that flipping the switch would cause any harm.³ Roughly speaking, proponents of the latter view (perspectivism about moral obligation) hold that moral obligations are affected by epistemic circumstances, while proponents of the former view (anti-perspectivism about moral obligation) deny this.⁴

¹ Thomson (1990, 229). I have taken the liberty to substitute "Billy" for "B" and "Alice" for "A".

² See e.g. Bykvist (2011); Graham (2010); Moore (1912, 80–82); Thomson (1990, 229–34).

³ See e.g. Jackson (1991); Prichard (1932); Ross (1939, 146–67); Scanlon (2008, 47–52).

⁴ This is a rough characterization of these views because anti-perspectivists can accept that particular obligations might depend in particular ways on epistemic circumstances, for example when a journalist is morally obligated to double-check some information she is about to make public, even though she would not be obligated to do so if she really knew for certain that they were true. In such cases the obligation depends on epistemic circumstances, but according to the anti-perspectivist, it does not depend on the epistemic circumstances with respect to the

The debate between perspectivists and anti-perspectivists is of considerable interest in moral philosophy not only because moral philosophers aim to find out what our obligations really are, but also because it has implications for other important issues in ethics and metaethics, such as the relation between obligatoriness and blameworthiness, or the relation between morality and rationality. To see this relevance, consider the fairly uncontroversial assumptions that Billy's flipping the switch is not blameworthy, and that it might have been fully rational of Billy to flip the switch. Once we grant these natural assumptions, anti-perspectivism entails that violating a moral obligation can be entirely rational and blameless – a claim that is itself of substantial interest in moral philosophy.

While there is a lively debate about the general question of whether perspectivism or anti-perspectivism is true, less attention has been spent on the question of how exactly we should understand the disagreement between these views, and, in particular, of how the claim of perspectivism should be spelled out. Michael J. Zimmerman's impressive and densely argued book *Ignorance and Moral Obligation* offers answers to both of these questions. Like its predecessor *Living with Uncertainty*, it defends "the relevance of ignorance to [...] judgments about what we are morally obligated to do"⁵. But one of the many virtues of this book is that its forceful argument for perspectivism is embedded in a sophisticated conceptual framework for understanding perspectivist and anti-perspectivist views, and that it provides

right- or wrong-making features (or with respect to the obligation itself). The anti-perspectivist claims, while the perspectivist denies, that the journalist has the obligation *no matter* her epistemic circumstances regarding the considerations that count in favor of double-checking or potentially make it obligatory. The distinctive claim of perspectivism is that obligations are *always* constrained by an agent's epistemic position *regarding the potential right- or wrong-making features* of the action.

⁵ Zimmerman (2014, vi).

and defends a clearly-defined version of perspectivism – the *Prospective View*, as Zimmerman calls it.

On the general level, I find myself in broad agreement with the major claims of Zimmerman’s book and the arguments presented therein. I am skeptical, however, about the particular kind of perspectivism that Zimmerman champions, and about his general framing of the debate. Hence, in this article I am concerned not with the question of whether we should accept perspectivism, but rather with the question of what kind of perspectivism we should accept (given that we should accept some form of perspectivism). According to Zimmerman, perspectivism is best spelled out as the thesis that an option is obligatory if and only if it maximizes what Zimmerman calls “prospective value”, which is in turn determined by the agent’s present evidence. I discuss two worries with this view. The first concerns the question of whether the distinction between perspectivist and anti-perspectivist views of obligation should be spelled out in terms of value, as Zimmerman suggests, or in terms of reasons, as I propose elsewhere.⁶ I argue that Zimmerman’s value-based approach creates a number of problems that a reason-based account avoids. Most importantly, I aim to show that despite Zimmerman’s official aspirations, his approach is not neutral between consequentialist and non-consequentialist moral theories. The second worry concerns the question which body of information perspectivists should regard as relevant for the epistemic constraints on our obligations. I argue that Zimmerman focuses on the wrong body of evidence, and that this

⁶ See Kiesewetter (2017, Ch. 8; forthcoming). In these works, as well as in Kiesewetter (2011), I am concerned with perspectivism and anti-perspectivism about the all-things-considered ought of deliberation, which I take to be a function of an agent’s normative reasons (both moral and non-moral), rather than the ought of overall moral obligation, which is the topic of Zimmerman’s book. However, since I agree with Zimmerman that moral obligations can be identified with facts about “what there is conclusive moral reason to do” (2014, 3), I believe that my view about the deliberative ought and reasons in general carries over to the ought of moral obligation.

commits him to an implausible solution to the much-discussed problem that perspectivists face in accounting for advice from better-informed sources.⁷ As will become clear, this objection also bears on the independent question of how to conceive, in general, obligations concerning future actions.

1. Values or reasons?

Broadly speaking, perspectivism is the thesis that epistemic circumstances affect our obligations. But how exactly should we spell out this claim? How should the disagreement between the perspectivist and the anti-perspectivist be understood?

Zimmerman thinks that it should be understood in terms of *value*. According to the anti-perspectivist, what we ought to do is determined by what is objectively best (throughout this article, I follow Zimmerman in using the unqualified term ‘ought’ to refer to overall moral obligation). According to the perspectivist, what we ought to do is not determined by what is objectively best, but by some epistemic function of what is objectively best. According to the version of perspectivism that Zimmerman calls “the Subjective View”, we ought to take the option that *we believe to be best*. According to a proto-version of his own “Prospective View”, we ought to take the option that is *probably best*, where the probabilities in turn are (somehow)⁸ provided by the agent’s evidence. According to the Prospective View, i.e. Zimmerman’s own ultimate version of perspectivism, what we ought to do is what is

⁷ For discussion, see e.g. Thomson (2008, 187–91); Kolodny and MacFarlane (unpublished; 2010), Björnsson and Finlay (2010), Kieseewetter (2011).

⁸ This might be understood in either of two ways: as some kind of objective probability conditional on the agent’s evidence, or as the subjective probability – i.e. the credence or degree of belief – that the agent justifiably has or would have if she accurately reflected her evidence.

prospectively best, which in turn is the option that constitutes “*the best bet* regarding the actual values at stake” (34).

On the approach that I favor, the disagreement is to be spelled out in terms of *normative reasons*, i.e. in terms of the facts that count in favor or against certain actions and thereby determine what we ought to do. At least some of an agent’s reasons are *available* to him in the sense that they belong to this agent’s *body of evidence*. What must be the case for this to happen is a controversial question, but I will here assume that A’s knowing that p is a sufficient condition for p to be part of A’s body of evidence.⁹ The kind of perspectivism that I favor is the view that an agent’s moral obligations are sensitive only to the agent’s *available reasons*.¹⁰ Some would say that this is so despite the fact that there are both available and non-available reasons; it is only that obligations are insensitive to non-available reasons.¹¹ For reasons that I have stated elsewhere, I prefer a view according to which non-available facts can only be *potential* reasons: there is an “epistemic filter” (Dancy 2000, 66) that a potential reason has to pass in order to constitute an actual reason for an agent.¹²

Like the value approach, the reason approach also allows us to define more subjectivist versions of perspectivism. According to such views, our moral obligations are given by the preponderance of our *apparent* (rather than actual) reasons, i.e. the reasons that we would have if our relevant beliefs (or the beliefs that we would have if we believed in

⁹ See Williamson (2000, Ch. 9), who also thinks it is a necessary condition.

