

## Social Reasons

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**ABSTRACT** *The goal of this article is to motivate the idea of a social reason and demonstrate its usefulness in social theorizing. For example, in a society that values getting married young, the fact that one is young is a reason to get married. In racist and sexist societies, we have social reasons to be racist and sexist. Social reasons give rise to social requirements and obligations, where these requirements often conflict with prudential and moral requirements. My application of reasons to social philosophy parallels Charles Mills' and Carole Pateman's applications of social contract theory to political philosophy. While they use social contract theory to make sense of patriarchy and white supremacy, I use the theory of normative reasons to make sense of social injustice. The theory of normative reasons meets non-ideal theory.*

### 1. Introduction

My mother called me recently. 'You should get married', she said. She told me that the fact that I am old is a reason to get married. What kind of reason is this? It is tempting to interpret the reason as a putative prudential or moral reason, but I argue that it is neither. Reasons like the one my mother offered are what I call *social reasons* – reasons for acting that are determined by how the social world is structured. Social reasons give rise to social requirements and obligations, where these requirements often conflict with prudential and moral requirements. In racist and sexist societies, we have social reasons to be racist and sexist; we may have most social reason to promote social injustice.

The goal of this article is to motivate the idea of a social reason and demonstrate its usefulness in social theorizing. I start by presenting different examples of social reasons (Section 2). Afterward, I argue that social reasons are significant because they capture the normativity of structural injustice (Section 3). I end by giving a constructivist, contextualist account of social reasons; on this view, social reasons are determined by the reasoning or outlook of an idealized social group in a context (Section 4). My application of reasons to social philosophy parallels Pateman's and Mills' applications of social contract theory to political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> While they use social contract theory to make sense of patriarchy and white supremacy, I use the theory of normative reasons to make sense of social injustice. The theory of normative reasons meets non-ideal theory.

## 2. Examples of Social Reasons

### 2.1. Preliminary Distinctions

To make a case for social reasons, I should clarify what kinds of reasons I take social reasons to be. It is customary to distinguish between normative, motivating, and explanatory reasons.<sup>2</sup> Normative reasons are broadly reasons that count in favor of an action. There are at least two kinds of normative reasons: moral reasons and prudential reasons. Moral reasons are the paradigm case of normative reasons. Megan sees a baby drowning in a shallow pond. The fact that the baby is drowning is a reason for her to save the baby. Prudential reasons depend on one's wellbeing or self-regarding desires. Given his predilection for sweet fruits, Santana has a reason to eat bananas. The fact that bananas are sweet is a reason for Santana to eat them.

Normative reasons can be contrasted with motivating and explanatory reasons. Motivating reasons are the reasons in light of which an agent acts; they serve as inputs to an agent's deliberation about what to do. Rudolph robs a convenience store, motivated by the fact that he needs to pay for his child's medical bills. Nonetheless, Rudolph does not necessarily have prudential or moral reason to rob a convenience store. Explanatory reasons are reasons that explain an agent's action, where such reasons may not be the reasons in light of which the agent acts. Concerning Rudolph, one might say: the reason why Rudolph robbed the convenience store is that he faced structural barriers to employment and health insurance. This may be true as a social scientific explanation, but the reason citing structural disadvantages is not the reason that motivated Rudolph.

I take social reasons, of the relevant sort, to be normative reasons. I understand the reason relation as follows:  $R$  is a reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\phi$  in context  $C$ . Reasons for action can be weighed. A reason may count in favor of an action yet be outweighed by other reasons against acting. There is *sufficient* reason to  $\phi$  just in case the reasons to  $\phi$  outweigh the reasons against  $\phi$ ing. Philosophers disagree about whether reasons are facts or propositions. I will speak as if reasons are facts, but this is for linguistic convenience. More substantively, I will assume that one can have a reason to  $\phi$  even if one does not actually know what that reason is. Finally, reasons are context-sensitive; what is a reason in one context may not be a reason in another.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2. Paradigm Cases

With this background in mind, here is my paradigm case of a social reason, in more detail.

*Marryland*: Dave lives in Marryland, a society in which marriage is a central social institution. Whether one is married substantially affects one's social standing, wealth, and lifetime wellbeing. The older an individual in this society becomes, the more important it is for the individual to get married. Although marriage is beneficial and respected within Marryland, it is not considered legally or morally required. Also, it is feasible for Dave to have an equally good life without getting married. Dave recently turns 40 years old. His mother calls him and informs him that he has a reason to get married: that he is 40 years old.

Let  $F$  be the putative reason for Dave to get married. What kind of reason, if any, is  $F$ ? At first glance,  $F$  is neither a moral reason nor a prudential reason.

It is not a moral reason, at least on most accounts of moral reasons. Either we do not have moral reasons to get married or  $F$  is not the right kind of moral reason to get married. Moral reasons are typically connected to moral requirements. The most direct connection is specified by the moral rationalist, who says: we are morally obligated to  $\phi$  just in case we have most (or most moral) reason to  $\phi$ . While Dave's mother describes one reason for him to get married, one could easily imagine many more. She could have said that the fact that Dave has a steady career is a reason to get married. Or, given the gender roles within their society, Dave's mother might say that the fact that Dave is a man is a reason for him to get married. We can imagine these reasons outweighing reasons for Dave to not get married, but it seems implausible that Dave is morally required to get married, or that he has sufficient moral reason to get married. Not only is  $F$  not a moral reason, it is not even widely assumed to be a moral reason. This is true by the construction of the case, but this is also plausibly true of the real world; some strongly supported social institutions are supported for non-moral reasons. Dave's reasons for getting married do not reduce to his community's believing that he has a moral reason to get married.

