

Responses to commentaries on 'Rationality versus normativity'

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I am very grateful to the ten authors who have written commentaries on my paper. I am overwhelmed by the number of interesting and useful arguments they have made. I cannot come near to responding adequately to all of them. I would love to pursue Paul Oppenheimer's account of the fascinating and underexplored topic of reification. I would love to discuss the insights about rationality that might be drawn from the perspective of responsibility, as Sebastian Schmidt proposes. I would love to respond to the arguments from Nathan Howard and Keshav Singh, aimed at showing that reasons do not have to be facts. I would love to defend my relatively narrow understanding of normativity against Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen's objections. But I can do none of these things. Instead, I shall take up just a few of the topics that are raised more than once among the comments.

Identity of properties

I start by recognizing a mistake I made, which is helpfully identified by both Krister Bykvist and Paul Oppenheimer.

I centred the argument of my paper around what I called 'the property-identity claim': that the property of rationality is identical to the property of normativity as I defined it. I aimed to refute this claim. But I am much more concerned to refute 'the requirement-identity claim': that what rationality requires of you is the same as what normativity requires of you (what you ought, that is to say). I said that refuting the property-identity claim refutes the requirement-identity claim, because I argued the requirement-identity claim implies the property-identity claim.

However, in making this argument, I assumed that properties are identical if they necessarily share the same extension. Bykvist and Oppenheimer point out that this is a dubious assumption, which I should not rely on. I agree.

I did not need to make that assumption. Bykvist identifies a perfectly satisfactory work-around. Instead of centring my argument on the property-identity claim, I should centre it on the claim that rationality and normativity necessarily share the same extension. That is what I should aim to refute. The property-identity claim can drop out of my argument, leaving my other conclusions intact. Bykvist explains exactly how. I am very grateful for this correction.

The backup view

Let us call 'subjectivism about ought' the view that whether or not you ought to *F* supervenes on your mind. Several commentators take me to reject subjectivism about ought,¹ but I do not. Indeed, in section 3.4 of my book *Rationality Through Reasoning* I gave some limited support to the subjectivist theory that you ought to *F* if and only if *F*ing has the greatest expected value for you out of all the alternatives, where expected values are given by your own credences and your own judgements of value.²

Nor did I argue against subjectivism in 'Rationality versus normativity'. I did argue against Benjamin Kiesewetter's attempt to have his cake and eat it – to accept subjectivism about ought and at the same time recognize objective reasons. I started by arguing against Kiesewetter's first defence of this position, which is based on externalism about the nature of mental states. My argument about externalism was not meant to be conclusive.³ Kiesewetter does not comment on this argument in his response to me.

He concentrates on his second defence of the have-cake-and-eat-it position, which is based on what he calls the 'backup view'. It is supposed to apply even if externalism is false. The backup view as it appears in his response to my paper is (slightly edited):

If A 's total phenomenal state supports assumption p , and p would – if true – provide sufficient (or decisive) reason for A to believe q , then A 's appearances also provide sufficient (or decisive) reason to believe q .⁴

'Reason' refers to available reasons only, and in this reply to Kieseewetter I use 'reason' in the same way.

I made two arguments against this view, testing it as Kieseewetter does, by comparing two possible states of affairs. A 's total phenomenal state, including how things appear to her, is the same in both states. But in the good state p is true and in the bad state false.

My first argument is this. Since A has the same appearances in both states, if her appearances provide a reason for believing p in the bad state, they also do so in the good state. If p is a reason to believe q , this reason exists in the good state but not the bad one. So there is this further reason for believing q in the good state. Yet, if externalism is false, subjectivism implies that A ought to believe q in the good state if and only if she ought to believe it in the bad one, since her phenomenal state is the same in each. So it implies that, if p provides a further reason to believe q in the good state, this reason makes no difference to whether or not A ought to believe q . It counts for nothing.

In his response, Kieseewetter points out that, just because this reason makes no difference in this particular comparison, it does not follow that it counts for nothing at all. In this comparison it makes no difference because it is not independent of the other reason to believe q , which is provided by the appearance. It might count for something in a different comparison, for example when it is weighed against other objective reasons. Hille Paakkunainen makes the same point in defending a similar claim of Errol Lord's. I accept it.

However, my argument is much more general, as I should have made clear. Subjectivism implies that what you ought to believe depends only on your mental properties. If externalism is false, external facts make no difference to your mental properties except indirectly by causally affecting some internal property. So if external facts are reasons to believe, these reasons never directly make any difference to what you ought to believe. They really do count for nothing.