¹⁰ On one variant of this view, moral obligations are sensitive only to available *moral* reasons, but I wish to allow for views according to which moral obligations are sensitive to available *non-moral* reasons as well.

¹¹ See e.g. Lord (2015, 28–29).

¹² See Kieseewetter (2017, 199–200). Dancy (2000, Ch. 3) and Gibbard (1990, 161–62) embrace a view of this general kind as well.

accordance with our evidence) were true.¹³ I mention this in passing, because such views seem to me more interesting and more difficult to rule out than Zimmerman's "Subjective View", according to which we ought to do what we believe is best, and which is indeed close to denying the fact that moral judgment can be fallible. But as neither Zimmerman's nor my sympathies lie with subjectivism in either of these senses, I will leave this issue aside.

In my view, the reason approach has a number of advantages over the value approach. In what follows, I will highlight four such respects (which are partly related to each other).

1.1 Generality

Let me start with a brief point before coming to the heart of the matter. The question of the normative relevance of epistemic circumstances arises not only with respect to moral obligations, but with respect to other normative contexts as well, such as the context of practical deliberation about what one ought to do all things considered, or the context of epistemic deliberation about what one may or ought to believe.¹⁴ An approach to moral obligations that is applicable to these other normative contexts as well is therefore more comprehensive. Moreover, it promises to account for the relevance of epistemic circumstances in a unified way. An approach that is not applicable to other contexts in which the same question arises needs to explain why that question gets answered in such different ways in these contexts.

¹³ Both Parfit (2011, esp. 150-64) and Schroeder (2009) claim that there is a subjective notion of 'ought' that can be defined in terms of apparent reasons.

¹⁴ See e.g. Kieseewetter (2011, 2016) and Lord (2015) on perspectivism about the deliberative ought and McHugh and Way (2017) on perspectivism about the epistemic ought.

The reason approach seems to offer a comprehensive and unified account of the normative relevance of epistemic circumstances: in different normative domains this relevance can be explained by the fact that reasons are subject to one and the same evidence constraint. It is far from obvious, however, that the deliberative ought can be represented as a function of some kind of value, and it seems to me very doubtful that epistemic obligations or permissions can.¹⁵ If they cannot, the value approach is not applicable in these contexts – it lacks the generality that we should expect from an account of the normative relevance of ignorance.

1.2 Theory neutrality

A second advantage of the reason approach is that it avoids some controversial assumptions about the relation between the right and the good that seem essential to Zimmerman's value approach. I, for one, am skeptical that Zimmerman's framework is sufficiently neutral between certain substantial disagreements in moral philosophy that we should expect to be independent of the moral relevance of ignorance.

To begin with, we should note that every view that can be represented by Zimmerman's approach is a form of consequentialism, i.e. a version of the thesis that an option is morally obligatory if, and only if, it maximizes some kind of value – be it objective, believed, probable, expected or prospective value. Now, Zimmerman is eager to emphasize that his

¹⁵ There are, of course, attempts in the literature to explain epistemic norms by recourse to the value of true belief or knowledge. The general problem of such views, in my opinion, is that the value of true belief depends on the content of the belief, while the existence of epistemic reasons and epistemic justification seems to be content-independent. A proper discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this article, but I hope it is at least clear that a comprehensive value approach carries significant burdens that a comprehensive reason approach seems to avoid.

approach is intended to be fully neutral between consequentialist and non-consequentialist views about moral obligations, since it leaves entirely open what it is that “matters morally” and is thus to be maximized. Zimmerman is a consequentializer rather than a consequentialist. But the project of consequentializing deontological approaches in normative ethics is itself controversial, and it seems not advisable to me to tie the substantial question of whether, for example, Kantian moral theory can be represented within a value-maximization framework to the question of the moral relevance of ignorance, by way of defining views about the relevance of ignorance as claims about the relation between obligation and value.¹⁶

Zimmerman maintains that all relevant moral theories, including Kantian and other non-consequentialist theories, make assumptions that allow these theories to fit his framework. First, they all assume that “the options we face have a certain deontic status – they will be either morally right or morally wrong – and they may be ranked accordingly. [...] Any option that is obligatory is one that is uniquely right” (2014, 1-2). Second, “they all presuppose that there is something that matters morally, in virtue of which our options have the deontic status that they have. [...] The act-utilitarian takes the production of pleasure and pain to be relevant. The Kantian (of one sort) takes the universalizability of maxims to be what matters. And so on” (2014, 2). So according to Zimmerman, all relevant moral theories are committed to the following claims:

- (i) Any option has a deontic status: it is either wrong or right, and if it is uniquely right, it is obligatory.

¹⁶ For a defence of the view that “any plausible non-consequentialist theory can be consequentialized”, see Portmore (2007, 39). For a defence of the view that “there are in fact limits to consequentialization”, see Brown (2011, 750).

- (ii) Options have their deontic status in virtue of something that matters morally.

In addition, according to Zimmerman all the *traditional* moral theories make the following third assumption:

- (iii) An option is obligatory if and only if it “actually best in terms of what matters morally” (2014, 2).

This third assumption is what, according to Zimmerman, makes all traditional theories variants of what he calls the “Objective View” – the view according to which we ought to take the option that is actually best.¹⁷ The only way to deny this view within Zimmerman’s framework is to substitute (iii) with one of its epistemic variants, according to which we ought to take the option that we *believe* to be best (the Subjective View), or the option that is *prospectively* best (the Prospective View).

One might object that there is another way to deny this claim, namely by rejecting the assumption that we necessarily ought to *maximize* what matters morally, rather than for example securing a certain threshold. But Zimmerman offers a response to this worry when addressing what he calls the “puzzling, troublesome matter of supererogation” (2014, 4). If you believe that we should secure a certain threshold of, say, well-being, then you believe that well-being matters morally, but according to Zimmerman you do not believe that well-being

¹⁷ Zimmerman also calls the obligatory option the “deontically best” (2014, 2) option. It is important to note that, in order for (iii) to be a substantial claim rather than a tautology, this notion of ‘best’ must be different from the notion that occurs in the phrase “best in terms of what matters morally”. Since one can easily avoid confusion by using the good old term ‘obligatory’ instead of ‘deontically best’, I do so.

matters morally “in a way that is relevant to determining what you are morally obligated to do” (2014, 4). Rather, what you believe matters morally in this obligation-determining way is that a certain threshold of well-being is reached. The option prescribed by the Objective View, however, is the option that is “best in terms of what matters morally, *insofar as our moral obligations are concerned*” (2014, 2, my emphasis). In this way, non-maximizing views can be represented within Zimmerman’s maximizing framework (even though this does not tell us why they should be represented in this way).

