

Guided by the Truth: Objectivism and Perspectivism in Ethics and Epistemology

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****This is a draft. The final version of this paper is due to appear in *Towards an Expansive Epistemology: Norms, Action, and the Social Sphere*, ed. A. Floweree and B. Reed (Routledge). Please refer to the published version once available.****

Abstract

According to ethical objectivism, what a person should do depends on the facts, as opposed to their perspective on the facts. A long-standing challenge to this view is that it fails to accommodate the role that norms play in guiding a person's action. Roughly, if the facts that determine what a person should do lie beyond their ken, they cannot inform a person's deliberations. This paper explores two recent developments of this line of thought. Both focus on the epistemic counterpart to ethical objectivism, according to which what a person should believe depends on the facts, as opposed to their perspective on the facts. The suggestion in each case is that epistemic objectivism faces a distinctive problem in accommodating guidance. Insofar as objectivism concerning the epistemic domain stands or falls with objectivism concerning the ethical domain, this is a problem for objectivism more generally. In this paper, I show that those arguments are not successful. The upshot is that the objectivist – whether ethical or epistemic – need not reject the idea that norms serve a guiding function.

O truth of the earth! O truth of things! I am determined to press my way toward you;
Sound your voice! I scale mountains, or dive in the sea after you.

(Walt Whitman, 'Great Are the Myths')

1. Introduction

According to *ethical objectivism*, what a person ought to do is unconstrained by their epistemic situation – it depends on what is the case and not only on what the person knows, or what they are in a position to know, or their evidence, or similar. According to *ethical perspectivism*, in contrast, what a person ought to do is constrained by their epistemic situation – it depends only on what the person knows, or what they are in a position to know, or their evidence, or similar.¹ Ethical objectivists and perspectivists extend their view to other overall verdicts, such as those concerning what a person *may* do.

To illustrate the distinction, suppose that Franklin asks Sally for a peanut. As it happens, Franklin is allergic to peanuts. If he consumes one, he will suffer an anaphylactic shock.

¹ For ethical objectivism, see (Driver 2012; Graham 2010; Moore 1912; D. Ross 1930; Thomson 2008). For ethical perspectivism, see (Broome 2013; Dancy 2000; Gibbons 2013; Jackson 1991; Kiesewetter 2011; Lord 2015; Markovits 2010; Mason 2013; Prichard 1932; Raz 2011; Robertson 2011; D. Ross 1939; Scanlon 2008; Setiya 2014; Zimmerman 2008).

However, Sally is unaware of Franklin's condition, has no evidence to suggest that he is allergic, is in no position to find out that he is, and so on. Indeed, Franklin has assured Sally that he has no allergies. The objectivist is likely to say that Sally ought not to give Franklin a peanut, her ignorance notwithstanding, while the perspectivist is likely to say that she may do so, given her ignorance.

One might think that the dispute between objectivism and perspectivism is merely verbal. There are simply different senses of 'ought' and 'may' – one fact-relative, others perspective-relative. To return to the example, in the objectivist sense, Sally ought not to give Franklin the peanut, but in the perspectivist sense she may do so. There is no clash here.

However, while there are indeed multiple senses of 'ought', there remains a substantive issue.² Consider contexts of deliberation. A person asks, 'What ought I to do?' After deliberating, they draw a conclusion, which their decision or action embodies, and which they express by saying, 'I ought to do such-and-such'. Call the notion of ought which frames deliberation and figures in deliberative conclusions, the *deliberative* ought. The question of whether the deliberative ought is objective or perspectival is a non-trivial one. Ditto for 'may'.

Consider now *epistemic objectivism*. According to it, what a person may or ought to believe is unconstrained by their epistemic situation – it depends on what is the case and not only on what the person knows, or what they are in a position to know, or their evidence, or similar. According to *epistemic perspectivism*, what a person may or ought to believe is constrained by their epistemic situation – it depends only on what the person knows, or what they are in a position to know, or their evidence, or similar.³

I assume that objectivism in the ethical domain goes hand in hand with the corresponding view in the epistemic domain, and vice versa.⁴ More carefully, I assume that ethical objectivism is true if and only if epistemic objectivism is true. Call this assumption, *Uniformity*. While it strikes me as highly plausible, and while I think that there are principled reasons to accept it, I do not defend the assumption in what follows; instead, I grant it for the sake of argument. As will become apparent shortly, Uniformity is common ground among participants in the debates to which I contribute here.