It is more plausible to interpret  $F$  as a prudential reason. Given the benefits of marriage in his society, Dave has a prudential reason to get married. It is certainly possible that  $F$  is a *pro tanto* prudential reason to get married; it is a reason that counts in favor of getting married that may be defeated by other reasons. But again, we can imagine a scenario in which Dave's reasons to get married are not defeated. Suppose Dave tells his mother that he does not need to be married in order to be happy (or whatever you take wellbeing to consist in). In fact, Dave would be happiest if he did not get married, and there are feasible ways of living his best, unmarried, life. Dave's mother could respond by pointing out that Dave's unmarried life, though morally permissible and optimal for his wellbeing, is simply not what one does as a member of their society. Dave's optimal life lies off the beaten path; it is not socially recognized or promoted. Dave has sufficient reason to get married, even if it does not maximize his wellbeing.

Of course, Dave could respond by claiming that  $F$  is simply not a reason for him to do anything. This is a natural response, one that many philosophers are likely to have. But this response should be interrogated. There is a sense in which Dave has sufficient reason to get married in the same way there is a sense in which Dave is obligated to get married. Dave is *socially* obligated to get married. The social rationalist says: we are socially obligated to  $\phi$  just in case we have most social reason to  $\phi$ . Social reasons and obligations, here, are largely determined by one's social context. Dave is in a context in which marriage is socially required and he therefore has social reasons to get married.

What could social reasons and social requirements be? I will not attempt to reductively analyze or define these notions. A reduction may be possible but a notion need not have a reductive account in order for it to earn its theoretical keep. My goal is instead to build familiarity with these notions by using them and describing their characteristic features. To this end, I provide one more example.

*Dominata*: Dominata is a country plagued by structural racism. The social institutions of Dominata systematically harm people of color. For example, policing in Dominata is known to disproportionately harm people of color; yet individual police officers do not consider themselves racist, nor do they actually have a vicious regard for people of color. Johnny is a white police officer in a Dominatan police department. When on his regular patrol, he sees a person of color, Jose. He

knows nothing about Jose and has no evidence that Jose is, or will, engage in criminal activity. Nonetheless, in a racist society, Johnny has a reason to harass Jose: namely, that Jose is Latino.

The fact that Jose is Latino does not morally count in favor of harassing him. But from the perspective of Johnny's social context, he does have a reason to harass Jose. Insofar as racism is built into the nature of the society, Johnny should take racial considerations as a basis for certain actions.

These kinds of social reasons, which count in favor of social injustice, are distortions of what we ordinarily take to be moral reasons. One may face some imaginative resistance when even suggesting that Jose's being a person of color is a reason for Johnny to harass Jose. The instinctive reaction is that there can be no such reason. However, it is likely that this instinctive reaction is clouded by a moral interpretation of Johnny's reasons. Unless we are willing to say that the only reasons are moral reasons, the fact that social reasons are often contrary to morality is not decisive evidence that there are no such reasons.

So far, I have used examples to motivate the idea of a social reason. The examples are idealized but they are not distant metaphysical possibilities; they are slightly idealized versions of actually existing social contexts. At first glance, the normative reasons in these examples are neither prudential nor moral.

### 2.3. *Objections*

I have suggested that social reasons are genuine normative reasons for action that are neither prudential nor moral. Before attempting to further characterize social reasons, I should address a few more obvious objections to the idea that there are distinctively social reasons.

The first objection comes in the form of a strong intuition: there are no social reasons, only the illusion (or mistaken perception) that there exist prudential or moral reasons. Call this the *illusion objection*. It flatly denies that there is such a thing as a social reason by suggesting that the appearance of a social reason is simply a mistake.

The illusion objection is not a compelling objection in itself. When one characterizes something as an illusion, there is usually an explanation of why one might be under an illusion. If there is a mistake in ascribing reasons, in the cases I have described, it would be helpful to know what mistake is being made.

Here is another objection, one that could complement the illusion objection. One might explain away the appearance of social reasons by appealing to social norms. Cristina Bicchieri provides a useful definition of social norms, writing:

A social norm is a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation).<sup>4</sup>

Here is an example. There is a norm of greeting people at workplaces, at least when you see them for the first time in the day. The empirical expectation is that most people in your workplace will greet other workers. The normative expectation is that most people in your workplace believe they ought to greet other workers. If you see a co-worker at work

and they do not greet you, there is something wrong. Or at least: you assume that others think there is something wrong.

One possibility is that social reasons are nothing more than pressures generated by the adoption of certain social norms. On this view, people in Maryland are expected to get married, and there is a general presumption that they ought to get married. So there is a social norm that tells Dave to get married, but there is no distinctively social *reason* for Dave to get married. Call this the *social norms objection*.

