

FIRST-PERSONAL AUTHORITY AND THE NORMATIVITY OF RATIONALITY

In “Vindicating the Normativity of Rationality,” Nicholas Southwood sets himself the task of meeting “Broome’s Challenge”—a challenge to demonstrate that rationality is normative, in the sense that we have normative (or “objective”) reason *in each and every case* to meet its requirements.¹ Southwood argues that success cannot be achieved by appealing to the normativity of other domains, such as prudence or morality. Rather, Southwood’s purported solution is to “*explain* the normativity or reason-giving force” of rationality by offering a theory that shows that rational requirements “are the kinds of thing that are, by their very nature, normative.”²

Southwood’s proposal is that rational requirements are demands of one’s “first-personal standpoint”—what is good from one’s point of view³:

It is commonly recognized that each of us has a particular first-personal standpoint, a standpoint constructed out of our particular beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, goals, values, and so on, and relative to which things can go well or badly. Our standpoints describe what *matters to us*; they are ones in which we are invested.⁴

What are the demands of one’s standpoint? Southwood illustrates with the following examples:

We are subject to a range of familiar standpoint-relative demands. Thus,

given my intention to read the complete works of Dostoyevsky, I am subject to a standpoint-relative demand to make decisions that would help me realize this aim in light of my views about how best to do so. Given my views about the moral significance of poverty, I am subject to certain standpoint-relative demands concerning, say, how to decide to spend my income. Given my belief that humans evolved from apes, I am subject to a standpoint-relative demand not to believe that the Book of Genesis is literally true.⁵

Notice that these demands resemble paradigmatic rational requirements.

Respectively, they appear to be instances of the rational requirements: *intend the perceived means to your ends*; *intend that which you believe you ought to do (enkrasia)*; and *have consistent beliefs*. Such demands are normative, says Southwood, because adhering to them “is a matter of honoring one's own first-personal authority.”⁶ It is partly constitutive of one's having a standpoint that one see that standpoint as normative.

Broome himself finds much of value in Southwood's account: “I agree that we can consider most requirements of rationality as being relative to a standpoint.”⁷ And he agrees, further, that standpoints have first-personal authority: “We can consider the authority first-personal, since it comes from nowhere else but your own standpoint.”⁸ Broome's primary reservation is merely that, while Southwood may be correct that standpoint-relative demands are requirements of rationality, and that rational requirements are thereby normative, this account fails to be sufficiently illuminating—it cannot *explain* the normativity in question: “There is no more

substance to the claim that rational requirements are standpoint relative or reveal first-personal authority that [*sic*] appears in the specification of the requirements themselves. So this claim cannot explain why rationality is normative, if indeed it is.”⁹

We argue that Southwood’s proposal fails on three counts: Southwood characterizes our standpoints as consisting in our “particular beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, goals, values, and so on” and as describing “what matters to us” or what is “good from [our] point[s] of view.”¹⁰ But there is tension in this model, because not all of the attitudes mentioned—specifically, many of our non-normative beliefs—really matter to us. If we maintain that our standpoints consist in the attitudes listed, then they do not have the normative authority both Southwood and Broome take them to have. We can, instead, understand our standpoints as consisting only in what matters to us; and the demands of our standpoints, so understood, may have normative authority. Yet this offers no help for Southwood, as these demands no longer resemble requirements of rationality and, in fact, may conflict with them. The demands of our first-personal standpoints may either be normative or resemble requirements of rationality, but not both.

Second, Southwood runs headlong into the “bootstrapping” objection that helped illuminate the need to vindicate the normativity of rationality in the first place: attitudes for which we conceivably had no prior justification unacceptably provide justification for themselves and others.

Lastly, even barring our other concerns, the normativity of our first-personal standpoints is even more dubious than the normativity of rationality, and so the idea of grounding the latter on the former is cause for concern. What's more, we argue that the only explanation on offer for why our standpoints *are* typically normative entails that the requirements of rationality, as understood by Southwood, are not normative in every case.

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Consider a variant of the classic gin/petrol case: Alan is sitting at a bar, after last call, with a full glass in front of him.¹¹ He believes this glass to contain fine gin. Drinking fine gin is good from Alan's point of view; it matters to him that he now drink a glass of fine gin, and he intends to do so. Rationality dictates that, absent a change in his antecedent attitudes, Alan ought to intend to drink the liquid in front of him.¹² After all, he intends to drink fine gin now and believes drinking the liquid in front of him to be his only means to this end; and rationality requires that one take what one believes to be the necessary means to one's ends. Southwood can accommodate this requirement: For him, both the intention to drink fine gin and the belief that the liquid in front of him *is* fine gin are parts of Alan's standpoint. Alan is therefore subject to a standpoint-relative demand to drink the liquid in front of him.

