

Goodness beyond Reason

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Abstract: Reasons-first theorists claim that facts about reasons for attitudes are normatively primitive, and that all other normative facts ultimately reduce to facts about reasons. According to their view, for example, the fact that something is good ultimately reduces to facts about reasons to favour it. I argue that these theories face a challenging dilemma due to the normativity of arational lifeforms, for instance the fact that water is good for plants. If all normative facts are, ultimately, facts about reasons for attitudes, then reasons-first theorists must either (a) show that these facts do reduce to facts about reasons, or (b) concede that they do not and, instead, show that this is not a problem for their view. Both options, however, are riddled with difficulties—or so I will try to argue.

Key words: normativity, reasons, reasons-first, buck-passing, value-first, natural goodness

1. REASONS-FIRST THEORIES OF NORMATIVITY

Normativity, reasons-first theorists tell us, is fundamentally about reasons for attitudes.¹ According to their view, facts about reasons for attitudes are normatively primitive, and all other normative facts ultimately reduce to facts about reasons; facts about reasons would thus constitute the most fundamental level of normative explanation (Scanlon 2011, cf. 1998; Schroeder 2005, 2007, 2021; Skorupski 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Parfit 2011; Rowland 2016, 2019; Lord 2018; Lord and Sylvan 2019). For example, on this view, the fact that an action is good, admirable, or our duty to perform ultimately reduces to and is fully explained by facts about properties of that action—e.g., facts about its aim, motive, or result—which are reasons for us to respectively favour it, admire it, or intend it. Facts about reasons being normatively primitive, they are normatively unanalysable: they are considerations in favour of an attitude, and that's as much as we can say about them.

Beyond their intuitive appeal, reasons-first views can easily account for many distinctive and familiar features of normativity which nonetheless keep puzzling us, e.g., normative supervenience, normative guidance, and normative unity. For instance, if goodness always supervenes on some natural property F, that would be because goodness always reduces to reasons for favouring, and being F is just such a reason (Schroeder 2005: 3; Schroeter and Schroeter 2009: 283). Similarly, that facts about goodness, betterness, or duty are supposed to guide us can be readily explained if these reduce to facts about reasons: after all, reasons are precisely those considerations which provide guidance as to which attitudes to adopt: favouring, preferring, intending, and so forth (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004: 391; Skorupski 2007b: 248). Lastly, if facts about goodness, merit, or duty seem to belong to a single, unified set which somehow contrasts with the set of non-normative facts, e.g., facts about blueness or roundness, that would be because the former involve facts about reasons, while the latter do not (Skorupski 2007a: 1; cf. Dancy 2005: 139). Given these

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straightforward, demystifying answers to longstanding normative puzzles, it is easy to see how reasons-first views have become leading metanormative frameworks.

Now, reasons-first theorists are right in claiming that reasons are important normative properties. They are also right that their view offers a compelling explanation of many facts that are central to our conception of normativity. They are nonetheless mistaken, I believe, in thinking of ‘the normative domain as consisting simply of truths about reasons’ (Scanlon 2011: 443). Think about the familiar fact that plants and animals can be in *good* or *bad* shape, that they can enjoy or suffer from *favourable* or *adverse* life conditions, that *errors* can occur in processes such as bone formation or mitotic division, that it is a *defect* in some animals to be unable to swim or to aestivate, or that all life forms *need* water (Anscombe 1958; von Wright 1963; Thomson 1996, 1997, 2008; Hursthouse 1999; Foot 2001; Lott 2012; Korsgaard 2014, 2018). These facts wear normativity on their sleeve, and yet they do not seem to ultimately reduce to facts about reasons. If this observation is correct, the normativity of life forms and life processes—henceforth ‘natural normativity’²—constitutes a serious worry for reasons-first theorists, in particular when it comes to arational life forms.³ This difficulty is best appreciated in a dilemmatic form: if all normative facts are ultimately facts about reasons for attitudes, then reasons-first theorists must either show that (a) the facts mentioned above ultimately reduce to and are explained by facts about reasons for attitudes, or argue that (b) although said facts are not ultimately facts about reasons, this is not a problem for their view. Both options, however, are riddled with difficulties.