My second argument against the backup view was aimed at this stronger version of it, which appears in Kieseewetter's *The Normativity of Rationality*:

If A 's total phenomenal state supports p , and would – if true – be a reason for (or against) believing q , then A 's appearances provide an equally strong reason for (or against) believing q .⁵

The argument is that, if both the fact that p and the appearance that p are reasons to believe q , the fact has to be a stronger reason than the appearance. If the fact and the appearance are reasons to believe q , that is because they are evidence of q , and the fact has to be stronger evidence. The appearance is evidence of q only because it is evidence of p , which is evidence of q . So its evidential strength derives from the evidential strength of p , but is diluted. The fact that p adds more probability to q than the appearance that p does.

This argument would fail if the appearance that p were conclusive evidence of p , because there would then be no dilution. But the appearance that p cannot be conclusive evidence of p in the example we are considering, because the appearance that p obtains in the bad state, whereas p does not.

Kieseewetter's response, if I understand it correctly, is that if the appearance that p is such a weak reason to believe q that it is not the case that A ought to believe q in the bad state, then in the good state the fact of p is not an *available* reason for A to believe q . In Kieseewetter's terminology, an available reason is one that is *supported* by A 's total phenomenal state. I take

this to mean that, given her total phenomenal state, A ought to believe p . In a footnote, Kieseewetter says that the support relation may be understood normatively or non-normatively, and I am understanding it normatively. So Kieseewetter is saying that, if it is not the case that A ought to believe q , then it is not the case that she ought to believe p . In other words, if she ought to believe p she ought to believe q .

This response would not be a convincing defence of the stronger version of the backup view, and it is not intended to be. It is intended to defend the weaker version. So we should assume the premise of the weaker version: that p would – if true – provide sufficient (or decisive) reason for A to believe q . Also, we should assume that this reason is available to A , since that is implicit in the formulation.

Maybe Kieseewetter's defence can be got to work with these assumptions, but I still cannot see how. Let me formalize the logic a bit. Let A 's total phenomenal state be s . Let OBp and OBq be respectively the propositions that A ought to believe p and that A ought to believe q . We have some premises that are true in both the good and the bad state. First, that A is in state s :

(1) s

Second, that p , if true, would be available to A , which is to say it is supported by s :

(2) $s \rightarrow OBp$

Third, that p , if true and available to A , would be a sufficient (or decisive) reason for A to believe q :

(3) $p \ \& \ s \ \& \ (s \rightarrow OBp) \rightarrow OBq$

In the good case we also have:

(4) p

From (1) and (2) we can derive OBp . From (1) to (4) we can derive OBq . But we cannot derive OBq in the bad case because we do not have (4). So we cannot derive Kieseewetter's conclusion that if A ought to believe p she ought to believe q .

Bernard Williams

At the start of 'Rationality versus normativity' I quoted Bernard Williams as an example of a philosopher who failed to respect the distinction between rationality and normativity. This was a brief remark, but since both Nomy Arpaly and Julia Markovits take up the subject of Williams's thinking, I should expand it.

I was referring to Williams's 'Internal and external reasons'.⁶ I said only that Williams did not respect the distinction between rationality and normativity; I did not try to explain why not. Here now is my diagnosis.

Williams considers carefully the meaning of what he calls 'an external reason statement' – a statement of the form 'There is a reason for A to φ ', made of some agent when the agent does not necessarily have any motivation that would lead him to φ . He argues that the statement

must be taken as roughly equivalent to, or at least as entailing, the claim that if the agent rationally deliberated, then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to φ .

I shall call this an 'analysis', since it is supposed to specify the meaning of the statement. But the phrase 'or at least as entailing' is an admission by Williams that it may be only a partial analysis, specifying only part of the meaning. This is as much as his argument can sustain.

This analysis is why Williams says, in the passage I originally quoted from him:

One who makes a great deal out of putting . . . criticism in the form of an external reason

statement seems concerned to say that what is particularly wrong with the agent is that he is *irrational*.

As his example of an external reasons statement, Williams uses ‘There is a reason for Owen to join the army’, as it might be said by the members of Owen Wingrave’s family even though they know Owen has no motivation that could bring him to join the army. Williams says:

What [these words] mean when uttered by the Wingraves is almost certainly not that rational deliberation would get Owen to be motivated to join the army – which is (very roughly) the meaning or implication we have found for them, if they are to bear the kind of weight such theorists wish to give them.

