

If You're Quasi-Explaining, You're Quasi-Losing¹

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The giving and requesting of explanations is central to normative practice. When we tell children that they must act in certain ways, they often ask why, and often we are able to answer them. Sentences like 'Kicking dogs is wrong because it hurts them', and 'You should eat your vegetables because they're healthy', are meaningful and ubiquitous.

In a recent (2020) paper, Selim Berker shows that these kinds of explanations present a challenge for expressivism. If the expressivist is to avoid advocating an extremely revisionary theory of normative discourse, she must be able to tell us what normative 'because'-statements mean. This means, according to Berker, there must be an expressivist account of normative grounding.

But why grounding? Berker offers an argument from exhaustion. The 'because' is obviously not causal. Blackburn (1993: 152-54; 172-74) claims it expresses a relation of counterfactual dependence. 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as means' tells us that if lying did not treat people as means it would not be wrong. But, Berker objects, this fails to capture the asymmetry of explanation (*forthcoming*: section 1). A Kantian thinks an act is wrong *if and only if* it treats people as mere means. But then she must agree with 'If lying were not wrong, it would not treat people as mere means'. But then she would have to accept, 'Lying treats others as mere means because it is wrong'.

Berker concludes 'because' in these cases expresses an asymmetric explanatory relation, a kind of grounding relation. But this presents a special challenge to expressivists. Expressivists are committed to understanding apparently realistic aspects of normative discourse in terms of the states of mind we express in making normative claims. What state of mind are we expressing when we make these claims about normative grounding?

Berker proposes, on behalf of the expressivist, that these claims express *basing relations* among our mental states (199ff.). Let's say that 'Lying is wrong' expresses disapproval of lying. In that case, 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' expresses being in a state in which one's disapproval of lying is *based on* one's belief that lying treats people as mere means. Basing, here, is roughly what Davidson called *rationalizing* (1963). The belief causes the disapproval: but it doesn't merely cause it, it also contributes to the disapproval's agential intelligibility, rational coherence, and so on. As Berker notes, an advantage of this account is that it can be combined with numerous existing expressivist semantics. If we are Blackburnians, we

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will say that it is disapproval of lying that is based on the belief that it treats people as mere means. If we are Gibbardians, we can say instead that it is a plan to get angry about lying that is based on the belief.

Nevertheless, the account can't work. Normative reasoning is typically abductive. We come to accept big moral principles such as 'It is wrong to treat people as mere means' or 'It is wrong to fail to maximise happiness' because these seem to explain why many of the things we antecedently judged wrong are wrong. These principles predict that lying, murder, theft, promise-breaking, and so on are wrong, at least in normal cases; and if they didn't do that we would not accept the big principle. But this means that my disapproval of treating people as mere means is partly based on my disapproval of lying. So I should accept, 'Treating people as mere means is wrong because lying is wrong'. This gets Kantian explanatory commitments backwards. Generalizing, when we reason abductively, the basing relation among our attitudes will be the reverse of our explanatory commitments.

There is also a big-picture worry that is in some ways more important: Berker's strategy is the wrong kind for the expressivist to pursue. The datum to be explained is that we make a certain kind of 'because' claim. 'Lying is wrong because it misleads people'. 'Misleading people is wrong because it treats them like mere means'. The expressivist should not first identify some explanatory relation denoted by 'because', then try to give an expressivist reinterpretation of that relation. This is not how expressivists have handled truth, for example. They do not first say that 'true' denotes a property, then try to give a more antirealist friendly interpretation of that property. Rather, they adopt the deflationist strategy: they look to the uses of the predicate 'true', as a device for disquotation, indirect assertion, and generalization. These uses are supposed ultimately to exhaust the meaning 'true' (e.g. Dreier 2004).

