Reasons Why in Normative Explanation*

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1. Introduction

I ought to rake the leaves because I promised to do so. Voter suppression is bad because of how it undermines democracy. These are normative explanations, where the rightness or goodness of something is explained. Such explanations are ubiquitous in ordinary normative thought, and what first-order normative theories aim to provide. But whereas there is a great deal of research on scientific explanation, there is little on normative explanation. A central question about normative explanation is how it is similar to and different from explanations in various non-normative domains. Many approaches to metaethics (non-naturalist realism, expressivism, and certain forms of constitutivism and constructivism, to name a few) suggest that normative explanation differs significantly from scientific explanation. It is also unclear just how normative explanation might relate to metaphysical explanation of the sort that many contemporary metaphysicians associate with the notion of grounding. Is the former a form of the latter, or something else altogether? These questions won't be defused by treating normative explanation as internal to first-order normative theory in the way that quietists and quasi-realist expressivists tend to do. The question of whether and how it is similar enough to explanations in other domains to warrant the common label 'explanation' would still arise.

Given this comparatively undeveloped state of theorizing about normative explanation, the prospect of a general theory of explanation should be enticing. A general theory would provide us with at least some grip on normative explanation

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which is independent of the explanations that various normative theories provide, and some help in sorting out how normative explanation may be similar to and different from explanations in other domains. This paper explores, as a case study, a theory which holds just such promise: Bradford Skow's recent theory of answers to why-questions, according to which a complete answer to the question why Q consists of all of the reasons why Q (Skow 2016). I'll argue that this theory cannot adequately account for the role of a certain "enablers" of reasons in normative explanation. This result is of broader interest than just that one allegedly general theory fails to be fully general. As I'll explain in the next section, theories of this general sort may be important to normative theory in several respects. They don't merely promise to provide a general framework for normative explanation which unifies it with explanations in other domains. They also promise to inform inquiry into the nature of normative explanation and improve our understanding of what first-order normative theories might be doing when specifying why the good and the right things are good and right. They may also be important to our broader understanding of normative reasons. As such, theories of answers to why-questions merit further exploration by normative theorists.

2. Why-Questions and Reasons Why

The term 'explanation' is used in many ways. Skow argues that most theories that have been branded by their proponents as "theories of explanation" shouldn't be branded that way. A "theory of explanation" that typically interests those who are interested in scientific or causal explanation is best thought of as a theory of answers to why- questions (Skow 2016: ch. 1). For instance, when scientists consider questions like 'Why did the dinosaurs go extinct?' they aim to find an answer to a why-question. (By contrast, a theory of explanation, properly so-called, is a theory of a kind of speech act. Explaining is something people do with words. See Skow 2016: 9.) The content of a correct answer is often aptly described as a reason why: a reason why the dinosaurs became extinct is that a comet or asteroid hit the Earth. A request for what we often call "an explanation" of why something

happened is then a request for a reason why it happened. When R is a reason why Q, some relation exists between Q and R such that Q occurs *because* R occurs. Such relations are often called explanatory, but that terminology is inessential here. Below when I speak of 'explanations', I'll do so for stylistic reasons and mean 'contents of answers to why-questions'.

Skow's overall theory consists of two main claims. The first is a theory of answers to why-questions. Skow writes: "A canonical statement of the complete answer to the question why E happened will have the form 'one reason why E happened is that A, another reason why E happened is that B, another reason why E happened is that C, …, and these are all the reasons why E happened'." (Skow 2016: 42; cf. 51). In short:

(CA) A complete answer to the question why Q lists all of the reasons why Q, and nothing else.

The individual reasons why then are atomic parts of a complete answer. The second main claim is a theory of reasons why. Its close-to-official statement runs as follows:

(RW) Necessarily, if it is a fact that Q and it is a fact that R, then: if the fact that R is a cause of the fact that Q, then one reason why Q is that R, *and* the reason why <one reason why Q is that R> is that the fact that R is a cause of the fact that Q. Similarly if the fact that R is a ground of the fact that Q. And every reason why Q is (i) either a cause of the fact that Q or a ground of the fact that Q and (ii) satisfies the relevant one of these conditionals. (Skow 2016: 38)[1]

1 I'll use corner brackets to keep iterations of reasons why readable. By 'fact' Skow means 'the occurrence of a concrete event' where events are understood liberally but exclude certain mathematical facts, such as that 2 + 2 = 4 (Skow 2016: 27-8). No direct argument is given for the claim that it is *because* causes and grounds are causes and grounds that they are reasons why.