While I agree that social norms can generate social reasons, this does not imply that there are no such things as social reasons. After all, social norms can generate prudential and moral reasons as well. Prudentially: it would benefit us to act according to the social norms of our society, in many cases. Morally: the world would be better off, in many cases, if we acted according to the social norms. To show that there are no social reasons, one has to show that social reasons simply do not exist, not that social reasons are generated by social norms.

A slightly different version of the social norms objection goes like this: if there were no social norms, there would be no social reasons; therefore, we should not think there are any distinctively social reasons. While it is plausible that social reasons supervene (or depend) on the existence of social norms, this does not entail that there are no social reasons. Quite the opposite: if social reasons exist, we should expect them to depend on the existence of social norms and other social entities.

There is another objection in the vicinity of the social norms objection. You may attempt to reduce social reasons to social expectations. Dave has no social reason to get married. Rather, most people in Maryland expect him to get married. This is the *social expectations objection*.<sup>5</sup>

The problem with this objection is that the prevalence of social expectations is neither necessary nor sufficient for social reasons. In the case of Dominata, the general population does not expect police officers to be racist or engage in racist policing. They have social reasons to be racist nonetheless.<sup>6</sup> Social expectations are not sufficient because the society may not have the right institutions in place for those expectations to correspond to social reasons. Imagine that Dave lives in a society where everyone expects him to get married but social institutions do not actually privilege marriage. This is a case in which Dave does not have a social reason to get married.

The social norms and social expectations objections are sometimes motivated by considerations of theoretical parsimony. The *parsimony objection* goes like this: while we have to posit prudential and moral reasons, we do not have to posit social reasons. Social reasons are not fundamental. Therefore, we ought not to posit them.

My response: social reasons can exist even if they are not normatively fundamental. Social reasons may well be grounded in prudential reasons, for example. *But wait a minute! If social reasons are not fundamental, why talk about them as opposed to prudential reasons (or whatever social reasons are fundamentally grounded in)?* What counts as theoretically significant depends on the question under discussion. In a discussion about fundamental moral duties, it is out of place to suggest that the duty to prevent climate change is fundamental. In a discussion of applied ethics, it is perfectly in order to claim that the duty to prevent climate change is fundamental. The theoretical setting makes a difference to what counts as significant.

The traditional question under discussion for value theorists who discuss reasons has been: what are normative reasons, fundamentally speaking? And how are these reasons connected to deontic constraints and values? These are all good questions, but they are not the questions I will be primarily interested in. The notion of a social reason is most useful when we consider questions that are not found within traditional value theory. I will say more about those kinds of questions in the next section.

Here is another objection to social reasons that comes from the perspective of traditional value theory. Normative reasons are associated with a binding normative force, but you may think that there is nothing binding in these social cases. Dave has no reason to get married and the police officer certainly has no reason to be racist. Social reasons do not have authority in the same way that other kinds of reasons do. Therefore, social reasons are not genuine reasons. Call this the *force objection*.

I should note that the force objection does not simply result in skepticism about social reasons, but skepticism about social normativity more generally. However, there is at least some evidence for the view that (distinctly) social normativity exists.

Margaret Gilbert understands social normativity as arising from joint commitments. Under the right conditions, two people jointly commit to building a house.<sup>7</sup> The two people thereby incur a non-moral, non-prudential obligation to build a house together. For Gilbert, the social world is shot through with distinctively social obligations.

Charlotte Witt has recently defended the notion of social normativity.<sup>8</sup> She is particularly interested in what she calls social role normativity, the kind of normativity that issues from social roles like *being a mother* and *being a professor*. As a mother, you ought to take care of your children. As a professor, you ought to do your research. The force of the 'ought', she argues, is neither prudential nor moral. Rather, it arises via the work being performed. She defends what she calls the artisanal model of social normativity.

Gilbert and Witt both give book-length defenses of social normativity. I cannot give such an extensive defense of social normativity here. I can, however, show the way in which the notion of social reasons – which presupposes social normativity – can be useful in value theory.

To summarize: I have addressed several common objections to the idea of distinctively social reasons. I recognize, however, that these responses are preliminary at best. In order to fully respond to these objections – particularly the parsimony and force objections – I need to say more about (a) the theoretical significance of social reasons and (b) the putative nature of social reasons.

### 3. The Significance of Social Reasons

I have said that social reasons are likely to seem foreign from the perspective of traditional value theory. But if we are not working within the context of traditional value theory, what theoretical perspective is likely to make the notion of a social reason attractive? My claim: non-ideal theory. I start by using Charles Mills' theory of the racial contract as an example of non-ideal theorizing, drawing parallels between his theory and my proposed theory of social reasons (Section 3.1); I then consider Mills' account of non-ideal theory, abstractly conceived (Section 3.2).

### 3.1. *The Racial Contract*

Charles Mills' theory of the racial contract gives a useful illustration of how to understand both the content and methodology of my account of social reasons.