Similarly, the expressivist should start by looking to our practices of *providing* explanations, of using explanatory speech acts to communicate. This suggests that expressivists should not look in the first instance at metaphysicians' accounts of noncausal explanation, but rather to "pragmatic" accounts of explanation in the philosophy of science (e.g., van Fraassen 1980, chapter 5; Achinstein 1983).² The specific model I will propose comes from Marc Lange (2017), who appeals to the pragmatic aspects of explanation—the way in which our interests and background knowledge affect what strikes us as explanatory—to account for noncausal explanations in mathematics. In brief, Lange argues that some mathematical proofs are explanatory, while others are not, because they utilize premises that answer to our interests in what is proved. This will be my model for another kind of noncausal explanation, normative explanation.

This will solve Berker's challenge for the expressivist. But it does more. It allows the expressivist to stake out a genuine metaphysical difference between those properties about which she is a realist and those about which she is a quasirealist—not simply a difference, as is standard, in our theories about how language and thought relate to these properties. In short, it allows for a new kind of solution, a distinctively

² See Kenneth Walden's (2016) paper for an excellent example of how to apply lessons from philosophy of science about the pragmatic aspects of explanation to issues with normative explanations. Also see (Blackburn 1993: 162-63).

metaphysical solution, to the problem of *creeping minimalism* (Dreier 2004 and 2018). We are genuine realists about those properties that stand somewhere in the hierarchy of fundamentality. The real properties are the properties that ground or are grounded by other properties. Quasireal properties stand outside this hierarchy. They neither ground nor are grounded by anything. To explain these properties is not to identify any objective relation of metaphysical dependence, but to provide information that answers to our interests—primarily practical interests—in the domain.³

This characterization of the quasireal seems to follow from how expressivism is standardly understood. The expressivist denies that normative properties reduce to or can be realized by the natural. She also denies that there is a *sui generis* relation of metaphysical determination between the natural and the normative. The normative, then, isn't grounded in any familiar way at all—whether grounding is a single unitary relation, or a placeholder for several different relations of metaphysical dependence, including reduction, realization, composition, etc. (e.g., Wilson 2014).

I will start with a case of explanations that expressivists should deny involve any objective metaphysical relations: explanations involving imperatives. I will then propose that these should be understood as explaining by generalizing. This will lead to a discussion of Lange's work on unifying explanations in mathematics. My proposal will be that the standard form of a normative explanation is a unifying generalization, one which explains by presenting a more particular normative injunction as a special case of a more general injunction. This kind of explanation creates no special problems for the expressivist, beyond the already familiar question of accounting for relations of logical consequence.⁴

1. Explaining Orders

Notice that imperatives can be conjoined with 'because'-clauses:

- (a) Louise, go to your room, because you told your brother to shut up!⁵
- (b) Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace.⁶
- (c) Donate blood, because reserves are low.⁷

This is not a causal 'because'. It is also not a 'because' of grounding. Grounding is a relation between facts, and imperatives, however exactly we should think of their content, do not purport to communicate facts: they do not tell us what the world is like. Rather, they tell us what to do.

³ David Enoch suggests that would be a position for the quasirealist to explore at the end of his (2019: 21).

⁴ A referee helpfully notes that a non-expressivist would also be free to adopt this theory of normative explanation as well.

⁵ Line in the show *Bob's Burgers*.

⁶ Taken from the internet.

⁷ Taken from (Starr 2018).

Or at least this is what expressivists will say. Imperatives may actually be disguised deontic modals—‘Go to your room!’ elliptical for ‘You must go to your room!’⁸ But expressivists are under pressure to resist that analysis. Imperatives have long been used by expressivists as examples of sentences that are not truth-apt but still have logical structure (Hare 1952; and Charlow 2014a and -b). It helps even more that they direct us to do things, as normative claims typically do. It has been a standard strategy to analyze a normative claim as something like an imperative but with additional logical structure (e.g., Hare 1952; and Alwood 2016). For an expressivist to concede that they are really disguised modal claims is to give up a key piece of evidence in expressivism’s favor, a key example of a speech act with the distinctive features expressivists associate with normative claims.