In a slogan: all reasons why that are facts are either causes or grounds.[2] That the tire blew out is a cause of the car skidding off the road. That the average kinetic energy of the molecules that constitute the air in this room increased is a ground for the increase of temperature in this room. Each is a reason why something occurs. (Skow 2016: 28- 9.) Skow refines (RW) later on, but holds to (CA) throughout.

Skow doesn't consider reasons why normative facts hold. But (CA) and (RW) don't exclude normative facts. Theories of this sort should interest normative theorists. When they talk about why things have their normative properties, they speak not only of actions being permissible *in virtue of* causing no harm, of policies being good *because* they reduce inequality, and of actions being *made wrong* by lack of consent. They also speak of not causing harm, reduction of inequality, and lack of consent as *reasons why* things are permissible, good, and wrong. So a theory like Skow's holds the prospect of showing how normative explanation is continuous with explanation in other domains: each aims to answer certain why-questions by offering certain kinds of reasons why. Indeed, the theory can be thought to apply to much of the recent literature on moral explanations. Many philosophers hold that moral explanations cite a kind of grounds (Bader 2017; Leary 2017; Sachs 2018), and Wielenberg (2014) holds that they cite a kind of causes.[3]

The theory can also be applied to first-order normative theories, which aim to specify not only which things have which normative features but also why they do so. For instance, utilitarians should be happy to state their theory by saying that the only ultimate reason why right actions are right is that they maximize utility. Theories of *prima facie* duties say there is an irreducible plurality of reasons why acts are *prima facie* duties (Ross 1930). First-order normative theories may thus be thought to be explanatory in the sense that they aim to specify reasons why things have the normative features they do. The notion of a reason why also supplies

2 Skow argues that 'reason why' and 'because' are "ambiguous between meanings used to report someone's reasons for acting and meanings used when one makes no claim to be reporting someone's reason for acting" (Skow 2016: 175ff.; cf. Anscombe 1963: §5). As I won't consider action explanation, the issue won't affect my discussion.

3 Expressivists are welcome to treat normative reasons why in a quasi-realist way.

multiple ways of understanding the structure of a moral theory. Kantians might not want to say, for fear of rule-fetishism, that the reason why an action is wrong is that its maxim couldn't be willed as a universal law. But they might instead say that the fact that one's maxim of lying to get out of trouble couldn't be willed as a universal law is a higher-level reason why. For it might be a reason why <the fact that S lied to get out of trouble is a reason why what S did was wrong>.[4] It would still be a normative reason why, in the sense of a fact that is a reason why a normative fact holds. Skow's theory promises to unify these normative explanations with how correct answers to why-questions work in general.

Finally, many people think there are important connections between normative reasons for action and reasons why we ought to do things. For instance, many hold that a normative reason for S to φ is a reason why (or else something that makes it the case that) S ought to φ (Alvarez 2010; Broome 2013; Nebel forthcoming). Insofar as such views are credible, understanding why-questions and reasons why in normative contexts may be important to our broader understanding of normative reasons.

A final preliminary worth noting is that (RW) is restricted to cases where both 'Q' and 'R' in 'R is a reason why Q' hold the place for a that-clause that expresses a fact (Skow 2016: 35). This assumption may fail in normative contexts. Some believe that there can be reasons why one ought to do something even if it isn't the case that one ought to do it (Nebel forthcoming). If so, 'R is a reason why Q' isn't factive with respect to 'Q'. For all that such examples show, however, it is factive with respect to 'R'; and it seems less plausible that a false proposition can be a reason why one ought to do something. The problems I'll press wouldn't be solved by allowing that 'R is a reason why Q' is non-factive with respect to 'Q', so I'll bracket the question whether allowing this would raise distinct challenges. All that I'll need for my purposes is that 'R is a reason why Q' be factive with respect to 'R'.

