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## **The norm of reasoning**

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents and defends a new account of reasoning. Reasoning is essentially subject to a constitutive norm, the norm of following sufficient normative reasons. Instead of rule-following, following normative reasons is essential. After clarifying the view, three arguments in its support will be presented. They concern the scope of (correct) reasoning, the value of (correct) reasoning, and the relation between reasoning and treating a consideration as a reason. Two objections – concerning the knowledge norm of belief and cases of improperly treating a consideration as a reason – will be dealt with.

### **Keywords**

Reasoning; inference; reasons; justification; norms; basing.

## **1. Introduction**

Some epistemologists have argued that there is a constitutive norm of belief. The truth-lovers think it is truth, the knowledge-lovers think it is knowledge, and so on. The main goal of this paper will be to spell out an account of reasoning that has a constitutive norm as its center and to defend it to some extent. Reasoning too is subject to a constitutive norm, in the same sense in which belief is said to be subject to a constitutive norm. I will specify the content of this norm of reasoning, and I will provide some initial arguments in its favor, though this will fall short of a full-scale defense.

There is a very natural and plausible conception of reasoning that runs as follows. Reasoning is a distinctive activity of *transiting* between, or *linking* of, some mental states. (For the present purposes we can leave it open whether these mental states have to be conscious in any interesting sense.) Not any old transition or linking is an instance of reasoning, however. Only if it meets some further condition does it count as reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

I submit that what distinguishes reasoning from non-reasoning is a *constitutive norm*, the norm of reasoning, which prescribes *responding to a sufficient normative reason*. What is normatively essential to reasoning is not rule-following but following sufficient normative reasons. This is the heart of the proposed account of reasoning – the ‘normative reasons account of reasoning’ – which I will present, clarify, and defend (to some extent) in this paper.

If a piece of reasoning meets the norm, and thus is correct, the reasoner *responds to a sufficient normative reason* or *responds for a sufficient normative reason*; the reasoner’s response – the immediate outcome of the reasoning – is *based on* the sufficient normative reason to which the reasoner responds; the reasoner *follows* this sufficient normative reason.<sup>2</sup> (As we will see later, in section 4, ‘responding to a sufficient normative reason’ has to be understood as *properly* and *adequately* responding to it. For now, we can leave out these qualifications and take them to be implicitly understood.) This is the content of the constitutive norm of reasoning.

The account to be proposed relies on reasons and following reasons. Reasons have turned out to be very much suitable as a basis for understanding other normative phenomena. This is the so-called ‘reasons-first approach’. One way of looking at the present paper is to see it as joining this approach. (Please note, however, that this does not presuppose that normative reasons cannot be naturalized. Reasons primitivism need not be accepted.) Another way of looking at it is to see it as ‘demystifying reasoning’. For it argues that once you have reasons and following reasons - something that everybody needs to embrace anyway - you already have what it takes to get an account of reasoning; you don't need anything more. The impression that it might not be sufficient is perhaps fostered by a tendency to overgeneralize from reasoning to all inference. As we will see, reasoning is a specific kind of inference. This kind of inference, reasoning, is subject to the constitutive norm

of following sufficient normative reasons. (This is compatible with holding that other inferences are also norm-governed, where the norm is a different one.)

In the literature, one can find hints at the normative reasons account of reasoning, though I am currently not aware of a full and explicit statement of it. Jonathan Dancy, for example, writes:

My general picture of reasoning sees it as a process in which we work from a detailed conception of the situation that confronts us to a response that is of the sort most favored by the relevant considerations, taken as a whole. (Dancy 2018, 8)

If we interpret the ‘favoring’ as the favoring provided by normative reasons, we here find the idea of reasoning as responding to normative reasons. However, the statement should be rephrased as a statement of the *norm* of reasoning. Reasoning can fall short of satisfying its norm of responding to a normative reason; even then it is still reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ralph Wedgwood writes:

Reasoning, I shall assume, is the process of *revising one’s beliefs or intentions, for a reason*. (Wedgwood 2006, 660)

If ‘reason’ here is interpreted as *normative* reason, this is in the vicinity of the normative account.<sup>4</sup> Again, however, the statement should be about the *norm* of reasoning, not about reasoning itself. Only *successful* – fully successful – reasoning consists in responding to a (sufficient) normative reason. (We will look at the idea of appealing to *motivating* instead of normative reasons in section 4.)

The normative reasons account of reasoning has significant virtues. Some of them will be spelled out in what follows. While this does not constitute a full-scale defense of the normative reasons account, it makes a good initial case for taking the account seriously, I believe.

Here is the plan of the paper. In section 2, I will present three further important clarifications as to how ‘reasoning’ and ‘constitutive norm’ are to be understood. In section 3, arguments in favor of the proposed account will be presented, which will provide some opportunity for further clarifications. The first argument for the

normative account of reasoning looks at the scope of reasoning and responding to normative reasons, which seem to be matching each other very nicely. The normative account of reasoning can explain this fact very elegantly. (Here we will also see the need to distinguish between reasoning and other kinds of inference.) The second argument is the argument from the *value* of correct reasoning. If correct reasoning leads to justified attitudes, the value is obvious: uncontroversially, justified attitudes have a positive normative standing. The third argument is about the relation between reasoning on the one hand and treating some consideration as a normative reason and motivating reasons on the other hand. A very plausible connection can be established that props up the normative reasons account once again.<sup>5</sup> In section 4, two objections will be considered and answered. The first objection concerns theoretical reasoning and the *knowledge norm of belief*. The second objection is about cases of *improperly* treating a normative reason as a normative reason, as put forward by John Turri (2010). Section 5 will be a short concluding section.

## 2. Three important clarifications

In this section, three further clarifications are presented that are important to see what the target phenomenon is and what a ‘constitutive norm’ is supposed to be.

