In contemporary philosophical usage, at least, a normative claim is an evaluation that others ought to accept, or more specifically, a claim that is supposed to provide reasons for action (understood to include reasons for belief). This identification of normativity with reason-giving poses a special problem for the traditional project of philosophical justification. If norms are, as most naturalistic philosophy and the other academic disciplines seem to presume, simply social facts of one sort or other, how can the reasons they provide be capable of any deep sort of justification? Unless we are prepared to say that norms are something other than social facts, how can the reasons they provide be capable of any deep sort of justification? Unless we are prepared to say that norms are something other than social facts, how can the reasons they provide be capable of any deep sort of justification?

This talk is taken from a book project arguing that this now-familiar problem about justification is not as fundamental and intractable as it might seem, because the identification of reasoning and normativity is itself a historical project. For long periods of its history, I argue, Western philosophy pursued projects of practical justification that made no essential reference to norms, or to normativity in general. In this chapter of the book, I show how Hobbes’ secularization of the concept of natural law not only made normativity central to practical philosophy, but also required a rethinking of the notion of normativity itself. It was the implications of this rethinking that created the relation between normativity and justification that we now take to be so fundamental, and so problematic. Thinking about Hobbes’ project can thus remind us of the historical dimension of the contemporary problem of justification, which is a first step toward dissolving it.