

The Place of Reasons in Epistemology

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1 Introduction

Reasons attract unprecedented interest in recent literature on the foundations of epistemic normativity. This follows a trend in metaethics, where many view reasons as the basic units of normativity.¹ While enthusiasm about this idea remains widespread in metaethics, it has also received direct and extensive critical attention.² Nothing similar can yet be said in epistemology. A few epistemologists have expressed doubts about whether reasons are even required for standings of traditional focus like justification and knowledge.³ But doubters often ignore the latest and best views about reasons, and so fail to target the most sophisticated versions of the “reasons first” program.

In this paper, we provide a fresh evaluation of the prospects for reasons-first epistemology, which we understand as the view that epistemic reasons are the sole fundamental constituents of epistemic normativity. Unlike earlier skeptics, we agree that one species of justified belief might require possessing sufficient epistemic reasons, and that belief for sufficient epistemic reasons may even suffice for justified belief. But we think these claims could only be true if possession and proper basing are themselves grounded in a deeper normative property of *competence*, which applies to more rudimentary cognitive functionings than beliefs (e.g., attractions to assent, which are plausibly seen as non-rational in the basic case). Competence at this level is not grounded in reasons. So, we claim, epis-

¹See, e.g., Scanlon (1998), Parfit (2011), Schroeder (2007), and Skorupski (2011).

²See, e.g., Broome (2004), Crisp (2006), Thomson (2008), Väyrynen (2011), and Wedgwood (2015).

³Two major recent examples are Lyons (2009) and Kornblith (2015).

temic reasons are *in the middle*: they ground one species of justified belief, but competences are the real foundations.

We will organize our discussion around three sets of questions. Most epistemologists who have worried about the centrality of reasons have targeted certain *modal* theses. One thesis is the NECESSITY THESIS, according to which possessing sufficient reasons is *necessary* for justified belief. Another is the SUFFICIENCY THESIS, according to which believing for sufficient epistemic reasons is necessarily *sufficient* for (*ex post*) justified belief. The status of these claims matters. So we will spend some time on:

(Q1: *The Modal Questions*) Does justified belief require backing by sufficient epistemic reasons? If one believes for sufficient epistemic reasons, is that necessarily sufficient for (*ex post*) justified belief?

These are not, however, the most important questions. Two phenomena may necessarily co-travel even though there is a metaphysical asymmetry between them. Even if justification and reasons do necessarily co-travel, then, we can still ask about their relative fundamentality. So, we will also consider:

(Q2: *The Relative Fundamentality Questions*) Are facts about possessing and believing for sufficient reasons more fundamental than facts about justified belief? Or are facts about justified belief more fundamental?

Answers to Q1–2 would still not give us a *complete* picture of the place of reasons in the metaphysics of justification. Even if reasons are prior to justification, there might be something else normative that is prior to both, or that is at least as fundamental as reasons, within the epistemic domain. So, one must also consider:

(Q3: *The Normative Bedrock Question*) Are the reasons that ground epistemic justification the sole fundamental ingredients of epistemic normativity, or is there something else normative that is at least as fundamental in the epistemic domain?

Our reflections on Q1–3 will cast doubt on the reasons-first program in epistemology. The only way justified belief *could* be grounded in belief for sufficient possessed epistemic reasons is if possession and proper basing are themselves grounded in the deeper property of competence. Or so we will argue.

Before proceeding, we should clarify that the reasons-first program in epistemology we are opposing in this paper is in two ways more restricted than the reasons-first program in metaethics, and our arguments will be correspondingly

restricted. First of all, reasons-first epistemology as we understand it is a thesis about the fundamental ingredients of epistemic normativity, which we take to be a domain-relative kind of normativity that might lack intrinsic domain-independent significance.⁴ The reasons we will be discussing are similarly domain-relative: they are the reasons that help to epistemically justify doxastic attitudes. While some reasons-first epistemologists would also defend the more ambitious view that reasons are the sole fundamental ingredients of domain-independent normativity (or normativity *simpliciter*), not all would.

Second of all, our discussion will center on possessed normative reasons for doxastic attitudes rather than unpossessed normative reasons, for the simple reason that these are the reasons most clearly suited to ground paradigmatic epistemic statuses like justification and rationality. Our central thesis is that these reasons are grounded in a more fundamental kind of epistemic normativity associated with evaluations of *competent epistemic performance*. We will argue that this kind of normativity in turn cannot generally be analyzed in terms of epistemic reasons, whether possessed or unpossessed.⁵ We leave it open whether unpossessed reasons might be *among* the fundamental ingredients of epistemic normativity. But they are not, we will argue, the *sole* fundamental ingredients.

With these clarifications out of the way, we turn to describe our plan. We start with some terminological clarifications *vis-à-vis* reasons in §2. In §3, we show that positive answers to Q1 are more defensible than some believe. But we argue that this does not justify optimism about the reasons-first program. The reasons that are suited to help us understand justified belief are *possessed* normative reasons. But possession is best analyzed in terms of competence—most fundamentally, a competence to hit the mark of truth.⁶ We note in §4 that this undermines opti-

⁴One of us has long held that epistemic evaluation is insulated from domain-independent evaluation in the same way attributive evaluations of an archer's shots as *good shots* are insulated. See Sosa (2007: Ch. 4) and (2010: Ch. 3).