2. A DILEMMA FOR REASONS-FIRST THEORISTS

2.1 The First Horn

The first option for reasons-first theorists is to argue that natural normativity ultimately reduces to and is fully explained by facts about reasons. Consider the following facts.

- H: Water is good for humans.
- P: Water is good for plants.

For most reasons-first theorists, to be good or bad is to possess properties subtending goodness or badness which are reasons for attitudes such as favouring or disfavouring. A first possibility, then, would be to argue that the fact that *x* is good for *y* ultimately reduces to, and is explained by, the fact that *x* possesses properties which are reasons for *y* to favour, appreciate, or pursue *x* for *y*’s own sake (cf. Skorupski 2007a: 9). This view yields an analysis of H which some might find plausible: water is good for humans because its necessity for the sustenance of life is a reason for us to desire it for our own sake. The same analysis, however, fails to transpose to P: this fact cannot reduce to reasons for plants to favour water for their own sake because there are no such reasons.

This is because reasons are relational properties, and they only ever stand in relation to attitudes such as belief or intention (Scanlon 1998: 19; Skorupski 2010: 59). There can be, for example, reasons to believe, desire, or fear that *p*, but no reasons to be hungry or to be tall. The explanation for this, many hold, is that reasons are for reasoning: there can be reasons only for states one can reason oneself into, e.g., belief or intention; since we cannot reason ourselves into hunger or tallness, there are no reasons for one to be in such states (Kolodny 2005: 549; Way 2012: 492, 2017: 251; McHugh and Way 2022: 153). Therefore, insofar as plants have neither the capacity to favour, nor the capacity to reason, there are no reasons for them to favour anything. Consequently, P cannot be reduced to facts about reasons for plants to favour water for their own sake. It is nonetheless plausible to think that water is good for plants simply because the former is necessary for the latter’s sustenance and, correlatively, that this need remaining unfulfilled will be detrimental to them (Anscombe 1958; Wiggins 1987; Hunter 2021). Reasons-first theorists thus face a first difficulty.

This difficulty, note, cannot be overcome by claiming that P reduces to the fact that, given plants' interest in getting sufficient water, there are reasons why they function in the way they do in relation to this need. The issue with this move is that it equivocates *explanatory* and *normative* reasons. To claim that there is a reason for a plant to function in a given way is to claim that there is an *explanation* for this fact similarly to the sense in which there is an explanation for volcanic eruptions, not that there is some fact that would *count in favour* of a plant functioning in a certain way, since plants cannot *intend* to function in a way or another (Scanlon 1998: 19; Thomson 2008: 129). This is a problem because reasons-first theories are plausible only when phrased in terms of normative reasons. For x to be valuable, reasons-first theorists insist, is for x to possess properties which *count in favour* of valuing x, not for x to possess properties which *explain* why we happen to value it. Indeed, there are often reasons *why* people value cruel acts even though such acts are obviously bad; reasons-first theorists know this well, and they thus phrase their analysis in terms of reasons *to* value—reasons plants could never have, hence the problem.

Of course, the proposal mentioned above is not the only way of analysing goodness for x, henceforth 'personal goodness,' along reasons-first lines. A second possibility is to think that, if x is good for y, that is because x possesses properties which are reasons for someone—not necessarily y—to favour x for y's sake (Rønnow-Rasmussen 2007: 424, 2011: 63; Parfit 2011: 41). Endorsing this gloss of personal goodness allows reasons-first theorists to catch a second wind and claim that P ultimately reduces to facts about reasons for *us*, and for other rational beings, to favour water for a plant's sake. For example, Scanlon (2011: 447) claims that we can explain the fact that water is good for plants only by engaging in hypothetical reasoning about a plant's interests, and by appreciating how these *could* be reasons for us to see to it that a plant gets the water it needs, provided we share its interest in its own sustenance. Rowland (2019: 84) similarly claims that the fact that water is good for a plant reduces to the fact that, provided that we care about it, we have reasons to favour water for that plant's sake—a view Schroeder (2010: 47–49) also seems to endorse.