4 As we'll see in section 4, Skow distinguishes between levels of reasons why. The distinction makes room for these different options.

3. Enablers of Reasons Why

The conjunction of (CA) and (RW) runs into trouble with a certain kind of "enablers" of reasons which are of interest to normative theory. I'll argue as follows:

(P1) A fully adequate general framework for normative explanation is such that, for any enabler E, it accounts for the role that E would play in normative explanation.

(P2) [(CA) and (RW)] fails to account for the role that certain enablers would play in normative explanation.

(C) So, [(CA) and (RW)] doesn't provide a fully adequate general framework for normative explanation.

I'll first explain what enablers are, and then defend my premises. My discussion will show that certain refinements of (RW) also fail to accommodate certain enablers.

In normative theory, "reasons holism" holds that a fact that in one set of circumstances is a reason why a normative fact holds may not be such a reason in another set of circumstances (Dancy 2004: 7, 86, 90). A parallel "value holism" holds that a feature may make its bearer good in one case without making its bearer good in another case. Here are illustrations (adapted from Dancy) of each view:

Pleasure: The fact that an experience gives me pleasure is often a reason why the experience good, but may be no such reason at all if the pleasure is vicious.

Promises: The fact that I promised to rake the leaves is often a reason why I ought to rake the leaves, but may be no such reason at all if the promise was extracted by duress or fraud, or was a promise to do something immoral.

Holists also say that the fact that a pleasure isn't vicious "enables" the fact that the experience is pleasurable to be a reason why the experience is good, without itself being a reason why it is good (Dancy 2004: ch. 3). Similarly, the fact that my promise wasn't extracted by duress or fraud enables the fact that I promised to rake the leaves to be a reason why I ought to rake the leaves, but without itself being a reason why I ought to rake the leaves.

Why accept (P1)? The holism of reasons and value is controversial. One might take issue with examples like *Pleasure* and *Promises*. And some argue that enablers are parts of complete reasons, not distinct from reasons (Raz 1999). Under non-holist theories, correct explanations of particular normative facts might not rely on enablers. Act-utilitarianism is an example, provided that the fact that an act promotes pleasure is a reason why the act is right even when the pleasure is vicious. However, (P1) doesn't require that the normative explanations offered by any plausible normative theory must account for the role of enablers. (P1) only requires that a general framework for normative explanation account for the role of enablers should there be any. Such frameworks shouldn't prejudge the issue of holism. (P1) is also dialectically sound. Skow's theory is general and, as we'll see, he discusses enablers.

I'll now argue that his treatment of enablers doesn't succeed, as (P2) claims. The discussion will be instructive for any account of enablers in explanation. The enabler that I'll focus on can be introduced by considering the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' (OIC). (I'll treat OIC as a necessary truth about the practical 'ought'; its necessity needn't be analytic or conceptual.) To say that 'ought' implies 'can' is to say that an agent ought to φ (at a given time) only if the agent (at that time) has both the ability and the opportunity to φ.

What role does the fact that S can φ play with respect to answers to the question why S ought to φ? The simplest option would be to say that it is part of a complete answer to the question why S ought to φ. This won't do, though. Remember (CA): a complete answer to the question why Q lists all of the reasons why Q, and nothing else. Given this, the simplest option entails that the fact that S

can φ is a reason why S ought to φ. But, certain exceptions aside, when S ought to φ, the fact that S can φ doesn't contribute to making that the case.[5] The reasons why I ought to help others, for instance, are facts such as that they need help, or that helping others will maximize happiness, or that helping others is in their interests, or the like. That I can help others doesn't seem to be among them. Or consider the various heinous acts I could perform. It is false that there is at least this much to be said in favor of such an act being what I ought to do: that I can do it.

More plausibly, normally the fact that I can help others constitutes the absence of a condition (the impossibility of helping others) whose presence would block these other facts from being reasons why I ought to help.[6] If the fact that S can φ is an enabler of other facts as reasons why S ought to φ, then (CA) won't count that fact as part of a complete answer to the question why S ought to φ. Dancy argues convincingly that P can enable R to be a reason why Q without P itself being a reason why Q (Dancy 2004: ch. 3). Skow presumably agrees, given his view that if P is a reason why <R is a reason why Q>, it doesn't follow that P is a reason why Q (Skow 2016: 76). It also seems intuitively correct that an enabler of R as a reason why Q isn't thereby itself a reason why Q. Consider a match that lit when struck, but wouldn't have lit if the match had been wet. The dryness of the match doesn't contribute to causing the match to light, but merely enables its striking to be a cause of its lighting. As a mere enabling condition it isn't part of a complete answer to the question why the match lit.