Fortunately, there are reasons to reject the modal analysis. As Nate Charlow puts it: “Such accounts face a major difficulty: explaining why, if an imperative’s semantic value is such an entity, its use is *performative* (requirement-creating), rather than representational” (2014a). Imperatives cannot express assertions (Charlow 2014b). And as William Starr (2018) points out, the following are not equivalent in meaning:

- (d) Invest in this company and you’ll be rich.
- (e) You must invest in this company and you’ll be rich.

The expressivist thus has grounds for insisting that imperatives provide an example of a distinctive, nonfactual, nonrepresentational semantic value. What’s more, unlike normative statements, which have the surface form of representational sentences, imperatives wear this distinctive semantic function on their face. They do not even state facts or states of affairs in some deflationary sense. Yet here they are, attached to ‘because’ clauses.

I propose that these ‘because’-claims are instances of explanation by generalization.

2. Explanation by Generalization

Are generalizations explanatory? Or are general truths rather explained by their instances? If we are talking about relations of objective determination, I do not know. Perhaps general truths are explained by instances. Fortunately, I don’t have to answer this. I’m concerned with explanatory speech acts. And we *provide explanations* by means of generalization all the time.

- (f) Why did Bob get laid off? Because everyone in that department got laid off.
- (g) Why aren’t there any unicorns in this forest? Because unicorns don’t exist.
- (h) Why does $2+2=4$? Because it couldn’t equal anything but 4.

Each explanation shows how some particular truth is an instance of a more general one. How is this explanatory? Think about the kind of explanatory information it provides us with: there is nothing *special* about the particular case. There is nothing special about *this* forest: unicorns are not to be found anywhere. There is nothing

⁸ See (Charlow 2014b) for overview of the debate.

special about the particular arrangement of our universe: $2+2$ would still equal 4 however things were arranged.

David Lewis's (1984) discussion of causal explanations is helpful here. An event is explained, for Lewis, by its causal history. Explanatory speech acts provide information about that causal history. The information can be more or less precise, detailed, disjunctive, and so on. What kind of information we provide will depend on our epistemic situation, that of our interlocutors, what is relevant to our interests, and so on (217ff).⁹ Given this, we can say (f) tells us that the cause of Bob's being laid off is whatever caused his entire department to be laid off. Given certain concerns—is he a competent worker?—that information may be all that we want.¹⁰

If we accept grounding explanations as another sort of explanation, in addition to the causal, we should generalize on Lewis, in the manner sketched in (Väyrynen 2006: 294ff; and Dasgupta 2017: 90-91). We can explain by providing information—more or less specific, detailed, etc—about determination relations, either causal relations *or* relations of metaphysical dependence. (h) plausibly tells us that if anything grounds the fact that $2+2=4$, then whatever it is must be a necessary truth. Not much information, but given certain interests, it may be plenty.

My proposal is that imperatival explanations are similarly based on generalizations. But these generalizations—unlike (f), say—do not provide any information about an objective determination relation, because imperatives do not stand in such relations. Rather, 'Louise, go to your room because you told your brother to shut up', explains by implying a more general command from which the specific command to go to one's room follows. For example, 'Go to your room whenever you tell a family member to shut up'. The more general command is implied by being the command which, in conjunction with *you told your brother to shut up*, would entail *go to your room*.¹¹

Why think that imperatives are explained by means of generalization? Partly because there are so few relations they can fit into. Causation and grounding were already ruled out. Fortunately, imperatives also have logical structure (this is part of what gives expressivists hope). If the explanations are implied generalizations, the relation between the imperative and what's denoted by the 'because' clause is one of logical consequence given a hidden background premise.

⁹ See (Bontly 2005 and Klein 2014) for further examples of pragmatic effects on causal explanation.

¹⁰ Stefan Roski (2018: 2000ff.) argues for a similar account of explanatory generalizations.