First, by ‘correct reasoning’ I do not mean the merely *conditionally* correct transition, but rather the *unconditionally* correct transition. This is analogous to the distinction between validity and soundness. As I will use the notion, ‘correct reasoning’ is not only correct in that it has the potential to lead to ‘good outcomes’, or that it would lead to ‘good outcomes’ if it started with ‘good inputs’; it is reasoning that actually leads to ‘good outcomes’. It corresponds to soundness rather than validity, as it were.<sup>6</sup> When reasoning correctly, in this non-conditional sense, one arrives at a correct attitude – and one forms this attitude for a sufficient normative reason. So, one arrives at a justified attitude. The rationale for this view is that we should start with the good or optimal case first, and then see what can go wrong. Once we have understood the case of correct reasoning, we can identify all the possible deficiencies and study the worse cases.

Having said that, we can add a conciliatory note. There is a way to capture the idea that reasoning can be ‘good’ or ‘kind of correct’ even if it starts with an incorrect premise. That is, a particular transition might be the manifestation of a *competence* of the thinker to comply with the norm of reasoning. Even if the particular instance is not correct reasoning, since it fails to start with a possessed reason, it might manifest a disposition or competence to reason correctly. This would amount to a kind of ‘secondary assessment’ of the transition. Such a ‘secondary assessment’ has been proposed in connection with the knowledge-norm of belief by Timothy Williamson; and similarly, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio has proposed that dealing with higher-order defeater can involve a competence (‘good disposition’) to revise one’s attitude in the light of higher-order defeating evidence (even at the cost of sometimes giving up knowledge when this evidence is misleading).<sup>7</sup> We can apply the same idea in the case of reasoning and its norm. One can have a competence or disposition to comply with the norm of reasoning in good conditions and still, on a particular occasion, fail to reason correctly since one is in bad conditions and fails to possess a (sufficient) reason as one’s premise. In that way, the intuition that ‘conditionally correct’ reasoning is somehow good or correct can be preserved, or close enough, while remaining steadfast about what genuinely correct reasoning requires.<sup>8</sup>

Second, ‘reasoning’ will be understood broadly here. It is not necessarily restricted to propositional attitudes as inputs. At least, this is a live option. (We will look at the output side in the next section.) The premises could also be perceptual states which, arguably, are non-doxastic (and probably also non-conceptual) states. For example, if a medical expert looks at an X ray picture of a patient, she can immediately reason from what she sees (a certain visual pattern exhibited by the picture) to the belief that the patient is likely suffering from condition C. This could also count as reasoning.<sup>9</sup> To impose a restriction to propositional attitudes on the input side would be arbitrary and artificial, at least without any further argument. In addition, this allows us to embrace a form of foundationalism with the option of foundational beliefs that are justified but not justified through some other (justified) beliefs. The foundational beliefs could simply be beliefs held for perceptual reasons that are given by (non-doxastic) perception.<sup>10</sup> So perhaps, reasoning can proceed from perception, and the normative reasons account has no problem accommodating this

possibility.<sup>11</sup> (Very often, of course, one reasons from perception to perceptual belief and then from this perceptual belief to some further belief or intention. Reasoning sometimes has proper sub-reasonings as parts. The chains can be long, and sometimes the conclusion can be the belief that a certain hypothesis is not plausible at all or that a certain question should be ignored. Each step or sub-reasoning, then, is subject to the norm of reasoning.)

Third, what is it to speak of a 'constitutive norm'? I take it that a constitutive norm is what philosophers have been talking about when talking about the norm of belief. The norm of reasoning is supposed to be 'constitutive' in the same sense as the norm of belief. Let me characterize it as follows. A phenomenon is subject to a constitutive norm just in case it is essentially governed by the norm. The norm states the essential correctness condition of the phenomenon. For example, belief might essentially be subject to the truth norm. This means that it is constitutive (essential) of belief that it has truth as its correctness condition. In other words, belief has a built-in standard, the norm of truth. (It can be evaluated by other standards or norms as well, such as the practical standard of having been formed quickly (a standard of using little cognitive resources), for example. Arguably this would not be a constitutive norm of belief. In contrast, that belief has truth as its standard of correctness is part of the nature of belief.) Moreover, it is important to note that a constitutive norm can be violated. A belief can fail to meet the norm of belief; a reasoning can fail to meet the norm of reasoning. But it is still a belief - an incorrect belief; it is still a reasoning - an incorrect reasoning. If a subject believes or reasons in a way that fails to meet the relevant norm, the belief or reasoning is incorrect, though it is still a belief or a piece of reasoning. Here it is important to see that there is a second notion of a 'constitutive norm'. This notion is used by John Searle, for example, when talking of rules of two kinds, constitutive rules and regulative rules.<sup>12</sup> Arguably, if one does not comply with the rules (norms) of chess, one does not play chess (strictly speaking). Constitutive norms of games are, thus, not constitutive in the sense in which belief and reasoning are subject to a constitutive norm; they are not about correctness and incorrectness. Satisfying a 'constitutive norm' in Searle's sense is a necessary condition of the phenomenon, and it is a non-prescriptive condition.<sup>13</sup> In the present paper, constitutive norms in this second, Searlean sense do not play any role. It is all about

constitutive norms in the first sense, i.e., about essential correctness conditions. The constitutive norm of reasoning in this sense is following sufficient normative reasons.<sup>14</sup>

Here, then, is the official statement of the account. Reasoning is subject to a constitutive norm, the norm of following (responding to) sufficient reasons for the relevant attitude (the conclusion). 'Reasons' here mean *normative* reasons (i.e., reasons that genuinely favor the attitude in question, in contrast to mere motivating reasons). Reasoning is correct if and only if it meets this norm. Correct reasoning is not merely correct in some 'conditional' sense that corresponds to validity, in contrast to soundness. In correct reasoning the reasoner moves from sufficient reasons possessed to the conclusion, the attitude held for these sufficient reasons or the action performed for these sufficient reasons.