A long-standing and influential line of thought in support of perspectivism regarding the ethical domain appeals to the idea of *guidance*.⁵ Very roughly, facts about what a person

² For the point to follow, see (Broome 2013, chap. 2; Graham 2010; Kiesewetter 2011; Lord 2015; Zimmerman 2008, chap. 1). For some resistance, see (Sepielli 2018).

³ While there are affinities, the dispute between epistemic objectivists and perspectivists does not map straightforwardly on to the dispute between epistemic *internalists* and *externalists*. Perspectivists need not think that what a person may or ought to believe depends on their internal mental states (Conee and Feldman 2004), let alone on their reflectively accessible states (Bonjour 1980; Chisholm 1988). And paradigmatic externalist views in epistemology (for example, Goldman 1979) do not have obvious counterparts in ethics. Finally, the externalist/internalist debate concerns *justification*, and it is a tricky question, which I am kept to sidestep, how that notion relates to the notions of what a person may or ought (in the deliberative sense) to do.

⁴ Gibbons (2010) and Littlejohn (2012) share this assumption. For discussion and defence, see (Way and Whiting 2016).

⁵ The other main line of thought appeals to 'three option' cases (see Jackson 1991; Parfit 2011; Regan 1980; J. Ross 2012; Zimmerman 2008). I take no stand here on whether it is successful. Epistemic counterparts to such cases are sometimes discussed (for example, Feldman 1988), though the parallel

may or ought to do must in some way be capable of guiding their actions. Ethical objectivism is supposed to be in tension with this. As H. A. Prichard puts it, if duty 'depends on certain facts of the situation', there will be cases in which, 'though we may have duties, we can never, strictly-speaking, do a duty [...] *because* it is a duty'. This shows, he continues, that our duty depends 'on our being in a certain attitude of mind towards the situation in respect of knowledge, thought, or opinion' (1932, 89). There are no doubt many ways to develop this suggestive line of thought.⁶ It is not my aim here to survey or assess them all. In what follows, I consider two recent guidance-based arguments due to Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way (2017) and to Philip Fox (2019). Those arguments are distinctive in their sustained focus on perspectivism and objectivism regarding the epistemic domain. In different ways, the idea behind both is that epistemic objectivism has a special problem accommodating the guiding role of obligations and permissions.⁷

McHugh and Way are primarily concerned to argue against epistemic objectivism. As they point out, however, if Uniformity holds, their argument also targets ethical objectivism (2017, 139–40). Fox, in contrast, is primarily concerned to argue against ethical objectivism. As he stresses, however, Uniformity figures as a premise in his argument (2019, 229–30),

To anticipate, I will suggest that both arguments are unsuccessful. That is not because I endorse objectivism in ethics or epistemology. I remain neutral on that issue here. The claim is rather that reflection on guidance does not count against it. While this is a negative result, I hope that the discussion is instructive insofar as it helps to clarify the commitments of the objectivist. That is something all parties should welcome. Moreover, while I do not accept the arguments from guidance, I agree with their proponents that it is fruitful to discuss positions in ethics alongside their counterparts in epistemology, and vice versa. I hope also that what follows serves to demonstrate this.

2. The truth norm

Before introducing and assessing the guidance-based arguments, I will address a preliminary matter. Consider:

Truth A person may believe a proposition if and only if that proposition is true.

To illustrate, consider again the case involving Franklin. According to Truth, Sally may believe that Franklin has a peanut allergy, his testimony notwithstanding, since that is true. By the same token, it is not the case that Sally may disbelieve this, hence, she ought not to do so.

A number of philosophers, myself included, maintain that a norm such as Truth governs belief.⁸ Are they thereby committed to epistemic objectivism, as McHugh and Way

with their ethical counterparts is not usually noted. For discussion, see (McHugh and Way 2017, 125–29; Way and Whiting 2016, 1883).

⁶ For recent versions, see (Dancy 2000, 59; Gibbons 2013, ch.6; Lord 2015; Mason 2017; Raz 2011, 109–11). For critical discussion, see (Way and Whiting 2017).

⁷ There is a tradition of defending epistemic internalism by appeal to guidance-based considerations (see, for example, Steup 1988). Cp. **n3**.