⁵Reasons-first theorists in ethics might defend a buck-passing account of attributive evaluative facts of the sort reported by claims like "That was a good shot", analyzing them in terms of facts about the reasons for admiring such shots *qua* shots; see, for example, Scanlon (2011)'s response to Thomson (2008). But even if successful, these analyses would not bolster reasons-first epistemology in our sense, which purports to ground epistemic normativity in *epistemic reasons*. Reasons for admiring shots—even if the shots are intellectual shots at the mark of truth—are not in our sense "epistemic". All epistemic reasons in this sense are reasons for or against doxastic attitudes or activities of theoretical reason (e.g., judgment).

⁶Following Sosa (2007, 2010, 2015), we understand competences in general as a special case of dispositions to succeed, relative to some standard of success; examples of competences outside epistemology include the competence to hit archery targets, the competence to draw accurate likenesses of faces, and the competence to navigate the New York City subway system. One might argue that epistemic competences are competences to correctly respond to epistemic reasons, and in this way try to reconcile one of our central themes with reasons-first epistemology. But

mistic answers to Q3 and renders optimistic answers to Q2 less interesting. After rebutting some objections in §5, we conclude in §6 by noting a different kind of primacy that reasons might retain—viz., primacy of authority over *judgment*.

2 Reasons: Some Distinctions

Talk about reasons can pick out at least four different phenomena: *explanatory reasons*, *motivating reasons*, *merely existing normative reasons*, and *possessed normative reasons*. Before we go any farther, it is worth getting clear on these distinctions, since we will focus mostly on the last type of reason.

Explanatory reasons are picked out by true answers to ‘why’-questions of the form ‘A reason why P is that Q’. Importantly, not all the reasons that *explain why* people believe, feel, intend and act are reasons *for which* they do these things. *Motivating* reasons fall in the proper subclass of explanatory reasons that help to illuminate why people believe, feel, intend, and act as they do by serving as the reasons for which they believe, feel, intend and act. The sense in which these reasons explain beliefs is not merely causal; rather, they figure in a distinctive kind of explanation of belief—namely, rationalizing explanation.⁷

We will focus only indirectly on explanatory and motivating reasons. *Normative* reasons are our direct focus. Normative reasons are considerations that count in favor of attitudes and acts by bearing in a *pro tanto* way on the correctness of these attitudes and acts. Epistemically normative reasons are a subclass of these, which bear on the correctness of doxastic attitudes like belief, disbelief, and suspension. We can divide normative epistemic reasons into ones that *merely exist* and ones that we *possess*. Undiscovered evidence for some hypothesis H is an example of the first kind of reason. Merely existing reasons *justify* no doxastic stances. Only reasons we also *possess* justify.

Importantly, this is not an essentially internalist claim. Many epistemologists have held that possession is an externalist relation, at least in the sense that

while one of us does elsewhere argue that possession ought partly to be understood in terms of such competences (see Sylvan (2015, forthcoming-1)), we take this claim to be consistent with denial of reasons-first epistemology for two reasons. Firstly, we think that competences that are not analyzed in terms of reasons also must be invoked to analyze possession. Secondly, even if all epistemic competences were—implausibly—competences to correctly respond to reasons, the notion of competence itself remains a distinctive normative notion. While one could imagine a crude kind of reliabilism about competences on which competences to succeed are merely reliable abilities to succeed, one of us argues at length elsewhere (see Sosa (2015)) that this view is mistaken and that the notion of competence is normatively primitive.

⁷For further discussion of this kind of explanation in general, see Dancy (2000, 2004) and Millar (2004). For discussion of the special case in epistemology, see Sylvan (forthcoming-2).

whether a subject bears that relation to a reason is not fixed simply by her non-factive mental states.⁸ We too favor an externalist account of possession—just a different one. And notably, other elements of the reasons framework can be viewed in an externalist manner. The goodness of reasons can be understood externalistically, as can the ontology of reasons.⁹

Verbally at least, we will follow a trend in metaethics of treating all normative reasons as facts or apparent facts.¹⁰ Here we have in mind truth-makers (or apparent truth-makers) rather than true propositions (or apparently true propositions).¹¹ A naïve objection to this view is that evidence that is “out there” is often irrelevant to justification. The response is (i) to agree that reasons must be *possessed* to justify and (ii) to agree that mental states *help us to possess* (or “*provide*”) these reasons, but (iii) to deny that mental states *are* the reasons.¹²

So, we will treat mental states as *providers* of normative reasons, but treat the normative reasons *provided* as facts or apparent facts. This is not to say that viewing the reasons themselves as (apparent) facts is indispensable for our argument. It is just our preferred ideology. Given the distinction between providing a reason and being a reason, one could translate between the competing ideologies: those who reject our ideology will just call ‘reasons’ what we call ‘providers of reasons’.

It is also worth noting that viewing normative epistemic reasons as facts or apparent facts does not commit one to thinking that justification is factive. For example, one can use a less than infallible inductive rule to justifiedly draw a false conclusion from only true premises. The reasons are facts, but the justified conclusion corresponds to no fact. Moreover, in cases like the demon world, one could allow that the operative normative reasons are facts about one’s mental life (e.g., the fact that one has some perceptual experience). Compare Williamson (2000: Chs. 8–9), who holds that we have different evidence in good and bad cases, although the evidence in both cases justifies. He agrees that normative

⁸See, e.g., Williamson (2000: Ch. 9), Gibbons (2006), and Goldman (2009b).

⁹See Alston (1988) and Dancy (2000), respectively.

¹⁰Turri (2009) calls a similar view ‘factualism’, but defines it as the view that *all* epistemic reasons are *non-mental* facts. No one holds this view, to our knowledge. Factualists will allow that we can have reasons to believe that we are in pain or are in other conscious mental states. What will these reasons be? Mental facts, surely.