Williams then says that this consideration and others suggests to him that external reason statements ‘are false, or incoherent, or really something else misleadingly expressed’.

I do not see how the example of the Wingraves supports this conclusion. He is no doubt right that when the Wingraves say ‘There is a reason for Owen to join the army’, they do not mean that rational deliberation would get Owen to be motivated to join the army. So their statement does not have Williams’s meaning. But that does not show it is incoherent. It may have a different, coherent meaning.

Williams’s own partial analysis leaves this possibility open. He could take the Wingraves at their word. They evidently intend to make a normative statement rather than a statement about rationality. In one paragraph, Williams apparently comes close to recognizing the possibility of a normative meaning for an external reason statement. He refers to ‘a supposed categorical imperative in the Kantian sense of an ought’, and he may have a normative sense in mind. But he dismisses this idea as an approach to understanding reasons, on the inadequate grounds that the relation between reasons and ought is obscure. When I said that Williams fails to respect the distinction between rationality and normativity, I could have more accurately said that he elides normativity altogether.

But Williams’s argument is that if ‘There is a reason for Owen to join the army’ is to have the kind of weight an external reasons theorist wishes to give it, it must imply that rational deliberation would get Owen to join the army. Has he not shown it does not have this weight?

The statement does indeed have the implication he mentions, provided we make some suitable interpretative assumptions. I shall not mention a few rather technical ones. Two are more substantial.

First, we must understand ‘rational deliberation’ in the way Williams specifies. It must include ‘considering the matter aright’ as he puts it, which includes coming to believe the statement itself if it is true.

Second, we have to do something about the possibility that, even if Owen has a reason to join the army, it is not the case that he ought to. He might have a stronger reason not to. In that case, even if he deliberates rationally on the basis of his belief that he himself has a reason to join the army, he might not come to intend to do so. One way of dealing with this problem is to call on a sort of motivation that falls short of an intention – a sort of internal push. But pushes like that belong to a crude mechanical model of psychology that I eschew.⁷ Because it is not important here, I shall simply assume that the reason is supposed to be conclusive. Then when Owen comes to believe the statement, he comes to believe that he ought to join the army.

Given all this, a principle of rationality that I call ‘enkrasia’ kicks in. Severely simplified, the principle is:

Rationality requires of a person that, if she believes she ought to φ , she intends to φ .⁸

Enkrasia is a crucial link between normativity and rationality. I believe there is also a process of reasoning that can bring a person to satisfy enkrasia by intending to ϕ .⁹ I call it 'enkratic reasoning'. So rational deliberation including enkratic reasoning would bring Owen to intend to join the army. An intention is a sort of motivation. So Williams's implication is home and dry.

Moreover the implication is necessary, given the interpretation I described. But it is not analytic. It is necessary because enkrasia is a necessary truth, and enkrasia is a substantive principle of rationality. So this implication is no part of the meaning of 'There is a reason for Owen to join the army'. It is not part of what the Wingraves say, though they imply it.

I conclude that the Wingraves' statement may have a perfectly good normative meaning. Williams does not have a successful argument for rejecting this meaning. Instead, he ignores it and replaces it with a meaning involving rationality.

Arpaly on Williams

According to Arpaly, Williams thinks an external reason statement is a normative judgement in disguise. An external reason statement does indeed express a normative judgement, but it is hardly in disguise. 'There is a reason for Owen to join the army' expresses a normative judgement in language that is as plain as it could be. Arpaly says that Williams suspects that people who make external reason statements mistakenly take them to be about rationality as well. She is right that Williams does have that suspicion. But this is only because of his own analysis of external reason statements, and his own refusal to take these statements at face value as normative. It is he who takes external reason statements to be about rationality, because that is the only meaning he can find for them.

Arpaly says:

It would be bad of me to step on someone's foot (because it's inconsiderate, cruel, selfish, and imprudent). However, the people who say that I have a reason – an external reason – to avoid stepping on feet want to say, or think they are saying, more than that.

They think they are saying not only that morality and prudence require me to avoid stepping on feet, but also that there is something wrong with my rationality.

She is right that the people she speaks of are saying more than that it would be bad of her to step on someone's foot. They are saying she has a reason not to step on someone's foot. They are saying something about normativity but nothing about rationality. Like Williams, Arpaly seems to ignore the possibility of a genuine normative claim.