⁸ I defend Truth in (2010; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; Forthcoming). For similar principles, though often stated in different terms, see (Boghossian 2008; Engel 2013; Fassio 2011; Greenberg Forthcoming; Griffiths 1967; Littlejohn 2012; Lynch 2004; McDowell 1996, xi–xii; Millar 2009; Olinder 2012; Schroeder 2015;

(2017, 123) and Fox (2019, 239) seem to suggest? No. One might accept Truth but reject epistemic objectivism by denying that ‘may’ as it figures in the principle is to be understood in the deliberative sense. Presumably McHugh and Way and Fox assume that (many of) those who advance Truth intend it to be read in that way. For what it is worth, I doubt that. While they typically take Truth to play a privileged role relative to other norms to which belief is subject, that role need not be that of framing deliberation. Rather, the idea is typically that Truth plays a privileged *explanatory* role, in the sense that other norms which govern belief are derived from it. Explanatory priority need not, and often does not, entail deliberative priority. Suppose that a team is explanatorily posterior to its members. Still, a fan might be more concerned with the team than with its members. In any event, and setting aside matters of scholarship, I agree that, if ‘may’ does express the deliberative notion, then to accept Truth is to accept epistemic objectivism.

Does a commitment to epistemic objectivism entail a commitment to Truth? Arguably not. Consider a theory according to which whether a person may believe a proposition depends on whether to do so has beneficial consequences, irrespective of whether that the person has any knowledge or evidence to suggest that believing the proposition has such consequences. Such a view is objectivist, but it is inconsistent with Truth.

One might complain that, while this view qualifies as objectivist, it does not qualify as epistemic, even if the relevant benefits are epistemic (for example, understanding).⁹ I will not pursue this issue here. Instead, I will follow McHugh, Way and Fox and focus on the version of epistemic objectivism that accepts Truth.

3. Guided by reasons

McHugh and Way’s argument against objectivism proceeds in two stages, which I will introduce and explain in turn. Here is the first stage:¹⁰

- (1) Explanatorily independent evidence that *p* can give a person undefeated reasons for believing that *p*.
- (2) When a person reasons well from undefeated reasons, they thereby come to do what they do permissibly.
- (3) So, there can be cases in which a person reasons from explanatorily independent evidence that *p* to believing that *p*, and thereby comes to believe that *p* permissibly. (From 1, 2.)

In some cases, evidence for the truth of a proposition also explains the truth of that proposition. For example, that rain is falling is both evidence that the streets are wet and explains why they are wet. In other cases, evidence for the truth of a proposition does not also explain the truth of that proposition. For example, that the streets are wet is evidence that it is raining but does not explain why it is raining. According to (1), it is possible for evidence of the second sort to provide a reason for believing, a reason that is undefeated. This is not something an objectivist should deny.

Regarding (2), McHugh and Way (2017, 129) claim that a person does something permissibly if they do it *because* they may do it, not just when they may do it.¹¹ To

Shah 2003; Shah and Velleman 2005; Velleman 2000; Wedgwood 2002; Sylvan 2012; Wedgwood 2013). For influential critical discussion, see (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007; 2013).

⁹ For the point that norms with epistemic content are not thereby epistemic norms, see (Simion 2018).

¹⁰ For consistency of style, I have made some harmless alternations to the wording of this argument.

¹¹ Compare Kant’s (1785) distinction between acting *in accordance with* duty and acting *from* duty.

illustrate, consider a version of the above case in which Franklin is not allergic to peanuts but Sally thinks that he is. In that case, if Sally gives Franklin a peanut, she does what she may do, but she does not do it permissibly, so understood. According to (2), a person acts permissibly if they reason (or otherwise respond) well from an undefeated reason for doing something to doing that thing, where to reason well is to reason in a way that is suitably sensitive both to its being a reason and to its being undefeated. To put the idea another way: a person does something permissibly when they do it for the reasons why it is permissible as such.¹² I return to this below.

Here is the second stage:

- (4) According to epistemic objectivism, the fact that p determines that a person may believe that p .
- (5) When a person reasons from explanatorily independent evidence that p to believing that p , they thereby come to believe that p because of the evidence, and not because p .
- (6) So, if epistemic objectivism is true, then, when a person reasons from explanatorily independent evidence that p to believing that p , they do not come to believe that p permissibly. (From 4, 5.)
- (7) So, epistemic objectivism is false. (From 3, 6.)