What is the racial contract? Mills writes:

The Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements (higher-level contracts about contracts, which set the limits of the contracts' validity) between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) 'racial' (phenotypical/genealogical/cultural) criteria C1, C2, C3 ... as 'white,' and coextensive (making due allowance for gender differentiation) with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining subset of humans as 'nonwhite' and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons ...<sup>9</sup>

There are agreements between individuals who deem themselves as superior on the basis of their race. In the case of those designated as white, the idea is that one is considered morally and political superior to those who are not designated white. Nonwhites, unlike whites, are to be regarded as subpersons; they are not fully human, not fully rational, and so on. As a consequence, they are to be treated as having less than full moral worth (or having less of whatever your preferred normative theory says that most humans have).

The racial contract is intended to be a descriptive characterization of actually existing societies. Throughout his classic book, Mills argues that a global racial contract among whites has been operative for hundreds of years, starting with the beginning of European colonialism. The racial contract fundamentally shapes human societies and their functionings, regardless of whether its influence is explicitly acknowledged.

Whether Mills' account is correct or not, it helps illustrate the kind of phenomenon that social reasons make sense of: widespread structural injustice. If the racial contract hypothesis is true, then racial inequality is not simply an unintended consequence of bad social policy; it is, instead, the intentional fulfillment of the racial contract.

If Mills is right, then there are social reasons to be racist. Why? Because a racial contract exists, and we can take the establishment and maintenance of this contract to require the perspective of some group. From the perspective of global white supremacy, police have a reason to harass black and brown people. Seen in this light, police are responding to social reasons. When people of color are treated as if they are subpersons, they are treated this way for social reasons.

By using social reasons to illuminate these cases, we are able to bring out the moral and political failings of the social groups and contexts that constitute and enable such reasons. Specifically, the concept of social reasons has a motivating effect that can be seen when contemplating various claims of social reasons. There are many claims about social reasons that are jarring because they are contrary to morality. To say that one has a social reason to be racist is to say something that is disturbing to the virtuous individual. Nonetheless, this language is useful because it simultaneously (a) describes some state of affairs and (b) evokes whatever moral emotions (or motives) incite one to action against the relevant bad states (or wrong actions).

It is worth comparing my project to Sally Haslanger's account of gender kinds. She defines the gender kind woman as follows:

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment

by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction.<sup>10</sup>

The account is not meant to describe what we actually mean by 'woman', but to present a concept of *woman* that will be useful for political purposes. In this case, Haslanger thinks this concept will be useful because, once one realizes they are part of the category woman (as defined by Haslanger), they will realize that there should be no members of the category.

Haslanger's definition of *woman* is jarring because it confronts women with the possibility (and actuality) of their being subordinated in accordance with some background social ideology. Now, one might insist that women are not necessarily subordinated, but this is not the point of the conceptual engineering (or ameliorative) project. The point is to draw attention to injustice by describing the social world in a way that brings out injustice. Instead of protesting against the definition of *woman* Haslanger provides, one ought to protest against the world in which that definition has instances.<sup>11</sup>

My account of social reasons has a similar structure. My account of social reasons is intended to bring out the discrepancy between our social reasons and our moral reasons. One may protest that we have no reason to be racist, even in a racist society, but this misses the point of the current theory. The vocabulary of social reasons brings out the problems of the social world because it tells us what counts as reasons from morally defective social perspectives.

### 3.2. *Non-Ideal Theory*

Mills, Haslanger, and I can all be understood as doing non-ideal social theory. What is non-ideal theory? I will rely on an influential characterization by Mills.<sup>12</sup>

Mills understands non-ideal theory by reference to ideal theory, but he does not give a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for what it takes to do ideal theory. Nonetheless, he provides a cluster of features that helps us identify ideal theory. I summarize the features below.<sup>13</sup>

- (1) *Idealized social ontology*. Social ontology abstracts away from 'relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression'.<sup>14</sup> Typically, society is represented as a collection of individuals.
- (2) *Idealized epistemic capacities*. Agents are represented as having unrealistic epistemic abilities. The minds and motivations of agents are represented as transparent to them.
- (3) *Silence on oppression*. Little is said about oppression or the ways that systematic oppression shapes social basic institutions.
- (4) *Ideal social institutions*. The family, the economy, the criminal justice system, and other institutions are represented as functioning in a way that obscures their actual (harmful) functioning.
- (5) *Strict compliance*. This is the Rawlsian idea that we consider principles of justice that would govern a well-ordered society, and that we need to start with morally or politically ideal case in order to determine what to do in cases of partial compliance to the principles of justice.



The overarching idea is that ideal theory, in the sense he criticizes, emphasizes the normatively ideal scenario – the just society, the epistemically ideal agent, etc. – in a way that obscures questions about oppression, domination, and injustice. The non-ideal theorist, in contrast, constructs theories that are particularly attentive to the normative failings, and actual functioning, of agents and social institutions.

The racial contract is an example of non-ideal theory. Mills says:

Whereas the ideal contract explains how a just society would be formed, ruled by a moral government, and regulated by a defensible moral code, this nonideal/naturalized contract explains how an unjust, exploitative society, ruled by an oppressive government and regulated by an immoral code, comes into existence.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Haslanger's account of *woman* tracks how women are in fact treated, and it is not silent on oppression and injustice. My account of social reasons tracks the reasons that actually exist in a social context, not just the moral ones; many actually existing social reasons are morally and politically bad.

