

Relations All the Way Down: Reasons, Affordances, and Normative Address

Much of present-day ethical theory, inspired by Moore (1903) and Ross (1930), takes normative reasons to be grounded in facts or properties: features of the world that we represent and respond to (Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014; Schroeder 2021). This suggests that moral cognition works like an inference: we perceive a fact ('this person is in pain'), represent its normative significance ('pain is bad'), and draw a conclusion ('I ought to help this person'). However, I argue that this picture is psychologically implausible. Both empirical research in moral psychology (Haidt 2001) and a growing body of work in cognitive science and phenomenology (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1991; Peter 2024; Rietveld & Kieverstein 2014) suggest that moral cognition is faster, more embodied, and more situationally embedded than inference allows.

Recently, fact-based theories have come under pressure from another angle. A novel and increasingly influential approach to ethical theory — "the You Turn" (Eilan 2014) — argues that normativity can arise from interpersonal relations: the legitimate demands we can make on one another (Darwall 2006; Wallace 2019; Zylberman 2021). My cousin's demand that I repay a loan gives me a reason to do so, without invoking pre-existing normative properties. While this approach avoids the implausible psychology of fact-based theories, it faces its own difficulties (Wallace 2007). Can it explain why I should help strangers in pain, even if they have made no demand on me? If normative facts are still needed to cover such cases, how should we handle conflicts between these facts and normative relations? For example, should I repay my cousin, or give all my money to charity because doing so reduces more pain in the world?

I argue that the relational approach points in the right direction, but needs to be extended and grounded in a more solid foundation. To achieve this, I draw on a concept from cognitive science and philosophy of mind: *affordances*. An affordance is a directly perceived possibility for action (Gibson 1979). We don't see a chair and infer from its features — its height, shape, sturdiness, etc. — that we could sit on it; we see it *as something to sit on*. The affordance is built into the perception itself. My hypothesis is that normative situations work the same way. Someone's pain doesn't supply factual input for ethical reasoning; it *affords helping*. The situation presents itself as calling for a response — not as a conclusion to be reached, but as a feature of what is perceived.

The crucial second step – extending and completing the relational approach to normativity – is to show that situations do not merely present the actions they afford as appropriate but *address* them to us. Two converging lines of evidence support this. Research in developmental psychology suggests that affordance perception is acquired through direct, second-personal engagement with caregivers in early childhood: before a child can *reason* about what is appropriate, a caregiver's concern or disapproval already shapes what situations are seen as calling for (Musholt 2025; Reddy 2018). And work in situated cognition suggests that affordance perceptions are always embedded in socially established practices or shared "forms of life" (Rietveld & Kieverstein 2014: 327; also see McDowell 1998).

Together, these findings suggest that normative situations carry the demands of others. Since our perception is rooted in early personal encounters and sustained by the fabric of shared practices, situations do not merely present action possibilities but *speak* to us, with the voice of the moral community. This tallies with Darwall's notion that, although moral obligations are "relational all the way down" (2006: 60), they don't depend on the contingent demands of concrete individuals. Instead, when we demand compliance with an obligation, we "add our voice to, or second, a demand that we must presuppose is made of everyone by the moral community" (Darwall 2013: 37).

In this way, affordances provide the needed foundation for an extended relational approach: they explain how normative situations can address us immediately and second-personally, without requiring either a detour through abstract normative facts or a restriction to cases of

explicit interpersonal demand. Moral conflicts — for instance, between the needs of a stranger and the demands of a relative — turn out to be conflicts within a single, relational, “landscape of affordances” (Rietveld & Kieverstein 2014).

This project is exploratory and somewhat adventurous. While the affordance concept has proven remarkably fruitful, even outside psychology and philosophy, applications to normative theory have remained rare, programmatic in nature, and restricted in scope. They tend to focus on specific normative phenomena, such as virtue (Hampson et al. 2021) or fittingness (Peters 2024), or cater to fact-based accounts of reasons (Starzak & Schlicht 2024). While these applications lend credence to some of my suggestions, my argument clearly goes out on a limb – both by providing an affordance-based account of normativity *as such* and by casting affordances as inherently relational.

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