Varieties of Normative Explanation

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1. Introduction

Requests for explanation abound in ethics. If I judge that Kim was wrong to arrive late, it is fair to ask why. This would normally be a request for a *reason why* the act was wrong, not for a psychological explanation of why I judge as I do. In response I might say "It was wrong *because* she promised to be on time". We ask *in virtue of* what exploitation is wrong, what *makes* death bad, and what *grounds* our obligation to provide asylum to refugees. Theories in ethics and political philosophy don't aim merely to list which things are right and wrong, good or bad, just and unjust, and so on, and guide us accordingly. They aim also to say *why* the right actions are right, the wrong ones are wrong, and so on. Likewise for other normative domains: we want to know why certain things are beautiful or good for us. Various links also hold between normative reasons and explanation. What we ought to do, all things considered, is often said to be explained by the reasons for and against acting in various ways. And if a climate tax on meat would be good because it would help limit emissions, it is natural also to think that its helping to limit emissions is a reason to impose such a tax.

One task for metaethics (or "metanormative" theory more generally) is to systematize explanations in normative domains. The above examples might suggest that the phenomenon is fairly uniform: the normative features of things are explained by other (typically, non-normative) features that make it the case that a particular thing is right, good, or the like. But normative explanatory projects exhibit more variety than that. Even in first-order normative inquiry, we may seek to explain not only particular normative facts, such as that I acted wrongly when lying to you about where I was last night, but also general normative facts, such as that lying is (*pro*

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tanto) wrong. These two kinds of *first-order normative explanations* might not work uniformly, perhaps especially in the case of genuine normative principles.[1]

Explanatory claims appear also in many discussions regarding the foundations of ethics and practical reason. People claim variously that moral facts are grounded in facts about the nature of agency or divine will, or else that the most fundamental moral facts or principles have no explanation. Similarly, people claim variously that your normative reasons for action are what they are in virtue of what you desire, or would rationally will, or what the objective goods are. How do these *foundational normative explanations* differ from first-order explanations of why the right actions are right? Or consider claims about *what it is* for actions to be right or for there to be a normative reason for an agent to do something. When these are not property-identity claims but explanatory claims about the nature of rightness and reasons, are they a special type of foundational explanations or something different?

Philosophers thus pursue a number of different explanatory projects when accounting for various normative phenomena. This chapter takes some steps towards understanding this variety. I'll lay some general ground about explanation, describe some key axes of debate about first-order normative explanations, and briefly discuss the other two, more foundational sorts of normative explanation. I hope this will stimulate further work. While there has been a lot of work on scientific and causal explanation, and work on metaphysical and mathematical explanation is growing, much less exists on how various explanations in normative domains work and how they might be similar to and different from explanations in other domains.

2. Fixing a Notion of Normative Explanation

Explanation involves a thing being explained (the "explanandum") and its explainer (the "explanans") related in a certain kind of way (the "explanation relation"). Sometimes 'explanation' refers just to the explanans, as when we say that the explanation of A is that B. Other times 'explanation' refers to the whole relationship: to ask whether an explanation is correct isn't merely to ask whether the explanans holds. Context will disambiguate.

1 In philosophy of science, explanation of laws of nature is widely thought to raise distinctive issues even for those laws that can be explained. The most fundamental laws or principles might have no explanation.

‘Explain’ and ‘explanation’ are said in many ways, even when we focus just on explaining why things are as they are, rather than explaining what the rules of the game are, how to play it, who Clem Fandango is, or where I can pick up my coat.[2] We may mean an act or process of explaining, a product of such a process, or a certain kind of structure that exists independently of such a process. We use ‘explains’ to relate sentences, propositions, facts, or even objects. We distinguish partial explanations from full or complete ones. We distinguish potential from actual explanations, as when we distinguish a causal story from a true causal story. An explanation’s being true or correct is contrasted variously with being false or no explanation at all. We also rank explanations as better or worse. Most people think ‘explain’ and ‘because’ denote different relations in causal and non-causal explanations. To get anywhere, we need to fix some ideas. I’ll focus first on first-order normative explanations; for now, ‘normative explanation’ will be shorthand specifically for this variety.

Normative theories aren’t fundamentally interested in acts of explaining.[3] Acts of explaining are subject to conversational norms that don’t bear on why right actions are right. What information an explanatory speech act needs to provide depends on our and our interlocutors’ epistemic situation, what is relevant to our interests, and so on (Lewis 1986). If we have enough in common morally, I can say just ‘Jim did wrong in saying he’d pay you back because he was lying’, trust my audience to fill in that this is one of those circumstances where lying is wrong, and not say anything about why lying is wrong. By contrast, normative theories make claims that are meant to hold even if they don’t figure in anyone’s explaining. If Kant’s moral theory is correct, wrong actions are wrong because they treat someone as mere means, and that is so even if no one has thought of this explanation. Normative theories are after explanations that are objective at least in the sense that they are discovered rather than invented, can remain unknown, and don’t require any specific audience.

This doesn’t yet tell us what things ‘explains’ and ‘because’ relate in normative explanation or what that relation is like. The relation seems *non-causal:* treating someone as mere means doesn’t cause lying to be wrong, but makes it wrong

2 See e.g. Jenkins (2008) and Ruben (2012: Ch. 1). Some propose avoiding talk of explanation altogether in favor of talk of why-questions and contents of answers to them (Skow 2016: Ch. 1).

3 One exception is Baker (2021), who argues that expressivists should account for normative explanation by looking to our practices of using explanatory speech acts for practically oriented communicative purposes.

in some non-causal way.[4] I'll mostly write as if explanation related facts rather than propositions, but not much hangs on this. We sometimes talk of an explanation as a set of propositions; we can interpret this as talk of propositions that represent certain relations between facts. I'll use '[*p*]' to denote the fact that *p* (Rosen 2017a: 299). So if α = my act of kicking you, [α is wrong] is the fact that I acted wrongly in kicking you. The notion of a fact can be taken in a deflationary way: 'It is a fact that *p*' says the same as '*p*'. Talk of normative facts in this minimal sense is compatible with many forms of normative antirealism.

A more controversial issue is whether normative theories use 'explain' and cognate notions in an *epistemic* or *pragmatic* sense, on which genuine explanations must have the potential, respectively, to increase understanding or answer to our interests.[5] Whether R explains Q in this sense might vary across audiences, depending on what they already know or are interested in knowing. Many accounts of scientific explanation are epistemic in this sense.[6] But the sort of explanations that normative theories seek to state and defend don't seem to be deeply audience-relative in this way (Väyrynen 2021a). For instance, act-utilitarianism is often taken to say that the ultimate reason why right actions are right is that they maximize happiness. The truth of this explanation doesn't depend on its potential to increase a given audience's understanding of how maximizing happiness contributes to rightness. An explanation of why an act is right might be *better* to the extent that it has such potential, but that is different from being required for its *truth*. If normative explanations can be true without providing such cognitive benefits, then they have a further degree of objectivity beyond being something we can discover or fail to know.