I will focus on another deontological worry, which concerns Zimmerman’s assumption that all relevant moral theories are committed to claim (ii), according to which “there is something that matters morally, in virtue of which our options have the deontic status that they have” (2014, 2). This claim may be read in either of two ways. On the first understanding, options have their deontic status in virtue of independent truths about what is valuable (or what matters). On the second, less demanding understanding, options have their deontic status in virtue of certain other properties that may be described in non-evaluative terms, and which we may (but need not) designate as “what matters morally”. The first understanding suits the way in which consequentialists usually see things, and some non-consequentialists as well, but certainly not all of them. Famously, some philosophers think that the right is not determined in this way by the good. Kantians, for example, need not think (and typically do not think) that we have an obligation to obey the categorical imperative in virtue of independent truths about the value of acting in accordance with universalizable maxims. Insofar as they believe in the value of acting in accordance with universalizable maxims to begin with, they will typically think that actions have this value in virtue of being right, rather than that they are right in virtue of being good. Other philosophers again, including those

sympathetic to the work of T.M. Scanlon, might hold that neither the right nor the good is more fundamental than the other, but both are to be explained in terms of normative reasons.¹⁸

So if Zimmerman's second assumption is supposed to be neutral with respect to such views – as he claims it is (cf. 2014, 5) –, we must interpret it as saying no more than that options have their deontic status in virtue of certain other properties. For example, according to Kantians, options have their deontic status of rightness in virtue of corresponding to universalizable maxims, and they have their deontic status of obligatoriness in virtue of being the only option that corresponds to a universalizable maxim. So far, so good. The trouble is that once we understand the second assumption in this way, the third assumption, according to which an option is obligatory iff it is “the option that is best in terms of what matters morally”, becomes trivial. And this is an unacceptable result for Zimmerman, since according to him, the third assumption just is the Objective View, which he wants to reject in favour of an alternative conception of moral obligation.

To illustrate this point, contrast the traditional Kantian view with a probabilistic variant, according to which an option is obligatory iff it is *probably* the only option that corresponds to a universalizable maxim. As Zimmerman sees things, both of these views agree on what matters morally (namely, the universalizability of maxims), while they disagree on how what matters morally bears on our obligations. But it is not clear how this picture can be maintained if “what matters morally” means nothing other than “whatever it is that makes actions obligatory”. On this assumption, the traditional and the probabilist Kantian do not share the same view about what matters morally; the probabilist Kantian in fact holds that what matters morally is the *likeliness* of universalizability rather than universalizability itself. And once we

¹⁸ Scanlon (1998). For a recent discussion of and survey of the literature on the so called *buck-passing account of value*, see Gertken and Kieseewetter (2017, §1).

take this into account, it follows that the probabilist Kantian can no longer deny what Zimmerman calls the “Objective View”, for on the probabilist Kantian conception, this view just claims that an option is obligatory iff it is best in terms of the likeliness of being the only universalizable option, which is to say, iff it is probably the only option that corresponds to a universalizable maxim.

This threat of trivialization of the Objective View is not limited to deontological views. Take any two theories T and T*, where according to T, an option is obligatory iff it is best in terms of X, and according to T* an option is obligatory iff it can be represented as some specific epistemic function of what is best in terms of X. For example, according to traditional act-utilitarianism, an option is obligatory iff it is best in terms of promoting pleasure, and according to decision-theoretic act-utilitarianism, an option is obligatory iff it is *expectably* best in terms of promoting pleasure. As Zimmerman sees things, T and T* agree about what matters morally, namely X (in our example, the promotion of pleasure). However, given that judgments about what matters morally are not judgments about value, but judgments about whatever it is that makes actions right or obligatory, it is difficult to see how T and T* can have the same conception of what matters morally. More accurately, we must say that according to T* what matters is some epistemic function of X rather than X itself. For example, according to decision-theoretic act-utilitarianism, what matters morally is the *expected* rather than actual promotion of pleasure. Once we say that, it turns out that the decision-theoretic act-utilitarian is a proponent of Zimmerman’s Objective View, and the same goes for all other instances of T* as well.

These considerations suggest that Zimmerman’s approach to capturing the disagreement between the perspectivist and the anti-perspectivist is applicable only on assumptions that are not neutral between views that take the good to be more fundamental than the right and those that do not. Once we interpret the assumption that actions have their

deontic status in virtue of some other thing that matters morally in a way that does not presuppose that actions have their deontic status in virtue of some evaluative truth, Zimmerman's definition of the Objective View is trivially satisfied.¹⁹

There is no reason to think that the reason approach outlined above faces any such problem. Admittedly, it is an open question how standard first-order moral theories like consequentialism, Kantianism or virtue ethics can be squared with reasons terminology. But there are natural ways to approach this issue. Act-consequentialists might say that a consideration is a moral reason for an action insofar as it explains why the action promotes some good. In contrast, Kantians might hold that a consideration is a moral reason insofar as we can rationally will that everyone be moved by it (to a certain degree) in relevantly similar circumstances, and virtue ethicists might claim that it is a moral reason insofar as being moved by it (to a certain degree) is part of a good character disposition. Developing and defending any such particular proposal is a task beyond the scope of this article. However, I hope that these candidates are serious enough to illustrate the general point that, at least without a special argument to the contrary, there is no ground for suspecting that the reason approach is in itself

¹⁹ One might think that this problem can be solved by characterizing "what matters morally" not as that in virtue of which options have their deontic status, but as that in virtue of which they *would* have a certain deontic status *if* the agent were fully informed. Accordingly, claim (ii) would have to be substituted by the claim that there are properties such that these properties would make options right if the agent were fully informed, and claim (iii) – the Objective View – would amount to the claim that an option is obligatory iff it is actually best in terms of having properties that would make the option right if the agent were fully informed. But while this way of putting things would escape the problem of trivialization, it seems unfitting to capture cases in which the option is made obligatory by facts about the epistemic state of the agent, such as the case of the journalist who is obligated to double-check information, mentioned in note 4.

partisan towards a controversial moral theory. This is an important advantage that the reason approach has over Zimmerman's value approach.

1.3 Pretheoretical appropriateness

Consider the case which Zimmerman takes from Jackson (1991) and which plays a very prominent role in his book:

Jill, a physician, has a patient, John, who is suffering from a minor but not trivial skin complaint. In order to treat him, she has three drugs from which to choose: A, B, and C. Drug A would in fact completely cure John; drug B would relieve his condition but not cure him completely; drug C would kill him; and giving John no drug at all would leave him permanently incurable. [...] All the evidence at Jill's disposal indicates (in keeping with the facts) that giving John drug B would cure him partially and giving him no drug would render him permanently incurable, but (despite the facts) it leaves it completely open whether it is giving him drug A or giving him drug C that would cure him completely and whether it is giving him drug A or giving him drug C that would kill him. (29-30)

What ought Jill to do? Intuitively, there are two relevant positions one might take with respect to this question, one of which takes into account Jill's epistemic circumstances, while the other does not. If one believes that epistemic circumstances are morally relevant, then one will say that Jill ought to give B; if one believes that they are irrelevant, then one will say that Jill ought to give A. In my view, a theoretical account of the relevance of epistemic circumstances should capture this pretheoretical distinction.

The reason approach (as I conceive of it) captures it as follows. Any plausible first-order moral theory will accept that, other things being equal, the fact that some drug will provide the cure for a patient suffering from a disease is, for an agent who knows this fact, a strong moral reason to give the drug to the patient. Needless to say, different moral theories will have different explanations for why this is so. For example, act-consequentialists might say that it is a reason for the action because it explains why the action promotes the good, and Kantians might hold that it is a reason because it is rational to will that agents are moved by it. But it seems that for a moral theory to be even minimally plausible, it should be able to accommodate the natural idea that the fact that a drug provides cure is, when known, a good reason to choose it.