Premise (4) is supposed to be a consequence of TRUTH.

Regarding (5), McHugh and Way write:

When evidence is explanatorily independent, your believing on its basis will not amount to believing because of the fact. For example, my belief that the sun will rise tomorrow, based on past sunsets, is not explained by the fact that the sun will rise tomorrow. To claim otherwise would be to posit explanatory relations that simply do not obtain in these cases. (2017, 132–33)

As noted above, given Uniformity, from (7) it follows that ethical objectivism is also false.

This is an interesting argument that presents the proponent of objectivism – ethical and epistemic – with a serious challenge. However, I think they can meet that challenge, as I will now explain.

3.1 The truth norm revisited

For the argument to go through, (4) needs to be read as follows:

- (4*) According to epistemic objectivism, *only* the fact that p determines that a person may believe that p .

If there are other facts than the fact that p that make it the case, according to epistemic objectivism, that a person may believe that p , then (6) does not follow. I suggest that a proponent of Truth, hence, of epistemic objectivism, need not accept (4*), hence, (4) so understood.

A norm such as Truth expresses an overall verdict. As stated, it is silent on the reasons that determine this verdict. It is consistent with Truth that considerations other than the truth of a proposition suffice to make it the case that a person may believe it. Of course, those considerations need in some way to establish the truth of the proposition, but they need not explain it. So, if a person believes a proposition on the basis of

¹² For related ideas, see (Arpaly and Schroeder 2013; Lord 2017; Markovits 2010; Way 2017).

explanatorily independent evidence, they might believe for a reason that makes it permissible to do so, hence, permissibly.

McHugh and Way anticipate a reply along these lines – an appeal, in effect, to overdetermination – and offer two responses. The first reply rests on a constraint I discuss in §4.2 below. I postpone assessment of it until then.

Their second point is that, given epistemic objectivism, the reason provided by explanatorily independent evidence will be ‘far *weaker*’ than the reason provided by the truth of the proposition (2017, 136). Why? Because ‘the weight of a reason reflects or is a measure of what opposing reasons it can outweigh’ (2017, 123). According to the objectivist, the fact that it is raining is a reason for believing that it is raining. After all, given Truth, it makes it the case that a person may believe that it is raining.¹³ Moreover, the fact that it is raining is a reason for believing that it is raining that no reason can defeat. If it is raining, it immediately follows from Truth that a person may believe this. Now consider the fact that the streets are wet. This too is a reason for believing that it is raining. But there are some reasons against believing that might in certain circumstances defeat it, say, reliable testimony that the streets were recently cleaned.

Having made this point, McHugh and Way go on to suggest that a person does not do something permissibly if they do it for an undefeated but weak reason when there are stronger undefeated reasons for doing it. Suppose, for example, that there are two undefeated reasons for Schroeder to play the piano – that he enjoys it, and that he promised to do so – where the first is much weaker than the second. If Schroeder plays the piano for the reason that he enjoys it, he does what he may do, but, one might think, he does not do it permissibly.¹⁴ By parity of reasoning, if Patty believes that it is raining for the reason that the streets are wet, and not for the reason that it is raining, then she does not believe permissibly.

On behalf of the objectivist, I offer two responses to this. Note, first, that talk of doing something permissibly is somewhat artificial. That is not an objection, but it might be instructive to consider more familiar ways of picking out the same status. And McHugh and Way suggest (2017, n. 21) that doing something permissibly is a matter of doing it *justifiedly*.¹⁵ Expressed in this way, their claims are less intuitive. In the practical case, the objectivist might insist, Schroeder *does* play the piano justifiedly when he plays for the undefeated reason that he enjoys it, even if he would be *more* justified in playing for the reason that he promised. (Compare: one person might be tall, even if another is taller.) Likewise, in the epistemic case, Patty is justified in believing that it is raining for the reason that the streets are wet, even if she would be *more* justified in believing this for the reason that it is raining.

Perhaps another way to get a purchase on the notion of doing something permissibly is in terms of *criticizability*. If a person does something permissibly, they do it in such a way that they are not open to criticism. If Schroeder plays the piano because he enjoys it, and not for the reason that he promised, he is open to criticism. By parity of

¹³ Perhaps there is room for the epistemic objectivist who accepts Truth to deny this but I will not explore that prospect.

¹⁴ To accommodate this point, McHugh and Way amend (2) above. I set this complication aside.

