The World of Reasons: A Shared Virtual Space

Grounding Practical Normativity in Collective Intentionality

In this talk, I defend the thesis that when a subject is responding to a practically normative reason then this subject is cognitively moving in a shared virtual space. This thesis entails two things: First, that without shared virtual spaces, the phenomenon of a subject responding to reasons does not exist; and second, that what is a reason for a subject, depends on a naturally evolved and contingently shaped social environment that could always be otherwise.

I thereby propose a communitarian foundation of reasons for action. My work is connecting an analytic debate about normativity with research on collective intentionality and social psychology. My most crucial point is that the thesis that reasons are grounded in human communities does not depend on whether humans make explicit reference to others or their needs and wishes when judging which reasons they have. The thesis is compatible with the fact that normative judgments appear to refer to an objective reality.

First, I start with an influential conception of reasons in contemporary analytic philosophy, according to which reasons are defined as facts standing in certain relations. A fact hereby is an obtaining state of affairs, for example the fact that it is raining, or the fact that two persons have different skin colours. Such facts can be reasons for people to act in certain ways. Which state of affairs counts as a reason for which behaviour depends on features of the subject and the situation. Facts are endowed with the property of being a reason in virtue of standing in relation to a particular subject, a particular point in time and a particular action. Philosophers such as Scanlon or Skorupski call this relation a *reason relation*. When a subject actively recognizes a fact standing in such a normativity grounding relation, this subject is responding to a normative reason.

Secondly, I critically assess the ontology and epistemology of reason relations. I focus on Skorupski's position that reason relations are objective irreals to which subjects respond spontaneously due to their very nature as subjects. Irreals are defined as entities not having causal stance in the world. As opposed to *subjective irreals*, such as for example fictional characters, reason relations, according to Skorupski, are *objective irreals* in the sense that they are not human creations.

Thirdly, I attack the view that reason relations are objective in the sense proposed by Skorupski and others. I will argue that what the term "objective irreals" describes is in fact a collective fiction, in analogy to "subjective irreals", which have to be re-described as individual fictions.

I will start my critical argument with an illumination of the phenomenon of responding to a reason from the perspective of psychology. By responding to reasons, humans understand themselves as subjects, thinking consciously and locating themselves in space and time. Responsiveness to reasons enables humans to understand themselves and make themselves understandable. Though the process of understanding relates to an external world, which exists independently of human cultures, culture and communication has an empirically evident influence on the way humans respond to the world. While the degree of this influence might be debatable in the epistemic domain, I argue that, in the practical domain, it is of particularly high relevance. I argue that, while the social influence on the formation of beliefs about how the world is might be accidental, the social background is most essential for the formation of beliefs about how one should act.

The next step of my critical argument is to point out that what is a reason for which action, for whom and under what circumstances is dependent on collective *acceptance.* According to Searle, individuals can hold a special kind of reason beliefs in virtue of possessing the cognitive feature of *collective intentionality*. This is a way of holding beliefs about features of objects (or situations). These features are neither given by physical properties nor resulting from a merely private ascription. They are the result of the collective ascription of a *status function*. Status functions, according to Searle, have the power to give reasons independently of private desires. I argue, building on an insight by Dancy, that the distinction between desire-dependent and desire-independent reasons is unfortunate. I hold against this that any response being a reason response rather than a reaction of a different psychological quality is best described as a spontaneous response to an independent reality.

Nonetheless, I build on Searle for arguing that these responses are instantiated by applying collective intentionality. I further modify Searle's account by arguing that collective intentionality is more than just a cognitive feature of individual brains. Creatures having a biological potential for collective intentionality establish systems of acceptances that exist independently of their brains. These systems establish gradually by repetition and reinforcement. Communities can be said to develop their own collective archives. Reasons

exist as items in that virtual archive, which is built up by communities of creatures having collective intentionality. In absence of such an archive, an individual cannot make use of its biological potential to become a reason responsive subject.

Reasons are not in need of having physical properties in order to be said to exist. They can be described as *irreal* entities. I alternatively suggest the term "virtual" for strengthening the point that the space of reasons is a creation that, though of course not voluntarily created, could always be otherwise and can be overwritten. Every individual reason response is an actual instantiation of an item within that shared virtual space. Reasons may appear as objective to the individual reasoner. This is because they are independent of individual mind and the reference to others is not inscribed into their propositional content. However, any practically normative reason a subject can act from exists in virtue of a community establishing a shared virtual space. Responding to a reason as a subject is making a successful move in this shared virtual space.