The account proposes a constitutive norm in the same sense in which belief has been said to have a constitutive norm (be it the truth-norm or the knowledge-norm or what have you). Any reasoning is subject to the norm of reasoning, even if it fails to be correct. Compare: any belief is subject to the norm of belief, even if it fails to be a correct belief. The constitutive norm is essential to reasoning, it is a constitutively essential feature. Such a constitutive norm is not constitutive in Searle's sense, the sense in which rules are constitutive of games. The premises of correct reasoning need not be propositional attitudes; they could also be states of perceptual awareness of (perceptual) reasons. The conclusions of correct reasoning, however, have to be propositional attitudes that can be held for reasons.

Two further minor qualifications will emerge at a later stage, concerning adequate and proper responding to reasons. The full norm of reasoning then reads as follows:

(NoR) Reasoning to the conclusion C is correct if and only if (and because) holding C is a proper and adequate response to a sufficient normative reason for C.

Finally, how reasoning is related to treating some considerations as a reason for the conclusion will be discussed below in section 3 (third argument).

### 3. Three arguments for the normative account of reasoning

A first argument for the normative reasons account of reasoning can be found by looking at the *scope of outcomes* of reasoning and the possible responses to (sufficient) normative reasons. They seem to match perfectly. Among the possible outcomes we find many propositional attitudes, like belief, intention, and various emotions, but also action. It is a striking fact that exactly these attitudes and actions are also things that can be held or done for a normative reasons. The normative account has an elegant explanation for this fact. Successful reasoning leads to following sufficient normative reasons, so the outcome of successful reasoning is one of the things that can be held or done for a normative reason. Reasoning aims at attitudes held for sufficient reasons (or actions done for sufficient reasons). This is what the norm of reasoning says. Given this norm of reasoning it follows that the conclusions of successful reasoning have to be attitudes held for reasons (or actions done for reasons). Thus, the kinds of attitudes that can be conclusions of reasoning, or the action we reason to, are things that can be held or done for reasons. Please note that the fact that the norm of reasoning semantically presupposes or requires that the conclusions of reasoning can be things held or done for reasons does not prevent it from doing explanatory work. (Analogously, one might explain why beliefs can be knowledge by appeal to the knowledge-norm of belief: beliefs aim at knowledge, that's what the knowledge-norm of belief says; therefore, beliefs can be knowledge. Here, the explanation might be less interesting than in the case of reasoning, but it is still okay.) If, on the other hand, an attitude can be held for sufficient reasons we can also reason to it. The reasoning to it is just the holding of the attitude for these reasons. As long as there are reasons for an attitude, we can in principle acquire the competence to treat these facts as reasons for the attitude. And, of course, we can reason to an action or a corresponding intention to act in a certain way. So, we can neatly explain the coincidence of the scope of outcomes of reasoning and the responses to reasons.

However, there might very well be other kinds of inference that have as their outcomes other states than propositional attitudes that can be held for normative reasons. For example, inferences in early vision (as proposed by computationalists, such as David Marr) might lead from 2-dimensional perceptual states to 2-1/2

dimensional perceptual states. If this is so, it seems that the proposed norm of reasoning cannot be right. These other inferences are counterexamples. If a perceptual state, for example, is the result of some inference, it is not held for a reason since it is not the right kind of state for being held for a reason.

There is some truth to this observation. A way out of the problem, however, is fairly easy to find: we need to distinguish between reasoning and other inferences that are not reasoning. The difference lies in the kind of output of the inference. An inference is a case of reasoning just in case its outcome is a propositional attitude that can be held for a normative reason, such as a belief or an intention. Inferences with other kinds of outcomes can be called 'inferential processing', just to have a name for it. Now, some inferential processing might also be subject to some constitutive norm, but not the same as the norm of reasoning. It is very plausible to think that any inference is subject to some norm (though I will not argue for this here). This is what makes it an *inference*, instead of a mere causal sequence of states. *Reasoning*, however, has a special constitutive norm, a norm that is appropriate to the kind of state which is the outcome of reasoning. It is subject to the norm of following sufficient normative reasons. Plausibly, other inferences (pieces of inferential processing) are subject to some other norm, and so there might be a plurality of norms governing different kinds of inferential processing.

At this point, the claim that there is a match between the outcomes of reasoning and the responses to normative reasons seems to become a kind of 'truth by definition'. This impression is misleading, however. We have discovered that there is a special kind of inference - reasoning - which leads to outcomes that are susceptible to normative reasons. And about *this* kind of inference we are now making substantial claims: it is governed by a constitutive norm, and its constitutive norm is following sufficient normative reasons. Other inferences are not subject to the same norm, since their outcomes are not even capable of being responses to normative reasons. They are governed by some other constitutive norm, arguably. (This latter claim is nothing that I will defend in this paper.) It is crucial to acknowledge important distinctions between different kinds of inference. The normative reasons account is an account of *reasoning* understood in this way, not of all kinds of inference.<sup>15</sup>

If we distinguish reasoning from other kinds of inference in this way, it is a non-trivial claim that reasoning has responding to (sufficient) normative reasons as its constitutive norm. It may be helpful to look at an alternative account of reasoning, at least briefly, to illustrate this point. Consider the view according to which reasoning aims at (probably) increasing the structural rationality (coherence) of the subject's mental states, as proposed by John Broome, for example.<sup>16</sup> Then it is far from clear that the states that figure in coherence requirements are exactly the states that one could form and hold for normative reasons. This is a claim which is not obviously true. The issue is hard to assess since it is unclear which coherence requirements there really are and what unifies them, if anything. One can be proud of oneself for the reason that one has made a significant and difficult achievement, and one can correctly reason from realizing one's achievement to this emotional attitude. But is there any structural rationality requirement governing emotional attitudes like pride? This is very much unclear. The normative reasons account seems to be clearer and more adequate, it seems. Whenever a propositional attitude is susceptible to normative reasons, reasoning to that attitude is possible and is subject to the norm of responding to sufficient normative reasons. Broome's account leaves it unclear what the boundaries of reasoning are. It depends on what structural requirements for what states/attitudes there are. And though there might be some plausibility to counting certain requirements as paradigm cases, Broome does not have any general demarcation mark for what structural requirements there are – apart from the very indeterminate or even opaque idea of 'coherence'. It is a rather widely shared assessment, however, that 'coherence' is not well understood.<sup>17</sup> Here the reasons account of reasoning has the upper hand. The notion of an attitude that can be held for a reason is much clearer and better understood.