¹¹ A referee notes that the imperative, 'take me out for dinner, because that's what I want', issued to one's spouse on Valentine's Day, does not seem to imply the standing command 'do whatever I want on Valentine's day'. This is true, but I suspect the implied command is, 'perform whichever demonstrations of affection I want on Valentine's Day, *ceteris paribus*'. Admittedly, appealing to *ceteris paribus* clauses may be a cost to the theory—it makes the theory harder to falsify by the device of making less straightforward predictions. But the question is whether alternative accounts of imperatival explanations can avoid implied *ceteris paribus* conditions. Actual explanatory speech is so loose that I suspect this will prove impossible.

But if these explanations don't provide information about an objective determination relation, how are they explanatory? By answering to our informational interests. Sentences like (f) - (g) subsume a particular prescription to a more general one. They instruct us not *to treat* some particular as special, but rather to perform a more specific act or set of acts *as a way* of satisfying a more general policy. There's nothing special happening now—go to your room whenever you tell your brother to shut up. There's nothing special about forgiveness—do those things that bring you peace.

This will be my model for normative explanation. 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' tells us that the prohibition on lying follows from the more general prohibition on treating people as mere means.

The relation between the specific command and the general is one of entailment on my account. Similarly, I will say the relation between the more specific and more general prohibition is one of entailment. But it is a standard dogma of these debates that entailment cannot be explanatory. This dogma is mistaken.

3. Explanatory Proofs in Mathematics

The dogma goes like this. Entailment cannot be explanatory. After all, the existence of Socrates entails the existence of the singleton set of Socrates, but the existence of the singleton set of Socrates also entails the existence of Socrates. But that would mean that explanation in this case is circular. Explanation is an asymmetric relation, but entailment is not. Or we may point instead to the fact that explanation is non-monotonic.¹² The existence of Socrates and the existence of Alcibiades entails existence of the singleton set of Socrates, but it is false that the singleton set of Socrates exists because Socrates exists and Alcibiades exists.

These arguments don't work. As David Kovacs points out, it relies on the assumption that if a relation is sometimes explanatory, it must always be explanatory (2017: 2936-38). Kovacs provides multiple reasons to reject this assumption (*ibid.*). For the current discussion the following will be sufficient: some mathematical proofs are deemed inferior by mathematicians because they fail to *explain* what they prove, whereas others are deemed superior for being explanatory (Kitcher 1989; Lange 2017 and 2019). But mathematical proofs prove their conclusions by being deductive arguments for them. So premises that entail a conclusion sometimes explain that conclusion and sometimes they do not.

Why are some entailments explanatory and others not? I will here turn to Lange. He argues that proofs can be explanatory in virtue of a number of properties they might have—symmetry, simplicity, or unity, for example (2017). What makes these different proofs explanatory? Lange's explanation is that explanatory proofs utilize a premise that displays the same kind of striking or salient feature we see in the result:

At least in many cases, what it *means* to ask for proof that explains is to ask for a proof that exploits a certain kind of feature of the setup

¹² Thanks to Selim Berker for pressing me on this issue.

—the same kind of feature that is outstanding (i.e., salient) in the result. (255)

In other words, a symmetrical proof is explanatory when the result proved displays a striking symmetry. We explain this striking symmetry in the result by utilizing a premise that has the same kind of symmetry (234ff.). Likewise for properties such as simplicity and unity, when these properties make a proof explanatory. To illustrate the idea further, I will present Lange's first example of a unifying proof (276ff.), both because the math is simple and because it will provide my model of the canonical form of a normative explanation.

There are certain numbers called calculator numbers. One forms them by starting at one corner, then typing across, down, or diagonally, and then typing back in the other direction. For example, starting at the lower left corner and typing across one would type 1... 2... 3... and then back again, 3... 2... 1. One repeats this process at each of the four corners, and for the four numbers that make the edges of the calculator face. The result is sixteen calculator numbers in total:

123321, 147741, 159951, 258852, 321123, 369963, ..., 951159, 987789.