A number of formal features of normative explanation are widely accepted. Explanation is *asymmetric*, and thus *irreflexive*: if R explains why Q, Q doesn't

4 For simplicity, I assume this relation isn't mere necessary covariation (i.e. supervenience); see e.g. DePaul (1987). This assumption is widely accepted but not innocent; see e.g. Strandberg (2008) and Kovacs (2019).

5 Explanation in an epistemic sense is often contrasted with explanation in a metaphysical sense (see e.g. Bennett 2017: 61; Fogal and Risberg 2020: 173). But 'metaphysical' might mean several different things here, not all of which contrast neatly with an epistemic notion. To illustrate with two possible notions of metaphysical explanation: if 'Q because R' states an explanation in a non-epistemic sense, that doesn't automatically mean that 'R' must cite the lower-level facts that give rise to Q or that the explanation must proceed by citing distinctions of interest to metaphysics. I'll stick to 'objective' rather than 'metaphysical'.

6 Woodward and Ross (2021: §6) survey the field. van Fraassen (1980) is a classic "pragmatic" account of scientific explanation. Bokulich (2018) is one recent and nuanced "epistemic" account. Accounts of moral explanation in Walden (2016) and Baker (2021) include epistemic and pragmatic conditions. Kovacs (2020: 1672-73) notes that not all epistemic conditions are deeply audience-relative in a way that would compromise a significant degree of objectivity.

explain why R, and thus Q cannot explain itself. Explanation is *non-monotonic*: an explanation that is true may not stay true with further information added. [Jones is male] explains why Jones doesn't get pregnant, but [Jones is male and takes birth control pills] doesn't (Salmon 1989: 50). This suggests that the facts in the explanans must be *relevant*: [Jones is on birth control] is irrelevant to why he doesn't get pregnant. Explanation is also *hyperintensional*: if 'Q because R' is true and 'P' is necessarily equivalent with 'R', 'Q because P' may fail to be true. For instance, suppose that, by necessity, any act is right if and only if it maximizes happiness and, by necessity, any act is right if and only if God commands it. Then God is a utilitarian: by necessity, they command something if and only if it maximizes happiness. But 'Any act is right because God commands it' is false if 'Any act is right because it maximizes happiness' is true, and vice versa (DePaul 1987: 437). Whether or when explanation is *transitive* or *contrastive* is more controversial.[7] At least typically, explanation is also doubly *factive:* 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' entails both that lying is wrong and that lying treats people as mere means.[8]

Explanations are sometimes construed as contents of answers to why-questions, where those contents are explanatory reasons. Sentences of the form 'Why Q?' can be used to ask for different things in different contexts: causes, non-causal grounds, goals or purposes, and more (van Fraassen 1980: 156; Jenkins 2008; Skow 2016: 62-64). Sometimes a correct answer to 'Why is Jones in pain?' is 'Because she hiked 50 miles without proper footwear', sometimes 'Because the C-fibers in her brain are firing thus-and-so', and sometimes 'Because she wanted to test her endurance'. When the question asks for causes of Jones' pain, the neural grounds of that fact don't qualify as a possible answer. Normative explanation allows this kind of context-sensitivity even if it is objective. For instance, Rossian moral pluralism says that fidelity to promises is a *pro tanto* duty. If fidelity to promises contributes to duty proper in this way, that holds irrespective of whether anyone asks the question. For

7 Walden (2016) argues that normative explanation is contrastive; see section 5 below. Various views on transitivity can be found in Väyrynen (2009b, 2021b), Berker (2018: 751-56), and Litland (2018).

8 We sometimes argue for a normative principle by saying that it explains various particular normative facts better than its rivals. Such claims may grant that some rivals also explain those facts (just not as well) despite being false. So perhaps 'R explains Q' doesn't always entail R, even if the factive notion is somehow prior. See also Bertrand (2022) on non-factive metaphysical explanation.

each question that 'Why is this wrong?' may be used to ask, the content of any answer can be true or false independently of pragmatic and epistemic factors.

The notion of normative explanation we have fixed so far is moderately objective. It doesn't imply that what gets explained are metaphysically robust normative facts, so it is neutral between realism and antirealism about normative facts and properties. What counts as a correct explanation of why causing bodily harm just for fun is wrong may be independent of our interests and its relation to understanding even if its wrongness isn't a metaphysically real fact. Questions about whether some types of normative antirealism can account for first-order normative explanations lie downstream from here.[9]

In normative explanation, the explanandum is a *normative* fact.[10] What that comes to isn't straightforward, in part because 'normative' may not mean the same thing in 'normative explanation', 'normative fact', 'normative judgment', and 'normative reason' (Finlay 2019a). Here is a rough pass. There seems to be some important (if hard to articulate) commonality among such claims as that a climate tax on meat would be good, kicking someone's shins just for fun is wrong, and one ought not to burp at the dinner table. Normative facts are those that such claims are about; they involve things having properties like being wrong, being good, and the like. What this property of "normativity" is that they have in common is controversial. What isn't controversial is that normative facts and claims are distinct from merely *normatively relevant* facts and claims. [I kicked your shins just for fun] is a non-normative fact. But as a reason why my act is wrong, it is a normatively relevant fact. By contrast, the claim that kicking your shins is wrong is normatively contentful (it attributes wrongness) and, if true, states a normative fact.

Normative facts and claims may be logically complex in various ways. Of special importance here is whether [My kicking your shins was wrong because it caused you pain] is a kind of normative fact.[11] There are reasons to think yes. Suppose we say that my kicking your shins was wrong – a normative claim. How could adding a reason why it was wrong turn the resulting complex into a non-normative claim? Another reason to treat such explanatory claims as a kind of normative claim is that

9 Berker (2020) raises this objection against expressivism about normative judgment; Baker (2021) responds.

10 There is a distinct debate about 'moral explanations' in the sense of whether moral properties figure in causal explanations of non-moral goings-on (see e.g. Sturgeon 1988). This debate isn't part of my focus.

11 I set aside other complications in classifying logically non-atomic facts or claims as normative or non-normative; see Prior (1960) and Russell (2022).

they are part of what gets disputed between competing moral outlooks. One might agree that my kicking your shins was wrong, but claim it was wrong in virtue of violating your bodily integrity. If the correct normative standards implied that bodily integrity isn't morally relevant, that claim would be false. Non-normative claims aren't sensitive to normative standards in this way.[12]

What exactly ties together all normative facts and claims is a live debate. On a narrow conception of normativity, only things that possess some specially robust kind of significance count as normative. Perhaps normative facts proper are categorically reason-giving or involve some kind of authoritative guidance over actions or attitudes, such that a person who ignores them is making a significant mistake. On a broad conception, you have something normative where you have standards that specify that certain conditions are to be met by things of a certain category, and failing to meet those conditions makes such things legitimate targets of criticism. If you move a rook diagonally in a game of chess, you are criticizable for violating the rules of this game. This kind of "formal" normativity doesn't require that there be antecedent reasons to care about conforming to those standards; a person who ignores chess-reasons isn't thereby making a significant mistake.[13] In between, there are various other conceptions of the normative. Including both formally and robustly normative facts in our target may raise significant complications about how they are related (Finlay 2019a: 204-7). My hope is that we can largely bracket the issue by assuming that if a fact is normative, then by that fact alone certain behavioral or attitudinal responses would be appropriate, or a suitably situated agent would have some given sort of reasons to think, feel, or act in certain ways. Broad conceptions of normativity count merely formally normative facts as normative. If my knife is good, recommending and using it in cooking is thereby appropriate. If my king is threatened, I thereby have a chess-reason to protect it. Narrow conceptions require normative facts to give rise to reasons which it would be a significant mistake to ignore.