One might object that we do not reason to emotions themselves – but reason to some other attitude which then causally influences one's emotion. However, there seem to be clear cases of reasoning to an emotion in ordinary life. For example, many people have the competence to reason to the emotion of fear from knowledge that the dog in front of them is dangerous. They become afraid of the dog for the reason that it is dangerous. (This competence might of course sometimes be exercised deficiently, as all other competences as well.) If we think that the reasoning does not

have the knowledge that the dog is dangerous as its premise, but the knowledge that one should be afraid of the dog (i.e., a piece of *reflective* knowledge), one could doubt that we can reason from this reflective knowledge to the emotion because we lack sufficient reflective control over our emotions. However, we can admit that our reflective control over emotions is perhaps less strong than in the case of beliefs and intentions. That would not show that we cannot reflectively reason to the emotion; it is merely less frequent. The fact that there are cases of recalcitrant emotions does not show that we never reason to an emotion.

It is controversial whether we can reason to emotions. Views of emotions include perceptualist accounts that make emotions come out as perceptions of internal and/or external features.<sup>18</sup> But there are no reasons for perception, and so on a perceptualist view there are no reason for emotions either, arguably. – Fortunately, however, we can divide and conquer the problem.<sup>19</sup> Can there be reasons for (some) emotions? If so, we can also reason to these emotions, since we can feel the emotion for such a reason. If not, these emotions are not in the range of reasons at all, and then we can of course not reason to these emotions either. Arguably, then, the apparent obstacle does not pose a serious threat.

Consider another alternative view of reasoning. According to this account, reasons are premises of good reasoning, so good reasoning explains reasons and not vice versa (see Way 2017). This alternative account seems to account for the explanandum equally well, since good reasoning starts with normative reasons and ends with conclusions supported by these reasons. However, the big difficulty with this account is that it is committed to patterns of reasoning. As Jonathan Way clearly says: ‘Reasoning falls into patterns.’ (Way 2017, 253) But in fact, reasoning is not restricted to patterns of reasoning. There is good reasoning that does not instantiate any (interesting, non-trivial) pattern. If I hear that there is a soft knocking and scratching at the door, I conclude that my cat wants to get in. There is neither any deductive pattern to this reasoning nor any inductive pattern. (It is inductive reasoning in the sense of not being deductive, but without any inductive pattern of reasoning.) So the alternative account can at best explain the explanandum partly.

Let us look at another worry concerning the outcomes of reasoning. One could object by pointing out that the outcomes of reasoning might include more than the

outcomes of *correct, successful* reasoning. Perhaps one could *badly* reason from some facts to some conclusion that is not anything one could see as a response to a normative reason. For example, consider a sensation like pain, or some perceptual experience, as a possible outcome of bad reasoning. This could not be correct, successful reasoning, of course, but it might still be *reasoning*, albeit bad reasoning. Then, the scope of reasoning would be larger than the set of attitudes and actions that can be held or done for a normative reason.

It is very doubtful, however, whether any such transition from (possession of) a normative reason to a sensation like pain could count as reasoning. Intuitively, it is *not the right kind of thing* for being reached as a conclusion through reasoning. A thinker would have to be so terribly confused if she ventured to reason from some fact to a sensation like pain. It would be bound to be a total failure. Such a thinker would be like an archer who aimed to shoot an arrow at the number five itself (instead of the concrete target with the number 'five' written thereon). Therefore, it is very doubtful if there could be anything like reasoning to a sensation, i.e., a state for which there could not be any normative reason. Thus, it is plausible to conclude that the scope of reasoning, including bad reasoning, does not go beyond the things that could be held (or done) for a normative reason. The normative account can explain this fact very elegantly, since if reasoning aims at responding to a normative reason, any activity that leads to things that cannot be held or done for a reason at all is not recognizable as reasoning.<sup>20</sup>

The second argument for the normative reasons account has an obvious starting point. Intuitively, successful, correct reasoning – reasoning that (fully) meets the norm of reasoning – is *valuable* in the sense of having a positive normative status. Now, what does its value consist in? The best explanation is that successful reasoning is valuable since it leads to a *justified* attitude, and quite uncontroversially, justification is a significant *positive normative status*.<sup>21</sup> If successful reasoning is understood as responding to sufficient normative reasons, the outcome attitude will be held for a sufficient normative reason and, therefore, be a *justified* attitude. So, given these connections between responding to a sufficient normative reason, justification, and

positive normative status, we can very elegantly explain why successful reasoning is valuable.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, since the norm of reasoning is not just some standard or other, conventionally or arbitrarily chosen, but a *constitutive* norm of the kind of cognitive activity called reasoning, the goodness that is attained by meeting this norm is not just a non-normative attributive goodness that merely consists in meeting some standard or other. Arguably, meeting the constitutive norm of reasoning is *cognitively valuable*.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the normative account allows for the attribution of a *robust* kind of epistemic value. In general, reasoning surely is a very important and fundamental kind of cognitive activity for human beings, so it is intuitively adequate to assign a robust value to successful reasoning. (In contrast, bad, incorrect reasoning leads to unjustified attitudes, and so it lacks positive normative standing; it misses its aim, it is botched, to take up a term from Williamson's characterization of mere belief as 'botched knowledge'.)