This may not be obvious from what she says, because Arpaly uses 'normative' differently from me. I use the word as I defined it in my paper, to mean involving ought or a reason, whereas Arpaly takes normativity to include morality, prudence and value (in this case badness). These things may be sources of normativity in my sense. That is to say, they may be reason-giving. But if they are, that is a substantive matter and not a matter of meaning. Arpaly may think that, if we take away the specific sources of normativity such as these, normativity will be left with no content. That may be because she does not recognize purely normative claims about reasons; she takes them to be about rationality. But that would be just the confusion of normativity and rationality that I complained of.

Markovits and Williams

Markovits says that Williams deliberately aims to reduce reasons to rationality. I agree, almost. Markovits hints that in quoting Williams in my paper, I meant to imply that Williams is merely confused by the language of 'reason'. But I agree he is not; he deliberately aims at a

reduction. He aims, in fact, at an analytic reduction by analysing the meaning of ‘having a reason’ or ‘there being a reason’.

For external reasons, he offers the analysis I quoted above. That is not a reduction, or even really an analysis. Williams claims to offer what may be only a partial analysis, specifying part of the meaning of an external reason statement rather than the whole of it. His claim even leaves open the possibility that the meaning includes an unanalysed normative component, though he himself ignores that possibility. However, Williams’s ultimate conclusion is that there are no external reasons, so the analysis of external reason statements is by the way so far as he is concerned.

His real analysis is his analysis of internal reason statements. This is not sharply formulated in ‘Internal and external reasons’, but he later gave this analysis of ‘A has a reason to φ ’:

[A] could reach the conclusion to φ by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has.¹⁰

‘Sound’ means rational, so this is an analysis of having a reason in terms of rationality and motivation.

Markovits says she shares Williams’s aim of reducing reasons to rationality. But my reading of her commentary makes me think this is not really so. I think that, instead, she aims to reduce morality to rationality. In ‘Internal and external reasons’ Williams does not concern himself with morality.

Markovits is looking for a response to an amoralist – a person who asks whether she has any reason to do what morality requires of her. The reduction of morality to rationality is the beginning of Markovits’s response. It is, more precisely, a reduction of requirements of morality to requirements of rationality, so that, whatever morality requires of someone, rationality requires it of her too. Markovits says this is an advance because people generally recognize that they have a reason to conform to rationality. So reducing moral requirements to rational requirements might bring people to recognize they have a reason to satisfy moral requirements. They might recognize that morality is reason-giving because rationality is reason-giving.

Markovits’s project is complicated by a further aim. As well as answering the amoralist’s normative question of whether she has a reason to be moral, Markovits also wants to explain how morality can get a ‘hold’ on the amoralist or on anyone. She contrasts morality with etiquette, which has no hold on many people. One explanation is that morality is reason-giving whereas etiquette is not; morality has this normative sort of hold. But Markovits is interested in a different sort. She takes the notion of ‘hold’ from Williams, and it refers to motivation rather than normativity. Markovits wants to explain how a person can be motivated to do what morality requires.

Recognizing that morality is reason-giving helps with this explanation too, for a rational person. Morality gives a person a reason to do what morality requires, and when a rational person has a reason to do something, she can be motivated to do it. How this motivation happens is a matter of the connection between normativity, rationality and motivation. There are different accounts. One is Williams’s, which I have been discussing. So although Markovits’s project is different from Williams’s, Williams’s can contribute to hers. An alternative is my own view that the connection is made by the rational principle of *enkrasia*.

Do moral requirements supervene on the mind?

I do not intend to pursue this complicated question further. I have described my understanding of Markovits’s project in order to point out that her project does not directly

conflict with my arguments in ‘Rationality versus normativity’, as she supposes it does. If her project were indeed to reduce normativity to rationality, it would conflict with my arguments, because I argued that rationality supervenes on the mind whereas normativity does not.

However, reducing morality to rationality is perfectly consistent with my arguments. It could be that both morality and rationality supervene on the mind, but normativity does not.

In passing, I want to clarify something that was evidently not clear enough in my paper. When I say that some property does or does not supervene on the mind, I refer to the mind and not to some part of it. If the mind has external features – as it does if knowledge is a state of mind – they are included in the supervenience base I refer to. I do not claim that rationality supervenes on the non-factive states of the mind, as Paakkunainen seems to assume I do.