5 If I have been paralyzed for a while, the fact that I can flex my arm might be a reason why I should do so, not merely an enabler of some other reason (Dancy 2004: 40).

6 This result isn't immediate if something can be a reason why I ought to φ even if it isn't the case that I ought to φ (Nebel forthcoming). For if so, there might be cases where I cannot φ and yet some fact R is a reason why I ought to φ. However, cases where something is a reason why one ought to φ even if it isn't the case that one ought to φ seem to arise from factors other than the absence of the ability or the opportunity to φ. (These don't feature among the examples in Nebel forthcoming.) For it is plausible that 'is a reason why one ought' implies 'is a reason to' (see e.g. Broome 2013). It also seems plausible that 'is a reason to' entails 'can': nothing can be a normative reason (at least one contributing to one ought to do) for an agent to do something she cannot do (see e.g. Streumer 2007 and Vranas 2007). If so, then 'is a reason why one ought' entails 'can'.

What we have so far is that, in cases where S ought to φ, the fact that S can φ isn't normally a reason why S ought to φ, but enables other facts to be reasons why S ought to φ. There is more to say about this enabler in particular. That S can φ is a *general* enabler of *any* reason why S ought to do some particular thing, in contrast to more specific enablers, such as those in *Pleasure* and *Promises*. If the fact that I can φ were a reason why I ought to φ, then every act I ought to do would have one reason why in common, namely that I can do the thing in question. But it doesn't seem that if we know that I ought to φ, we thereby already know one of the reasons why I ought to φ, namely that I can φ (Dancy 2004: 40).

So far so good. But the following question remains for any theory of explanation: what role might an enabler of a reason why Q play with respect to Q? (Or what roles? General and specific enablers might play different sorts of roles.) To say that a complete answer to the question why Q lists all of the reasons why Q plus all enablers of those reasons, where those enablers may not themselves be reasons why Q, would retain (RW) but only at the cost of giving up (CA). I'll discuss three other responses on behalf of [(CA) and (RW)] instead:

- *Response 1:* That S can φ isn't a reason why S ought to φ but is a reason why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ. As a reason why that it part of a complete answer to a different why-question, it satisfies both (CA) and (RW).
- *Response 2:* That S can φ is a merely partial answer to the question why S ought to φ or the question why the fact that R is a reason why S ought to φ, but not part of a complete answer to either, and thus not a counterexample to (CA) or (RW).
- *Response 3:* That S can φ is no answer at all (neither a merely partial answer nor part of a complete answer) to the question why S ought to φ or the question why the fact that R is a reason why S ought to φ, and thus again not a counterexample to (CA) or (RW).

4. Trying Out Response 1

Response 1 gets legs from one of Skow's chief refinements to (RW): the distinction between levels of reasons why (Skow 2016: ch. 5). For any reason R why Q, we can ask why <R is a reason why Q>. Often there will be an answer: some fact that is a reason why <R is a reason why Q>. This delivers *higher-level* reasons why: reasons why <R is a reason why Q>. One of Skow's uses of the distinction between first-level and higher- level reasons why is to identify the role of laws with respect to reasons why effects of causes occur. When C is a cause of E, a law L connecting C and E is a higher-level reason why <the occurrence of C is a reason why E happened>. (CA) then counts it as part of a complete answer to the corresponding higher-level why-question. But as many have noted, it doesn't follow that L is a first-level reason why E happened.[7] As Skow puts is, "the proposition that A is a reason why <B is a reason why C> does not entail the proposition that A is a reason why C" (Skow 2016: 76). Skow's official full refinement of (RW) to accommodate higher-level reasons why (and other complications) is very complex (Skow 2016: 124). But I won't need to state the full theory to discuss whether the distinction between levels of reasons why helps to account for enablers. The idea is that even if the fact that S can φ isn't part of a complete answer to the question why S ought to φ, it might be part of a complete answer to the related question why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ, and thus a higher-level reason why. This would save the conjunction of (CA) and (RW).