I do not have the space to look at all *alternative* accounts. But a look at one important alternative can help us to see that the just given explanation is superior. Successful reasoning could be understood as a transition that preserves fittingness (correctness). Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way have proposed such an account.<sup>24</sup> However, it is quite clear that reasoning that merely preserves fittingness *need not lead to a justified outcome attitude*. So why should there be any value to making transitions between mental attitudes in a fittingness preserving way? No positive normative status of any attitude is guaranteed by the mere fact that the transition has the feature of preserving fittingness, it seems. The proposed normative reasons account fares clearly better in this respect, since it can assign robust epistemic value to all instances of successful reasoning. If the response is that correctness preserving reasoning is valuable in a proper subset of cases, namely, those that start with a correct or fitting premise attitude (or several such attitudes), we only get a partial explanation. Intuitively, however, *all* instances of successful reasoning share some common robust value.<sup>25</sup>

Now, one might wonder whether Way and McHugh could not hold that correct reasoning in their sense has value because it *manifests a competence* to form justified, reasons supported attitudes in suitable conditions? – This would not work well. Having

such a competence would not always be valuable, it seems. It depends on whether the conditions C (circumstances, environment) relative to which it is a competence are likely to occur or are modally close. Competences are always relative to such conditions. Some competences are clearly not valuable, since their conditions are just too unlikely or modally remote. If a permanent brain in a vat, which could not easily escape, possessed a competence to reason from perceivable appearance facts to underlying kind facts relative to conditions that are normal for us (non bivs), that would not be a valuable competence, arguably. So, Way and McHugh could not assign a value as robust as the one that the proposed reasons account can assign.<sup>26</sup>

If reasoning is simply seen as the exercise of *rational capacities* in the transition between mental states, we enter the vexed question of the value and normative status of rationality, where rationality is understood in the *structural* sense and, thus, as independent of normative reasons, at least in the sense that an exercise of rational capacities need not amount to responding to normative reasons and, thus, need not give rise to a justified outcome. If successful reasoning merely amounts to rationally (in the structural sense) transiting between input and outcome attitudes, it remains unclear what its value is. If such a successful exercise of rational capacities is conceived of as entailing a rational outcome attitude and rational attitudes are taken to be valuable, we would get an alternative explanation of the value of successful reasoning. However, the big question that this raises is, again, whether structural rationality is normative and valuable as such.<sup>27</sup>

If, in contrast, rationality (in the capacity sense) is understood as a capacity to respond to normative reasons, rationality becomes necessary for correct reasoning. This is in line with the proposed account, not an alternative.

Perhaps, a 'secondary' or 'derivative' value could be assigned to unsuccessful reasoning that consists at least in responding to *merely apparent reasons*, where a 'merely apparent reason' is understood as a false consideration that would be a (genuine) normative reason if true.<sup>28</sup> However, it's unclear what the value of generating an attitude that is formed or maintained in 'response to a merely apparent reason' is. One could call it 'rational'. But being rational in this sense is not the same as being justified.<sup>29</sup> A brain in a vat might have many 'rational' attitudes in this sense which are not justified. One could say that they have a 'secondary value' or are better

than attitudes that are neither justified nor rational in this sense. But it seems clear that assigning such 'secondary value' only makes sense if one assumes something like the idea that a proper part of a valuable whole is itself valuable in a derivative sense and to some extent.

The third argument begins with a worry. One might be concerned that *no statement of the nature of reasoning* has been given yet. We have been told what successful reasoning is like, but what is *reasoning*? And shouldn't an account of reasoning tell us what all kinds of reasoning, good and bad, have in common? In addition, an alternative characterization of reasoning suggests itself: reasoning consists in *treating some consideration as a normative reason for a response*. There might be further attempts at spelling out what 'treating as a normative reason' is. (Perhaps, treating some consideration as a normative reason requires believing or representing that it is a normative reason for the relevant response. And perhaps, it involves the exercise of some rational ability, as Ralph Wedgwood proposes.)<sup>30</sup> But whatever the ultimate account of 'treating' is, it seems clear that in both good and bad cases of reasoning, the subject treats some consideration as a normative reason for her response. So good reasoning might be responding to normative reasons, but all reasoning is treating some consideration as a normative reason for some response – no matter whether this consideration is a normative reason for the response or not.

The reply to this objection is that we do not have to reject the characterization of reasoning as treating some consideration as a normative reason; we can embrace it if we want to. But this does not make the normative account of reasoning empty or superfluous or false. Quite the contrary. For *treating as a normative reason* must itself be understood as an activity that is subject to the norm of reasoning. Treating a consideration as a normative reason, as it is part of all reasoning, 'aims' at responding to a normative reason. (Here, speaking of 'aiming' does not mean intentional aiming, in the form of some person-level intention to respond to a normative reason. It rather expresses the idea of there being a constitutive norm governing any reasoning.)<sup>31</sup>

An analogy might help here. One can treat someone as a police officer in a pretend way or in a serious way. Pretend treating is also treating, but it does not come with the full commitment of genuinely, seriously treating someone as having the

authority of a police officer. Analogously, one might treat some consideration as a reason but without genuinely aiming at thereby responding to a normative reason. Suppositional reasoning might be like that. One supposes that p and then treats p as a normative reason for some further proposition q. This is not subject to the same criticism or evaluation as the genuine kind of treating as a normative reason that is present in genuinely responding to the fact that p as a normative reason. One cannot classify the suppositional reasoning as bad merely because the supposition that p is false, and one can still ‘suppositionally treat’ the consideration as a normative reason, without treating it as a normative reason *simpliciter*. So, thinking of reasoning as treating some consideration as a normative reason might indeed be correct, but only as long as one thinks of the ‘treating’ as a specific, particular activity that is subject to the norm of reasoning, responding to normative reasons. Thus, the substance of the worry rather reinforces than discredits the normative account of reasoning. No account of the nature of reasoning can leave out the essential normative truth about it that the normative account is articulating. Those who share the intuition that reasoning essentially involves *treating as a reason* can and should happily embrace the normative reasons account of reasoning. We can say that all reasoning involves treating some consideration as a normative reason and that this treating as a normative reason aims at following sufficient normative reasons. In a nutshell, we can summarize the argument as an inference to the best explanation, as follows.