Each of these calculator numbers is divisible by 37. There is a simple proof of this that is clearly not explanatory. We could simply list out each of the calculator numbers, say there are no other calculator numbers, then take each number and divide it by 37 (276). Such a proof would leave one still wondering why each calculator number is divisible by 37.

The following proof, by contrast, is explanatory. Each calculator number must be an instance of the following formula:

$$a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a.$$

And:

$$a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a = 111111a+12210d = 1221(91a+10d)$$

And:

$$1221 = 37*33$$

This is what Lange means by a setup that exploits the same kind of unity we see in the result. The explanatory proof explains why it is that all calculator numbers have a certain property (being divisible by 37), by identifying another property they must all have in common (being instances of $a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a$), and deriving the first common property from the second. This is an example of a deductive argument that is explanatory, even though not all deductive arguments are explanatory.

But might explanatory proofs implicitly invoke grounds as premises? It doesn't seem so. First, it would seem that the non-explanatory proof does cite the grounds as premises: intuitively, the fact that all calculator numbers are divisible by 37 is

grounded in the fact that 123321 is divisible by 37, and that 159951 is divisible by 37, etc (Lange 2019: 2). What's more, the individual mathematical facts are not intuitively explained by the property that explains the general fact. That is, the fact that 123321 is an instance of $a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a$ does not explain why 123321 is divisible by 37. In fact, it's not clear that anything explains 123321 being divisible by 37 (Lange 2017: 279). If someone asked you 'Why is 123321 divisible by 37?' it would be, outside of some further context, unclear what they were asking for. But if being instances of $a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a$ grounded all of the calculator numbers being divisible by 37, it should be the grounds of any individual calculator number being divisible by 37.¹³

For Lange, the reason some entailments are explanatory and others not clearly rests on pragmatic concerns (see especially 308ff.). The unity of the result calls for an explanation because it is, in his words, "salient." It would be very strange if it turned out to be a coincidence that all calculator numbers are divisible by 37. So we want a proof that shows how this striking common property follows from another common property the calculator numbers must share. This accounts for why the property—being an instance of $a*10^5+(a+d)10^4+(a+2d)10^3+(a+2d)10^2+(a+d)10+a$ —explains the general result and not the particular. When we ask, 'Why is each calculator number divisible by 37?' it is obvious what kind of information we are after, what we find salient. We want information from which a commonality follows. But the question 'Why is 123321 divisible by 37?' is opaque without further background, and so the same information is not explanatory.

The expressivist should similarly appeal to pragmatic aspects of explanation. Our interest in normative discourse leads to a general interest in unifying information. The question 'Why is lying wrong?' is standardly understood as a request for more general principles, or so I will argue.

4. The Theory

"Euthyphro" is often taken as one of the classic statements of a request for asymmetrical grounds in explanation. What is more fundamental, being god-beloved or being pious? However, it is worth noting that the *initial* problem Socrates presents to Euthyphro looks much more like a request for a unifying explanation. Socrates asks Euthyphro "what is the pious," and Euthyphro responds, "To prosecute the wrongdoer" (Plato, 5). Socrates responds by first pointing out that there are many kinds of pious actions, and then says, "...I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious" (6). Euthyphro explained why calculator numbers are divisible by 37 by dividing 321123. Socrates wants a unifying explanation, a property that all the pious acts have in common from which their piety follows. Of course, Socrates finds Euthyphro's unifying answer dissatisfying as well, and so the need for asymmetric determinations gets rolling. But let's start with the value of unifying explanations of the normative, and deal with asymmetry later.

¹³ Lange gives a host of other reasons, along with further examples and arguments, to show that many cases of mathematical explanation cannot be grounding explanations (2019).

Why do we want such explanations? In the mathematical case, there is simply a striking unity. There can be something similar in the normative case. Why is prosecuting murderers on the same list as praying to and sacrificing to the gods? That's unexpected.