If both morality and rationality supervene on the mind, and if they are both normative – which is to say reason-giving – then these are important areas of normativity that do supervene on the mind. But there could be other areas that do not. For example, family honour might be reason-giving, and give Owen a reason to join the army, which is an act in the outside world that does not supervene on his mind. For another example, the law might be reason-giving and give you a reason to pay your taxes, which does not supervene on your mind. Prudence might be reason-giving and give you a reason to stay two metres from other people, which does not supervene on your mind.

If Markovits is right that moral requirements reduces to rational requirements, then either rational requirements do not supervene on the mind or moral requirements do. Markovits rejects the first of these options and embraces the second. Indeed, she goes further and suggests that all normative requirements might supervene on the mind. Kiesewetter also makes this suggestion, and so does Arpaly if I understand her right. At the end of section 6 of my paper, I recognized this possibility but gave it short shrift. I shall take this opportunity to give it more attention. To be clear: the question is whether, whenever you ought to *F*, which is to say whenever normativity requires you to *F*, then whether or not you *F* supervenes on your mind.

Markovits does not recognize how radical her suggestion is. As an example of something that supervenes on your mind, she gives behaving in a way that you reasonably believe will result in your house’s being insured. But behaviour does not supervene on the mind. For example, you might reasonably believe that filling in an application form, mailing it to the insurers and paying a premium will result in your house’s being insured. But whether or not you pay a premium depends partly on the working of the banking system. Even if behaviour is restricted to bodily movements, it does not supervene on the mind. You might intend to raise your arm, and think you are doing so, but actually fail to do so because your nerves fail to activate your muscles and you are looking the other way. Only properties of the mind itself supervene on the mind.

It is really not credible that all normative requirements supervene on the mind. For example, the law requires you to pay your taxes, and often the law makes it the case that you ought to pay your taxes. You fail to meet this requirement if you do not perform the act in the outside world of paying your taxes, whatever the properties of your mind.

I still find it hard to believe even of requirements of morality that they supervene on the mind. Certainly on the face of it, morality seems to require acts in the world. For instance, it requires you to keep your promises. But this might be wrong. Krister Bykvist points out that morality might require, not actually acting but deciding to act. When we ordinarily think that morality requires you to do something, the truth might be that morality requires you to decide to do that thing. This requirement would supervene on your mind.

But merely requiring a decision is not enough for morality, because you might change your mind and not act, and that would be a moral failure. It is more plausible that morality requires you to form an intention to act, and maintain your intention. This too supervenes on your mind. But even this will not ensure that you do the act. For instance, suppose you have promised to deliver a package before 11 on Sunday, so we ordinarily think morality requires you to deliver the package before 11 on Sunday. Suppose you decide to do so and maintain your intention. But you forget that the clocks went forward the previous night, so you break your promise by being late. Your forgetfulness does not excuse you; you could have remembered. Because of your forgetfulness you fail to act as morality requires. If the moral requirement to keep this promise is to be replaced by one that supervenes on the mind, it would have to be replaced by a requirement to decide to keep your promise and maintain your intention, and also to remember about the clocks.

The requirement on your mind would often have to be complex. For another instance, think of the moral requirement to be kind to vulnerable people. Merely deciding to be kind and maintaining this intention is not enough to ensure you are kind. Kindness requires a subtle sensitivity to people's needs, which can demand quite a complex of mental properties. Merely intending to be kind might not bring you to develop this sensitivity even though you could; you might be too obtuse to realize it is needed. So morality requires a complex combination of mental properties. What explanation can there be of why it requires just the combination that makes you kind, if it is not that morality requires you to be kind? I see no possible explanation. So I do not see how requirements on the mind can replace requirements to act; they exist only because of requirements to act.

Notes

My great thanks to Garrett Cullity for curating this exchange of views. Research for this paper was supported by ARC Discovery Grant DP180100355.

1. This is explicit in Presskorn-Thygesen's comment, and at least implicit in Singh's and Arpaly's.
2. This theory is mentioned as an example in 'Rationality versus normativity', section 6.
3. I did say that this sort of externalism is unappealing and offends common sense; Presskorn-Thygesen reads this as a definite rejection, but it is not meant to be.
4. This is an edited version of the formulation of the backup view that appears in Kiesewetter's comment in this issue.
5. *The Normativity of Rationality*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 173.
6. In his in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 101–13.
7. See my 'Motivation, *Theoria*, 75 (2009), pp. 79–99.
8. Enkrasia is fully examined in my *Rationality Through Reasoning*, section 9.4.
9. *Rationality Through Reasoning*, section 16.1.
10. 'Internal reasons and the obscurity of blame', *Logos*, 10 (1989), pp. 1–11.