¹¹For defense of this view about normative epistemic reasons, see Sylvan (forthcoming-1). We will also talk in what follows as if motivating epistemic reasons are propositions, going against Dancy (2000)’s insistence that motivating and normative reasons must belong to the same ontological category. For a defense of this position that persuaded us, see Mantel (2015).

¹²Compare Williamson (2000: 197), though he favors the view that reasons are true propositions rather than truth-makers: “Experiences provide evidence; they do not consist of propositions. So much is obvious. But to provide something is not to consist of it. The question is whether experiences provide evidence just by conferring the status of evidence on propositions.”

reasons are facts, but doesn't think that non-inferential justification is factive. In any case, one could also claim that normative epistemic reasons in bad cases are merely *apparent* facts about non-mental reality.

Finally, we will assume nowhere that all epistemic reasons are evidence, though we will assume that epistemic reasons are always reasons for or against doxastic attitudes (including agnosticism) and combinations of doxastic attitudes. Pragmatic encroachment aside, there seem to be epistemic reasons to suspend judgment that are not themselves evidence. For example, the fact that P entails Q is an epistemic reason not to be in the following complex doxastic state: believing P and disbelieving Q. But it is unclear whether it makes sense to call a reason to avoid a complex state of this kind "evidence".¹³ We don't claim that evidentialism is obviously false for such reasons. But we do claim that reasons-first epistemology is not obviously equivalent to evidentialist epistemology.¹⁴

3 The Modal Questions

If normative reasons are to play an important explanatory role in epistemology, there should minimally be a modally strong connection between them and phenomena of long-standing interest in epistemology like justified belief.¹⁵ Here are two connections worth considering:

(NECESSITY) Necessarily, one justifiedly believes that P only if one possesses sufficient epistemic reasons to believe that P;

(SUFFICIENCY) Necessarily, if one believes that P for sufficient epistemic reasons, one's belief that P is epistemically justified (*ex post*),

¹³Perhaps, following Kolodny (2005), one might deny that there really are such reasons, and prefer merely to speak of rational requirements. We are, however, persuaded by Reisner (2011) that Kolodny's skepticism about whether there are reasons to comply with wide-scope requirements of theoretical coherence can be answered. For further discussion of the problems for evidentialism in this sense, see Sylvan (forthcoming-1).

¹⁴In this respect and many others, our focus differs from Beddor (2015)'s and Goldman (2011)'s. Beddor argues that evidentialism is a metaphysically circular view when understood as a view about the grounds of justification. Goldman makes a similar claim, though while viewing evidentialism as a conceptual analysis. None of our claims specifically concern evidentialism. Moreover, we do not think that *circularity* of either a metaphysical or a conceptual sort is a worry for reasons-first views. Indeed, we embrace the claim that possessed reasons are *metaphysically prior* to justification. We just add that the possession relation is itself best understood in terms of deeper normative facts about competence.

¹⁵Throughout, 'belief' is short for 'judgmental belief', which amounts to a disposition to judge, where judgment is an act of affirmation. See Sosa (2010: Ch.3), (2013), and (2015).

- where *sufficiency* is understood comparatively, in terms of other reasons: a sufficient epistemic reason for belief is one that is not outweighed or undercut by the epistemic reasons for disbelief and suspension.¹⁶

So far in epistemology, challenges to the centrality of reasons have targeted these sorts of claims. But we think that this is not where the action is. These theses can be defended by adopting subtler views about possessing and believing for sufficient reasons than objectors have so far considered.

Crucially, however, the best of these subtler views will place competence before reasons in the metaphysical explanation of justified belief. Ironically, then, a reasons-friendly answer to the Modal Questions can be had only at the cost of compromising a reasons-first answer to deeper questions. To bring this out, we will consider some existing challenges to NECESSITY and SUFFICIENCY. We will show that the best answers crucially appeal to competence in understanding possession of and belief for normative epistemic reasons.

3.1 The Challenge to Necessity

To see one kind of challenge to NECESSITY, consider basic *a priori* justification. We can be non-inferentially justified in believing $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$.¹⁷ Our belief need not be justified by any inference from further arithmetic truths. If so, what reason justifies us in believing $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$?

Some suppose a fancy state of intuition provides a non-inferential reason to believe $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$. Exactly what reason is *provided*? Well, one might claim that it is the obvious fact that $1 + 1 = 2$, which makes true $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$. By comparison, note that we can be justified in believing that we are in pain on the basis of the obvious fact that we are in pain. There is no *circularity* here, though our belief is based on its truth-maker. It would be circular if one tried to *infer* $\langle I \text{ am in pain} \rangle$ from $\langle I \text{ am in pain} \rangle$. But our case is crucially *non-inferential*, and circularity is a property of inferences.¹⁸ So fans of intuition might claim that it too puts us into direct contact with further obvious facts, which can then serve as non-inferential reasons.

But the ‘obvious’ remains crucial. Not all arithmetic facts are candidates for non-inferentially licensing beliefs about them. Intuition enthusiasts suppose that

¹⁶For discussions of how important it is to include suspension as a relevant alternative in accounts of sufficiency like this, see Schroeder (2012a), (2012b) and (2015).

¹⁷Only because the difference is now relevant, we will use expressions like ‘ $\langle P \rangle$ ’ for propositions and expressions like ‘the fact that P’ for their truth-makers.

¹⁸This addresses Turri (2009: 498)’s circularity objection to factalist accounts of reasons.

their special state draws the line. But one of us has argued extensively that intuitions are just a species of *attractions to assent*.¹⁹ And plausibly, not just any attraction to assent can provide serious normative reasons.²⁰ Some people find far too much “simply obvious”. They are hastily attracted to assent to propositions they have no serious reason to believe, in virtue of overgeneralizing incompetences. But they are not in a different *kind* of mental state from the state we are in when we find $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$ obvious.