12 Precursors of this claim include Emmons (1967) and Hare (1978: 75), who argue that to claim, *of* some non-moral feature of a situation, that it is morally relevant is to invoke a substantive moral principle. For a feature of an act to *make* it wrong is one way of being morally, and thus normatively, relevant.

13 There is broad consensus that games are merely formally normative, whereas morality and self-interest are authoritatively normative. Controversial cases include legal standards and standards of etiquette. Baker (2018) is one useful survey of this territory. See also the chapters by David Plunkett and Tristram McPherson and by Nathan Howard and Nicholas Laskowski in this volume.

Beyond this fix of ideas, questions concerning explanations that first-order normative theories aim to formulate and defend remain pretty wide open. It may be helpful to sort these questions into three broad (albeit overlapping) categories:

Form: What form or structure may first-order normative explanations take?

Content: What is the content of first-order normative explanations? (For instance: What relation(s) may 'because' and it cognates denote in them?)

Function: What function(s) does normative explanation play in first-order normative inquiry and theory?

We'll focus largely on *Form* and *Content*; perhaps surprisingly, there is less work on *Function* to survey. To mitigate this, section 5 will offer a twist for future work.

3. The Form of First-Order Normative Explanation

In normative explanation, the things that get explained are normative facts. How the explanans of a normative explanation must be constituted is more complex. Most people think that particular normative facts ultimately hold at least partly in virtue of non-normative facts.[14] If an act is right because it maximizes value, the latter is explained at least partly by whatever non-normative facts make things valuable. Whether the same is true of general normative facts may be less clear, depending on how they relate to particular normative facts. But often there seems to be no relevant difference. Moral theorists often ask questions such as what makes exploitation wrong and what is wrong with lying. The answer is rarely that their wrongness is brute. And their wrongness is often given at least a partly non-normative basis.

None of the above settles two key debates about the form of first-order normative explanations:

14 The agreement isn't universal. Some think that it is "a live theoretical option" that "nothing explains why what it's like to be in agony is a reason for me to avoid future agony" (Berker 2019: 931). Others think that "thick" value facts (such as that someone is tactful, or greedy) may be irreducibly evaluative and their explanation needn't have a cleanly delineable non-evaluative basis (see e.g. Roberts 2017).

(FQ1) Must explanations of why an act is wrong entail or otherwise guarantee that it is wrong?

(FQ2) What role do normative principles or other normative generalizations play in explanations of particular normative facts?

These are best understood as questions about *full* normative explanations. A partial explanation picks out only a selected few explanatory factors. These needn't include principles and don't guarantee that the explanandum-fact obtains.

To illustrate both (FQ1) and (FQ2), consider "covering law" models of explanation. The best-known such model, Carl Hempel's "deductive-nomological" (DN) model of explanation, says that a complete true explanation is a sound deductive argument whose premises (the explanans) are sentences expressing a (non-accidentally true) universal generalization and a set of initial conditions, and whose conclusion is a sentence describing the explanandum-phenomenon (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948). Normative explanation would then work by subsuming non-normative facts under normative principles in a way that allows deriving the particular normative explanandum. Some kind of subsumptive or covering law model is implicit in a lot of talk of explanation in normative inquiry.

The DN model is now widely rejected as an account of scientific explanation. A central problem is its failure to track causal asymmetries (Salmon 1989 reviews this and other objections). One might think this doesn't doom DN models of normative explanation. Sarah McGrath writes: "Insofar as moral explanations are not causal explanations, we should expect that analogues to this class of counterexamples will not arise in the moral case" (McGrath 2020: 98n51). This may be overly optimistic. Normative explanation involves non-causal asymmetries. Suppose act α is right and maximizes happiness. Given that α maximizes happiness, we can invoke the putative non-accidental generalization that any act is right if and only if it maximizes happiness to deduce that α is right. Given that α is right, we can invoke the same generalization to deduce that α maximizes happiness. But the fact that α maximizes happiness is (at least typically) not explained by α's being right. So, applying the DN model to normative explanation may require refinements to deal with asymmetries.[15]

15 Options include appeal to pragmatic factors (Baker 2021), a restricted form of logical entailment (Wilsch 2016), and upgrading the DN model to a unificationist account of explanation (discussed below).

As regards (FQ1), covering law models imply that the explanans of a full explanation must entail or otherwise guarantee that its explanandum holds. Some work on normative explanation draws more fine-grained distinctions in ways that conflict with this constraint. One such distinction is between the facts in virtue of which particular normative facts obtain and conditions on which the truth of such explanations merely depends. One example is Kant's view that happiness is only good when had by someone who has a good will. The idea isn't that happiness is good partly in virtue of being had by someone with a good will (Bader 2017: 129). Perhaps happiness is good because of how it involves pleasure, or life satisfaction, or some complex of positive affects. Having a good will is instead an "enabling condition" for whatever makes happiness good to do so. The enabler is morally relevant in a different way than what it enables. Or suppose I promised to help you and have a *pro tanto* obligation to keep the promise: I ought to help you move so far as my having promised goes, even if, all things considered, I ought to break the promise.[16] (Perhaps I must do so to save a life.) Promising to do something may be insufficient for being even *pro tanto* obliged to do it. Its status as a reason why one ought to do it may require the absence of "disablers", such as that the promise was given under duress, and probably more besides (Dancy 2004: 38-41). If an explanans always necessitates the explanandum, it isn't simply because I promised to help you that I ought *pro tanto* to do it. Rather, I ought to help you because of a more complex fact: [I promised to do it, my promise wasn't given under duress, it isn't a promise to do something immoral, and ___]. But many think instead that the facts that my promise wasn't given under duress and isn't a promise to do something immoral aren't part of what makes it right or what is responsible for its being right. If the act's being right is fully explained by facts that make it right and the enabling conditions aren't part of what makes it right, then a full normative explanation needn't guarantee that the explanandum obtains.[17]

Our intuitions may be shaky regarding whether 'Because your promise to help wasn't extracted by deception' counts as a correct answer to the question 'Why should I help you move?' in the way 'Because you promised to help' does. But it is at

16 I'll typically use terms like 'right' and 'ought' to refer to *pro tanto* normative notions.

17 Dancy (2004: Ch. 3) distinguishes right-makers and normative reasons from their enablers and disablers, and uses the distinction to argue that not even full explanations must guarantee their explanandum. Zangwill (2008) uses 'responsibility' for this because-relation. Useful recent discussions include Bader (2016) and Wygoda Cohen (2020). Both argue that the distinction is metaphysical, not merely pragmatic.

least an open question whether the background conditions that are necessary for the truth of an explanation of why I should help you are part of that which explains why I should. Their obtaining might instead be analyzed as a condition on the explainers (cf. Bader 2017: 129). Or we might analyze them as higher-level explainers: an enabling condition for R to be a reason why Q partly explains why R is a reason why Q (cf. Skow 2016: 109). Even those who see full explanation as a guaranteeing notion that is insensitive to these finer distinctions should offer some account of why (say) the facts that make happiness good and the condition that happiness be had by someone with a good will seem to be differentially relevant to why happiness is good.