According to anti-perspectivism, there is no epistemic constraint on what facts can be reasons, or on what reasons are relevant for determining our moral obligation. Absent any such constraint, one cannot plausibly deny that in Jill's case, the fact that drug A is the cure is a strong reason to give John drug A, and since this case does not involve any competitive reason that is capable of counterbalancing the consideration that A is the cure, anti-perspectivists are committed to the claim that Jill ought to give A.

In contrast, perspectivists must exclude the fact that A is the cure as a reason relevant for determining Jill's obligations. But they can and should make the following claims: the fact that drug B will improve John's condition is a good reason to give drug B; the fact that giving A involves a 50 per cent risk of killing John is a strong reason against doing so; and the fact that giving C involves a 50 per cent risk of killing John is a strong reason against doing so.²⁰

²⁰ To clarify: First, the relevant notion of risk is related to an evidential sense of probability; as before, this probability might be identified with some sort of objective probability conditional on the agent's evidence, or with the agent's justified credences. Second, I assume that one cannot at the same time reject an evidence

Again, given the absence of relevant competing reasons, it is clear that perspectivists are committed to the claim that Jill ought to give B.

On Zimmerman's value approach, to get the same result, we have to assume that giving A is best in terms of what matters morally, while giving B is prospectively best in terms of what matters morally. This will be so if we assume that what matters morally in this case is pleasure or well-being, but it is far from obvious that other substantial theories have that implication as well. Consider again the Kantian view, according to which options are right in virtue of the universalizability of their respective maxims. There is a case to be made that on this view, giving B and not A is what is best in terms of what matters. This is because it is difficult to see how giving A or doing nothing could, under the circumstances described, correspond to universalizable maxims (apart, maybe, from Karl Kraus' infamous maxim "In case of doubt, decide in favor of what is correct").²¹ In contrast, giving B corresponds to a

constraint on reasons and affirm the existence of risk-related reasons in this sense. It makes no sense, for example, to say *both* that the fact that A is the cure is a reason for giving A, and that the risk that A is not the cure is a reason against giving A. I argue for this point in Kiesewetter (2017, 203). Third, even if the anti-perspectivist could coherently affirm the existence of such risk-related reasons, it is difficult to see how the risk that A is not the cure could *counterbalance* the fact that A is the cure. Hence, in any case, rejecting an evidence constraint on reasons commits one to saying that Jill ought to give A.

²¹ What about the maxim "If A is the cure, I shall give A"? Assuming that we cannot give both A and B, this maxim is universalizable only if "If A is the cure, I shall not give B" is universalizable, too. And this latter maxim is universalizable only if "If C is the cure, I shall not give B" is also universalizable. It follows that "If either A or C is the cure, I shall not give B" must also be universalizable. Plausibly, however, we could not rationally will that everyone acted on such a maxim if they are in Jill's circumstances. We could not rationally will, for example, that our own doctors act on that maxim if they were in Jill's circumstances, since we could not rationally will that they choose to not give B as long as they do not know whether A or C is the cure, thereby imposing us to an irresponsible risk of death. Therefore, the maxim "If A is the cure, I shall give A" is not, plausibly, universalizable.

maxim that is plausibly universalizable, such as “When treatment B has the best prospect for my patient’s well-being, and nothing else is at stake, I shall choose treatment B”. And so it looks like the Objective View, on a natural Kantian interpretation, will not entail that Jill ought to give A.

Similar points could be made about a rule consequentialist or virtue ethicist construction of the Objective View. Both might well entail that giving B rather than A is best in terms of what morally matters, for a case can be made that in the circumstances described, it is giving B rather than A that is best in terms of accordance with the rule that would produce the best consequences, or in terms of manifesting a virtue or imitating the virtuous person.

Assume, for the sake of the argument, that this is indeed true: Kantianism, rule consequentialism and virtue ethics entail that Jill ought to give B. What follows from this? I would conclude that these views participate in the wisdom of perspectivism; they acknowledge that epistemic circumstances are relevant for our moral obligations. And I would argue that it is incoherent to maintain such a view while rejecting the claim that reasons (or at least obligation-affecting reasons) are subject to an evidence constraint. But as we have seen, it is not at all incoherent to hold one of these views in combination with Zimmerman’s Objective View.

What this means is that unless we presuppose some form of act-consequentialism, Zimmerman’s distinction between the Objective, the Subjective and the Prospective View is orthogonal to the pretheoretical distinction between views that accept and views that do not accept the relevance of epistemic circumstances. By contrast, the reason approach promises to capture that very pretheoretical distinction, without presupposing act-consequentialism, or

indeed any other controversial first-order normative claim. In my view, this is again a great advantage of the reason approach.²²

1.4 Argument soundness

The results of the last section also have important implications for the (one and only) argument that Zimmerman presents against the Objective View (2014, 32-33). This argument is basically that moral conscientiousness precludes knowingly violating one's obligations, but also requires giving B in Jill's circumstances, which rules out a view that prohibits giving B. An important premise of this argument is that the Objective View implies that it would be morally wrong for Jill to give B. But as we have just seen, this premise can be accepted only on the assumption of a very particular moral outlook, namely act-consequentialism. Kantians, rule consequentialists, and virtue ethicists need not accept it. It turns out, then, that by choosing his framework, Zimmerman makes his own argument much weaker than it could be.

²² It might be worried that if what I have argued is correct, then the reason approach is itself not theory-neutral in some sense. For as I have suggested myself, on the reason approach certain first-order theories seem to entail perspectivism. But note that there are two standards of theory-neutrality at issue here: the first demands that a useful and pretheoretically appropriate conception of perspectivism and anti-perspectivism abstain from controversial first-order assumptions; the second demands that such a conception allow standard first-order normative theories to be compatible with both perspectivism and anti-perspectivism. I have argued in this section that Zimmerman's conception fails to meet the first standard, while the reason approach meets it. In contrast, the second standard is violated by both approaches: on Zimmerman's account, all standard normative theories entail the Objective View; while on the reason approach, it seems that some standard normative theories entail perspectivism. Is this a problem? No, because there is no reason to accept the second standard. There is no reason to presuppose, for example, that the best interpretation of Kantianism is compatible with both perspectivism and anti-perspectivism. It might be, or it might not be, but it is not a reasonable demand that a conception of the perspectivism/anti-perspectivism distinction needs to ensure this.

Had we defined the Objective View as the view that denies that reasons are subject to an evidence constraint, the argument would (I think) go through without assuming act-consequentialism.

Zimmerman is aware of this weakness of his argument. But he claims that for any conception of what matters morally, a structurally analogous argument will succeed in proving the Objective View to be false. All that is needed for such an argument to work is what Zimmerman calls a “Jackson case” – a case in which all that the agent knows is that either option A or option C is best in terms of what matters, while the other is worst in terms of what matters, and while option B is definitely much better than the worst option. For illustration, Zimmerman briefly sketches an example designed to address the “Kantian who stresses showing people due respect” (2014, 38). He asks us to imagine that a friend has financial difficulties, and that our evidence regarding what showing respect requires is divided between offering money, on the one hand, and non-interference, on the other hand. “In such a case”, Zimmerman says, “your prospectively best option might be some compromise between these two responses” (2014, 40).