¹⁵ More carefully, it is to do it in a way that is *ex post* justified, not *ex ante*. For this distinction, see (Goldman 1979).

reasoning, by objectivist lights, if Patty believes that it is raining for the reason that the streets are wet, and not for the reason that it is raining, then she is open to criticism.

This brings me to the second response to McHugh and Way's defence of (4). I grant that, in the practical case, Schroeder does not permissibly play the piano, insofar as he is criticisable. However, I deny that this verdict carries across to the epistemic case. A plausible diagnosis for what is problematic in the practical case is that Schroeder manifests excessive concern for one value – personal enjoyment – or insufficient concern for another – fidelity. That is not what is happening in the epistemic case, since there only one value is at stake: truth.¹⁶ If Patty believes that it is raining for the reason that the streets are wet, and not for the reason that it is raining, then she does not manifest a lack of concern for, or insensitivity to, the truth of what she believes.

One might revise the example from ethics so that it does not involve distinct values. Suppose that Schroeder made a trivial promise to Lucy to play and also made a solemn promise to Violet to play. Suppose further that Schroeder plays on the basis of the promise to Lucy, not the promise to Violet. In this case too, one might think, Schroeder does not play permissibly (in the relevant sense). This looks analogous to the epistemic case.

However, it remains importantly different. In the revised case, Schroeder shows excessive concern for one instance of a value – fidelity – or insufficient concern for another instance of that value. That is not what is happening in the epistemic case, since there is only one instance of the relevant value: truth.

3.2 Ways of believing permissibly

Perhaps there are further strategies available to McHugh and Way for defending (4). I will now suggest that, even granting (4), their guidance-based argument against objectivism is unsuccessful.

The objectivist can deny that (6) follows from (4) and (5). It is true that, if a person reasons from explanatorily independent evidence that p to believing that p , they do not come to believe that p because p . It does not follow that they do not come to believe that p permissibly. As (2) states, one way to come to do something permissibly is by doing it for the reasons that make it permissible, that is, for the reasons why they may do it. But it remains to be seen that that is the only way.

Consider first a practical case. Marcie has conclusive evidence that Sherman needs to receive life-saving medication, say, that he exhibits certain symptoms. She reasons from that evidence – as evidence of Sherman's need – to a decision to give the medicine. In this case, it seems, Patty gives the medicine permissibly. But, for the objectivist, the basis on which Patty gives the medicine does not explain why doing so is permissible – it is only evidence that doing so is permissible.

Now consider an epistemic case. Patty knows that the streets are wet. This is conclusive evidence in the circumstances that it is raining. She reasons from that evidence – as evidence that it is raining – to believing that it is raining. In this case, it seems, Patty believes permissibly. But, for the objectivist, the basis on which she believes does not explain why it is permissible – it is only evidence that so believing is permissible.

¹⁶ Talk of values in this context is just a convenient way of talking of what matters from an ethical or epistemic point of view.

McHugh and Way anticipate a response of this sort:

It's not generally true that doing something because of evidence for p [...] is a way of doing that thing because p . In particular, when p is not among, and does not explain, the considerations for which you do something – that is, when those considerations are explanatorily independent of p – it is hard to see how you count as doing that thing because of p . For example, if I buy new matches because the old ones are spent, I do not thereby count as buying matches because the wood burned. (2017, 135)

The point here is that, as they characterise it, a person does something permissibly only if the fact that it is permissible, or some fact which explains why it is permissible, explains why they do it, that is, only if there is some explanatory connection between their acting and the permissibility of doing so. I suggest that the objectivist reject this understanding of what it is to do something permissibly as unduly restrictive. Of course, McHugh and Way are free to define terms as they like but, as noted above, the notion of doing something permissibly is supposed to relate to more familiar notions like that of doing something justifiedly, or in a way that is not criticisable, or to provide a gloss on the notion of following a norm, rather than just according with it.

The objectivist can insist that, if a person does something in response to evidence that indicates or reveals that what they do is permissible and/or why it is permissible, and do so in a way that is suitably sensitive to the status of that evidence, then in the relevant sense they do it permissibly (cf. Whiting Forthcoming).