As regards (FQ2), regarding the role of general principles, covering law models also imply that non-normative facts don't suffice to explain normative facts even with every relevant non-normative fact on board. Normative principles also play some crucial role. Some putative principles are *pro toto:* they concern what is right and wrong overall. Others concern *pro tanto* normative notions. What is right and wrong overall might be claimed to be explained either by *pro toto* principles, or by some kind of balancing of various *pro tanto* principles. The DN model would require either sort of principles to be *exceptionless*. This is multiply controversial. First, the literature on scientific explanation gives us reasons of parity to think that normative explanation needn't involve exceptionless principles (Leibowitz 2011). Second, *moral particularism* denies that there are any true general moral principles (exceptionless or not), except perhaps as a mere accident on which nothing hangs (Dancy 2004).[18] So however explanation of particular moral facts works, it cannot involve principles. Third, various accounts of principles allow not only *pro toto* but also *pro tanto* principles to tolerate exceptions (Lance and Little 2007; Väyrynen 2009a; Robinson 2011). On these views, a full explanation might involve principles but not entail its explanandum.

Debates about the role of general principles in normative explanation interact with the nature of normative principles. It used to be common to present principles as necessary universal generalizations of the form 'Necessarily, for any *x*, *x* is N if and only if *x* is F' or 'Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is F, then *x* is N' (where 'N' is a normative predicate and 'F' is typically some non-normative predicate). Kantian deontology, for instance, would say that, necessarily, any act is wrong if and only if it

18 For surveys of the generalism-particularism debate, see Ridge and McKeever (2020) and Väyrynen (2018). Particularists deny that "supervenience functions" that map non-normative properties onto normative properties count as principles in the relevant sense (Dancy 2004: 88; but see also Strandberg 2008).

violates the Categorical Imperative. A principle that posits just (necessary and) sufficient conditions for a normative property doesn't itself posit any explanatory relations. But if its claim is sufficiently lawlike, it might still somehow help to provide explanations of why particular acts are right.

These days it is more common to think of principles as in themselves explanatory. This idea has two distinct interpretations. One is that normative principles are "explanation-involving" or *explanatory in content*: they specify which particular non-normative facts explain which normative facts. The other is that principles are "explanation-serving" or *explanatory in role:* they play some special role in explaining particular normative facts.[19] To see how these differ, suppose normative principles are necessary universal generalizations with explanatory content. The act-utilitarian principle, for instance, would say this: necessarily, any act *x* is *pro toto* right if and only if, and because, *x* maximizes happiness. Moral pluralists would accept only something weaker, such as: Necessarily, for any act *x*, if *x* maximizes general happiness, then *x* is *pro tanto* right because of that fact. These principles are explanatory in content: their content says that N-facts hold *because* F-facts hold.

Selim Berker argues that principles so understood are redundant in explanations of particular normative facts, and thus not explanatory in role. (What follows is a crude summary of one main argument in Berker 2019.) Universal generalizations (lawlike and otherwise) state regularities that are fully grounded in their particular instances. If there is nothing more to normative principles than what is given in their form as necessary universal explanation-involving generalizations, then they are fully grounded in the particular explanatory relationships that are their instances. For instance, the act-utilitarian principle would be fully grounded in the following facts: that A_1 is right because it maximizes general happiness, that A_2 is right because it maximizes general happiness, …, that A_n is right because it maximizes general happiness (plus perhaps a "that's it" clause).[20] But then it is hard to see what work of its own the act-utilitarian principle could do in explaining why the right acts are right. More plausibly, each right act is right fully because it maximizes happiness. But if any right act is right fully in virtue of the non-normative facts that

19 The terminology in quotes is due to Berker (2019: 905), that in italics to Fogal and Risberg (2020: 174).

20 It doesn't follow that the principle simply *is* a long conjunction of its instances or otherwise reduces to them. One and the same universal generalization may be grounded by different things in different worlds.

ground its rightness, then normative principles won't be explanatory in role, even if they are explanatory in content.

Different accounts of how normative principles are explanatory in role may try to resist this redundancy argument in different ways. One is to say that normative principles are necessary universal explanation-involving generalizations, but their explanatory role is to *unify* normative phenomena (Stamatiadis-Bréhier ms). Even if principles are redundant in grounding explanations, it doesn't follow that they're redundant in unifying explanations. That successful explanations exhibit connections between phenomena that may previously have seemed unrelated is a familiar view of scientific and mathematical explanation.[21] Derek Baker argues in this vein that the standard form of normative explanation is *unifying generalization* (Baker 2021). For instance, an explanation of why a particular lie is wrong would identify some more general property of which this act is a special case and which it shares with some larger class of wrong acts. Unifying power comes in degrees. If the more general property in question is something like treating others as mere means, it might unify this particular lie not just with other lies that are wrong but also with further, superficially different ways of treating people as mere means. On many accounts of what unification is more precisely, a generalization may unify even if it is grounded in its instances.

Another option is to deny that normative principles are grounded in their instances. The relevant notion of a normative law or principle might be primitive, or principles might be connections between universals or "govern" their instances in some other way.[22] Such principles might be a non-redundant part of explanations of particular normative facts or play some other special role.[23] The former view can be introduced by an analogy. Suppose I drive through a school zone at 50mph. That my act is unlawful doesn't obtain fully in virtue of its non-legal features, but in part because it is in general illegal to drive through a school zone at over 20mph.

21 Kitcher (1989) defends unificationism about scientific explanation, Lange (2016) about mathematical explanation, and Baron and Norton (2019) and Kovacs (2020) about metaphysical explanation. They all take unifying explanation to be epistemic in that its explanatory power derives at least partly from its potential to increase understanding. For criticism, see Gijsbers (2007) and Ruben (2012: 191-92).

22 See, variously, Robinson (2011), Skarskaune (2015), Rosen (2017b), and Fogal and Risberg (2020: 183, adapting an account of "metaphysical laws" in Glazier 2016), and Berker (2019) for critical discussion.

23 Some who take principles to be explanatory in role stay neutral between the two views discussed in this paragraph (Fogal and Risberg 2020). Other views may be described as mixing them (Enoch 2019).

Normative facts might in general be like legal facts in this respect. Particular normative facts are explained from below, by things in virtue of which they obtain, and principles are among those things (Rosen 2017a-b). Alternatively, principles might *structure* explanatory relationships while sitting outside of that structure.[24] Ralf Bader proposes that particular normative facts obtain fully in virtue of non-normative facts and principles "govern the grounding relations connecting non-normative grounds to normative properties" (Bader 2017: 117). One way to understand this is that principles are a kind of "higher-level" explainers (cf. Skow 2016: Ch. 4, on laws of nature). For instance, act-utilitarianism might be interpreted as saying that particular acts are right fully in virtue of maximizing happiness, and the act-utilitarian principle explains why the fact that an act maximizes happiness makes it right. Whatever form structuring takes, one challenge is to give an account of the form and nature of normative principles on which they are actually equipped to play that role (Berker 2019). Principles might also play different explanatory roles in different normative domains (Enoch 2019). Overall, the form of normative explanation is a rich topic that interacts with long-standing debates about the nature of normative principles.