I am not convinced by this response. Firstly, the assumption that some option B is not best but much better than the worst crucially depends on a non-binary conception of what matters morally. Perhaps respect is such a non-binary notion (although this is not trivial), but other conceptions of what matters are binary. Recall that “what matters” refers to whatever it is that gives options their deontic status. So according to Kantianism or rule consequentialism, what matters is universalizability of maxims or conformity with some rule. On these assumptions, there cannot be options that are in between the best and the worst in terms of what matters, for an option either conforms to a rule or universalizable maxim or it does not. The lesson is that Zimmerman’s argument cannot be addressed to versions of the Objective View that maintain that options have their deontic status in virtue of some binary rather than

gradable property. This includes such influential views as Kantianism and rule consequentialism.

Secondly, Zimmerman's argument assumes that what matters morally can be such that it is possible to be in a justified epistemic state in which one's credence between an option being best and the same option being worst in terms of what matters is divided. This assumption seems unproblematic if we have in mind a conception of what matters according to which whether an option is best or worst depends on causal relations or other empirical information about the external world, such as the utilitarian's conception. But once we turn to conceptions according to which it is *a priori* detectable whether an option is best or worst in terms of what matters, the assumption is very much open to debate. Is it possible that we are not in a position to know more than that an option is either universalizable or not? Kant himself would very likely have denied this possibility.²³ It is also not clear to me that we should grant the assumption that an agent's justified credences can be equally divided over whether an act is best or worst in terms of being respectful. At least according to one natural notion of respect, what respect requires of an agent is not independent of this agent's epistemic state.

To sum up, I doubt that Jackson cases can be mounted against a number of relevant versions of the Objective View. They can only be mounted against those versions of this view that assume that right-making features are gradable and that right-making features are such that agents may not have epistemic access to them. Thus, the scope of Zimmerman's argument

²³ Compare Kant (1788, 5:36): "But the moral law commands compliance from everyone, and indeed the most exact compliance. Appraising what is to be done in accordance with it must, therefore, not be so difficult that the most common and unpracticed understanding should not know how to go about it, even without worldly prudence."

against the Objective View is severely limited; it really applies only to particular variants of this view.

At one point of his discussion, Zimmerman seems to concede that his argument does not rule out all versions of the Objective View:

I suppose that it is possible that, on some objectivist theory, what is actually best will, and can, never diverge from what is prospectively best [...], in which case, of course, no argument of the form of [the argument presented] would be applicable to that theory after all. That would be fine with me, since that theory would also be a version of the Prospective View. Any objectivist theory that does not meet this condition, though, will be vulnerable to an argument of the form of [the argument presented].²⁴

Let me conclude this section with two brief comments on this passage. First, it does not seem correct to me that all versions of the Objective View that escape Zimmerman's argument, will also be versions of the Prospective View. As I have just argued, in order to escape this argument, one need only to maintain a binary conception of what makes actions right, and this alone does not commit one to anything like the Prospective View. Second, if it turns out that a significant subset of views that satisfy Zimmerman's definition of the Objective View also satisfy his definition of the Prospective View, this only substantiates my general worry that Zimmerman's approach fails to capture the pretheoretical distinction between views that accept and views that reject the moral relevance of ignorance.

2. Which body of evidence?

²⁴ Zimmerman (2014, 40)

Perspectivists hold that obligations are constrained by the agent's epistemic circumstances. But how are an agent's epistemic circumstances to be specified? I agree with Zimmerman that they are to be specified by reference to the agent's evidence, where the agent's evidence may be characterized as a set of propositions that is mentally available to him, for example because he knows them. But given that a body of evidence might change within the period in which a certain obligation applies, we still have to specify what the relevant body of evidence is. It is tempting to say that any presently valid obligation is constrained by the agent's present body of evidence. This is also Zimmerman's view. But sometimes we should resist temptation. As a number of philosophers have pointed out, common practices of deliberation and advice strongly suggest that our obligations can be sensitive to information that we do not currently possess.²⁵ This poses an important challenge for perspectivism. As I have argued elsewhere, perspectivists can meet this challenge if they focus on the right body of evidence.²⁶ My worry is that Zimmerman does not focus on the right body of evidence, and that this prevents him from giving a satisfactory account of advice. As turns out, in the background of our disagreement about advice and the body of evidence that perspectivists should focus on, there is a further disagreement about the nature of diachronic obligations, i.e. present obligations concerning future actions. I will begin by describing the problem of advice (2.1), before introducing my preferred solution to this problem and my background theory of diachronic obligation (2.2). Subsequently, I will discuss Zimmerman's response to the problem and say why I find it unconvincing (2.3-2.5). I conclude by offering a diagnosis of the disagreement

²⁵ See e.g. Thomson (2008, 187–91) and Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010, 119–20) for this line of objection to perspectivism.

²⁶ Kieseewetter (2011; 2017, Ch. 8).

and a proposal how Zimmerman could incorporate my preferred solution into his framework (2.6)

2.1 *The problem of advice*

Consider the following variant of Jill's case that Zimmerman describes:

Suppose that, before [Jill] has to decide which option to choose, she has the opportunity to consult her colleague, Jack, and asks him, "What ought I to do?" And suppose that [...] Jack knows that it is drug A that would cure John completely.²⁷

It is very natural to think that the appropriate answer to Jill's question is that she ought to give drug A. But this verdict poses a problem for perspectivists: if "You ought to give A" is the appropriate advice to give, does this not show that an agent's obligations do not turn on the agent's evidence?

Zimmerman's original reply to this problem was that his view can account for the fact that Jack could be permitted, or even obligated, to give advice on the basis of better information, if doing so is prospectively best.²⁸ On this view, Jack's advice is (at the moment of the utterance at least) not truthful, but morally justified. Zimmerman now seems to agree with me and others that this is not a satisfying response to the problem. Intuitively, Jack's advice is not a case of a justified lie. It's not merely morally permitted, but will be appreciated as *correct* or *truthful*.

²⁷ Zimmerman (2014, 82).

²⁸ Cf. Zimmerman (2008, 31–33).

One option at this point is to distinguish different senses of ‘ought’ or adopt some kind of speaker-relative contextualism, according to which the truth conditions of ought-statements are provided by the epistemic position of the speaker rather than the agent who is subject to the obligation. There is a natural worry with this reply that it leads to what Jackson has called an “annoying profusion of ‘oughts’” (or at least to a profusion of truths about what an agent ought to do).²⁹ Perhaps more importantly, both of these views face the problem that according to them, advice and deliberation have different subject matters. They both entail that while the conscientious moral agent is concerned with what she ought to do, relative to her own epistemic position, the adviser is concerned with what the agent ought to do, relative to his better information. Although the adviser speaks correctly, he can do so only by way of talking past the agent rather than answering her question.³⁰ We want an account that can explain how the adviser’s better-informed judgment can be an answer to the very question the conscientious agent was asking herself in her moral deliberation.

The problem of advice, then, is to explain how adviser can *correctly* base their advice on their own better information while providing an answer to the very question that the conscientious agent asks in moral deliberation, if at the same time the sense of ‘ought’ with which the conscientious agent is concerned in deliberation depends on the agent’s limited epistemic standpoint. Let me briefly outline how I think this question should be answered before we consider Zimmerman’s current take on it.

²⁹ Jackson (1991, 471).