Skow recognizes that there are enablers. He claims that in its "ordinary" sense, 'enabler' is different from the concept of a reason why: "Suppose I am chosen by lottery to be 'team runner'; the condition of my legs enables me to play that role, but it does not seem to be a reason why I play that role" (Skow 2016: 85n19). I'll bracket the question of what role if any enablers in this sense play with respect to why-questions. (Skow doesn't specify.) For Skow distinguishes a "semi-technical" sense of 'enabler': "If X is an enabler of R with respect to the fact that Q, it enables R to be a sufficient reason why Q when it otherwise would not be"

7 Väyrynen (2009: 101-2) makes this point about laws and causes in the context of arguing that we shouldn't assume that what makes R a reason for something must itself be a reason for it.

(Skow 2016: 109).[8] An enabler in this sense would seem to be part of a complete answer to the question why <R is a reason why Q>. (CA) then requires it to be a (higher-level) reason why.[9] Skow claims that the fact that oxygen was present, which enables the striking of a match with respect to the match lighting, is a reason why <the fact that the match was struck is a reason why it lit> (Skow 2016: 78, 109). However, he doesn't defend this claim or offer a theory of higher-level reasons why to support it (cf. Skow 2016: 179).[10]

In some cases where S ought to φ, the fact that S can φ enables, in this semi-technical sense, some other fact to be a reason why S ought to φ. But that will hold only in some cases: not all reasons why S ought to φ are sufficient, whereas Skow's semi-technical notion is restricted to enablers of sufficient reasons. However, I see no deep reason to deny that contributory reasons why Q, which may not be sufficient for Q to occur, can also have enablers in this semi-technical sense. For instance, if reasons holism is true, the fact that the pleasure isn't vicious might enable the fact that an experience is pleasurable to be a reason why the experience is good. Thus extended, the semi-technical notion of an enabler is at least close (and closer than Skow's "ordinary" sense) to the notion of enablers deployed by reasons and value holism. Skow might thus well be sympathetic to Response 1. An enabler of R with respect to Q is a higher-level reason why <R is a reason why Q>, and thus qualifies under [(CA) and (RW)] as part of a complete answer to the question why <R is a reason why Q>.

It is unclear whether Response 1 is adequate. Suppose (to turn Skow's team runner example into a normative case) that the fact that I was chosen by lottery to

8 This is a generalization of the notion of a causal enabler introduced by Yablo (2010: 98). It is probably not quite right as it stands, since enablers may themselves be subject to disablers or require enablers, and so on.

9 (RW) requires that if an enabler of R with respect to Q is a reason why <R is a reason why Q>, it is a cause or a ground of <R is a reason why Q>. Skow grants that this has counterexamples: not every reason why is either a cause or a ground (Skow 2016: 108-9). Some reasons why are enablers or "ennoblers" (a notion from Yablo 2010 that I don't need to discuss here). He considers an alternative to (RW) according to which all reasons why are either causes, grounds, or enablers or ennoblers. He says this hypothesis "has a nice ring to it" but doesn't endorse it (Skow 2016: 109). Enablers that don't count as higher-level reasons why are equally a problem for this hypothesis.

10 Below we'll see reasons for concern about treating enablers, qua enablers, as higher-level reasons why.

be team runner is a reason why I ought to be team runner. Then the fact that I can play the role of team runner (thanks to the condition of my legs) enables the fact that I was chosen to play that role to be a reason why I ought to play it. Response 1 requires that the fact that I can be team runner is a reason why <that I was chosen by lottery to be team runner is a reason why I ought to serve as team runner>. For now, at least, this claim remains a mere assertion. It doesn't appear to be certified by clear and confident intuitive judgments about reasons why. And again, Skow doesn't help intuition by offering a theory of higher-level reasons why to support the claim.