McHugh and Way might respond by simply stipulating that doing something permissibly is to be understood in their restrictive sense – a person does something permissibly only when they do it because they may do so or for the reasons why they may do so. But then it is open to the objectivist to reject premise (2). When a person reasons well from undefeated reasons, they might not thereby come to do what they do permissibly *in the restricted sense*, since those reasons might not be among those that explain why the person may do the thing.

3.3 Summing up

McHugh and Way argue that epistemic objectivism cannot explain the way in which permissions to believe, or the considerations that determine them, guide a person's deliberations. I have suggested that that argument rests on views about what grounds epistemic permissions and about what it is to be guided by them that an objectivist need not accept. I turn now to Fox's argument against objectivism, one which appeals to the guiding role played by theories of what a person may or ought to do, rather than their subject matter.

4. Guided by theory

Here is Fox's (2019) argument against ethical objectivism:¹⁷

- (A) It is possible for an ethical theory to correctly guide action.
- (B) If ethical objectivism is true, it is not possible for an ethical theory to correctly guide action.
- (C) So, ethical objectivism is false. (From A, B.)

¹⁷ Again, I have made some changes to Fox's presentation of the arguments that do not affect their substance.

Given Uniformity, it follows that epistemic objectivism is false.

Most of the action concerns step (B) but I will pause to unpack (A). By an ethical theory, Fox has in mind a theory such as Kantianism that both states what a person may or ought to do in some circumstances, say, keep a promise, and explains why they may or ought to do it, say, because it respects autonomy, or it accords with the categorical imperative, or whatever.

Fox's premise (A) is quite modest. It is not that agents are always guided in acting or deliberating by an explicit or implicit grasp of an ethical theory, or that in every context an ethical theory can provide suitable guidance, but only that there are some cases in which it does so.

In relation to (A), Fox offers a partial characterisation of what it is for an ethical theory to guide an agent in acting (2019, 230–34). It requires:

- (i) that there be some reason to act that, according to the theory, is decisive;
- (ii) that the person believe that the relevant consideration is a decisive reason for acting; and
- (iii) that they believe this for a theory-based reason.

It is easy to illustrate what is meant by a 'theory-based' reason in this context. Suppose that Schroeder keeps his promise to play the piano. According to Kantianism, what makes this a reason is that it respects autonomy. So, Schroeder satisfies (iii) if he believes that his promise is a reason for playing on the grounds that it respects autonomy. Suppose, however, that Schroeder in fact believes it on the grounds that it maximizes utility. In that case, although Schroeder keeps his promise by playing, he is not guided by Kantianism. His reason for believing that the promise is a decisive reason is not theory-based in the relevant sense.

One might query Fox's conception of guidance by a theory but, on behalf of the objectivist, I grant it. I also grant premise (A), the claim that theories can guide action, so understood. My focus is on (B), to which I now turn.

4.1 Infection

In support of premise (B), Fox offers what she calls *the Infection Argument* (2019, 239):

- (I) Epistemic objectivism implies that it is impossible for a person to believe ethical propositions for theory-based reasons.
- (II) A person is correctly guided by an ethical theory only if it is possible for them to believe ethical propositions for theory-based reasons.
- (III) So, epistemic objectivism implies that it is not possible for a person to be correctly guided by an ethical theory. (From I, II.)
- (IV) Ethical objectivism implies epistemic objectivism.
- (V) So, ethical objectivism implies that it is not possible for a person to be correctly guided by an ethical theory. (From III, IV.)

The conclusion (V) is a restatement of (B) in Fox's main argument from guidance. (II) follows from Fox's characterisation of what it is for a theory to guide. (IV) follows from Uniformity. So, the critical premise is (I).

Fox defends (I) as follows. First, he claims that, if epistemic objectivism is true, then the truth of a proposition is a reason to believe it. Plausibly, and to return to an earlier theme, this is a consequence of the truth norm for belief. Moreover, Fox adds, if

epistemic objectivism is true, then the truth of a proposition is the *only* reason for believing it. In that case, condition (iii) on being guided by a theory is not met. Schroeder cannot believe that the promise is a decisive reason for playing for the reason that it respects autonomy. He can only believe it for the reason that it is true, that it is, for the reason that the promise is a decisive reason for playing. So, Schroeder cannot believe that the promise is a decisive reason for a theory-based reason.