Some critics of NECESSITY see an unanswerable challenge here. Attractions to assent must pass muster from the epistemic point of view to provide serious reasons for belief. But how? The story can’t be reasons-based. There are no more basic purely mental facts that explain why we are properly attracted to assent to $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$. The sheer fact that $1 + 1 = 2$ does not explain why the attraction is proper! We can be improperly attracted to treat any fact as given if we are sufficiently incompetent. Moreover, our incompetence can fail to be accessible to us, so it is not as if we will *possess* an undercutting defeater in all cases of this form. But if attractions to assent can pass muster without being based on reasons, why can’t beliefs qualify in this way too? It is arbitrary to say otherwise, objectors insist: like attractions, beliefs can pass muster without being based on reasons.

3.2 Solution: Possessing Reasons as an Achievement

There is a strategy for addressing this challenge. It lies in viewing the possession of reasons as an achievement, and in appreciating an asymmetry in epistemic agency between beliefs and attractions to assent.

To bring this out, consider parallels in the introspective case. Imagine Fred, who sits around contemplating his visual field and the number of floaters in it. He has pathetic subitizing ability and cannot reliably discriminate more than four floaters without long focus. But Fred is self-deceived, fancying himself like Rain Man. Faced now with sixteen floaters in his visual field, he by sheer luck finds himself attracted to the correct answer. It is hard to regard him as coming to possess the fact that there are sixteen floaters in his visual field as a serious reason to believe that there are, just in virtue of this attraction. Plausibly, the explanation is that the attraction fails to manifest competence.

Accordingly, not even all conscious mental facts can immediately justify beliefs about them in the absence of competence. But the “no reasons needed”

¹⁹See Sosa (2007: Ch. 3) for one stretch of argument.

²⁰Schroeder (2011) couldn’t disagree. He claims that mere belief in P is sufficient to make one possess P as a reason, but must add that if such a belief is incompetently formed, P is guaranteed to be a *weak* reason—and hence not a *serious* reason. Still, we reject Schroeder’s style of explanation, and argue against it in §5.

conclusion is implausible. Imagine a far more discriminating subject glimpsing the fact that there is an exact, big number of floaters in her visual field, and then judging that there is this number. When she judges, the fact that there are this many floaters in her visual field is *clearly relevant* to why her judgment is justified. The key is just that she, unlike Fred, *possesses* this fact as a non-inferential reason for belief, which she can directly cite. She possesses this fact as a non-inferential reason *in virtue of* her greater cognitive abilities.

So, epistemic competences plausibly constitute grounds of one's possession of certain normative epistemic reasons. But defenders of NECESSITY only ever claimed that *possessed* normative reasons are necessary for justification—*merely existing* normative reasons are obviously irrelevant.

We can think similarly about the intuitive case. Confrontation with the obvious fact that $1 + 1 = 2$ can make this very fact available as a non-inferential normative reason to believe the proposition $\langle 1 + 1 = 2 \rangle$, which the fact makes true. Yes, we cannot be directly confronted with any arithmetic fact *just* by finding it obvious. But that shows only that arithmetic facts aren't *possessed* as direct licenses for belief unless we have certain cognitive abilities. It doesn't show that possessing reasons is unnecessary for justified belief.

It can be argued, then, that possessing sufficient reasons is itself an *achievement*. It is the achievement of getting reasons in one's grip for justifying use in virtue of one's competence. Reflection on our observations recommends a bi-level account, with (i) *non-inferential justification* grounded in the deeper normativity of *possessed sufficient reasons* and (ii) the *possession* of normative reasons grounded in facts about the *manifestation of competence by attractions to assent*. Specifically, one could say:

(Level 1) S is non-inferentially justified in believing $\langle P \rangle$ iff (i) S possesses some (apparent) fact F as a sufficient non-inferential normative reason to believe P, and (ii) S believes $\langle P \rangle$ for this normative reason.

(Level 2) S possesses some (apparent) fact F as a non-inferential reason to believe $\langle P \rangle$ iff (i) F attracts S to assent to $\langle P \rangle$, (ii) this attraction manifests S's epistemic competence, and (iii) S has the ability to competently base her belief in $\langle P \rangle$ on F in a non-inferential way.

This account of non-inferential justification is general, applying to basic perceptual and introspective belief as well as basic intuitive belief. It leaves open how exactly we are to understand cases of false non-inferentially justified belief. In these cases, one could view F as a genuine fact, but not the fact that makes $\langle P \rangle$ true. If so, one would end up with a Williamsonian model on which the normative epistemic reasons that do the work differ in good and bad cases. But one

could also view F as a *merely apparent* fact, and deny that possessed normative reasons must be genuine facts. We are undecided.

3.3 The Other Edge of the Sword

So, possessing sufficient reasons might remain necessary for justified belief after all—as long as possession is itself understood as constitutively involving competence. But lovers of reasons shouldn't get too excited. For there is a further modal question to which the answer is plausibly 'No':

(*General Necessity Question*) Must all attributable cognitive functionings be based on reasons to attain fully positive epistemic status?

We have seen that the states that enable us to possess reasons are *attractions to assent*. Attractions to assent are psychologically more primitive than beliefs, and are plausibly non-rational in the basic case. Still, they can be evaluated for competence and incompetence. But their competence cannot be essentially reasons-based: that way lies regress or circularity. So, our way of vindicating NECESSITY for beliefs requires that these more primitive states are not based on reasons, at least in the basic case.