³⁰ See esp. Kolodny and MacFarlane (unpublished, §1.3). For a defense of the view that advisers and deliberators are concerned with different ought-propositions, see Björnsson and Finlay (2010, 17–25).

2.2 A proposal for solution

My view rests on a distinction between synchronic and diachronic reason statements, which is analogous to Zimmerman's distinction between "immediate" and "remote obligations"³¹:

Synchronic reason statement: At t , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t .

Diachronic reason statement: At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 .

The point of this distinction is that reasons as well as obligations can exert normative force, i.e. be in place, before the action that is favoured or required is supposed to take place. A promise given on a Monday is binding (provided that relevant background conditions are satisfied) from Monday on, for example by giving rise to all sorts of derivative reasons not to act in ways that are incompatible with keeping it, even if what is promised is an act on Friday.

Given this distinction, we can ask what kinds of epistemic constraints apply to these statements. In my view, the constraint that a reason must be part of an agent's body of evidence applies to synchronic reasons only:

Synchronic evidence constraint: At t , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t , only if at t , A 's evidence includes R .

This synchronic evidence constraint is entailed by a more general evidence constraint, which applies to both synchronic and diachronic reason statements. This more general constraint requires that reasons must be part of a *hypothetical* body of evidence, which the agent *would*

³¹ See Zimmerman (2008, 128). See also Goldman (1976, 449–50).

have at the time at which he is supposed to act *if* he followed what I call a “normatively optimal course of actions” – that is, a course in which the agent conforms to all of her decisive reasons:

General evidence constraint: At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 , only if A’s evidence at t_2 would include R if A conformed to her decisive reasons at every t from t_1 to t_2 .³²

If we accept the idea that perspectivism is to be spelled out in terms of the general evidence constraint, we can solve the problem of advice – or at least a huge part of it.³³ When Jill is deliberating about what to do in a situation in which advice is still possible, then she must be concerned with diachronic rather than synchronic reasons. These reasons need not be part of her current evidence; according to the general evidence constraint, their existence is sensitive to information that the agent *will* receive if she follows a normatively optimal course. Consequently, Jack can base his advice on his own better information without either speaking falsely or talking past Jill, as long as he correctly expects that he will succeed in transmitting his evidence before it is time to act – which in turn seems to be a presupposition for advice to make sense.

It is worth noting that the general evidence constraint is not an *ad hoc* solution to the problem of advice. It can be derived from the synchronic evidence constraint and an

³² This is in the same spirit, but involves some modifications of the account I proposed in Kiesewetter (2011, 16).

³³ Further questions can be raised about better-informed advisers that are not trustworthy and about the implication of this view that the correctness of advice partly depends on the adviser’s choice to share information. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Kiesewetter (2017, Ch. 8).

independently plausible account of the general connection between synchronic and diachronic reasons:

General account: At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 iff (i) at t_1 , R is the case (as are background conditions C_i, \dots , and C_n), and (ii) if A conformed to her decisive reasons at every t from t_1 to t_2 , then at t_2 , R would be a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 (partly because of C_i, \dots , and C_n).

This claim basically tells us that diachronic reasons correlate with the synchronic reasons of a normatively optimal course of actions. As I argue in more detail elsewhere, this claim is strongly supported by the idea that an agent must be able to conform to any present decisive reason without thereby necessitating the violation of another (present or future) decisive reason – surely a plausible constraint for someone who, like Zimmerman, rejects the possibility of tragic dilemmas.³⁴

This is, very broadly, how I think that perspectivists should deal with the problem of advice. No doubt, further questions would have to be addressed in order to defend this proposal, but this is not the place to do this, and I hope the general story is clear enough for now.³⁵ Diachronic reasons are constrained not by the present body of evidence, but by the hypothetical body of evidence that the agent *would* have if she followed a normatively optimal course. The proposal is independently motivated by considerations about the general relation between synchronic and diachronic reasons, and it can easily be applied to obligations, at least

³⁴ Cf. Zimmerman (2014, 13). Strictly speaking, Zimmerman rejects the possibility of tragic *moral* dilemmas, while I am here concerned with tragic dilemmas between decisive reasons. I argue against tragic dilemmas between decisive reasons in Kieseewetter (2015, 930–34).

³⁵ For an extensive discussion and defense of the ideas outlined here, see Kieseewetter (2017, Ch. 8).

if one follows Zimmerman in identifying obligations with facts about “what there is conclusive moral reason to do” (2014, 3).

2.3 Zimmerman on advice

When Zimmerman reconsiders the advice problem in *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*, he takes parts of this story on board, but for the most part, he insists on assumptions that are incompatible with it. I am not convinced that he has a satisfying response to the problem.

How does Zimmerman interpret the situation between Jill and Jack? He starts by pointing out that the context is essentially one that involves a time lapse between coming to a judgment about what one ought to do and acting: “What [Jill] wants to know is not what she ought to do *now* but what she ought to do *later*”.³⁶ He then goes on to distinguish three interpretations of the question “What ought I to do later?” when addressed to a potential adviser:³⁷

1. What ought_{now} I to do_{later}?
2. What ought_{later} I to do_{later}?
3. What would it be the case that I ought_{later} to do_{later} if at every time *t* between now and later we did what we ought_{*t*} to do_{*t*}?

The “we” in (3) refers to both the person asking and the addressee of the question, i.e. the potential adviser. With respect to the question that Jill poses to Jack, Zimmerman rejects the

³⁶ Zimmerman (2014, 83).

³⁷ Zimmerman (2014, 84–86).

first two of these interpretations and embraces the third one. It follows that Jack can correctly answer Jill's question by telling her that she ought to give A.

Zimmerman is clearly right that (2), which asks for a future synchronic obligation, is not the correct interpretation. Suppose that on Monday, A promises B to help him on Friday. Moreover, suppose that on Tuesday, A considers whether to leave for a trip that would make her unable to help B on Friday. Suppose also that A cannot ask B to release her from the promise before having to leave for the trip, and that the reasons for keeping the promise outweigh the reasons for going on the trip. Intuitively, A may reason as follows:

- (i) I ought to help B on Friday.
- (ii) In order to help B on Friday, I need to refrain from leaving today.
- (iii) So, I ought to refrain from leaving today.

But now suppose that A, being well aware of her own weakness, knows that she will in fact leave for the trip, and thus that she will be unable to ϕ on Friday. Since 'ought' implies 'can', it follows that on Friday, A will not have an obligation to ϕ . So if premise (i) is about her future synchronic obligation, it is false.

The conclusion that a number of philosophers have drawn from cases like this is that deliberation about future actions must be concerned with *present diachronic* obligations rather than *future synchronic* ones.³⁸ So why does Zimmerman reject the present diachronic interpretation (1) of Jill's question? I find his reasoning elusive at this point.³⁹ However, the

³⁸ See e.g. Goldman (1976, 449–50), Streumer (2007, 368; 2010, 80–82), and Vranas (2007, 175–78).

³⁹ Cf. Zimmerman (2014, 84).

reasons that Zimmerman himself gives for rejecting interpretation (2) do provide a positive rationale for his interpretation (3).