It is in any case unclear what illumination would be gained by affirming that, for any fact R that is a reason why S ought to φ, the fact that S can φ is a higher-level reason why <R is a reason why S ought to φ>. A fact such as that promising to φ creates a legitimate expectation that one φ is at least a clear candidate for a reason why <that I promised to rake the leaves is a reason why I ought to rake the leaves>. And a general principle to the effect that we ought to help those in need is at least a clear candidate for a reason why <that she needs my help is a reason why I ought to help her>.[11] If they play any role with respect to the relevant reasons why, it will be a distinctive role in making it the case that certain other facts are reasons. (Grounds are often glossed as facts that make it the case that the fact they ground obtains.) By contrast, the role of an enabler is that of a necessary background condition for some other fact(s) to do such work. It requires further argument to say that enabling is a similarly distinctive sort of case-making role. Perhaps we could say that if I cannot φ, this makes it the case (for any R) that R isn't a reason why I ought to φ. But if not-P makes it the case that not-Q, it doesn't follow that P makes it the case that Q.

This problem for Response 1 isn't decisive. There might be ways to refine (RW) to deal with it, even as it isn't clear what such refinements might be. But Response 1 also has implausible implications. (RW) implies that if an enabler of R

11 Treating normative laws or principles as higher-level reasons why fits with those views of normative explanation where principles aren't part of singular explanations of normative facts but only "back" them.

with respect to Q is a higher-level reason why, then the enabler is a cause or a ground of <R is a reason why Q>. However, being a cause of something and being a ground of something are asymmetric relations, whereas being an enabling condition for something isn't an asymmetric relation. As Shlomit Cohen notes, "just as the fact that Bale is a good forward player is an enabling condition for the fact that Ronaldo is a good forward player, so the fact that Ronaldo is a good forward player is an enabling condition for the fact that Bale is a good forward player" (Cohen forthcoming: 5). (This problem extends beyond general enablers, so the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' may not be crucial to my objection, but only a particularly clear case of it.) So, if enablers are higher-level reasons why, (RW) has incorrect implications for enablers.

A further problem with Response 1 again highlights special features of general enablers. If the fact that S can φ were a reason why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ, then every instance of <R is a reason why S ought to φ> would have one higher-level reason why in common, namely that S can φ. But recall Dancy's point (introduced in section 3) against treating a general enabler for <R is a reason why Q> as itself a reason why Q. This point can be extended to higher-level reasons why. When we know that S ought to φ, we know that S can φ but may not yet know any reason why S ought to φ. We'll only know that there is a reason why S ought to φ. So we couldn't yet even raise any question of the form 'Why is R a reason why S ought to φ?' Why then think that we thereby already know at least one higher-level reason why those facts (whichever they are) that are reasons why S ought to φ are such reasons? A more tempered conclusion would be that this kind of a general enabler isn't a higher-level reason why.

I conclude that we have no good reason to think that enablers will, at least in general, be reasons why, higher-level or otherwise. If so, Response 1 fails. But intuitively the fact that S can φ plays some part in a complete answer to the question 'Why is R a reason why S ought to φ?' If at least some enablers that aren't reasons why still are part of a complete answer to some relevant why-question like this, then (CA) will be false.

5. Trying out Responses 2 and 3

Responses 2 and 3 deny the assumption that the fact that S can φ is part of a complete answer to the question why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ. Response 2 gets legs from another distinction Skow draws, between *part of a complete answer* to a why-question and a *merely partial answer* to a why-question (Skow 2016: 51). Suppose I ask 'Who came to the party?' and you reply 'Two people whose names begin with 'J''. This isn't part of a complete answer to my question. The complete answer "says, of all the people who came to the party, that they came to the party" (Skow 2016: 41). It is, rather, a merely partial answer – "something that rules out a possible complete answer" (Skow 2016: 41). In our example, 'Two people whose names begin with 'J'' is a partial answer because it entails (among various other things) that 'Slim and Tim and no one else came to the party' isn't a complete answer. In the case of why-questions, a merely partial answer rules out a possible complete answer but without putting forward a reason why (Skow 2016: 46, 51). Response 2 says that in cases where S ought to φ, that S can φ merely rules out a possible complete answer both to the question why S ought to φ and the question why R is a reason why S ought to φ, instead of constituting part of a complete answer to one or the other question.