Although attractions to assent are evaluable, they are not evaluable in all the same ways as beliefs. It makes little sense to regard an attraction to assent as *justified* or *unjustified*, though it can manifest more or less *competence*. Justifiedness in its clearest sense is a deontic notion, closely akin to permissibility.²¹ Competence in ϕ -ing isn't itself a deontic notion, but an evaluative one. Whether competence *lines up* with anything deontic depends on the nature of the ϕ -ing. Attractions are not objects of deliberation and guidance by reason in the way beliefs are. Being intuitively struck in some way isn't a condition that we enter by reasoning. Of course, we can change our striking profiles *indirectly*, by brainwashing, enculturation or the like. But not readily, as a direct response to deliberation about what to be struck by. By contrast, beliefs can change in direct response to deliberation about what to believe.

Given these deeper differences, competent attractions can serve to ground the possession of reasons, and thereby justified belief. Regarding justification

²¹By a *deontic* notion, we mean a notion in the family including *ought*, *may*, et al. We distinguish these from concepts of praise and blame, which are not themselves deontic. We think a strong doxastic voluntarism on which one can alter beliefs simply on the basis of practical reasons isn't necessary for the applicability of deontic notions in epistemology. We do think one must be responsible for one's beliefs in order to be subject to epistemic praise and blame, but we don't think such responsibility should be understood in a strong voluntarist way. For defenses of this view, see Hieronymi (2008) and McHugh (2014).

and competence as it applies to attractions as on a par ignores the fine structure of epistemic agency. Nevertheless, appreciating this fine structure also reveals a more primitive stratum that is not reason-based. And here we see a major limit to the reasons program in epistemology.

3.4 The Challenge to Sufficiency

NECESSITY is not the only modal thesis that people question. Some also question SUFFICIENCY. To see why, consider:

(FORTUNATELY FALLACIOUS) Jones's rationale for believing $\langle P \rangle$ is $\langle Q \& R \rangle$. As it happens, the fact that $Q \& R$ is a sufficient abductive reason to believe P . But Jones believes $\langle P \rangle$ *via* bad deduction rather than good abduction, and doesn't realize that $Q \& R$ is a good abductive reason to believe P . He tries to deductively infer $\langle P \rangle$ from $\langle Q \& R \rangle$ by following some wildly invalid inference rule.

Several epistemologists have worried that cases like these refute SUFFICIENCY.²² It is easy to see the worry, which can be put in the form of a simple argument:

The Insufficiency Argument

1. Jones's rationale for believing $\langle P \rangle$ is $\langle Q \& R \rangle$.
2. This rationale happens to align with a sufficient normative reason to believe $\langle P \rangle$.²³
3. So, Jones believes $\langle P \rangle$ for a sufficient normative reason.
4. But Jones is doxastically unjustified.
5. So, SUFFICIENCY is false.

This can sound compelling.

It might be suggested that the difference between Jones and the person who uses good abduction is that one of them uses a reliable inference rule and the

²²Armstrong (1973: 98), Swain (1988: 467), Millar (1991: 57), Turri (2010) and Goldman (2012: 7) all discuss cases of this form.

²³What do we mean by 'aligning' with a normative reason? When spelling out someone's *rationale* for belief, it is natural to list *propositions*. A motivating reason *aligns* with a normative reason iff the former is a proposition made true by the fact that is the normative reason. We think of a person's having some rationale as an internally determined matter, while continuing to think of normative reasons as external.

other does not. But this is not enough. After all, imagine a third subject—call her Reckless—who possesses the same good reasons as Jones and *completely randomly* selects a reliable inference rule that recommends believing that P on the basis of Q&R. Suppose that by sheer luck, Reckless happens to select the good abduction rule. Reckless still fails to be doxastically justified.

It cannot plausibly be demanded that the subject must also know that the inference rule she uses is reliable. Real epistemic subjects can have inferentially justified beliefs in spite of lacking the concepts to articulate the inference rules they are using or to believe that they are using reliable rules. What is missing in the case of both Jones and Reckless is simply *inferential competence*. This goes beyond the simple reliabilist proposal, since a belief formed by a randomly selected reliable inference rule manifests no competence.²⁴

3.5 ϕ -ing for Normative Reasons as an Achievement

But that conclusion is not trivially incompatible with the thought behind SUFFICIENCY. The inference from (1-2) to (3) in the Insufficiency Argument presupposes that believing for a sufficient normative reason is something that one can pull off by dumb luck, by accidentally landing on a rationale that happens to align with a normative reason. Friends of reasons in epistemology could dispute this. We will consider two tactics.

3.5.1 Strategy 1: Connecting to Specific Favorers

The first proceeds from a simple observation. Normative reasons are not *mere* facts. They are facts that stand in *specific favoring relations* to doxastic attitudes. For example, some facts might favor some belief because its truth would *best explain* them, and *not* favor it by *deductively entailing* its truth.

In cases like FORTUNATELY FALLACIOUS, subjects crucially fail to be sensitive to the specific favoring relations between the relevant facts and their beliefs. By ‘sensitive’ here, we don’t merely mean something that can be captured by a Nozickian counterfactual. What we mean is that these subjects fail to manifest an inferential competence. Certain counterfactuals may serve as *evidence* of a subject’s failure to manifest such competence. In FORTUNATELY FALLACIOUS, we have this evidence: even if Q&R were not a good abductive reason, Jones would still have used the bad deductive rule. This is evidence that Jones is not in tune with Q&R’s specific favoring profile.

These observations suggest a way in which SUFFICIENCY could be compatible with a serious role for competence. For they suggest that:

²⁴See Greco (1999) and (2010) for illuminating further discussions of this point.