4. The Content of First-Order Normative Explanation

Many questions about the content of normative explanation turn on substantive normative issues, such as what normative principles are true. I'll focus on three key axes of debate about more generic content questions about first-order normative explanations:

(CQ1) What relation(s) or structure(s) may be denoted by 'because' and its cognates in explanations of normative facts?
(CQ2) What are the truth-conditions of such explanations?
(CQ3) Are such explanations distinctive in some significant way compared to explanations in other domains, and how?

Some issues that bear on (CQ2) have already come up. One is that if normative explanation is moderately objective (see section 2), then its truth-conditions don't

24 An analogy might be the view that laws of nature structure the causal relations between causes and effects instead of featuring as relata (Bader 2017: 117). On that view, see Ruben (2012: 186-91).

include deeply audience-relative epistemic or pragmatic condition. Another is that an explanation that provides a fine-grained account of the specific non-normative facts that make a normative fact obtain can be true even if it doesn't unify that normative fact with a broader class, whereas a true unifying explanation must do so. But (CQ2) isn't exhausted by these questions.

The answer to (CQ1) will depend in part on whether normative inquiry by its nature carries deep commitments on what relation 'because' picks out in claims like 'We ought to impose a climate tax on meat because that would help reduce emissions'. Selim Berker, for instance, claims that moral philosophers and laypeople alike have all along been appealing to *metaphysical grounding* in their ideas about why the right acts are right (Berker 2018). Whether or not that's right, the answer to (CQ1) also depends on whether *explanatory realism* is true of normative explanation. Explanatory realism is the view that an explanation is true only if it tracks, depicts, or gives information about a relation or structure of metaphysical determination.[25] Causal explanatory realism, for instance, requires causal explanations to report relations whereby causes are metaphysically responsible for their effects. Explanatory irrealism about normative explanation may appeal if you are generally skeptical about robust metaphysical relations or think that normative facts are too deflationary to stand in such relations. An irrealist answer to (CQ1) might be a purely modal relation of entailment, necessitation, or counterfactual variation, perhaps supplemented with conditions that impose the kind of structure (asymmetry, etc.) that explanation requires (Strandberg 2008; Baker 2021). Normative explanatory realists have offered various views about the metaphysical basis of normative explanation: constitution (Shafer-Landau 2003: 75), (multiple) realization (Shafer-Landau 2003: 77), or some form of grounding (Bader 2017; Rosen 2017b; Berker 2018; Sachs 2018; Enoch 2019). Realism about normative explanation can take various further forms. One choice is whether the operative relation of metaphysical determination just *is* the relation of normative explanation or somehow "backs" normative explanation.[26] Whether the explanations that normative theories seek to state and defend carry deep

25 Other formulations talk about explanations having an "objective correlate" or present realism as a view about what it is "to explain". Explanatory realists include Kim (1985), Lewis (1986), and Ruben (2012: Ch. 6). Explanatory irrealists include Bokulich (2018) and Taylor (2018, 2022), among others.

26 The standard labels for these views about the link between grounding and metaphysical explanation are, respectively, "unionism" and "separatism" (Raven 2015). Explanatory irrealism is compatible both with a deflationary conception of grounding explanation (see e.g. Dasgupta 2017) and the idea that explanations are backed (Taylor 2022). On backing, see also Stamatiadis-Bréhier (2021).

commitments on (CQ1) thus depends not only on how normative inquiry works but also on active debates in metaphysics that bear on normative explanatory realism and irrealism.

Turning to (CQ3) might foster progress. If first-order normative explanations are importantly different from explanations in other domains, that will be due to some features of the relation they denote, or normative facts themselves, or both. They can be distinctive with respect to their relation only insofar as this relation is distinct from general relations of metaphysical determination. One view is that normative explanation may (though needn't) involve instances of metaphysical grounding or some other metaphysical determination relation so long as they meet some further conditions that are special to the normative case. But as we'll see below, such conditions would arguably come from some distinctive features of normative facts. Another view is *grounding pluralism:* whereas 'The vase is fragile because it has crystalline bonds between its component molecules' denotes *metaphysical grounding*, 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' denotes *normative grounding*.[27] How distinctive this would make normative explanation is unclear. Metaphysical and normative grounding are typically distinguished only by the strength of necessity that they involve.[28] A full metaphysical ground of [*p*] *metaphysically necessitates* [*p*]. A full normative ground of [*p*] brings about [*p*] only by *normative necessity* (roughly, necessity given the normative laws). These come apart if the normative laws that hold in the actual world don't hold in all metaphysically possible worlds (Fine 2002; Rosen 2020). There may be nothing particularly distinctive about differences merely in modal strength.

Might normative explanations instead have distinctive truth-conditions because of what they explain: normative facts? Most accounts of normative explanation discussed so far don't support this option. If anything is explained from below by its metaphysical grounds, then many non-normative facts are so explained. And if anything is explained by unification, then many non-normative facts are so explained. And yet, it might not be surprising if it took something different to explain normative facts. They seem importantly different from non-normative facts even if their "normativity" is hard to analyze. A long-standing concern of normative theorists

27 Fine (2012), Bader (2017), and Enoch (2019) defend forms of this kind of grounding pluralism. For a critique of grounding pluralism, see Berker (2018). For worries about using normative grounding to explicate first-order normative explanations, see Rosen (2017b).

28 The prospects of distinguishing normative grounding from metaphysical grounding instead by appeal to the normativity of normative facts are yet to be explored.

is that the requirements issued by their theories be justified or legitimate. Facts about what we ought to do and what is good are supposed to have a certain kind of claim to guide our actions and attitudes and provide a basis for a certain kind of criticism if we fall short. If torture is morally wrong, for instance, then it is thereby fitting to condemn torture, suitably situated agents have moral reasons to refrain from torture, and so on.

I have recently argued that the normativity of normative facts is reflected in the truth-conditions of their explanations as follows: a correct full explanation of why a particular normative fact obtains must identify features that would go at least some way towards justifying certain responses in behavior or attitude (Väyrynen 2021a).[29] An intuitive case for this *justification condition* on normative explanation is that if no correct explanation of why (say) I acted morally wrongly in telling a lie had to identify features that make it fitting to resent my act or give me a moral reason not to lie, why count my lying as wrong in the first place? An important feature of the fact that lying is morally wrong – one that distinguishes it from even the fact that lying is socially sanctioned – would remain unaccounted for. The justification condition is fairly neutral on (CQ1): the relation denoted by 'because' in the explanations that normative theories seek may be whatever is consistent with the requirement that correct full normative explanations specify justifications. For instance, the normative fact that lying is wrong may be grounded in a plurality of facts Γ, but if nothing in Γ justifies certain responses to lying, Γ doesn't normatively explain why lying is wrong. This bears on (CQ2) and (CQ3): the justification condition implies that first-order normative explanations have a distinctive truth-condition that non-normative explanations lack.