This is incorrect, however. Take first the question why S ought to φ. If 'ought' implies 'can', then the fact that S can φ rules out no complete answer to that question. In ruling out things that S cannot do, it only rules out actions for which it isn't the case that S ought to perform them to begin with. So that fact had better be compatible with all the potential reasons why S ought to φ. Now take the question why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ. The fact that S can φ rules out no complete answer to that question either. Any complete answer to the question why R is a reason why S ought to φ must also be compatible with the fact that S can φ. So 'S can φ' isn't a merely partial answer to either question. Thus Response 2 fails.

This is where Response 3 kicks in. Suppose that the fact that S can φ isn't a merely partial answer to either of these two why-questions. In section 3, I agreed

that the fact that S can φ isn't part of a complete answer to the question why S ought to φ. So the remaining question for me to address is this: why think that the fact that S can φ is part of a complete answer to the question why R is a reason why S ought to φ, rather than no answer at all? If 'S can φ' were no answer at all, Response 3 would stand.

Specifying answerhood is a complex and difficult issue in the semantics of questions and answers, and why-questions have been relatively neglected compared to alternative questions, yes-no-questions, and (other) wh-questions.[12] Skow says little about what logical properties he takes a complete answer to the question why Q to have, beyond that it is a conjunction of all of the reasons why Q. This makes it hard to reach completely confident conclusions about Response 3. On the one hand, we might suspect that 'Why is R a reason why S ought to φ?' presupposes that S can φ. A presupposition of a question won't be part of a complete answer to it. On the other hand, even if that is so in this particular case, Response 3 sits poorly with enablers in general. Suppose that the value holist interpretation of *Pleasure* is right. The question 'Why is the fact that E is an experience of pleasure a reason why E is good?' doesn't appear to presuppose that E isn't a vicious pleasure. In that case it seems plausible to count the enabler as part of a complete answer to the question at issue. So I doubt that Response 3 is adequate in general.

The point just made is consistent with my objection to Response 1. There I argued that certain enablers aren't higher-level reasons why, not that they aren't parts of complete answers. Reasons why <that E is an experience of pleasure is a reason why E is good> would seem to be facts about things like how pleasure feels and what it does to us. We don't need to count the fact that E isn't vicious as a further higher-level reason why to account for its relevance to E's being good. This only requires counting it as an enabler. Even if Skow's account of a complete answer to a why-question can be developed further to deal with this kind of observation, the observation at the very least challenges his claim that his accounts of a complete answer and part of a complete answer to a why-question in terms of the notion of a reason why "should not be controversial; they should be common

12 See e.g. the surveys in Groenendijk and Stokhof (1997) and Cross and Roelofsen (2018).

ground" (Skow 2016: 25). At least for now, I take us to have reason to think that an enabler of the fact that R as a reason why a normative fact N obtains can be part of a complete answer to the question 'Why is R a reason why N obtains?' without being a higher-level reason why <R is a reason why N obtains>. If that is the case, then the conjunction of (CA) and (RW) is false.

6. Taking Stock

A recent theory of answers to why-questions, Skow's theory of reasons why, says that a complete answer to the question why some fact holds consists in all of the reasons why it holds (CA) and that all reasons why that are facts are either causes or grounds (RW). I have explored this theory's capacity to illuminate normative explanation. I proposed that an adequate theoretical framework for normative explanation should account for the role of enablers in normative explanation. My main example was the following general enabler: when S ought to φ, the fact that S can φ is an enabler for any other fact R as a reason why S ought to φ. I first argued that such enablers aren't among the first-level reasons why S ought to φ. I then explored three other responses on behalf of Skow's theory. I first argued that counting the enabler that S can φ as a higher-level reason why <R is a reason why S ought to φ> would be problematic for several reasons. I then argued that the fact that S can φ isn't a merely partial answer either to the question why S ought to φ or the question why some other fact R is a reason why S ought to φ. And finally I offered reasons to doubt that the fact that S can φ is no answer at all to the question why R is a reason why S ought to φ.