A response might be to say that, according to Kantianism, the decisive reason for playing is not that it keeps a promise but, precisely, that it respects autonomy. In that case, Schroeder might satisfy condition (iii) if he believes that the fact that it respects autonomy is a decisive reason for playing, and believes this because it is true. But, Fox continues, even if it is possible to believe some propositions on the basis of their truth, it is not possible to believe normative propositions on that basis. I will not rehearse here the considerations he offers in support of this claim.

4.2 Impact

This is another interesting argument that presents the opponent of objectivism – ethical and epistemic – with a serious challenge. There are, however, various points at which the objectivist might try to resist it. I focus on the following.

The objectivist can, and should, deny that the *only* reason for believing a proposition is that it is true. To return to an earlier theme, it is consistent with Truth that facts which explain, or which otherwise provide evidence for, the truth of a proposition are reasons for believing it. So, Fox's defence of (I) of the Infection Argument is unsuccessful. In turn, Fox's argument for premise (B) of his version of the guidance argument is unsuccessful.

In support of the claim that, given objectivism, only the fact that a proposition is true is a reason to believe, Fox appeals to the following:¹⁸

Impact Constraint If some fact is a reason for a person to do something, then it could make a difference, or contribute, to whether they may or ought to do that thing.

As noted in §3.1, McHugh and Way also appeal to a version of this constraint in support of their argument against objectivism.

To see how the Impact Constraint bears on the issue at hand, suppose that it is true that it is raining. In that case, it follows from Truth that Patty may believe this. Whether the streets are wet, indeed, whether anything else is the case, makes no difference to what Patty may believe. So, given the Impact Constraint, only the truth is a reason to believe.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I suggest that the objectivist reject the Impact Constraint. Grant for the sake of argument that the fact that the streets are wet makes no difference to whether Patty may believe that it is raining. Still, it bears other hallmarks of a reason. Reasons are considerations that speak in favour of doing something. And the fact that the streets are wet does speak in favour of believing that it is raining. Reasons are good bases for acting. And the fact that the streets are wet is a good basis for believing that it is raining. Reasons are premises of good reasoning. And it is good reasoning for Patty to infer from the fact that the streets are wet that it is raining.¹⁹ More generally, facts that

¹⁸ Fox formulates the constraint only in terms of what a person ought to do but it is clearly supposed to generalise.

¹⁹ Here I draw on Wodak's (Forthcoming) defence (in a different context) of the claim that there can be explanatorily redundant reasons.

do not make a difference to what a person may or ought to do might nonetheless display the characteristic features of reasons.

A proponent of the Infection Argument might suggest that this only postpones the issue. They might ask how, on the objectivist view, facts other than the fact that a proposition is true can serve as a good basis for believing it, for example. The response to McHugh and Way above goes some way to addressing this. Rather than explore it further, I will suggest that, even if the objectivist grants the Impact Constraint, they can still deny that only the truth of a proposition is a reason for believing it.

If the Impact Constraint holds, then it rules out explanatorily independent evidence as a reason for believing. But it does not rule out facts that make a difference to whether, or contribute to an explanation of why, some proposition is true, and thereby make a difference to whether, or contribute to an explanation of why, it is permissible to believe it. For example, that the air is cooling might explain why it is raining. In making a difference to whether it is raining, it thereby makes a difference (by the lights of Truth) to whether Patty may believe that it is raining. So, it is consistent with the Impact Constraint that the fact that the air is cooling is a reason for her to believe that it is raining.²⁰

4.3 Weighing

So, the objectivist can say either that the Impact Constraint is false or that it does not support the claim that, given Truth, only the truth of a proposition is a reason for believing it. However, Fox provides additional support for that claim by appeal to a further constraint on reasons (2019, 243):

Weighing Constraint If some fact is a reason for or against doing something, then there is a situation in which it makes sense to weigh up that fact and other reasons in deliberation about whether to do that thing.

This Constraint admits of a weaker and stronger interpretation. Consider first:

Weak Weighing If some fact is a reason for or against doing something, then there is a situation in which it makes sense to weigh up that fact and *some* other reasons in deliberation about whether to do that thing.

This constraint is satisfied in the sort of case under consideration. Suppose that Patty is deliberating as to whether to believe that it is raining. She might (intelligibly) weigh the fact that the street streets are wet against the fact that the weather report says that it is not raining, or alongside the fact that it is cloudy. Nothing in epistemic objectivism, or Truth, rules this out.