To be clear: non-ideal theory does not reject all abstractions or (non-normative) idealizations. Mills says: 'What distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual'.<sup>16</sup> The notion of a racial contract is indeed an idealization, but it is one that is better attuned to describe the actual (unjust) world that we live in.

The non-ideal theorist is interested in giving a perspicuous account of what is *wrong* with society, and we cannot simply understand what is wrong by starting with the ideal case. Moral and prudential reasons highlight the ideal case: the case in which we have moral or practical reason to do something. But the focus on moral and prudential reasons does not give us an understanding of the way reasons can be distorted within a society.<sup>17</sup> For that, we need a concept like *social reasons*.

This suggests that we cannot brush off social reasons purely on the grounds of theoretical parsimony. Or at least, parsimony should not be understood in terms of whether an entity is absolutely (or metaphysically) fundamental. In ideal theory, we may be interested in the most fundamental sorts of reasons. In non-ideal theory, however, we are trying to posit the most theoretically useful sorts of reasons. My claim is that social reasons are useful, in this context.

Of course, my defense of social reasons is not quite done yet. I have argued that social reasons can be useful from the perspective of non-ideal theory, but I have yet to say how, exactly, they can be useful. I also have not given an additional response to the force objection. In the next section, I will do both of those things.

#### 4. The Nature of Social Reasons

The nature of social reasons can be captured by a slogan: social reasons are reasons relative to a social perspective. In this section, I turn this slogan into a theory. I start by presenting my tentative account of the nature of social reasons (Section 4.1). Then I argue that we can use it to develop a stronger response to the force objection (Section 4.2).

#### 4.1. *Social Reasons: A Constructivist View*

A social perspective only exists within a social context. A context is a set of facts that tells us what some bit of reality is like. Most obviously, a context specifies the possible world, time, and location of some state of affairs. A *social* context specifies additional facts about social structure; such facts enable social reasons. More precisely, social contexts specify three types of facts: agential, ideological, and material.

Agential facts are facts about how individuals or groups in a social context act. For example, the fact that many adults in Maryland get married is an agential fact. This fact simply describes what people in a given community do. The relevant agential facts of interest will characterize not just what people do, but the underlying social relations that people are part of.

Ideological facts are facts about how agents interpret the social world. All ideological facts are agential facts, but the converse does not hold. Facts about what agents in a society do are not exhausted by what agents in a society believe or think. It is an agential fact that one person killed another, but this fact holds independently of how the killing was interpreted. Ideological facts can be facts about beliefs, but they can also be facts about other non-belief-like attitudes – scripts, prototypes, emotions, desires, preferences, etc.

Material facts are facts about the non-agential matter that constitutes, or otherwise facilitates, the social world. Agents and their interpretations are part of the social context, but they do not exhaust the social context. Haslanger gives the example of a highway.<sup>18</sup> Interstate 95 is (a) made of concrete and asphalt, and (b) a legal right of way for cars and trucks. While the latter property may be partly agential, the former property is not; the highway is at least partially grounded in matter.

Social reasons are enabled by (or grounded in) a social context. But how does the social context make certain reasons count in favor of actions? My answer: by constituting or grounding a social perspective. I will outline constructivism about social reasons, the view that social reasons are constructed from a social perspective.

*Constructivism* names a family of views in metaethics. What makes a normative claim correct or incorrect? For realists, the correctness of a normative claim fundamentally depends on a certain kind of agent-independent facts. On this view, murder is wrong just in case the fact *murder is wrong* obtains. For constructivists, ‘the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim’s being entailed from within the practical point of view’.<sup>19</sup> On this view, murder is wrong just in case the proposition that murder is wrong is entailed by the relevant practical standpoint. The key difference between realists and constructivists is that: for realists, one’s practical standpoint responds to the normative truths; for constructivists, one’s practical standpoint grounds the normative truths.

A practical standpoint, here, is a set of values and value judgments that bear on normative questions. Having an altruistic perspective involves (a) positively valuing the welfare of others and (b) judging that the welfare of others is valuable or good. Given a perspective and the normative facts, we can derive normative conclusions. If I have an altruistic perspective, and I see a person needing my help, then – other things being equal – it follows that I have a normative reason to help them. Constructivists disagree about how exactly to characterize the entailment relation, but the consensus is that the relation itself presupposes no substantive values; it is a relation that governs practical reason.

One particularly notable kind of constructivist is the *Humean* constructivist. The Humean constructivist takes normative facts to depend on one’s practical standpoint, but they

reject the idea that there are substantive values – like respect for humanity – that all practical standpoints are committed to. The distinction between Humean and non-Humean constructivists is best illustrated by the thought experiment of the ideally coherent Caligula. Caligula values torturing people for fun, among other things. The Humean thinks that a fully rational, fully informed Caligula's practical standpoint would entail that torturing people for fun is permissible (relative to Caligula's practical standpoint). While Humean constructivism is contentious in metaethics more generally, this variety of constructivist will be useful when understanding social reasons, specifically.

Now I will turn to constructivism about social reasons. I take a practical standpoint to be a normative perspective. In discussions of constructivism in ethics, there is a tendency to focus on the perspectives of individuals. However, it is plausible that groups also have normative perspectives. It is normal to speak of the values of a culture, community, or society. This society values honor; that society values family; and so on. This suggests there is a collective normative perspective that groups can have. I will call such perspectives *social perspectives*. If such perspectives exist, then it is plausible to think there are normative claims that, in combination with other facts, entail facts about what reasons individuals have.