(A) If P is a sufficient reason to believe Q but S fails to manifest inferential competence in reasoning from P to Q, then S fails to be sensitive to the specific favoring relation between P and believing Q.

But if a subject is really insensitive to the specific favoring relation between P and believing Q, then S plausibly does not believe Q for the specific favoring reason constituted by the fact that P. So:

(B) If P is a sufficient reason to believe Q but S fails to manifest inferential competence in reasoning from P to Q, then S fails to believe Q for the specific favoring reason constituted by the fact that P.

This entails:

(C) S believes Q for the specific favoring reason constituted by the fact that P *only if* S manifests inferential competence in reasoning from P to Q.

Yet (C) does not undermine the thought behind SUFFICIENCY. (C) *supports* it, when that thought is expressed more precisely as follows:

(SUFFICIENCY*) If S believes that Q on the basis of the specific favoring reason constituted by the fact that P, then S's belief that Q is justified.

Basing on a specific favoring reason could then be understood as follows:

S believes that Q on the basis of the specific favoring reason constituted by the fact that P iff (i) P favors believing Q in way W, (ii) S believes Q on the basis of P, and (iii) (ii) holds *because* (i) holds.

The 'because' could then be analyzed in terms of the manifestation of inferential competence by S's having a rationale that aligns with a specific favorer.

3.5.2 Strategy 2: Apt Rationales

There is a related strategy that does not require qualifying SUFFICIENCY. To see it, an analogy with perception proves useful. Suppose you have an experience with the content <P>. And suppose it is a fact that P. Does it follow that you experience this fact? No. There may be no connection between the fact that P and your having a perceptual experience *as of* that fact. If a neuroscientist sees that P and causes some brain to have a visual experience *as of* this fact, that brain doesn't see that P. It enjoys a *veridical hallucination*.

It could be claimed that cases like FORTUNATELY FALLACIOUS structurally resemble veridical hallucination. The analogy:

HAVING A VISUAL EXPERIENCE WITH CONTENT <P> WHEN P

:

SEEING THAT P

::

ϕ -ING WITH A RATIONALE <P> THAT HAPPENS TO ALIGN WITH A NORMATIVE REASON R

:

ϕ -ING FOR THE NORMATIVE REASON R

This makes trouble for the Insufficiency Argument, especially if one appreciates the ontological difference between rationales and normative reasons.

Whether someone has <P> as a *rationale* is plausibly determined by her non-factive mental life. While *some* motivational locutions might work differently, talk of *rationales* is clearly non-factive. But normative reasons are facts, and these facts are often external. Seen in this light, the Insufficiency Argument makes a familiar mistake: it tries to factor an achievement that bridges the internal and the external into a mere composite of internal and external factors. Specifically, it factors the achievement of believing for a normative reason into a mere composite of having a certain rationale and that rationale's happening to correspond to a genuine normative reason.

One might say that what cases like FORTUNATELY FALLACIOUS really show is that this picture is false, not that believing for a sufficient normative reason is insufficient for justified belief. To make this precise, note that the move from (1 & 2) to (3) in the Insufficiency Argument presupposes:

(THE COINCIDENT RATIONALE VIEW) Believing for a normative reason is nothing more than (i) believing with a certain rationale, and (ii) that rationale's happening (perhaps by luck) to align with a normative reason.

The COINCIDENT RATIONALE VIEW is questionable. Believing for a normative reason is an achievement. Like other achievements, one might insist that it requires a kind of *non-accidentality*: (i) must hold *because* (ii) holds. But that is missing in Jones's case. It is a sheer accident that he lands on a rationale that aligns with a normative reason.

Such reflections recommend an alternative view:

(THE APT RATIONALE VIEW) Believing for a normative reason is an achievement: it requires (i) that one believes with a certain rationale, (ii) that this rationale aligns with a normative reason to believe what one believes, and (iii) that (i) holds *because* (ii) holds.

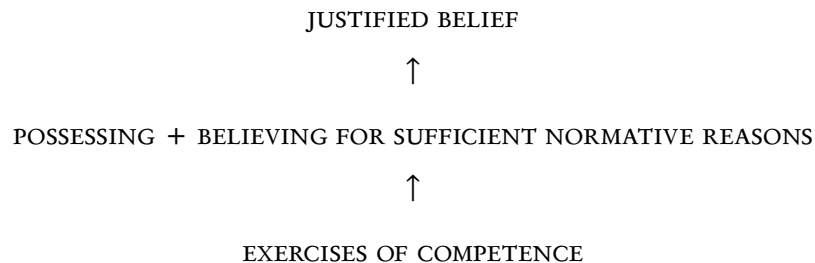
What does it take for (i) to hold *because* (ii) holds? We think it takes nothing other than the manifestation of an inferential competence. Partly because he uses a horrible inference rule, Jones fails to manifest such a competence. So, one might suggest, he fails to achieve belief for sufficient normative reasons.

3.5.3 The Upshot

We are unsure which of the two strategies is best. But there is a lesson to learn from both. Both crucially appeal to competence in explaining of the kind of basing required for doxastic justification. They simply add that this is compatible with the likes of SUFFICIENCY. So, although rejecting SUFFICIENCY or its ilk may be misplaced, the deeper point remains: manifesting competence is required for getting doxastically justified by normative reasons.

4 Relative Fundamentality and the Bedrock

This brings us to the Relative Fundamentality and Normative Bedrock Questions. Our take on the former is friendlier to lovers of reasons. Our models do vindicate the idea that possessing and believing for sufficient reasons are *more fundamental* than justification. Remember, after all, that our models had the following structure, where the arrows indicate metaphysical explanation:



Justification appears only at the highest level. So it is not normatively fundamental. Moreover, possessed reasons appear below justification. So, possessed reasons are more fundamental than justification.