But (surprise!) the glass is not full of fine gin; it is full of petrol. Drinking petrol would kill Alan, and being dead is not valuable to Alan, in any sense. In fact, it is good from Alan's point of view that he remain alive. If Alan has any normative reasons here, surely he has reason *not* to drink the liquid in front of him. Yet this is the opposite of what rationality demands of him.

Is Alan really subject to a normative demand to drink the liquid in front of him—the liquid that is, in fact, petrol? One would think Southwood might reject this conclusion, asserting rather that there is, for Alan, merely a *subjective* demand—a perceived demand—to drink the liquid. Yet Southwood explicitly rejects this kind of response:

. . . I regard the first-personal authority account as a kind of improved modification of the subjective reasons account. Both accounts regard rational requirements as claims about the attitudes we ought to have and form “from our own point of view.” The difference concerns the interpretation of what this comes to. According to the subjective reasons account, this is interpreted in terms of the notion of subjective demands, whereas according to the first-personal authority account, it is interpreted in terms of the idea of standpoint-relative demands. Unlike subjective demands, standpoint-relative demands are genuine demands rather than merely believed or perceived demands.¹³

There is something strange about this view, beyond its implication that Alan has an

objective reason to do something that will, in fact, kill him. The notions of ‘standpoint’ and ‘standpoint-relative demand’ are supposed to be natural. But there is nothing natural about supposing that it could ever be best, with respect to what matters to us, to drink petrol. Yet this is what Southwood’s view indicates. So what has gone wrong?

It is not difficult to see the problem: There is a difference between that which is good from Alan’s point of view and what Alan believes would help realize these goods. The latter—such as Alan’s belief that there is fine gin in front of him—are not themselves good from his point of view, they are not part of what matters to him. Rather, such beliefs are Alan’s best guess as to what really *would* realize the good from his point of view. Honoring what matters to Alan does not involve his drinking *perceived* fine gin; it involves his drinking fine gin.

In order for them to capture what really matters to us, then, we must understand our standpoints not to include many of our beliefs. We must exclude from Alan’s standpoint, for example, the belief that the glass in front of him is full of fine gin. Yet this revision offers no help for Southwood. The demands of our standpoints so understood no longer resemble requirements of rationality. What is advisable with respect to what matters to Alan is to do that which *in fact* realizes the good from his point of view. But failures to do what is advisable in this way are not failures of rationality. Surely, it would be advisable with respect to what is good from Alan’s point of view for him to be drinking at World of Gin (which serves the finest

gin in town). Yet, given his belief that World of Gin is a gas station, Alan's failure to do so is not a failure of rationality.

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One might reply on Southwood's behalf that rationality does not require that Alan intend to drink the liquid in front of him, but rather that he must either form this intention *or* revise one of his antecedent attitudes—either the intention to drink fine gin or his belief that the liquid is fine gin. According to this reply, the relevant requirement of rationality has *wide scope*.

Indeed, Broome appears to read rational requirements, as understood by Southwood, as having wide scope:

I agree that we can consider most requirements of rationality as being relative to a standpoint. For instance, take the requirement I call "enkrasia." This is the requirement, roughly, that you intend to do what you believe you ought to do. Suppose you believe you ought to *F*. Rationality does not require you simply to intend to *F*. Instead, its requirement is in a particular way relative to your belief that you ought to *F*. It is conditional on this belief. More exactly, rationality requires of you the conditional proposition that you intend to *F* if you believe you ought to *F*. Your belief that *F* is part of your standpoint. So the requirement is relative to your standpoint in a

particular way. Precisely what this relativity amounts to is specified in the conditional form of what is required.¹⁴

On Broome's reading, if one believes one ought to *F*, one acts enkratically *either* by intending to *F* *or* by ceasing to believe that one ought to *F*. This is not, however, the only way to understand this requirement. On a *narrow-scope* reading, one is required to intend to *F* given that one believes one ought to *F*. The requirement ranges only over the consequent of the conditional.