Fox's point, however, is that those facts cannot be weighed with or against the fact *that it is raining*. When deliberating as to whether to believe that it is raining, it makes no

²⁰ Here the fact about air cooling *causally* explains the fact about rain. But the point could be made with a different example involving non-causal explanation. The fact that droplets formed around hygroscopic nuclei condensed from atmospheric water vapor are falling under gravity (or something along those lines) *constitutively* explains why it is raining. Given epistemic objectivism, it thereby explains why Patty may believe this. This assumes (in line with orthodoxy) that the relevant sense of explanation is transitive (Clark and Liggins 2012, 817–18). For the claim that there is not a deep difference between the two types of explanation, see (Bennett 2017, chap. 4).

sense for Patty to reason as follows, ‘Well, on the one hand it is raining, but on the other hand the streets are dry, and yet the streets are wet’. More generally, if the fact that a proposition is true is a reason for believing it, there are no other facts with which it might (intelligibly) be weighed when deliberating as to whether to believe that proposition. So, Fox intends the Weighing Constraint to be read as follows:

Strong Weighing If some fact is a reason for or against doing something, then there is a situation where it makes sense to weigh up that fact and *any* other reasons in deliberation about whether to do that thing.

This constraint is too strong: it rules out all derivative or non-fundamental reasons. Consider a practical case (and assume for illustrative purposes that some version of Kantianism is true). The fact that Sherman needs to receive life-saving medication is a reason for Marcie to give him the pills. So too is the fact that it will save Sherman’s life. So too is the fact that it will save a person’s life. So too is the fact that it will respect a person’s autonomy. So too is the fact that to do otherwise is to violate the categorical imperative. And so on. These are all reasons for Marcie to give the pill. But they are not independent of one another. As a result, when deliberating as to whether to give the pills, it makes no sense for Marcie to weigh the fact that it will save Sherman’s life, for example, alongside the fact that it will save someone’s life. That is double-counting.

The point does not turn on the example. Whenever one reason to do something is derived from another, their weights are not independent, and so it makes no sense to treat them in deliberation as separate considerations bearing on whether to do that thing.²¹ Since Strong Weighing is incompatible with derivative reasons, all parties should reject it.

In view of this, a defender of the Infection Argument might propose:

Moderate Weighing If some fact is a reason for or against doing something, then there is a situation where it makes sense to weigh up that fact and any other *explanatorily independent* reasons in deliberation about whether to do that thing.

This constraint does not rule out derivative reasons. However, for that very reason, it does not support the claim that, given epistemic objectivism, only the truth of a proposition is a reason for believing it. To return to the earlier example, it is consistent with Moderate Weighing that Schroeder can believe that the promise is a decisive reason for playing for the reason that it respects autonomy. For the objectivist, and assuming Kantianism, the fact that it respects autonomy, or its status as a reason for believing, is *not* explanatorily independent of the fact that the promise is a decisive reason for playing, or its status as a reason for believing. More generally, the objectivist need not say that reasons for believing a proposition (additional to its truth) are explanatorily independent.

4.4 Summing up

It remains to be seen that, if ethical objectivism is true, it is not possible for an ethical theory to correctly guide action. Fox’s argument for this depends, crucially, on the claim

²¹ That is not to say that derivative reasons have no weight, only that their weight is not independent of the weight of the reason(s) from which they derive.

that, if epistemic objectivism is true, only the truth of a proposition is a reason for believing it. This, I have argued, is false, or at least that Fox has yet to establish it.

5. Conclusion

What should I do? What should I think? According to the objectivist, these questions, when asked in the context of deliberation, answer to the facts. According to the perspectivist, in contrast, these questions, when asked in the context of deliberation, answer to a person's perspective on the facts. A persistent worry about objectivism is that it clashes with the idea that the norms to which a person is subject, or the reasons that ground them, must in some important sense be capable of guiding that person. This problem might seem especially acute when focusing on the epistemic domain.

One response is to reject the guidance intuition, that is, to deny that there is any deep or robust connection between the norms to which a person is subject and their deliberations.²² A lesson to emerge from the preceding is that the objectivist need not respond in this way. Like the perspectivist, they can accept that, if a person should do or think something, they can be guided to doing or thinking it by the considerations that make this the case.²³

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²² For relevant discussion, see (Srinivasan 2015).

²³ Thanks to Philip Fox and Jonathan Way for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this material. Thanks also to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding in support of this research (AH/S006338/1).

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