But even when the unity is not particularly striking we still want unifying explanations. Why? Socrates has a good explanation ready: "Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it and, using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not" (*ibid.*).

But why do we need something to use as a model? Here's the expressivist answer. Normative terms, 'piety' or 'wrong', function to coordinate our actions and attitudes. They express commitments to respond in certain ways. We need a model in order to say what it is that we've committed to responding to. A mere list of examples will always be finite, and hence potentially incomplete. A model allows us to say whether novel acts are pious.

And Socrates wants a model that applies to actions "whether yours or another's." Human nature is such that we make exceptions of ourselves and judge strangers' behavior more harshly than friends'. So long as our normative commitments are unprincipled, there is greater risk that our judgments on cases are *post hoc* justifications of unreflective prejudice, or the product of self-serving loopholes (McKeever and Ridge 2006: Chapter 8).¹⁴ Or, even if they are not, other people, familiar as they are with humanity, are more likely to *suspect* these loopholes are at play. Sure, Euthyphro, prosecuting your own dad is just like praying.

Lange's view is that sometimes proofs are explanatory when they are unifying, because sometimes it is unity that is salient to us. Adapting this to the normative case, I think that the case of Socrates and Euthyphro gives reason to think normative principles are always or nearly always explanatory when they are unifying, because our interests in normative discourse ensure that unity is always salient.

Why? Again, start with an expressivist-friendly account of the purpose of normative discourse: to serve social coordination, by coordinating our acts, thoughts, and feelings. Unifying principles support these aims. They help secure agreement not just on a list of cases, but over a potentially wide range of novel cases. It is easier to remember and teach to others than a disjunctive list of what falls under a normative term's extension ('It is wrong to lie, or kill, or steal, or break a promise, or...'). And it creates confidence that a normative sensibility is not tailor-made to a particular person or group's benefit and prejudice, by means of *ad hoc* exceptions or additions.

A normative explanation, then, is a premise which, possibly in conjunction with implicit background premises, entails the conclusion, *by identifying a common property of the objects the conclusion is about*. The canonical 'because' claims in normative explanations are of one of two related forms. In the case where we explain why some singular entity has a normative property, they take the form:

¹⁴ Though McKeever and Ridge also point out that intermediary principles will sometimes be superior for preventing special pleading (199ff).

a is *N* because *a* is *G*.

And when they explain why all members of some class have a normative property they take the form:

*F*s are *N*s because *F*s are *G*s.

In these statements the *explanans* is a premise to an implicit argument to which the *explanandum* is a conclusion. Context and basic facts about what's needed for the conclusion to follow will determine the remaining, unspoken premises. They will generally be *G*s are *N*s, or *G*s are *N*s, *all else being equal* along with the premise *All else is equal*.

Like imperatival explanations, these subsume specific prescriptions to more general ones. 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' explains the prohibition on lying by telling us that it follows from the more general prohibition on treating people as mere means.

Also like the account of imperatival explanations, the account here tells us that 'because' expresses a relation of entailment from a premise that unifies our normative commitments. This is an advantage to the proposal: it is ecumenical between different expressivist theories. Those who have been waiting to hear what state of mind is expressed by the 'because' claim will be disappointed. I have no *specific* account of that. But one isn't needed. The normative 'because' is used to communicate a deductive argument. 'Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means' thus communicates something like:

1. Lying treats people as mere means.
2. Any act that treats people as mere means is wrong. (implied premise)
3. Therefore, lying is wrong.

The state of mind expressed is whatever state of mind would be expressed by making the above argument. Plug in whatever expressivist theory you like for that.

Of course, the expressivist needs to be able to account for quantification, conditionals, and entailment. But expressivists already owed an account of that. If expressivists can solve the Frege-Geach Problem, they can account for the normative 'because'.