Keep in mind that for Southwood rational requirements are the demands of one's standpoint—demands whose authority stems from the need to *honor* that standpoint. As Broome acknowledges, your belief that you ought to *F* is part of your standpoint. It follows that unless your belief conflicts with other attitudes you have, it would be impossible for you to give up this belief without appealing to something external to your standpoint—in giving up your belief that you ought to *F*, you would fail to honor that standpoint. Therefore, on Southwood's view, all else being equal, given that one believes one ought to *F*, one is required to intend to *F*. This requirement has narrow scope.

Though not all requirements of rationality will turn out to have narrow scope for Southwood, many will. Take a general case, in which two mental states, A and B, conflict. Rational requirements are often seen as requirements of coherence amongst one's mental states and so, as traditionally understood, rationality requires that one not be in both states, A and B.¹⁵ But on Southwood's view, if A is part of

one's standpoint, but B is not, then one is required to avoid B (and vice versa).¹⁶

In fact, though Southwood claims to remain neutral between these interpretations, his examples all appear to have narrow scope.¹⁷ For instance, when Southwood says, “[g]iven my belief that humans evolved from apes, I am subject to a standpoint-relative demand not to believe that the Book of Genesis is literally true,” it seems clear he does not mean to leave open the option of revising his original belief. After all, all else being equal, such revision would be an affront to his standpoint.

But most theorists, including Broome, find rational requirements’ being both normative and narrow-scope intolerable.¹⁸ Consider again Southwood’s belief concerning evolution. Any evidence Southwood has for his antecedent belief may likewise be evidence that the book of Genesis’ is not literally true. But, for all we know, Southwood has no prior justification whatsoever for this belief. He may have formed the belief, as it were, *ex nihilo* and given no thought to its merit, and yet *the mere fact* of the belief gives him normative reason to not believe in Genesis. Notice, further, that this requirement appears to be an instance of a more general requirement to believe the entailments of one’s beliefs. Thus, given that the proposition that humans evolved from apes entails itself, Southwood has normative reason to believe *this*, following directly from the fact that he already believes it—his attitude is self-justifying. Likewise, that Southwood adopts something as his end gives him normative reason to intend its means. And it is at least dubious that the

mere fact that we adopt something as our end should provide us with any normative reasons at all.

This is the problem of bootstrapping, and it is highly objectionable. What is more, it is one of the objections that generated renewed interest in the normativity of rationality—that has led to the movement within the literature in which Southwood situates himself. Yet Southwood appears unable to avoid charges of bootstrapping himself.

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Even barring our concerns above, Southwood's proposal cannot accomplish all that he hopes. His theory of rational requirements does not "*explain* their normativity or reason-giving force" by showing that they are "the kinds of thing that are, by their very nature, normative." Claiming that our first-personal standpoints generate normative reasons is even more controversial than claiming that rational requirements do. After all, many deny that the bare fact that something *matters to us* justifies action. Instead, they argue, our standpoints provide us with normative reasons only insofar as our particular beliefs and evaluations reflect independent facts and values.¹⁹

In trying to justify his claim that standpoint-relative demands are normative, Southwood offers only that to even *qualify* as possessing such a standpoint, one must

see oneself as subject to its demands. And perhaps this is right. After all, when something matters to you or is something that you are “invested in,” perhaps you cannot help but treat it as normative—it seems impossible to get “reflective distance” from your standpoint.

But for all Southwood has said here, he might well be defending the subjective reasons account—the view that the demands of rationality are always, but only, *apparently* normative. Though we may be unable to both possess a particular standpoint and question its normativity, we may yet ask: does the fact that something matters to me provide me with normative reasons?²⁰ And many of us, especially were we to learn that our particular beliefs and evaluations were mistaken, would insist that the mere fact that these attitudes were *our* attitudes did not mean that they provided us with any normative reasons at all.

Southwood owes us further justification for the controversial claim that our standpoints really do matter merely in virtue of their being our standpoints. There is a resource in the literature that initially looks like it might help: the view that we merit a particular kind of respect. Consider the following, from Stephen Darwall:

[R]espect for persons is a responsiveness to what makes them persons, the capacity for free agency. What we must attend to here is not, primarily anyway, what is for someone’s good, but what she holds good, and would want from her point of view . . . [T]reating another’s point of view as normative is a form of respect. Taking a person’s welfare as normative is a

form of care.²¹

The lesson others extract from Darwall's position is that our welfare matters only when and because we merit care.²² Analogously, one might conclude that our first-personal standpoints are normative only because we merit respect.²³ This appears to be not only *a* way to explain the normativity of our standpoints; it appears necessary to any such explanation. One is hard-pressed to see why we would have any normative reason to "honor" our standpoints (qua our standpoints) if we did not merit respect.