However, possessed reasons can only occupy this position if they are themselves grounded in manifestations of competence. Indeed, if this picture isn't pursued, we cannot see how NECESSITY and SUFFICIENCY could be true. So, reasons of the sort relevant to justified belief are in the middle.

If those who advocate a reasons-first epistemology deny this claim, they are mistaken. Still, the *standard* form of opposition to reasons-involving epistemology is not on the mark. This opposition usually consists in rejecting modal theses like NECESSITY and SUFFICIENCY. While these theses are not uncontroversial, complaints about them fail to get at the heart of the matter.

Still, as we stressed, reasons can't be required to do the explanatory work at *all* levels of intellectual evaluation. There are three strata: (i) a deliberative stratum that contains beliefs, (ii) a stratum of attributable functioning that contains attractions to assent, and (iii) a stratum of passivity that contains the likes of itches. While properties like justification apply most plausibly to (i) and not (ii), it doesn't follow that (ii) and (iii) are a par with respect to evaluability. While itches cannot manifest competence and incompetence, attractions can.²⁵ And *this* kind of competence is not reasons-based: it is a foundational kind of competence that is a precondition for reasons to do significant work in epistemology.

So, there are two ways in which reasons of the sort relevant to justification cannot be normatively fundamental. Firstly, these reasons are possessed reasons, and possession is itself grounded in competence. Secondly, there is a level of evaluable intellectual functioning that isn't reasons-based. Indeed, functionings at this level *cannot* be reasons-based if reasons are to do work in epistemology: their competence is a *precondition* for reasons to do this work.

Of course, compatibly with all we have said, merely existing normative reasons may remain ungrounded in further normative properties. But merely existing reasons are simply not relevant to justification. So this point would not affect our primary conclusions. Such reasons might be seen as relevant to knowledge. But we believe that knowledge can be analyzed without appeal to them.²⁶ Indeed, we suspect that one kind of knowledge—namely, animal knowledge—is prior to the sort of justification we've been discussing.

5 Can the Priority of Competence Be Resisted?

Might the priority of competence be resisted? Well, prominent members of the reasons-first movement have given stories without appealing to competence.

²⁵Again, see Sosa (2007: Ch. 3) for further argument, and Sosa (2013, 2015) for further discussion of the three strata mentioned here.

²⁶See Sosa (2007, 2010) for details.

Against our claim that possession must be analyzed in terms of competence, these proponents argue that even *mere belief* in P is sufficient for possessing P as a normative reason. To accommodate the datum that incompetent beliefs cannot improve one's standing with respect to their consequences, they may hypothesize that when one manifests incompetence in believing P, the reason to believe constituted by P will be defeated by other possessed reasons.²⁷

Unfortunately, we find it hard to see how this proposal could work in all cases. Suppose it is a fact that P. The fact that P is an existing reason to believe P of the highest quality.²⁸ So if one really possessed this normative reason simply in virtue of believing P or being intuitively attracted to P, then one would appear to possess a great *pro tanto* reason. What possessed reasons defeat it when the belief or intuitive attraction is incompetently formed?

We see no sufficiently general answer. One need not possess any other relevant reasons that rebut P in all cases of this form. And one need not *possess* any undercutting defeaters in *all* cases of this form. For one will not necessarily have any kind of access to the fact that one's belief was incompetently formed. Indeed, one might be so self-deceived that one's belief or attraction strikes one—in virtue of further incompetence!—as competent. If, on the other hand, we are talking about P's weight as an objective reason, then the sheer fact that P is the best such reason there could be to believe P.

So it is hard to see how the defeat story could work in all the troubling cases. When it is a fact that P, this fact is the best objective reason there could be to believe P. Moreover, one does not come to *possess* any reason *against* continuing to believe P just in virtue of the fact that one's belief is incompetently formed. For the fact of incompetent formation may itself be inaccessible: one may be thoroughly self-deceived about one's own competence.

As far as we can see, there is nothing better to do than simply *insist* that P is defeated in the relevant sense while remaining possessed. But this is unsatisfying unless this insistence is backed by a story about how the defeat works. As we have said, we cannot see a sufficiently general story. If one wants to make it plausible that justification is a function of possessed reasons, it is better to analyze possession in terms of competence, and not allow incompetently formed beliefs and attractions to provide one with serious reasons.

Perhaps they can provide one with *a* reason—just a *weak* one? Here we could agree with Schroeder. Indeed, we do agree with him that intuitions about 'no reason' claims are unreliable. But the *weakness* of this possessed reason must be explained by something other than defeat by distinct possessed reasons. For what

²⁷This would be an extension of Schroeder (2011)'s strategy.

²⁸As Schroeder agrees; cf. his (2015).

does the explanatory work is the sheer fact of incompetent formation, which may be well beyond one's ken. So the objection needn't rest on any 'no reason' intuition. It rests on an intuition with which Schroeder can agree, but is barred—as far as we can see—from explaining.

There is a different way to dispute the place of competence afforded by our picture. Note that we have argued as follows:

1. The only reasons that could ground facts about justification are possessed reasons.
2. But in some foundational cases, there is no state that could, independently of having further normative features (e.g., being competently formed), ground possession of the relevant reasons.
3. If (2), there are more basic normative items than possessed reasons that help to ground facts about justification.
4. So, there are more basic normative items than possessed reasons that help to ground facts about justification.

One could reject (2) in a different way than the way we just considered. One could agree that only some of these states can provide reasons, but try to draw the line in descriptive, non-normative terms.