Various further issues about the content of first-order normative explanations have barely begun to be explored. One is whether there are skeptical worries that are distinctive to normative explanation (cf. Korsgaard 1996; Radzik 1999; Schroeder 2005; Väyrynen 2013; Elstein ms). Another is whether every such explanation somehow depends on brute normative facts or truths and how those might gain their claim to guide our actions and attitudes.[30] A third is whether and how the kind of explanations that normative inquiry seeks to state and defend transmit along chains of

29 The relevant notion is *normative justification* of a sort that doesn't reduce to epistemic justification for normative belief and is objective in the same respects as the notion of explanation fixed in section 2.

30 Shafer-Landau (2003) and Enoch (2011), among others, accept that the most basic moral truths are brute. See also Heathwood (2012).

metaphysical determination (Berker 2018: 751-56; Väyrynen 2021b; cf. Chappell 2021: 433). That an experience is good has a metaphysical ground in neurophysical facts. That a distributive arrangement is just has a metaphysical ground in specific facts about what the Smiths, Wangs, and Ericksons gain and lose in an arrangement that meets the condition of distributive justice (egalitarianism, maximin, or whatnot). Do these low-level facts also normatively explain why the experience is good and why the social arrangement is just? These issues about the "right" level(s) of normative explanation are under-explored, but have an important bearing on the shape of first-order normative theories.

5. The Function of Explanation in Normative Inquiry

Normative theories are said to be explanatory by their nature, even if they also have other functions, such as guiding action.[31] Here I'll look at two questions about this: What does this claim amount to? And are the explanations that first-order normative theories may appropriately seek uniform or diverse in form and content?

The most minimal version of the claim that normative theories are explanatory parallels the corresponding claim about normative principles: they help provide explanations but aren't themselves explanatory in content or role. If normative theories consist partly in principles, then they are explanatory in content if those principles are explanatory in content, and explanatory in role if those principles are explanatory in role. A compelling independent reason to think that normative theories are explanatory at least in content is that this is required for distinguishing theories that are intuitively distinct. Consider the project of *consequentializing*. This claims that any non-consequentialist moral theory has a consequentialist deontic equivalent that identifies all and only the same acts morally right.[32] For instance, the view that acts are right if and only if they treat persons also as ends and not merely as means might be consequentialized by formulating a theory of value on which treating people in this way maximizes value and so is right by the standards of maximizing consequentialism. If moral theories weren't explanatory in content, we couldn't distinguish such pairs of theories. But we can explain why they are distinct if we interpret them as including also claims about what makes the right acts right. Non-consequentialist theories don't say that the right acts are right *because* they maximize

31 See e.g. Sachs (2018) for a discussion of the idea that moral theorizing is an explanatory project.
32 For a survey of consequentializing, see Portmore (2009).

value. That's why claiming that acts are right in virtue of treating persons always also as ends and never as mere means is to propose a moral theory distinct from consequentialism.

Whether normative theories are explanatory also in role parallels the issues concerning the explanatory redundancy of normative principles. Instead of rehearsing those arguments again, here is the twist I promised. Most views of normative explanation are *monistic:* they suppose that all first-order normative explanations work the same way. Some monistic claims are that all normative explanations work by grounding (Berker 2018), that unifying generalization is the standard form of normative explanation (Baker 2021), that principles never play a special role in them (Berker 2019), and that they always do (Rosen 2017a-b). *Pluralism* about normative explanation says instead that a normative fact may have more than one distinct type of correct complete non-causal explanation.[33] Suppose I broke my promise to help you move and this was morally wrong. According to normative explanatory pluralism, the fact that it was wrong may have both a correct grounding explanation and a correct unifying explanation, which get their explanatory power from different sources.

Whether normative explanatory pluralism is true depends partly on whether normative inquiry has multiple explanatory goals. Some views endorse such plurality. David Enoch appeals to grounding pluralism to distinguish explanations "within the moral story" and explanations that provide and "set up" the "fuller story": particular moral facts are fully morally grounded in non-moral facts but metaphysically grounded in moral principles plus those non-moral facts, and moral principles also explain what moral grounding relations hold (Enoch 2019: 10-11). Another example is the view that the wrongness of an act may receive either a "criterial" or a "ground-level" explanation, depending on whether the question of why it is wrong is asking after a general property that is shared by all wrong acts (a "criterion" of wrongness), or the specific morally significant features that made the act meet the general criteria for wrongness (Chappell 2021: 431-32).[34] A structurally distinct example is the view that normative theories might seek to specify both first-level reasons why atomic normative facts obtain and higher-level explanations of why some fact about an act

33 Potochnik (2015) defends explanatory pluralism in the special sciences, Lange (2016) in mathematics. For normative explanatory pluralism, see Stamatiadis-Bréhier (ms) and Väyrynen (ms).

34 Chappell himself doesn't describe criterial principles as explanatory in content, but other views might.

makes it wrong. For instance, some Kantians might want to deny that the fundamentally wrong-making feature of any wrong act is that its maxim violates the Categorical Imperative. (This view faces charges of rule-worship, and worse.) The reason why an act is wrong might instead be variously that it is a lie, that it harms a person, that it breaks a promise, and so on. That such acts' maxims violate the Categorical Imperative might instead explain why the fact that an act is a lie (etc.) makes it wrong.[35] Consequentialists, contractualists, and virtue ethicists might say the same. For instance, that a virtuous person wouldn't characteristically lie in a given circumstance might be, not what fundamentally makes that act wrong, but what explains why its being a lie makes it wrong. The plausibility of such views depends on whether normative principles play what we earlier called a "structuring" explanatory role.

Some weaker form of normative explanatory pluralism may hold even if the general form of normative explanation is uniform. Kenneth Walden argues that explanation in ethics is *contrastive*, and one and the same moral fact may have different full and adequate explanations relative to different contrasts. Consider an example he gives (Walden 2016: 192). Your valet drops a tray and you aim to thrash him with a blackjack. That would be wrong. Why? The explanation will be different depending on what we are asking: Why would it be wrong to thrash *the valet* (rather than the cook or the butler)? Why would it be wrong to thrash someone for *dropping a tray* (as opposed to some other offence)? Why would it be wrong to *thrash* someone for dropping a tray (instead of some milder rebuke)? As Walden puts it: "That it's not usually a valet's job to carry trays may explain why it'd be wrong to thrash your valet rather than your butler, but it doesn't explain why a thrashing is an inappropriately severe punishment" (Walden 2016: 192). If normative explanation is contrastive, this may have important implications for substantive normative theorizing. For instance, some contrasts may be morally defective and various moral phenomena may lack a unique explanation because they conceal multiple possible contrasts (Walden 2016: 200ff.).