Here is the view.

*Social Reasons Constructivism:*  $X$  is a social reason for agent  $A$  to  $\phi$  in context  $C$  just in case  $X$  is a reason for agent  $A$  to  $\phi$  is entailed by the perspective of the relevant group in  $C$ .

Social reasons constructivism differs from standard constructivist theories by virtue of its subject matter and its structure. The subject matter difference is obvious: one is constructivist about social reasons rather than non-social reasons. The interesting structural difference is that: what social reasons one has fundamentally depends on the perspective not of the agent, but of some group in relation to the agent. So whether Dave from Maryland has a reason to get married will depend on the perspective of a group in (or sufficiently related to) Maryland.

If we consider each of the examples of social reasons earlier, it looks like social reasons constructivism provides a sensible account of what constitutes a social reason for an agent. Consider societies like Maryland. The following claim seems right: from the perspective of Maryland, Dave has a reason to get married. The reasons for Dave, whatever they are, are entailed by some idealized group agent corresponding to the perspectives of Maryland. We can tell a similar story about the Dominata case.

Not only is constructivism about social reasons intuitive, but it also explains what makes social reasons what they are. Social reasons are social in virtue of following from the perspective of a social group. The constructivist does not have to argue that social reasons are primitive or that they are immediately grounded by non-social facts. One only needs to be committed to the idea of the perspective of a social group.

What does it mean for a social group to have a perspective? I will start by taking a perspective to consist in descriptive and normative beliefs. What is a group belief? There is a massive literature defining the notion.<sup>20</sup> While there may be many accounts of group belief that suffice, I will work with a relatively conservative account of group belief. Lackey defines a group belief as follows: 'A group,  $G$ , believes that  $p$  if and only if: (a) there is a significant percentage of  $G$ 's operative members who believe that  $p$ , and (b) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that  $p$  yields a belief set that is not substantively

incoherent'.<sup>21</sup> Consider an environmental rights group that believes that climate change is the biggest threat to human life. There may be members of the group that do not believe this. In fact, it may be that most members of the group do not believe this. However, if the vast majority of the operative members of the group – say, the board – believes it, then the group has that belief.

Let us apply Lackey's account to group beliefs in the case of social reasons. There may be a group of people in Maryland who believe proposition *M*: that everyone in Maryland should be married by age 30. If most people believe they should be married by age 30, and for the same reasons, then this is a straightforward case of group belief. However, realistic cases are more complex. Suppose most people in Maryland do not believe *M*. They could still be part of a group that believes *M* if they are simply the non-operative members of a group that believes *M*. We can imagine that there is a small group of powerful public figures in Maryland that believes *M* for the same reasons. There may be a larger group of people who do not believe *M* but act as if they believe *M* for strategic reasons. It would be right to say that the social perspective of the entire group includes the belief that *M* because the operative members of the group believe *M* (and on coherent grounds).

I should note that, due to the operative/non-operative distinction, your social reasons may be entirely independent of *your* perspective. The relevant group that determines your social reasons may not include you; you may not be an operative member of the group that determines what the social reasons are.

Lackey's account is particularly useful because it does not require the beliefs of the group to be shared by everyone, only those who are in a given position of authority. What kind of authority, and how it works, is the subject of further discussion. I only want to draw attention to the fact that group perspectives are not necessarily (or even realistically) a matter of consensus. Rather, there are power relations at work in a social context that designate some individuals as operative and some as non-operative. Limning the structure of group belief in these cases will require a combination of social ontology and sociological analysis.

Perspectives are not exclusively composed of beliefs; beliefs are just easier to model, for current purposes. A more sophisticated account of perspectives would incorporate group desires, emotions, and other attitudes. The general assumption is that we will be able to recover a group perspective out of these elements.

Humean constructivism is controversial in metaethics because it rules out the existence of substantive moral constraints on reasons. Your reasons entirely depend on your deliberative starting points, but there are no constraints on those. This state of affairs may be problematic for constructivism about moral reasons, but it is a good result for constructivism about social reasons. One's social reasons are not constrained by morality.

We are now better able to see why social reasons are beneficial to posit, from the perspective of non-ideal theory. Social reasons are those things issued from the perspectives of social contexts, and our social contexts are often morally and politically bad. Instead of simply identifying the bad perspective or ideology that characterizes a social perspective, we can think more carefully about how these perspectives influence the deliberation of agents.

Agents, under non-ideal conditions particularly, take social reasons as reasons for action. And those reasons are, from a social perspective, things that count in favor of a given action. These basic facts are not easily captured by the resources of ideal value theory.

#### 4.2. Social Reasons in Context

One feature of the account I have proposed is that it suggests that social reasons are context-sensitive. But how do we understand the context-sensitivity of social reasons, exactly? And why should we think these social reasons are binding on us?

Luckily, there are existing models of context-sensitive normativity in the vicinity: namely, those of moral contextualism. The moral contextualist takes moral statements to be context-sensitive, where their context-sensitivity involves being sensitive to a specified moral perspective.