As noted, the implied premises may include *ceteris paribus* clauses or the fact that all else really is equal. This is important if we are to account for actual normative discourse. Many normative explanations given in everyday life cite *prima facie* or *pro tanto* principles rather than exceptionless ones. E.g., 'Hot-wiring a car is wrong because it is stealing'. We would not assume someone who gives such an explanation must believe stealing is always wrong, even to save a life.

Another feature of actual normative discourse should be noted. While normative explanations in the context of philosophy often take the form of 'Lying is wrong

because it treats people as mere means’, or ‘Lying is (generally) wrong because it (generally) fails to maximize happiness’, explanations citing these kinds of ultimate principles are uncommon elsewhere. Much more typical are explanations like:

Because it misleads others.

Because you wouldn’t like it if people lied to you.

These explanations can also be appropriate—even more appropriate than an explanation citing Kantian or utilitarian principles, given the right background context. Why? Perhaps I am a Kantian and you are a utilitarian, but even if we disagree about ultimate principles, we can still find agreement on intermediary ones. Any plausible moral theory will tell us that misleading others and doing unto others what you would not have them do unto you are wrong, or at least wrong, *ceteris paribus*. Rather than getting sucked into an interminable debate on abstract issues, we can quickly establish agreement over a wide range of cases through a still relatively principled ethics, and limit disagreement to the marginal situations in which *ceteris non paribus*.¹⁵

4.1. Explaining Asymmetry?

But what about the asymmetry that initially motivated Berker? Why isn’t the Kantian also committed to ‘Lying treats people as mere means because it is wrong’? And what about non-monotonicity? How does one avoid commitment to ‘That act was wrong because it is lying on a Tuesday’?¹⁶

I will start with non-monotonicity because it is the easier case. The first thing to note is that explaining why the sentence ‘That act was wrong because it is lying on a Tuesday’ is unacceptable is a problem for everyone. Advocates of normative grounding do not escape it simply by saying that grounding is a non-monotonic relation. As noted above, most of our real life normative explanations do not cite the ultimate normative principles, but intermediary principles, which have the virtue of being less contentious. For the grounding theorist, this means that we rarely cite in a direct way the actual grounds of an action’s wrongness when explaining why it is wrong. This is not an objection to the grounding account. As also noted earlier, the grounding theorist can appeal to the generalized version of Lewis’s account of explanation. Just as the causal explanations we provide present some information about the cause, but of more or less detail, directness, and so on, an explanation such as ‘That act was wrong because it was lying’ provides information about the grounds of the act’s wrongness, but in indirect form. It tells us the act is wrong in virtue of whatever property is (*ceteris paribus*) shared by acts of lying, in virtue of which they are (*ceteris paribus*) wrong. But if lying is wrong, then a further intermediary principle is that lying on Tuesday is wrong. Lying on Tuesday will possess whatever property it is that grounds wrongness. So why can’t we cite lying on Tuesday as an *explanans*?

¹⁵ Also, as Walden notes, these kinds of explanations may identify considerations that are more epistemically tractable and easier to use in deliberation (196ff).

¹⁶ Thanks to Selim Berker for this example.

As Lewis (1984) and Dasgupta (2017) both note, the kind of explanatory information we provide will depend on the pragmatics of communication generally. But then we have an explanation of why ‘That act is wrong because it’s lying on a Tuesday’ will be unacceptable—because it is hard to imagine cases in which being Tuesday is salient to our interests in social coordination or our epistemic position. But I can appeal to the same thing. Salience is supposed to distinguish explanatory from non-explanatory cases of entailment.