If all this is right, then some enablers will be parts of complete answers to certain why-questions without being reasons why. But then (CA) is false, despite its promise to illuminate normative explanation in conjunction with (RW). A main choice point for future work is whether an enabler for R as a reason why Q that isn't a reason why <R is a reason why Q> really is part of a complete answer to the question why R is a reason why Q. Those who deny that it is such a part owe us an account of what role it does play with respect to complete answers to that question,

if it is neither a merely partial answer nor no answer at all. Those who affirm that it is such a part need to say more about what kind of part it is. Any account either way would illuminate normative explanation by specifying different ways that enablers can relate to explanations of normative facts.

I'll close by briefly sketching two options. One is to reject (CA) and instead allow that complete answers may include enablers as parts even when those enablers aren't themselves reasons why. One merit of this view is that it can say the following. If our question is why R is a reason why Q, the answer that S can φ is true – because it is part of a complete answer – but often misleading. That answer would often carry a pragmatic implication to the effect that the fact that S can φ makes a distinctive contribution to making it the case that R is a reason why S ought to φ. Insofar as such contribution is the job of reasons why <R is a reason why S ought to φ> but the fact that S can φ isn't such a reason, giving it as an answer would often be misleading, though not false. That S can φ isn't what is "at issue" in most conversations regarding why those facts that are reasons why S ought to φ are such reasons. That S can φ is a general enabler for every reason why S ought to φ. Not all contexts are like that, however. If we know that Sue promised to rake the leaves but you ask why that means Sue ought to do so, sometimes an appropriate answer may be something like 'She is able to do it. Nothing prevents her from keeping her promise.' This option fits with the common view that answerhood is sensitive to pragmatic considerations.

A different option is to say that a complete answer to the question why Q consists in all of the reasons why Q, but say that it is a complete answer only when the relevant enabling conditions hold. This background condition view retains the narrow letter of (CA), if not its spirit. But (CA) as it stands lacks resources to underwrite this option. One possible way to develop it is to treat the presence of an enabler as a *presupposition* of the relevant why-question. Some think that a question presupposes P just in case the truth of P is a logically necessary condition for there being a correct answer to the question (Belnap and Steel 1976: 5). That S can φ appears to meet this condition with respect to 'Why is R a reason why S

ought to φ?' It also meets the diagnostic that if the presupposition of a question isn't true, the question has no direct unambiguous answer. Where S cannot φ, our answer won't be 'R is a reason why S ought to φ because …' but something like 'Hey, wait a minute, it isn't the case that S ought to φ!' Such behavior is characteristic of presuppositions. Supplementing (CA) with a theory of the presuppositions of why-questions might thus help it solve the problem of enablers.

It isn't clear, however, that this would work in general. In discussing Response 3, I noted that even if 'Why is R a reason why S ought to φ?' presupposes that S can φ, 'Why is the fact that E is an experience of pleasure a reason why E is good?' doesn't presuppose the holding of the enabling condition that the pleasure isn't vicious. Moreover, if we concede to Skow that some enablers are higher-level reasons why, how do we distinguish those enablers in a principled way from enablers that are presuppositions rather than parts of complete answers to (higher-level) why-questions? A more sophisticated theory of answers to why-questions might be able to resolve such complications in favor of (CA). But the jury is clearly still out on that issue.

I'll close by iterating why the issues raised in this paper should interest normative theorists. Thinking about normative explanation in terms of reasons why promises to unify normative explanation with explanation in other domains. It fits well with the kinds of answers that normative theories aim to provide to questions like why we ought to do what we ought to do, why the good things are good, and so on. It may also be important to our broader understanding of normative reasons. Moreover, distinguishing between levels of reasons why helps us to distinguish distinct projects in normative theory, such as explaining why we ought to do certain things and explaining why certain facts are reasons why we ought to do those things. If we currently lack an adequate general framework for normative explanation, normative theorists should be interested in developing a better framework. This is especially because it would be premature to conclude from the shortcomings of a particular theory like Skow's that exploring what constitutes a correct complete answer to a why-question won't yield valuable insights into

normative explanation. It allows us to theorize about normative explanation without taking any very specific stand on what kind of entities (grounds or otherwise) figure in correct answers to normative why-questions. Intriguingly, the fact that why-questions request different things in different contexts (causes, grounds, and other things as well) makes room for the possibility that correct answers to why-questions in normative contexts might have some distinctive features, in addition to unifying similarities with correct answers to why-questions in other contexts.

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