Even so, Southwood cannot use this resource. First, it seems to run contrary to his stated aim of showing that rational requirements are "by their very nature" normative, for if the normativity of our first-personal standpoints depends on our meriting respect, its normativity is conditional on our value. But much more importantly, if the normativity of rational requirements were grounded in a demand for self-respect, then there would be no normative reason to conform with rational requirements when doing so conflicts with self-respect. For example, if our ends involved ceding our agency to slavery or drug addiction, then there would be no normative reason to conform to the demand to take the perceived means to one's ends.

If Southwood, and apparently Broome, are right to claim that requirements of rationality are demands of our first-personal standpoints, and it is true that an appeal to self-respect is necessary to ground the normativity of those standpoints, it

follows that it is impossible to meet Broome's Challenge.²⁴

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Our attitudes can—and inevitably do—lead us astray. We fail to get what we want, what we value, what we hope for, because, despite our best efforts, we fail to recognize the true means to our ends. And even when we do not fail in this way, we may have no assurance that the desires, values and hopes we began with are themselves fitting. When we fail—either in achieving our ends or in adopting the right ones—we may not have failed rationally; in fact, we may have done everything rationally required of us. And so, many of our attitudes are not really *good* from our points of view. They are merely instruments—tools we use to get us where we think we are meant to go. These tools do not constitute what matters to us. They may have no inherent value, no normative authority. And the mere fact that we possess them does not always—or perhaps ever—justify anything.

We have argued, for these reasons, that Southwood's model fails to vindicate the normativity of rationality. There may be a way to explain, via our meriting respect, how elements of our standpoints become normative merely because they are ours. But even this will not vindicate the normativity of rationality in each and every case.

Ultimately, Southwood may be seen as bolstering the subjective reasons

account he takes his view to improve upon. Rationality *appears* normative because meeting the demands of our standpoint as modeled by Southwood—meeting the requirements of rationality—represents our best attempts at honoring what matters to us.

NOTES

¹ Nicholas Southwood, “Vindicating the Normativity of Rationality,” *Ethics* 119:1 (2008): 9-30.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26, emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ John Broome, “Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity,” *Ethics* 119:1 (2008): 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰ Southwood, 25.

¹¹ See Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 102-103.

¹² We include “absent a change in his antecedent attitudes” in recognition of the possibility that this rational requirement has wide scope. In the next section, we argue that on Southwood’s model, this and many requirements of rationality have narrow scope.

¹³ Southwood, 29. For arguments in favor of the subjective reasons account, see Niko Kolodny, “Why Be Rational?” *Mind* 114 (2005): 509-563.

¹⁴ Broome, “Reply,” 98.

¹⁵ We talk about coherence amongst mental states rather than attitudes because sometimes failures of rationality involve failure to *adopt* an attitude, and thus there can be conflicts between two mental states, one of which is the lack of an attitude; such conflicts are not conflicts between attitudes.

¹⁶ Alan’s requirement to drink the liquid in front of him—stemming from his fine-gin-drinking end

and his belief that the glass is a glass of fine gin—matches this schema, and therefore, on Southwood's view, also has narrow scope.

¹⁷ Southwood, 11, n.5.

¹⁸ See, for one, John Broome, "Normative Requirements," *Ratio* 12 (1999): 398-419. See also Kolodny, "Why Be Rational?"

¹⁹ For a particularly perspicuous example, see Donald H. Regan, "The Value of Rational Nature," *Ethics* 112:2, 2002: 267-291.

²⁰ For related discussion, see David Enoch, "Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't Come from What Is Constitutive of Action," *Philosophical Review* 115:2 (2006): 169-198.

²¹ Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 14-15.

²² See David Velleman, "A Right of Self-Termination?" *Ethics* 109:3 (1999): 606-620; Connie Rosati, "Darwall on Welfare and Rational Care," Symposium on Stephen Darwall's *Welfare and Rational Care*, *Philosophical Studies* 130 (2006): 619-635; and [omitted for blind review]. For a similar view, see Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²³ For a similar point, see Velleman, "A Right to Self-Termination."

²⁴ There is one possible out: One could claim instead that we have learned, surprisingly, that rationality requires us not to adopt ends that are incompatible with self-respect. Such requirements, however, would look suspiciously unlike traditional requirements of rationality.