- (1) Reasoning essentially is a specific kind of treating some consideration (that p) as a normative reason for a conclusion attitude.
- (2) This specific kind of treating some consideration (that p) as a normative reason for a conclusion attitude essentially aims at forming or holding this conclusion attitude for the normative reason that p.

----- (by inference to the best explanation)

- (3) The norm of reasoning: reasoning essentially is subject to the constitutive norm of forming or holding a conclusion attitude for a normative reason.<sup>32</sup>

In this way we can derive the norm of reasoning from the underlying phenomenon of treating as a reason and its correctness norm. Though I have not given much of an independent argument for the two premises of the argument, they are surely intuitively quite plausible. So the argument does lend some further support to the normative reasons account.

A follow-up worry might arise at this point. One might think that there is an alternative that works by way of re-interpreting the notion of a 'reason'. More precisely, it is tempting to move from normative reasons to *motivating reasons*. For even in cases of bad reasoning, it seems that the subject has and responds to some *motivating* reason. Motivating reasons are often characterized as 'considerations for which' (or 'considerations in the light of which') one responds as one responds, or as a consideration taken by the subject to favor the response.<sup>33</sup> And it is natural to think that in the good case, a motivating reason is, or corresponds to, a normative reason. So, reasoning could still be responding to reasons – yet to *motivating* reasons rather than normative reasons. (This has been briefly mentioned above, in connection with Wedgwood's characterization of reasoning.)

Understood in a certain way, this is not a genuine alternative. What it is for some consideration to amount to a motivating reason is a matter of considerable controversy. Motivating reasons are reasons 'for which' the agent responds or reasons that motivate or move the agent to respond in a certain way, in some sense or other. Motivating reasons may comprise several aspects, such as concerning the 'light in which' the agent sees the response or whether the agent sees or treats the consideration as making the response good or correct in some sense. Plausibly, one could shape or re-shape a notion of 'motivating reason' in such a way as to make it come out true that in all cases of reasoning, the subject has and responds to a motivating reason for her response. Yet what would this 'responding to a motivating reason' amount to? The most plausible answer is that it *amounts to treating some consideration as a normative reason* for one's response. Quite clearly, it cannot be understood as treating some consideration *as a motivating* reason. When reasoning, one treats a consideration as a *normative* reason, as something that really *favors* the response. If one were to treat it as a mere motivating reason, if this makes sense at all,

one would not aspire to being guided by something genuinely normative. One would aspire to simply being guided by something. Perhaps this would amount to being always successful; and perhaps, this does not make much sense. But it would not establish any genuinely normative status of *justification* when successful. So, we should stick to the idea that responding to a motivating reason is treating something as a normative reason – that’s what it is to respond to a motivating reason. And therefore, properly understood, the proposal is not a genuine alternative to the proposed view, but merely a notational variant. We can happily take on board the new characterization of ‘responding to motivating reasons’ while keeping in mind and insisting that it does not bring in a genuinely new idea.

#### 4. Two objections answered

The first objection focuses on the *theoretical* case in which a doxastic attitude is formed or maintained as the relevant outcome. In this kind of case, one could object that the norm of reasoning is acquiring *knowledge* – and not just any old kind of ‘justification’ that makes the doxastic attitude fall short of knowledge. (Let us suppose for the moment that some such notion of justification is available that allows for justified doxastic attitudes that are not knowledge.) If we bring in some constitutive norm of reasoning, it should be the full, ambitious one: theoretical reasoning aims at *knowledge*, and nothing less.

In response to this worry, it is helpful to point out that there are several different doxastic attitudes. Full, *outright* belief is one kind of doxastic attitude. But perhaps, there are also *partial* beliefs (degrees of belief, credences).<sup>34</sup> Plausibly, knowledge is the norm of full, outright belief.<sup>35</sup> Then, partial belief has degreed justification as its norm, arguably. So, if a partial belief is held in response to some normative reason, it is justified to a degree that is determined by the strength of the normative reason. Degreed justification is the norm of partial belief, where the degree of belief is adequate to the strength of the normative reason for which it is held. And knowledge is the norm of outright belief.

The reasons account could thus be modified in such a way as to take on board the objection. Responding to a sufficient normative reason is to be understood as responding that is *adequate to the normative reason's strength*. This means that if the normative reason is conclusive, it is sufficient for justifying *full* belief, i.e., to knowledge. If the normative reason is less than conclusive, adequately responding to it means forming a partial belief for whose degree the normative reason is sufficiently strong. If the strength of the reason and the degree of belief are adequate to each other, the partial belief meets the norm of partial belief. In all cases, one *adequately* responds to a sufficient normative reason by forming a justified doxastic attitude where the degree of belief is adequate to the strength of the normative reason (in order to make the normative reason sufficient for this degree of belief). In this way, the dimension of degree or strength can be included in the reasons account of reasoning – quite a welcome further development of the account. – In a sense, of course, the notion of responding to a sufficient reason had already built in this idea of adequacy of degrees between reason and response. So, we have just made explicit what is already implicit in the idea of responding to a sufficient reason.<sup>36</sup>

A second objection could be raised by pointing to the issue of *improperly* responding a normative reason as a normative reason for a certain response. As John Turri has pointed out, quite correctly, one can *improperly* respond to a normative reason by exhibiting the right response, i.e., the response for which it is indeed a (sufficient) normative reason (and also, as we can add, to the adequate degree), though not along the right, rational way. What goes wrong is the type of processing that leads from the awareness of the normative reason to the response. Most importantly, one might use an improper rule of inference that nevertheless or accidentally, in the case at hand, leads to a response for which the input reason happens to be a normative reason.