A representative moral contextualist view can be found in Björnsson and Finlay:

We believe that normative ‘ought’ claims are doubly relative to context, being relativized both to (i) bodies of information and (ii) standards or ends. On this view, every meaningful normative utterance of a sentence ‘A ought to  $\phi$ ’ will express a proposition to the effect that A ought-relative-to-information-*i*-and-standard-*s* to  $\phi$ , for some *i* and *s* determined by the context of utterance.<sup>22</sup>

On this view, normative claims are always implicitly relativized to a body of information and a standard. What you ought to do is determined by the information and the standard, but the information and the standard may differ, depending on the context.

Social reasons are contextually variable similar to the way that moral contextualists take moral reasons to be. In any given context, there will be information, understood as facts about the social context, as well as putative facts that the social perspective takes to hold. There will also be standards or goals, given a social perspective. Maryland has one sort of goal for its citizens; Dominata has another goal.

Let me be more precise about the analogy. Strictly speaking, moral contextualism is a thesis about moral language; the claim is that utterances of ‘A ought to  $\phi$ ’ will be context-sensitive. As such, the thesis strictly falls short of the claim that the property *ought* is a relational property. However, we can have a version of moral contextualism that is strictly committed to the relational facts that Björnsson and Finlay hint at: namely, facts like *A-ought-to- $\phi$ -relative-to-information-*i*-and-standard-*s**. The connection between talk and reality is as follows: ‘A ought to  $\phi$ ’ is uttered in a context that singles out information *i* and standard *s*; the proposition expressed will describe the relational ought-fact.

This kind of moral contextualism will be structurally parallel to the reasons contextualism I have in mind. An utterance of ‘A has a social reason to  $\phi$ ’ in a context will express the proposition that A has a social reason to  $\phi$  relative to perspective *p*, where *p* is given by the context. This proposition will be true if and only if a certain fact obtains, namely: the fact *A-has-a-social-reason-to- $\phi$ -relative-to-perspective-*p**. The difference between talk and reality requires us to be careful about what is, and is not, variable. Social reasons are context-sensitive in the sense that social reason *claims* will be context-sensitive; social reason claims will have different truth conditions, depending on the context. When I say that social reasons change across contexts, I am alluding to this linguistic context-sensitivity. Social reason *facts* are relational; this means that it is possible that *A* has a social reason to  $\phi$  relative to perspective *p* even if *A* does not have a social reason to  $\phi$  relative to perspective *q*. These relational facts themselves do not shift from context to context. If *A* has a social reason to  $\phi$  relative to *p*, then this fact holds in every context. The moral equivalent would be the relational moral fact that murder is wrong in society *c*; the relativity of the wrongness of murder is not itself relative to anything else. Lastly, I should note

that social reasons are relative to perspectives, but perspectives can be shared (partly or entirely) across contexts. For example, there may be social reasons to be racist in multiple countries because some countries share racist perspectives.

In light of the context-sensitivity and relationality of social reasons, it is time to return to the force objection. It may appear that social reasons do not have the requisite normative force to count as genuine normative reasons. In these cases of bad/unjust reasons, one is inclined to say: no one has a (non-prudential) reason to perform such bad/unjust acts.

My view is that the social context provides norms and standards that people are, *qua* members of that social context, evaluable in relation to. These norms and standards have as much force as non-moral normativity can have. Again, consider the parallels with moral contextualism. Moral contextualists take moral standards to have normative force even if (a) the moral standards change across contexts and (b) the moral standards are relative to information and goal sets. Social reasons have normative force even though what counts as a social reason changes across context, varying according to the social perspectives of the contexts.

There are two sources of resistance to the normativity of social reasons.

First, one might resist the facts about the social context. In many cases, the social reasons of interest will not paint a flattering picture of the social context in which one is embedded. In some cases, it turns out that you have social reasons to be racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. The social reasons recommend things that are morally forbidden. In other cases, your social reasons recommend things that are morally permissible but not obligatory. For example, social reasons will recommend things – like getting married or having a family – that most ethicists and political theorists take to be optional. Individuals should be free to make whatever decisions they like concerning what kind of household they may or may not form. While the stated values of a nation may concern liberty and freedom, the actual social context suggests that there are specific ways of life recommended to citizens. One may outright deny that the social perspective actually generates these kinds of social reasons.

Another source of resistance to social reasons will be resistance to the moral or social acceptability of the social reasons in our social contexts. I previously suggested that resistance to social reasons is tied up with resistance to the morality of the social reasons involved. It is not that there is no social reason to be racist; rather, we express our moral objections to morally bad social reasons by suggesting that they do not exist. Now I am in a position to expand on this claim.

An analogy is useful here. In debates about moral contextualism, there is a well-known issue concerning how people from different moral contexts nonetheless disagree. On the face of it, moral contextualism predicts that two interlocutors from different moral contexts will have trouble straightforwardly disagreeing. One person says, ‘Capitalism is bad!’ with one set of information and goals, while another person says ‘Capitalism is not bad!’ with a different set of information and goals. It seems like the two individuals are disagreeing about a single proposition – namely, whether capitalism is bad *simpliciter* – although moral contextualism suggests that there is no such disagreement to be had.