How? Recall our claim that the most promising normative notion to invoke at this level is competence. One strategy that a denier of (2) could adopt is to substitute a purely descriptive characterization of the dispositions that competence consists in, and draw the distinction between states that can and can't provide reasons in this way. Wouldn't it then be true that there is a state that could constitute our possession of the relevant reasons, where this state is characterizable in purely descriptive terms?

Yes. But, of course, this is what competence *consists in*. So, (2) still wouldn't fail. For the state couldn't constitute our possession of the relevant reasons *independently of having further normative features*, since the features to which the objector alludes *ground* competence! There is a clear dependence here. Unless the objector denies that competence is constituted by the disposition at issue—which would be self-defeating—she cannot reject (2).

6 The Deliberative Authority of Reasons

While reasons won't help us limn the deepest reaches of epistemic normativity, this fact does not deprive reasons of every kind of primacy. Possessed reasons may

retain a primacy of authority with respect to prospective deliberation about what to judge. For even if a current belief that P excels by all the marks of diachronic competence, it may not be permissible to continue to affirm the content of this belief if one presently fails to possess sufficient reasons for it.²⁹

To bring this out, consider the fact that a great many of our beliefs remain in storage long after we've forgotten the original factors that led us to form them. Often the most one can say when asked why one believes as one does is "I just remember". If one is now considering the question whether to continue to judge that P, how ought one to respond? It seems irrational and stubborn to rest content with leaving it at "I just remember". This is not to deny that the belief as it stands may be highly diachronically competent. Indeed, the diachronic competence of this belief may far outstrip one's ability to assess whether it is diachronically competent.

Consider an example. Suppose that deep in your past you were shamefully insulted. And suppose the memory abilities that you manifest in retaining the belief that this happened are of the highest in competence. Still, you might be in no position to appreciate this, and reasonably doubt yourself on topics of this sort. Faced with reasonable self-doubt and a lack of reasons now in view for your long-held belief, the answer to the deliberative question of whether to continue to judge that P seems to be 'No'. You should suspend.

There is a more striking converse to this point.³⁰ Suppose you originally formed some belief incompetently, and over time ignored heaps of evidence against it. All this counterevidence was forgotten, and your belief remains in storage. Within your current perspective, you might now have only other strong reasons to hold this belief, and to take yourself to have formed it in a highly competent manner. Indeed, your character may have changed, so that you wouldn't be epistemically negligent in further doxastic conduct. If you ask yourself whether you may continue to judge on the basis of this stored belief, the answer may be 'Yes'. This is despite the fact that this stored belief performs horribly just by the test of diachronic competence.³¹

²⁹Much of what follows is defended at greater length in Sosa (2013) and (2015).

³⁰Cases like the one to be discussed are presented in Goldman (2009a) and Greco (2005). While Goldman and Greco are right that the beliefs in these cases are in a clear sense incompetent, they oversimplify matters by not attending to intuitions about whether these subjects may continue to affirm the contents of these beliefs in prospective doxastic deliberation. They miss the *tension* in our intuitions about these cases.

³¹Is this in tension with our discussion of Schroeder? We don't think so. We are not claiming here that a stored belief that P gives one *P* as a reason, if unwittingly formed through incompetence. The point is that the *other* reasons that one now possesses can make it rational to *continue* to affirm the content of one's belief true even if the origins of that belief are bad. But those *other* reasons will not *themselves* be possessed unless the attractions that provide them manifest

So, with respect to the prospective, deliberative question of what now to judge, possessed normative epistemic reasons seem to have supreme authority.

There is a more fundamental rationale for this conclusion. When we consider whether to judge now that *P*, we must rule out not just *denying P* but also *suspending on P* as an alternative. And there are good reasons to think that suspension is a second-order attitude, targeted at the assessment of first-order beliefs and one's competence in forming them. After all, to suspend on *P* is not *simply* to lack belief and disbelief in *P*. One can be in that negative state even if one has never considered the question whether *P*. And simply adding that one has considered the question isn't enough. For one may not have yet decided to take any attitude, including suspension. Suspending is *intentionally neither disbelieving or believing*. If so, however, it is a second-order attitude, targeting first-order doxastic conduct.

If so, then what justifies suspending would also appear to be on the second-order. Properly deciding whether to retreat to agnosticism now will require assessing the standing of the attitude one already has, given the considerations now in view. The mere fact that one has some attitude—e.g., one “just remembers that *P*”—is no mark in favor of affirming its content now, when the question is so posed. To justify the attitude when suspension is an alternative, one must appeal either to currently possessed reasons for the attitude or reasons for thinking that it was competently formed in the first place.

Accordingly, possessed reasons have a kind of conclusive authority in deliberation about what now to judge. This is not to yield to skepticism about stored beliefs even when such beliefs are being evaluated in theoretical deliberation. Often enough there is much to be said from the current time-slice in favor of our diachronic competence. What is striking here is not any skeptical consequence. It is the fact that possessed reasons determine what one ought now to judge *even if they unwittingly mislead one about the diachronic competence that stored doxastic attitudes exhibit*.

Still, this authority is not unconditional. It is surely proper to act on animal knowledge if one engages in no further reflection on its content and has no plan to ascend to that deliberative level. To say otherwise *would* be intolerably skeptical. The claims of authority apply to the second-order *deliberative* question of what one ought now to judge—a question that need not and usually does not occupy us in workaday life.

competence. So competence remains in the story, enabling these reasons to do their work. The striking thing is just that these other possessed reasons can work to keep afloat some belief that was originally incompetently formed.

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