Zimmerman rejects interpretation (2) on the basis of yet another variant of Jackson's drug case, in which it depends on Jack whether Jill will be *able* to give drug A.⁴⁰ Supposing that Jack is determined to *disable* Jill to give drug A, it follows from 'ought' implies 'can' that Jill's actual future obligation will be to give drug B. According to Zimmerman, however, in such a scenario it does not seem to be "fully appropriate" of Jack to tell Jill "You ought to give B", even though this would be the correct answer to question (2). The case seems to provide an independent rationale for Zimmerman's approach, for if (3) is the correct interpretation of Jill's question, Jack cannot correctly advise her to give B as long as it is possible for him to refrain from disabling Jill to give A.

There are two general questions to ask about Zimmerman's proposal. The first is whether his interpretation of Jill's question (3) solves the problem of advice. The second is whether it really is a legitimate interpretation of the question "What ought I to do?" I shall discuss these questions in turn.

2.4 First question: Does the interpretation solve the problem of advice?

The problem of advice consists in the challenge to give an account of obligation, which (i) allows advisers to truthfully base their moral advice on superior information, while (ii) preserving the idea that moral advice answers the very question that conscientious agents ask themselves in moral deliberation, but (iii) without running into the problems that an anti-

⁴⁰ See Zimmerman (2014, 84–85). I slightly modified his example: while in his version Jack is in the position to *enable* Jill to give A (but is set not to do so), in my version Jack is in the position to *disable* Jill to give A (and is set to do so).

perspectivist interpretation of obligation creates. I believe that the following case shows that Zimmerman's interpretation cannot at the same time satisfy criteria (ii) and (iii):

Jackass. Jill knows that drug B will improve John's condition, that either drug A or C will cure John completely, while the other will kill him, and she doesn't know which is which. Jill also knows that Jack knows which of A or C is the curing drug. She asks Jack for advice: "What ought I to do?" Unfortunately, however, Jack is being an idiot. He's unwilling to share his information with Jill and just shrugs his shoulders.

Suppose that the correct interpretation of Jill's question is:

- (3) What would it be the case that I ought_{later} to do_{later} if at every time t between now and later we did what we ought _{t} to do _{t} ?

Since Jill knows that Jack can tell which drug cures, she knows that if *both* he and she herself did what they ought to do, then at the time of the decision, either she ought to give A or she ought to give C. Thus, according to Zimmerman's interpretation of Jill's question, Jill is in a position to know that giving B is definitely wrong. Yet, it is clear that a morally conscientious person in these circumstances would give B. So if the sense of 'ought' used in requests for moral advice is the same as the sense used in conscientious moral deliberation, as criterion (ii) demands, then Zimmerman's interpretation of the request "What ought I to do?" is ruled out by the same argument that Zimmerman uses against the Objective View. Zimmerman's solution to the problem of advice runs into the same problems as the objectivist solution; it fails to satisfy criterion (iii).

Perhaps Zimmerman does not intend his proposal to satisfy criterion (ii). Perhaps he wants to say that the question “What ought I to do?” has different meanings, depending on whether it is used in first-personal deliberation or directed to someone else. On the face of it, however, this seems like a very unattractive view. Imagine that Jill, after recognizing that Jack is unwilling to cooperate, says to herself: “It looks like I ought to give B, after all”. If moral deliberation and moral advice were concerned with different notions of obligation, then she would change the subject rather than answering the very question that she was directing at Jack before. The problem is that it just does not seem like she is changing the subject at all. Or suppose that Jill is doing some first-personal deliberation in which she asks herself “What ought I to do?” Then Jack comes along and she asks him: “What do you think: What ought I to do?” Again, it does not seem like Jill is changing the subject; instead she is asking for someone else’s opinion on the *same question* that she was considering all along.

The problem raised in this section has an easy fix. We need only to substitute an “I” for the “we” in Zimmerman’s interpretation of Jill’s question. In other words, we need to substitute (4) for (3):

- (4) What would it be the case that I ought_{later} to do_{later} if at every time t between now and later I did what I ought _{t} to do _{t} ?

If Jill’s question is to be understood in this way, then (ii) can be maintained without a failure of (iii). Jill would not have to conclude that it is definitely wrong to give B in the case described. If we do this, however, what should we say about the case in which Jack is set to *disable* Jill to give A and tells her that she ought to give B? On Zimmerman’s interpretation of Jill’s question, the inappropriateness of this piece of advice can be straightforwardly

explained by its incorrectness: since it's not true that Jill will be obliged to give B if *both Jack and Jill* did what they ought to do, Jack does not answer Jill's question correctly.

In contrast, I think that the foregoing considerations support the view that Jack's answer is in fact correct, and that its inappropriateness has to be explained in a different way. Very briefly, the explanation is as follows.⁴¹ The aim of advice is not exhausted by making correct statements about the agent's reasons, it also encompasses the aim of helping agents to pursue the values on which these reasons are based.⁴² Jack's advice in favour of giving B is correct, but since Jack could *also* correctly advise Jill to give drug A (namely, if he gave up his intention to disable her to give A), and since he would thereby be of much greater help to Jill's concern with John's well-being, his advice is clearly deficient – and deficient *as* advice. We need not (and, for the reasons mentioned, should not) assume that it is also incorrect.

The intermediate conclusion is that Zimmerman might well substitute the “we” for an “I” in his interpretation of Jill's question. Doing so, however, does not release him from answering the second question.

2.5 Second question: Is Zimmerman's interpretation a legitimate interpretation of the question “What ought I to do?”

If (3) or (4) were legitimate interpretations of the question “What ought I to do?”, that could help solving the problem of advice. Jack could truthfully tell Jill that she ought to give A, thereby answering the question that she posed to him. Any such solution to the problem of advice, however, is *ad hoc* unless we have been given any independent reason to think that

⁴¹ See Kiesewetter (2017, Ch. 8.8) for a more detailed statement of this explanation.

⁴² See also Björnsson and Finlay (2010, 16–17) for a similar conception of advice.

the question “What ought I to do?” can be interpreted as asking for the truth about a complex hypothetical proposition like (3) or (4).

I only know one good reason for accepting such an interpretation. The reason is that answers to question (4) are also answers to question (1), or, in other words, that the hypothetical truths about future synchronic obligations that Zimmerman has in mind provide the truth conditions for present diachronic obligations. Details aside, this follows from the general account of the relation between synchronic and diachronic reasons that I have mentioned above.⁴³ So the only good reason is, in my view, an excellent reason. The problem is that Zimmerman himself seems to reject it.

This is implicit in the way he presents the issue: if the relevant hypothetical truths about future obligations fall in one with the relevant truths about present diachronic obligations, then there is no need for rejecting the plausible idea that the primary concern of moral deliberation is with present obligations, and there is also no need to distinguish more than two interpretations of the question “What ought I to do?” when it is directed to future actions. Zimmerman feels the need to introduce these rather unattractive twists into his theory because he presupposes that present diachronic obligations do *not* correlate with the synchronic obligations of a normatively optimal course.

Why? Because he thinks that present diachronic obligations are constrained by the agent’s *present* evidence. This at least follows from the Prospective View of *diachronic* obligation that Zimmerman has put forward elsewhere.⁴⁴ Since an agent’s present body of

⁴³ The details that I put aside here mainly concern the condition (i) of the general account, which requires the presence of the reason-giving fact.