The solution, for moral contextualists, is to suggest that people do not disagree simply by asserting contradictory moral propositions. Rather, people disagree by trying to get others to share their moral perspective, their information and goal set.<sup>23</sup> Saying ‘Capitalism is bad!’ in the face of an interlocutor from a sufficiently different moral context will not contradict their claims, but it will be a way of suggesting that they consider a different set of

goals. This is called metalinguistic negotiation; one is negotiating the meaning of a word by using the word itself.<sup>24</sup>

In their landmark article on metalinguistic negotiation, Plunkett and Sundell write:

We argue that speakers can, and often do, genuinely disagree with each other even while in the disputes reflecting those disagreements, those speakers *do not* mean the same things by their words. How is disagreement reflected in such a linguistic exchange? Via a largely tacit negotiation over how *best* to use the relevant words.<sup>25</sup>

For Plunkett and Sundell, metalinguistic disagreements are genuine disagreements, and they happen quite frequently. Of course, Plunkett and Sundell acknowledge that the kind of disagreement is non-standard – or to use their phrase, non-canonical – because two speakers express claims that do not contradict one another. Plunkett and Sundell, like many other contemporary contextualists, give accounts of disagreement that appeal to the clash of non-doxastic, rather than doxastic, attitudes.<sup>26</sup>

Something analogous is true for social reasons. We object to social reasons by saying there are no such reasons, but this is often because we want to change the context we are in. We may have moral objections to the social reasons that exist, as I mentioned earlier. Or we could simply object – for non-moral, prudential, or personal reasons – to the social reasons because we do not want those reasons to characterize our society. I do not want to live in a society in which the social reasons are structured to privilege one rigid way of living life. But this kind of objection only pushes us to take a different perspective under consideration; the perspective of our society still exists, and its social reasons exist in relation to it.

The fact that we resist the force of social reasons counts in favor of the theoretical utility of social reasons. In the case of non-ideal theory, we want notions that help illuminate the injustice and oppression we find within society. The notion of a social reason does this. When I say, ‘We have social reasons to be racist’, this assertion is jarring. Those who reject my claim are in the position of having to show that we have no such social reasons. This means one has to think about the actual social context we live in, not the ideal one.

This is not to say that every assertion about social reasons will be correct. We will often be wrong about what social reasons there are. Nonetheless, the notion of social reasons has the ability to draw our attention to the actual world and the injustices that come with it. For those interested in non-ideal theory, this can be a helpful tool.

## 5. Conclusion

I have given an account of a new category of reasons – social reasons – and argued for its utility in non-ideal moral and political theory. I am less confident in my exact treatment of social reasons than I am in the hypothesis that there is something to the idea of social reasons. Perhaps there are others that now have (evidential) reasons to expand on the idea.

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## NOTES

- 1 Pateman, *Sexual Contract*; Mills, *Racial Contract*.
- 2 For useful discussions of the variety of reasons, see Alvarez, “How Many?”; Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons*; McNaughton and Rawling, “Motivating Reasons.”
- 3 The view that reasons are context-sensitive should not be mistaken for *holism*, the view that implies there are no context-insensitive reasons. For the latter view, see Dancy, *Ethics*.
- 4 Bicchieri, *Norms in the Wild*, 35. Also see Bicchieri, *Grammar of Society*.
- 5 Thanks to a reviewer for this suggestion.
- 6 Saying that police have ‘social reasons to be racist’ may not be the most perspicuous way to describe the situation, even if we agree with the spirit of the claim. You may think that the relevant social reasons do not build racism into their content. Instead, the correct formulation might be: police have social reasons to  $\phi$ . Separate from the content of the reason, it turns out that  $\phi$ ing corresponds to a racist action. I believe racism can figure into the content of the reason itself, but one could think of the content in more morally neutral terms. Thanks to a reviewer for this suggestion.
- 7 Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*.
- 8 Witt, *Social Goodness*.
- 9 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 11.
- 10 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 230.
- 11 Or so one might argue. I am not endorsing Haslanger’s particular ameliorative account here.
- 12 Mills, “Ideal Theory.”
- 13 See *ibid.*, 168–9, for the full characterization.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 168.
- 15 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 5.
- 16 Mills, “Ideal Theory,” 168.
- 17 More precisely: focusing on moral and prudential reasons does not, by itself, help us understand the non-ideal case. Though they may be useful to identify in the context of a larger project within non-ideal moral theory.
- 18 Haslanger, “Failures.”
- 19 Street, “Constructivism,” 367.
- 20 Here is a sample of the literature: Gilbert, *On Social Facts*; Gilbert, “Walking Together”; Searle, *Construction*; Searle, *Making*; Bratman, *Shared Agency*; Pettit and Schweikard, “Joint Actions”; Tuomela, *Philosophy of Sociality*; Tuomela, *Social Ontology*; List and Pettit, *Group Agency*.
- 21 Lackey, *Epistemology*, 48.
- 22 Björnsson and Finlay, “Metaethical Contextualism,” 8.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Plunkett and Sundell, “Disagreement.”
- 25 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 26 See Sundell, “Disagreements”; Huenes, “Varieties of Disagreement”; Marques and García-Carpintero, “Disagreement about Taste”; Marques, “Disagreeing”; López de Sa, “Expressing Disagreement.”

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