The problem with this reply is that it makes an explanatorily idle detour through reasons. More precisely, facts like P are explainable without—and are arguably *best* explained without—appealing to reasons for attitudes. As Anscombe (1958: 7), Thomson and (1996: 141, 2008: 20) and Foot (2001: 27) separately suggest, natural goodness is *autonomous*: facts like P are entirely determined by the nature of plants, and they can thus ultimately be explained in terms of what contributes to a plant's health and thriving—and this regardless of *our* reasons to favour this or that thing for a plant's sake.⁴ The crucial thought here is that goodness for plants and animals is prior to and independent of our capacity to rationally appreciate their thriving.⁵ Therefore, insisting that a detour through reasons is necessary to explain why P holds misdescribes natural normativity by making it dependent on beings endowed with rational attitudes, which in turn leads to a reversal of the correct order of explanation. It is because water is good for plants, and that we care about them for their own sake, that we have reasons to favour their getting the water they need—and, arguably, not the other way around.

Against this view, one could object, following Rowland (2019: 88), that 'the concept *good for plants* cannot be reduced to the concept of promoting plants' health because the concept *good for humans* cannot be reduced to the concept of promoting humans' health.' This is because many of the things that are good for humans—e.g., pursuing worthwhile projects—may in fact detract from our health.⁶ This objection, though compelling, is misguided. To be sure, we cannot *conceptually* or *formally* analyse personal goodness in terms of health promotion, but the argument above does not rely on this assumption. Anscombe and Foot in particular think that we should formally analyse goodness for a life form in terms of what facilitates or constitutes its thriving, and not in terms of health promotion. Because different life forms need different things in order to thrive, one can hold that thriving for plants is, *substantively*, only about health, while for human beings, given our faculties, needs, and concerns, it encompasses other goods beyond healthiness, some of which might

conflict (Foot 2001: 94; Lott 2018: 272–273, cf. Kraut 2013: 70–72). This seems to me to assuage a worry like Rowland's. The first horn of the dilemma thus remains pressing: reasons-first theorists must still convince us that they can give a plausible analysis of P in terms of reasons, and that this analysis must be preferred over ones that do not mention reasons, rationality, and rational agents.

2.2. The Second Horn

The second option for reasons-first theorists is to claim that natural normativity does not reduce to reasons, and that this is not a problem for their view. A first shot in this direction is to argue that natural normativity is nonrobust, and so that it lies beyond the remit of reasons-first theories. Consider the contrast between moral, epistemic, or prudential norms, and the norms of orthography, etiquette, and tennis. The former are robust in that they are inherently authoritative, while the latter are not (Rosen 2001; Wodak 2019). This is a difference that all non-revisionary metanormative theories should be able to retain, and reasons-first theorists are well-placed to explain it. Robust normative facts like the moral prescription against causing harm are inherently authoritative because they reduce to facts about reasons—in this case, facts about harm which are reasons to avoid it. Nonrobust normative facts such as the prescription to spell 'kerfuffle' in this way, by contrast, are not grounded in facts about this spelling which are reasons to prefer it to another: they are grounded in an imposed convention whose demands are not inherently authoritative. Reasons-first theorists can thus restrict their view to robust normativity (Skorupski 2007b: 255, Wodak 2020: 50; cf. Lord and Sylvan 2019: 51); nonrobust normativity would thus no longer constitute a counterexample to their theory.

Now, though compelling for typical forms of nonrobust normativity, this reply does not neatly transpose to natural normativity. Firstly, contrary to standard cases of nonrobust normativity, natural normativity is not grounded in convention: unlike orthographic norms, it is not stipulated arbitrarily. After all, what is good for a life form is *discovered* rather than *invented* (Bloomfield 1997: 321). We learn, that is, about what is good for plants by looking at the way they live, not from a gardening society's annual contest rulebook. Secondly, because H and P are arguably both facts about health, and because facts about health seem inherently authoritative, it is not implausible to think of H and P as normatively robust from a pretheoretical perspective. Indeed, most reasons-first theorists would normally treat H as a robust normative fact to be analysed in terms of reasons, so it is unclear why P—which, in many ways, is analogous to H—should be treated differently. Therefore, as it stands, this strategy is unconvincing.