The response is similar to the response given to the previous objection. The point can be taken on board, and it can be seen as making something explicit about what 'responding to a (sufficient) normative reason' involves, namely, that one uses the right, rational road. 'Responding to a normative reason', properly understood, means responding in a proper, rational way. (Otherwise, one merely behaves in accordance with the normative reason.) And in case one uses a pattern or rule of

reasoning (though this is not necessary for reasoning), the rule should be a proper, rational one in the sense of its reliably leading to responses that are in line with the premises.<sup>37</sup> So, in the end, responding to a normative reason is *properly* and *adequately* responding to it – and that’s what the normative account of reasoning says.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper spells out and argues for the view that reasoning is subject to a constitutive norm. For a sequence or linking of mental states to count as reasoning it has to be governed by the norm of (properly and adequately) following a sufficient normative reason. In itself, this does not provide a (naturalistic) reduction of reasoning to mental states plus causation (and dispositions), and neither is it an anti-naturalistic account. It is an open question whether a (naturalistic) reduction can be given.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, it does not portray reasoning as rule-following.<sup>39</sup> A rule may be involved or not. This is what the reasoning account yields, at least *prima facie*. Even if the arguments given here are not conclusive, they make a good case that entitles the view to a hearing.

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I hereby confirm that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Boghossian 2014, Wedgwood 2006, Siegel 2016, Chap. 5. Strictly speaking, no further attitude needs to be formed, linking a response to an attitude one already has is sufficient. To simplify formulations, I will mostly use the term 'transition' in the broad sense that covers this case of linking, too. Furthermore, merely for the sake of simplicity, I will mostly treat all responses as *attitudes* here. In the practical case, the proper outcome might be an *action*, as Jonathan Dancy has argued, for example. (See Dancy 2018.) Everything could be adjusted correspondingly if this turned out to be the correct view, I believe. For an alternative view, according to which the proper outcome of practical reasoning is an *intention* (as I will assume here), see Fink 2013. (Only in section 3 I will consider action as a possible outcome when discussing the issue of the scope of reasoning.)

<sup>2</sup> I am using the normative notion of *correctness* in order to state the norm.

Alternatively, one could also use the normative notion of *ought* and speak of 'what reasoning ought to be like'.

<sup>3</sup> At a later passage, Dancy characterizes reasoning as follows: 'Reasoning is a process in which we try to work out how to respond to the situation which confronts us. The reasoning is intended to determine the shape of that situation, in doing which we determine what sort of response is most appropriate. When things go at their best, the response adopted is of the sort most favored in the situation, taken as a whole.'

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(Dancy 2018, 97) Here, reasoning is more explicitly characterized as ‘intending’ or ‘aiming’ at responding to reasons, so more or even entirely in line with the proposed normative account.

<sup>4</sup> Wedgwood thinks of reasons as *rationalizing mental states or contents*, roughly, but he also takes ‘rationalizing’ as entailing some *justifying*. (See Wedgwood 2006, 677.) Fortunately, we need not settle this exegetical question of what Wedgwood really has in mind.

<sup>5</sup> All three arguments have the form of an inference to the best explanation. That said, the reader will surely recognize that not very much is shown as to the bestness claim that is part of an inference to the best explanation. Partly this is due to lack of space, partly to the fact that alternative accounts of reasoning do not even address the relevant explananda explicitly. Some reasons will be provided for thinking that the proposed explanations fare well or better in comparison to other accounts. But it is admitted that they are not conclusive.

<sup>6</sup> Please note that reasoning, as understood here, is a mental process or activity, not a set of propositions that exhibit a certain pattern or instantiate an abstract rule (studied in logics). See Harman 1973.

<sup>7</sup> See Williamson forthcoming; Lasonen-Aarnio 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to add this consideration.

<sup>9</sup> Here, again, I am in line with Gilbert Harman (1973).

<sup>10</sup> That genuine perception can serve as a kind of awareness that is sufficient for possession of (perceptual) evidence has been argued in Hofmann (2018).

<sup>11</sup> It is not so clear that other accounts of reasoning could equally well accommodate this fact. So, perhaps, this is already a ‘zeroth argument’ for the normative reasons account. However, since I might agree (though I am not sure about this) that the issue seems to be rather a matter of initial characterization – or ‘definition’ – of what phenomenon one is talking about, at least to some extent, I refrain from flagging it as an independent argument here.

<sup>12</sup> See Searle 1969. A similar distinction was made by John Rawls in (Rawls 1955).

<sup>13</sup> A possible confusion of these two different notions of a ‘constitutive norm’ has also been observed by Pagin, Marsili (2021).

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<sup>14</sup> Here I am assuming that the constitutive is essential, but I am not holding that the essential is always constitutive. The distinction, made by Kit Fine, between the constitutive essence and the consequential essence is relevant here: ‘An essential property of an object is a constitutive part of the essence of that object if it is not had in virtue of being a consequence of some more basic essential properties of the object; and otherwise it is a consequential part of the essence.’ (Fine 1995, 57) His example: being human or being a mountain belongs to the consequential essence of Socrates, not to the constitutive essence (like being human, arguably). Conor McHugh (2023) holds that a constitutive norm should rather be conceived of as essential but not constitutively essential. To me it seems more plausible that the norm of reasoning is constitutively essential to reasoning. It is what (partly) makes reasoning what it is. However, for the main purposes of this paper the issue might not be very important. - Thanks to an anonymous referee for inviting me to clarify this point.