Explanation may have further functions in normative inquiry. For example, if we aren't sure whether an action is wrong, constructing potential explanations of why it is wrong may be one way of finding out whether it is. If no satisfactory explanation

35 Such a higher-level explanation doesn't automatically collapse into another first-level explanation of why the act is wrong (cf. Skow 2016: 76). Sachs (2018: 164-65) suggests that it will nonetheless be plausible on substantive grounds that the higher-level explanation is an even more plausible first-level explanation.

is found, we may instead conclude that it isn't wrong. One example might be that if you regard the distinction between actions and omissions as morally irrelevant, you may think this because you haven't found any explanation of this putative moral difference tenable.

6. Foundational Normative Explanations

At the outset we distinguished first-order normative explanations from explanations concerning the foundations of morality, law, and practical reason. Some philosophers argue that moral facts are grounded in facts about the nature of agency while others say they are grounded in facts about well-being, or facts about the divine will, and so on. According to legal positivism, legal facts are grounded in social facts, whereas others say that legal facts are grounded at least in part in moral merits. Normative reasons for action are variously said to be grounded in agents' (idealized) desires, or acts of will, or the objective values, or some hybrid of these. These seem to be claims about classes of normative facts – moral facts, legal facts, and so on. It also seems that they are often meant to differ somehow from the claims made by various first-order normative theories. For instance, if moral facts as a class are grounded in the nature of agency, it seems to be a further question just which things are morally right and whether particular right acts are right because they maximize happiness, treat people also as ends in themselves, or exemplify a given set of virtues.

Unfortunately the distinction between first-order and foundational normative explanations isn't this straightforward. The view that normative reasons for action are grounded in agents' (idealized) desires seems to imply that if (in the idealized conditions) you had no desire to φ, then you have no reason to φ. This seems like a specific, substantive normative implication. For instance, a hedonist utilitarian in normative ethics might reject it if φ-ing maximized pleasure in the relevant situation.[36] If a putative foundational explanation is incompatible with a putative first-order one, then it seems to operate in the same space. Even foundational explanations that don't on their own carry specific, substantive normative implications may not be easy to distinguish from first-order normative views. If moral facts are grounded in the nature of agency or divine will, which particular acts are morally right will

36 Thanks to Olle Risberg here. Many complications arise, such as whether the claim that if an act is right, then suitably situated agents have a reason to do it, is part of the utilitarian position or an independent claim. Any view can be made incompatible with any other view by adding suitable auxiliary assumptions.

depend on further issues about the nature of agency and what God wills. But on utilitarian and virtue ethical theories, which particular acts are right similarly depends on further issues about what happiness is and what character traits are virtues. First-order and foundational explanations may therefore not fall into fundamentally different kinds.

Might the two instead differ in their explanatory goals? For instance, foundational explanations might concern some specific feature of their target class, explaining which isn't a business item for first-order normative explanations. Perhaps in ethics it is the distinctive normative "force" or "authority" of moral facts that is claimed to be foundationally explained by the nature of agency or divine will, whereas in law or etiquette the target feature is something different. This view allows that targets of first-order moral explanation (particular moral facts) inherit features that characterize moral facts as a general class. The view is far from sure to be right, however. For instance, claims to the effect that moral facts are foundationally explained by X don't in general presuppose any specific hypothesis about what kind of normative authority moral facts have. This distinction between foundational and first-order normative explanations therefore remains highly provisional.

Might foundational and first-order normative explanations instead be distinguished by the relations they involve? For instance, if a grounding pluralist were asked what relation is denoted in 'Moral facts are grounded in facts about the nature of agency', they would likely answer: a metaphysical grounding relation between the nature of agency and moral facts as a class. By contrast, substantive theories of normative ethics seek to specify which non-normative facts normatively ground which particular normative facts. A distinction in relations might also be combined with a distinction in the more specific target features of foundational and first-order explanations. According to Ruth Chang, for instance, if you claim that the "source" of reasons for action are desires, the will, or objective values, you are making a claim about the metaphysical ground of their normativity. This is to be distinguished from how particular reasons may in some other sense "come from", for instance, general normative principles (Chang 2013: 164-69; cf. Enoch 2019: 20). Plenty of detail remains to be worked out here as well, but in the big picture much depends on whether grounding pluralism is true. For suppose instead that fundamentally there is a single generic grounding relation that is involved equally when an act is wrong in part because it is a lie and when a vase is fragile in virtue of its molecular structure. In that case normative claims about what makes particular moral facts obtain would seem to

be (also) metaphysical claims. Selim Berker takes this to mean that first-order normative explanations are also metaethical claims, since the metaphysics of ethics is part of metaethics.[37] First-order and foundational normative explanations would then be hard to distinguish by the relations they denote. By contrast, grounding pluralism might both block this way of collapsing ethics into metaethics and force more distance between first-order and foundational normative explanations. To conclude, first-order and foundational normative explanations seem intuitively to be distinct in certain key respects, but it remains unclear just how best to distinguish them.

7. Other Explanations in Normative Domains

Besides first-order and foundational normative explanations, there may be further kinds of explanations of normative phenomena. One possible example is the "X-first" debate about normativity. *Reasons-first* views say that facts about normative reasons don't obtain in virtue of any facts about other normative categories and all other evaluative and deontic facts obtain in virtue of them.[38] Other views put *value* or *fittingness* first in the order of such explanation. Another possible example is *explanationism* about normative properties. For example, what it is for a fact to be a normative reason for an agent S to φ might be for it to explain why S *ought* to φ (Broome 2013: 50), or to explain why it would be *good* (in some way, to some degree) for S to φ (Finlay 2019b), or to explain why there is *normative support* for S's φ-ing (Fogal and Risberg forthcoming). I'll focus on a third example: accounts of specific normative properties. Metaethical hedonists claim that *what it is* for a state of affairs to be good for its own sake is for it to be a state of pleasure, whereas buck-passers say that it is to have other properties that are reasons in its favor. And desire-based theorists of normative reasons sometimes argue that what it is for an agent to have a reason to φ is for her to desire (in idealized conditions) something that φ-ing would promote.[39] How are these claims to be understood, and how do they relate to first-order and foundational normative explanations?

37 See Berker (2018) and, for critical discussion, Enoch (2019) and Akhlagi (2022).

38 Reasons-first views are often characterized by their proponents in terms of reduction or analysis. According to Berker (2018: 744), reasons-first views are best understood in terms of grounding.

39 Other projects may be harder to classify. Scanlon interprets his contractualist formula (that an act is wrong if it is allowed only by principles that could reasonably be rejected) as "describing one *way* of being wrong", which things exemplify in virtue of non-normative properties such as harmfulness (Scanlon 2007: 16). This might be cast as an analysis of a more specific wrongness property, or as a distinct sort of project.