⁴⁴ See Zimmerman (2008, 135). It is also suggested by Zimmerman’s contention that the Prospective View is “to be understood as the view that what it is right or wrong *on Tuesday* for Jill to do depends on the evidence she

evidence might be very different from the body of evidence that this agent would have if he followed a normatively optimal course, this claim rules out that diachronic obligations correlate with the synchronic obligations of a normatively optimal course. This in turn prevents Zimmerman from giving a satisfactory response to the problem of advice. If both synchronic and diachronic obligations, in the sense of ‘obligation’ with which morally conscientious deliberation is concerned, depend on the agent’s *present* evidence, then advice based on better evidence cannot be both: truthful and concerned with the same sense of obligation.

Zimmerman’s way out of this is to assign a special meaning to the question “What ought I to do?”, when it is posed in a context of advice. But this proposal is unconvincing. Firstly, since Zimmerman offers no independent reason to accept the view that the question “What ought I to do?” can have the complex, hypothetical meaning that Zimmerman claims it has in advice contexts, his proposal is *ad hoc*. Secondly, it ultimately sacrifices the intuitive idea that moral advice is concerned with the same subject as moral deliberation, which is a great cost. Thirdly, because of this, Zimmerman’s proposal has all sorts of implausible implications about when people change the subject. For example, it entails that agents change the subject when they first address the question “What ought I to do?” in deliberation and then direct it to someone else, or when they first discuss it with someone else and then answer it for themselves. These implications seem to me very hard to defend.

has *on Tuesday*” (2014, 66 and again 79). It is therefore surprising that in a footnote, Zimmerman entertains the possibility that an agent may have, on Monday, an obligation to ϕ on Tuesday, even though she will come to have the relevant evidence that supports ϕ -ing on Tuesday only if she satisfies further obligations (Zimmerman 2014, 79, n. 18). This possibility seems to be ruled out by the claim that an obligation present at t must depend on the evidence at t .

2.6 Concluding remarks

What, on the other side, is the argument in favour of the assumption that diachronic obligations are constrained by present evidence? I am not aware of a single argument in favour of this view. There are formidable arguments for the claim that synchronic or immediate obligations are constrained by present evidence, and as I said, it is tempting to generalize this insight and think that diachronic obligations must be constrained in the very same way. But once one thinks about independent constraints on how synchronic and diachronic obligations are related to each other, it becomes clear that it is a fallacy to apply a constraint to diachronic obligations just because it applies to synchronic obligations. Moreover, once we avoid this fallacy, we can see how the formidable arguments in favour of something like the synchronic evidence constraint are not really in conflict with the practices of advice and deliberation in which the use of ‘ought’ is sensitive to facts that are not part of the agent’s current evidence.

In my view, one needs strong arguments to resist the advantages that a version of perspectivism along the lines of the general evidence constraint has. These advantages are not restricted to the reason approach, but can easily be incorporated into Zimmerman’s value approach. In order to do this, Zimmerman only needs to restrict his Prospective View to synchronic obligations, and then adopt the view that diachronic obligations correlate with the synchronic obligations of a normatively optimal course of actions. Bracketing my worries in the first half of this article, this would be my advice.

In any case, Zimmerman has not offered any argument for the view that diachronic obligations are constrained by present evidence. Without such an argument, we should not

accept such a strong constraint, and much less if it forces us to explain common practices of advice in the way in which Zimmerman explains them.⁴⁵

References

- Björnsson, Gunnar, and Stephen Finlay. 2010. 'Metaethical Contextualism Defended'. *Ethics* 121 (1): 7–36.
- Brown, Campbell. 2011. 'Consequentialize This'. *Ethics* 121 (4): 749–771.
- Bykvist, Krister. 2011. 'How to Do Wrong Knowingly and Get Away with It'. In *Neither/Nor. Philosophical Papers Dedicated to Erik Carlson on the Occasion of His Fiftieth Birthday*, 31–47. Uppsala Philosophical Studies 58. Uppsala: Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University.
- Dancy, Jonathan. 2000. *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (rev. ed. 2002).
- Gertken, Jan, and Benjamin Kiesewetter. 2017. 'The Right and the Wrong Kind of Reasons'. *Philosophy Compass* 12 (5): e12412. doi:10.1111/phc3.12412.
- Gibbard, Allan. 1990. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings. A Theory of Normative Judgment*. Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks (repr. 2002).
- Goldman, Holly S. 1976. 'Dated Rightness and Moral Imperfection'. *The Philosophical Review* 85 (4): 449–87.

⁴⁵ For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I would like to thank an anonymous referee, Vuko Andric, Jan Gertken, the participants of Thomas Schmidt's research colloquium at Humboldt University of Berlin, and the participants of the book symposium on *Ignorance and Moral Obligation* at the 2017 Pacific APA in Seattle. Work on this paper has been supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG project "Principles of the Deliberative Ought").

- Graham, Peter A. 2010. 'In Defense of Objectivism about Moral Obligation'. *Ethics* 121 (1): 88–115.
- Jackson, Frank. 1991. 'Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection'. *Ethics* 101 (3): 461–82.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1788. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Edited by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1997, rev. ed. 2015).
- Kiesewetter, Benjamin. 2011. "'Ought" and the Perspective of the Agent'. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 5 (3): 1–24.
- . 2015. 'Instrumental Normativity: In Defense of the Transmission Principle'. *Ethics* 125 (4): 921–46.
- . 2016. 'You Ought to ϕ Only If You May Believe That You Ought to ϕ '. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (265): 760–82.
- . 2017. *The Normativity of Rationality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . n.d. 'How Reasons Are Sensitive to Available Evidence'. In *Normativity: Epistemic and Practical*, edited by Conor McHugh, Jonathan Way, and Daniel Whiting. Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming). <http://philpapers.org/rec/KIEHRA>.
- Kolodny, Niko, and John MacFarlane. 2010. 'Ifs and Oughts'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 107 (3): 115–43.
- . n.d. 'Ought: Between Objective and Subjective'. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley, September 2009.
- Lord, Errol. 2015. 'Acting for the Right Reasons, Abilities, and Obligation'. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 10: 26–52.
- McHugh, Conor, and Jonathan Way. 2017. 'Objectivism and Perspectivism about the Epistemic Ought'. *Ergo* 4 (5): 121–45.
- Moore, G.E. 1912. *Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (repr. 1969).

- Parfit, Derek. 2011. *On What Matters*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Portmore, Douglas W. 2007. 'Consequentializing Moral Theories'. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (1): 39–73.
- Prichard, H.A. 1932. 'Duty and Ignorance of Fact'. Reprinted in *Moral Writings*, 84–101. Oxford: Clarendon Press (2002).
- Ross, W. David. 1939. *Foundations of Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (repr. 1968).
- Scanlon, T.M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- . 2008. *Moral Dimensions. Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Schroeder, Mark. 2009. 'Means-End Coherence, Stringency, and Subjective Reasons'. *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2): 223–48.
- Streumer, Bart. 2007. 'Reasons and Impossibility'. *Philosophical Studies* 136: 351–84.
- . 2010. 'Reasons, Impossibility and Efficient Steps: Reply to Heuer'. *Philosophical Studies* 151: 79–86.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1990. *The Realm of Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2008. *Normativity*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court.
- Vranas, Peter B. M. 2007. 'I Ought, Therefore I Can'. *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2): 167–216.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zimmerman, Michael J. 2008. *Living with Uncertainty. The Moral Significance of Ignorance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.