Still, there is another, more promising way of replying to the dilemma's second horn: excluding natural normativity from the normative domain. This reply is suggested by Skorupski's claim that "normativity" can be nothing more than that by which autonomous—reason-sensitive—agents steer' so that 'elaborations of normative discourse must issue in propositions about reasons or they are idle wheels' (2007b: 248). If this is right, then all normative facts must ultimately connect with facts about reasons and, if a purportedly normative fact does not, then it is simply not a normative fact.⁷ Reasons-first theorists could therefore accept the inescapability of the dilemma's first horn and claim that this only shows that whatever P is, it is not a normative fact; the claim that refers to it merely features the term 'good' which, in this case, does not indicate anything normative (Lenman 2005: 44; cf. Parfit 2011: 38). Facts like H, those about natural goodness and defect in humans, which reasons-first theorists might presumably want to preserve, can be reconstructed as uninteresting prudential facts—here the fact that we have reasons to favour water for our own sake.

Some reasons-first theorists might be attracted to this view because, like Skorupski, they take it as a matter of pretheoretical fact that normativity originates from reasons and judgment-sensitive attitudes. This view, however, is not uncontroversial. Value-first theorists of the neo-Aristotelian kind, for example, consider that normativity originates from the property of being alive and able to enjoy or suffer from conditions that allow or hinder the thriving of a life form

(Thomson 1997, 2008; Hursthouse 1999). Foot, for instance, writes that ‘[o]n barren Mars there is no natural goodness’ and that ‘goodness can be attributed to things on that planet only by relating them to our own lives, or to living things existing elsewhere’ (2001: 27). According to her view, that certain weather conditions are good or bad can only be made sense of in relation to how they favour or stymie the flourishing of life forms such as plants, birds, or humans, and this regardless of the reasons weather conditions could provide to reasons-sensitive beings.⁸ So, if we have reasons to favour water for our own sake, that is because water is ultimately good for us in the same way it is good for plants; the only difference here between plants and us is that we can *reason* about our own needs, while plants obviously cannot reason about theirs (Hursthouse 1991: 67; cf. Korsgaard 2014: 422). Defenders of this metanormative theory would presumably deny that it is simply a matter of pretheoretical fact that normativity stems from reasons and rationality, and this can hardly be attributed to confusion about the relevant matter.

In fact, value-first neo-Aristotelian naturalists seem to have the upper hand here. Because they take goodness to be primitive, value-first neo-Aristotelian naturalists can give a unified gloss to H and P; reasons-first theorists, by contrast, are currently unable to do so: on the two glosses of personal goodness given above, their analysis is either impossible or implausible. Another gloss, provided it can be given, must be offered in order to analyse H and P through reasons in a plausible and unified way. Of course, another option is to argue that H does reduce to reasons for favouring, but P does not, and that this is not a problem for reasons-first views. It is unclear, however, how this much disunity could be justified: H and P cannot be so different as to warrant a different treatment. As Rowland (2019: 83) notes, ‘[b]eing good *for* plants and animals seems in a way not unconnected to being good *for* a human: if I claim that sunlight is good *for* trees and eating healthily is good *for* humans, it seems like I’m claiming that sunlight bears a relationship to trees that is similar to the relationship that eating healthily bears to humans.’ On a similar note, Schroeder (2010: 45) writes that this approach ‘would leave the striking question of why we use the same word, “good,” for all of these things, and in a way that exhibits at least a certain amount of cross-linguistic robustness.’ To retain unity, then, a further possibility would be to argue that neither H nor P are reducible to facts about reasons, but in a way that squares well with reasons-first views. The issue is that a viable solution of this sort, as far as I know, has not yet been defended.