On one reading, 'To be good is to promote pleasure' *identifies* goodness with promoting pleasure. Identifications aren't in themselves explanatory.[40] For example, if *being good* and *promoting pleasure* are the same property, it isn't clear how promoting pleasure could be what *makes* a thing good. But "what it is to be" claims can also be read as stating a *metaphysical analysis w*hose right-hand side "unpacks" its left-hand side and which supports explanatory claims. When 'To be an acid just is to be a proton donor' is read in this way, we may infer that HCl is an acid in virtue of the fact that HCl is a proton donor (Rosen 2010: 124). Fogal and Risberg suggest that so read, 'To be good is to promote pleasure' expresses an asymmetric metaphysical law to the effect that a thing's promoting pleasure makes it the case that it is good (Fogal and Risberg 2020: 189). Earlier work is often unclear on which reading of "what it is to be" claims is meant or else takes them in both ways. Mark Schroeder, for instance, defends a desire-based theory of normative reasons which he takes to secure both a reductive property identity and constitutive explanations of why particular agents have the normative reasons they do (Schroeder 2007: Ch. 4). Fogal and Risberg suggest that these need to be kept distinct: a property analysis neither is an identification nor entails one, even if the corresponding identification is also true (Fogal and Risberg 2020: 189). Future work might fruitfully explore various possible explanatory conceptions of metaphysical analysis, such as what kind of relations might be eligible to be involved in a metaphysical analysis of a normative property, and just when an informative analysis might be available.[41]

Normative property analyses clearly can come apart from first-order normative explanations. The hedonistic utilitarian claim in normative ethics that particular acts right because they maximize pleasure doesn't entail the metaethical hedonist claim that what it is to be right is to maximize pleasure. G. E. Moore denies that there is any informative analysis of what it is to be intrinsically good, but thinks that things are intrinsically good in virtue of involving pleasure, knowledge, or appreciation of beauty (Moore 1903). Stephanie Leary characterizes metaethical non-

40 Dorr (2016) is a thorough discussion of identifications. Identifications aren't explanatory in themselves in part because they are symmetric, whereas explanation is asymmetric. An identification may still be part of an explanatory theory. For example, the identification that to be an acid is to be a proton donor typically follows from an explanatory theory about the nature of acids. See also Rosen (2010: 124-25).

41 Leary (2017, forthcoming) and Rosen (2020) suggest that whether normative properties admit of analysis in wholly non-normative terms and whether their instances are fully grounded in non-normative facts are key questions in distinguishing between naturalist and non-naturalist normative realism. For a critique of this way to characterize normative non-naturalism, see McPherson and Plunkett (forthcoming).

naturalism as the view that some normative properties, like rightness, have *sui generis* essences that cannot be specified in wholly non-normative terms (Leary 2017, forthcoming). If such properties can be had fully in virtue of non-normative facts, those first-order explanations are independent of what it is to be right. That said, if a given analysis of rightness is correct, it sometimes seems natural to think that what makes it the case that a particular act is right is that the conditions that appear in the analysis obtain. If to be right were to maximize pleasure, maximizing pleasure would seem to be what (as it is sometimes put) a particular right act's rightness *consists in* (cf. Schroeder 2007: 62). But not always. For instance, consider the sentimentalist analysis that what it is for an act to be morally wrong is for it to violate standards such that an agent who violates those standards without a moral excuse is morally blameworthy for violating them.[42] This needn't be an identificational claim. But nor is it naturally read as saying that what makes it the case that a particular act is right is that this blameworthiness conditions obtains. More plausibly, what explains why a particular wrong act is wrong are the facts specified in the moral standards, such as that the act harms someone, or breaks a promise, or the like. More remains to be said about how first-order normative explanations relate to normative property analyses.

Normative property analyses may also come apart from foundational explanations. For instance, the view that moral facts are grounded in the nature of agency is rarely if ever a view about what it is for something to be morally valuable or obligatory, and *vice versa*.[43] But such views may be mutually constraining. The claim that moral facts are grounded in the nature of agency is compatible with the claim that to be morally right is to maximize pleasure at best under strong assumptions about agency and/or pleasure. And sometimes their relation is unclear. Recall Ruth Chang's interpretation of desire-based theories of normative reasons as the view that the normativity of normative reasons is metaphysically grounded in desires (Chang 2013). How is this related to the putative analysis that what it is for a fact to be a reason for an agent to φ is for that fact to be part of what explains why her φ-ing would promote the satisfaction of a desire she has (Schroeder 2007)? There is more to say here.

One final question about how normative property analyses relate to first-order and foundational normative explanations concerns whether their statements are a kind

42 Thanks to Samuel Mason for this formulation.

43 Sometimes (not always) the account is transcendental. See e.g. Korsgaard (1996: 123-24) and, for discussion, Stern (2011).

of normative claim. Talk of analyses of *properties* sounds metaphysical. Most people classify such accounts as metaethical rather than normative. In a wide-ranging discussion of whether moral facts have a non-normative "source", Chris Heathwood argues that analyses and identifications of moral properties, as well as foundational claims about moral facts, are all moral claims (Heathwood 2012). Consider the claim that to be valuable is to be something we would desire to desire. Heathwood's evidence that this is a moral claim includes the following: (i) Given suitable non-normative facts, this claim entails all sorts of claims that are uncontroversially normative or evaluative, such as that honesty is valuable. (ii) It can play the same sort of role as uncontroversially moral principles in explaining particular moral facts: doing this thing is good because it is an act of promise-keeping, we would desire to desire to keep our promises, and to be good is to be what we would desire to desire. (iii) The claim that to be valuable is to be what we would desire to desire isn't morally neutral but rules out various other moral stands. (Heathwood 2012: 11.) We might add that this claim's truth-value seems sensitive to normative standards. For example, the claim is false in a model in which we desire to desire punishing criminals but punishment is bad (cf. Russell 2022).

If Heathwood is right, then every account of where moral truths come from is committed to at least one brute normative truth, namely one stating the normative property analysis, identity, or source. For instance, the claim that normative reasons are metaphysically grounded in desires, properly articulated, would count as a kind of first-order normative claim, even if it also states a true reduction of reasons to desires. This result would have significant implications for several issues we have touched on. Statements of normative property analyses and of foundational normative explanations would plausibly be both normative and metaethical claims. That would collapse a sharp distinction between ethics and metaethics in a different way from Berker's argument from grounding monism (see section 6). Normative explanation might also become distinctive from explanations in other domains more widely across the board. Even if normative explanations of various kinds were continuous with non-causal explanations in other domains with respect to their relation, their statements would be a kind of normative claim in one case but not the other. Whether an explanatory claim is a normative or a non-normative claim is a significant difference.[44]

44 This case for distinctiveness might be thought to depend on whether a fact about the grounds of D-facts, for some non-normative domain D, counts as a D-fact in a relevantly analogous sense. For

My aim has to been to distinguish different kinds of explanations that we encounter in normative domains and describe some different views about what those explanations are like and how they might be related to each other. Much of the discussion barely scratches the surface, and progressively raises more questions than it answers. I hope the chapter conveys why normative explanation is an important topic, and plea for more work on different kinds of normative explanation and their relation to explanations in other domains.[45]

example, if mental facts are grounded in physical facts, is this a kind of mental fact? If yes, isn't the normative case like the mental/physical case, and hence not distinctive? Just how to understand the import of such parallels is unclear. If the normative/non-normative distinction were sufficiently different *in content* from mental/non-mental and biological/non-biological, this might block the worry, even if there are parallels *in form*.

45 Many thanks to Matt Bedke, David Copp, Daniel Fogal, Jyrki Konkka, Olle Risberg, Stefan Sciaraffa, and Alex Stamatiadis-Bréhier for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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