<sup>15</sup> Please note that it is no part of the definition of reasoning that it leads to an attitude held for sufficient normative reasons. The method is a rather standard one that can be described as follows, roughly. We first identify a subset of inferences by intuitions about cases (like, e.g., ordinary inferences from beliefs or intentions to beliefs and intentions). We then identify what is common to the kind of inference that forms this subset: the conclusion is an attitude that can be held for a reason. Finally, we state some further (normative) truth about this kind of inference (reasoning): it is subject to the constitutive norm of following sufficient normative reasons. Thus, we come to see that there is a sufficiently unified phenomenon – reasoning – and we find out what its nature is. – Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this point.

<sup>16</sup> See Broome 2013.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., discussions of coherence in the context of coherentism about justification. Laurence Bonjour, for example, points out that the notion of coherence is poorly understood because it is related to other ‘still inadequately understood topics, such as induction, confirmation, probability, explanation and various issues in logic’ (Bonjour 1999, 123).

<sup>18</sup> For perceptualist accounts see, e.g., Tappolet 2003, Prinz 2004.

<sup>19</sup> The following draws on a suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer, to which I am particularly grateful.

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<sup>20</sup> Susanna Siegel argues that there can be inferences to a *perceptual state*, sometimes even from the subject's 'outlook' (which is at least partly constituted by beliefs). (See Siegel 2016, Chap. 5.) She takes inference to consist in transitions that establish an epistemic dependence between input and output, and she rejects Boghossian's 'taking condition'. (See Siegel 2016, 79.) Consequently, she has to think of perceptual states as themselves having an epistemic status – a very non-standard view. - It is quite clear, however, that these transitions belong to the species of inferential processing rather than of reasoning. To lump perceptual states and reasons-susceptible propositional attitudes together is to miss a significant distinction in kind, even though both can be the outcomes of inference broadly understood. We need to distinguish between significantly different kinds of inference.

<sup>21</sup> See Sylvan 2018 for a discussion of justification as a paradigmatic normative standing.

<sup>22</sup> In addition, one could argue for the value of correct reasoning as follows. Intuitively, correct reasoning is an achievement and therefore valuable, it has cognitive value – even if it (or its conclusion) might not have any practical value.

<sup>23</sup> Here we can leave it open whether we should speak of an intrinsic or final value, which is a matter of controversy. (Some philosophers think that final value can be extrinsic. See Rabinowicz, Ronnow-Rasmussen 2000. This is also a debate about 'details' that we can leave open here.) Furthermore, successful reasoning might be thought of as an *achievement*, in line with virtue epistemologists' conception of achievement as success from ability that enjoys a special, additional value. See, e.g., Greco 2010, Sosa 2007.

<sup>24</sup> See McHugh, Way 2018.

<sup>25</sup> That a pattern of reasoning is good (or correct) in McHugh and Way's sense does not easily translate into something valuable about the mind of the thinker. But even if some good reasoning starts with correct premises, there is again the problem that their account only allows for reasoning that falls into patterns. They even point out that this is an advantage of the kind of account that I am proposing (what they call the 'reasons view'): '... it allows for the possibility of good reasoning without good patterns of reasoning.' (McHugh, Way 2018, 160, n. 13) So at best, their account could only partly explain the value of correct reasoning.

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<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing up this proposal and pressing me on this point.

<sup>27</sup> Worsnip (2022) contains an attempt at arguing that structural rationality is genuinely normative. However, the argument is very ambitious, and it is far from clear whether it succeeds.

<sup>28</sup> This is the characterization of apparent reasons that Derek Parfit has given. See Parfit 2011, 34-35. Please note that being an apparent reason in this sense need not be the same as what some authors call a 'subjective reason'. (For more on the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective reasons' see, e.g., Sylvan 2016.)

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Weatherson 2008, Hofmann 2022.

<sup>30</sup> See Wedgwood 2016, 672-73.

<sup>31</sup> For more on 'aiming' and how it is to be understood in relation to both belief and intention see Hofmann 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Here I have left out the dimension of *sufficiency*, to simplify things. Treating some consideration as a normative reason is implicitly to be understood as involving an *adequacy* of the normative reason in relation to the conclusion. We will come back to this dimension in section 4. The argument can be understood as qualified accordingly.

<sup>33</sup> For the latter, see Hieronymi 2014, Sc. III, for example. Both characterizations are sometimes mentioned, for example, in Alvarez (2016) and in Littlejohn (2018).

<sup>34</sup> There are those who deny that there are any degrees of belief. See, for example, Moon 2017. If there are no degrees of belief, belief is always full belief, and we can say that a belief will be formed in adequate response to a normative reason only if that reason is sufficiently strong where being sufficiently strong might amount to being conclusive. Since, arguably, full belief held for a sufficiently strong (i.e., conclusive) normative reason is knowledge, believing in adequate response to a sufficient normative reason is knowledge, and so the 'ambitious' knowledge-norm of belief can be accepted in line with the proposed normative account of reasoning.

<sup>35</sup> This has been argued by a number of philosophers and, perhaps most importantly, by Timothy Williamson. See, e.g., Williamson 2011, Williamson 2000.

<sup>36</sup> The objection considers the theoretical case. How about the practical case where an intention is formed? Fortunately, it seems that we can generalize the notion of adequacy to other attitudes like intentions, too, supposing that there are something

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like partial intentions or degrees of intention, as Richard Holton has proposed. (See Holton 2008.)

<sup>37</sup> A well-developed view of following normative reasons that accounts for this point can be found in Mantel (2018).

<sup>38</sup> This depends on whether the norm can be naturalized. My best hunch for a naturalistic approach is *teleofunctionalism*: our reasoning capacities for forming beliefs and intentions are essentially subject to the norm of reasoning because they have the teleofunction of yielding beliefs and intentions held for sufficient normative reasons. A general outline of teleofunctionalism in epistemology can be found in Graham (2019).

<sup>39</sup> Even the fittingness preservation account of reasoning given by Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way does not endorse the claim that good reasoning requires rule-following. They merely hold that *competent* reasoning requires rule-following. See McHugh, Way 2018, 4.