3. A DILEMMA TO BE TACKLED HEAD ON

Reasons-first theorists face a challenging dilemma, one that is difficult to solve not only because its horns are hard to parry, but also because it cannot be evaded by restricting the scope of the theory to normative facts limited to human beings—e.g., facts about sentimental values such as the admirable, the offensive, or the amusing which, admittedly, reasons-first views are well-placed to explain. After all, reasons-first theorists insist that their view can make sense of *all* normative facts and of their overarching features—e.g., supervenience, guidance, and unity—through the reason relation; conceding that not all normative facts are ultimately facts about reasons would *ipso facto* break this promise. Even worse, to make this move would be to abandon reasons-first theories altogether. The dilemma therefore needs to be urgently addressed, and reasons-first theorists seem to have no other option but to tackle it head on. Whether this challenge can be overcome, that depends on whether reasons-first theorists can convince us that goodness for plants and other arational life forms truly reduces to facts about reasons, or, alternatively, that we should revise our conception of these facts as garden-variety examples of what we ordinarily call ‘normativity.’

NOTES

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1. 'Reasons' will henceforth refer to normative reasons except when otherwise specified.
2. Natural normativity relates to life forms and life processes similarly to how moral, epistemic, and prudential normativity respectively relate to conduct, cognition, and welfare.
3. Some reasons-first theorists, e.g., Schroeder (2010), Scanlon (2011), and Rowland (2019), are aware of this challenge; its precursors can be found in the work of value-first theorists such as Foot (2001) and Thomson (2008).
4. Bykvist (2009) and Hurtig (2019) raise a similar objection against fitting-attitude analyses of value. Their point is that in a world devoid of rational creatures, but populated by sentient egrets, the egrets' pleasures and displeasures seem to be, respectively, valuable and disvaluable. These evaluative facts, however, cannot be reduced to facts about reasons—for egrets, or for anyone else in that world—to favour or disfavour the egrets' pleasures or displeasures, since no creature in that world could possibly respond to them. To this objection, Stratton-Lake (2013: 94) replies that a fact can be a reason to ϕ in a world w even if nothing in w can ϕ —a contentious point, but one I will not dispute here. Indeed, the point I am trying to make does not rest on technical issues about the metaphysics of reasons: the problem is that reasons-first analyses of P yield poor results even in worlds like ours, and this is because they require a detour through rational agents which does not sit well with the idea that natural goodness is autonomous.
5. Goodness for artefacts, as Foot (2001: 26) and Thomson (1996: 141–142) observe, is obviously different from goodness for plants. To analyse the fact that regular maintenance is good for lawnmowers, we must make reference to what lawnmowers are, and so to what *we* designed them for, and how they serve *our* interests (cf. Korsgaard 1983). Because we must do so, it is not implausible to claim that, if regular maintenance is good for lawnmowers, that is because we have reasons to favour it given our interests.
6. Rowland does not directly press this worry against Foot and Thomson, but it is easy to see why one might want to do so.
7. According to reasons-first theorists, even the functional goodness of artefacts like toasters and frying pans—a kind of goodness standardly analysed through an artefact's design function (Foot 1961; Thomson 1997)—is to be understood in terms of reasons for attitudes. For example, both Scanlon (2011: 446) and Skorupski (2007a: 6; 2007b: 257) argue that the fact that x is a good toaster must ultimately be explained in terms of reasons to favour it as a toaster. This should not be surprising. After all, their view is that, for all normative facts, their most fundamental level of normative explanation is constituted by reasons for attitudes. Functional normativity therefore cannot be directly naturalised through design functions without first encountering the explanatory level of normative reasons. These same considerations prevent reasons-first theorists from circumventing the dilemma's second horn by directly naturalising natural normativity, at least if they are to retain its normative character by their own lights.
8. We can of course deem pollution bad for inanimate entities such as oceans and marshes, but we can do so meaningfully only with respect to how pollution disfavours and hinders the thriving of the life forms that populate them. On this note, see Blanshard 1962: 275, Thomson 1997: 292, and Sumner 1992: 7.

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