Evidence that the issue is a pragmatic one is provided by imagined cases where ‘That act is wrong because it is lying on a Tuesday’ would be a fine explanation. Let’s say you’ve been trying to teach Bill that some acts, such as drinking, smoking, and cussing, are wrong on the Sabbath but okay otherwise. You catch him lying and tell him what he did was wrong. “But it’s a Tuesday!” he replies. Realizing his mistake you answer, “It’s wrong because *it’s lying* on a Tuesday.” Or let’s say you live in a community where many of your neighbors think it is okay to lie on most days, but that Tuesday is the designated truth day. You are trying to get people in the town to agree that the mayor has behaved badly. Knowing your neighbors’ strange moral views, you focus on the following: “We can at least agree that what he did was wrong because it was lying on a Tuesday.” Of course, it seems more natural to choose language that indicates that you aren’t entirely happy with this explanation (“We can at least agree that...”), but this is not unfamiliar in normative discussion. I might say to more authoritarian fellow citizens, “We can at least agree that torture is wrong because it puts our own troops at risk.” When we must coordinate with those whose moral views we find distasteful, we look for ways to indicate that we think there are further normative considerations that are relevant, but that we won’t, in this context, treat failure to acknowledge them as a deal-breaker.

Asymmetry is a bit harder, but still ultimately depends on our interests in kinds of explanatory information. Let’s review how things are supposed to work. Explanations provide information relevant to our interests and epistemic situation. What counts as an explanation will thus vary with the *explanandum*. When I ask why all calculator numbers are divisible by 37, typically what I want is a more obvious common property from which the surprising one is derived. But if I ask why 123321 is divisible by 37, it is unclear what information I am looking for. What explains the general case will not be explanatory for the particular, because what interests us differs.

Consider ‘Lying is wrong because it treats people as mere means’. Here the *explanandum* is normative. What we are after here is a more general principle under which to subsume the more specific verdict, because that supports our interests in social coordination. We are not after a grounding explanation. Knowledge of objective metaphysical dependencies is not in any obvious way relevant to our practical interests in the normative. What’s more, since normative properties are quasireal, they can’t stand in such relations. So we aren’t interested in, or asking about, those.

‘Lying treats people as mere means because it is wrong’, by contrast, has a nonnormative *explanandum*. By changing the kind of *explanandum*, we change the kind of information we are standardly after. In this case, what we would typically want is

information about the *explanandum's* cause or its grounds. ‘Why does lying treat people as mere means?’ is most naturally interpreted as asking what it is to treat someone as mere means. It thus asks for information about what grounds the fact that lying treats others as mere means. (A good answer might be: ‘Because lying takes away from others the ability to make an informed choice’.) But then my theory has a straightforward explanation why ‘lying treats people as mere means because it is wrong’ is unacceptable in most contexts. Interpreted as a claim about grounds, the answer is false. Normative properties, being quasireal, cannot ground anything. Interpreted as a claim about entailment, on the other hand, it fails to answer the correct why-question. We were asking about grounds.

So the metaphysical distinction between real and quasireal properties can do real work vindicating our intuitions about the acceptability of certain ‘because’ statements and accounting for the apparent asymmetry in normative explanations.

I say “apparent” because the asymmetry is ultimately based on interests, epistemic situation, and context. There can be cases, then, in which ‘Lying treats people as mere means because it is wrong’ is acceptable, cases in which our interests and background knowledge are atypical. If this sounds surprising, keep in mind that ‘The fire is to the north because that’s where the smoke is coming from’ is acceptable in some contexts, as is ‘The earth is getting warmer because all the scientists say that it is’.¹⁷ Let’s say we both know that God has given me a list of all the wrong acts, and He also told us both that acts are wrong if and only if they treat people as mere means. I tell you lying treats others as mere means. You ask me why. I say, ‘Because it’s wrong!’

4.2. Really Explaining

One might worry that this use of ‘because’ is merely evidential. It doesn’t strike us as *genuinely* explanatory. That’s fine. Again, what will strike us as genuinely explanatory will vary to some degree with the *explanandum*. If the *explanandum* is fire to north of us, or an act treating someone as mere means, genuine explanation requires information about the cause or the grounds. Otherwise it feels like the *explanans* bears a merely evidential relation to the *explanandum*.

But consider the following ‘because’-claims:

- (i) Lying is wrong because my mother told me it’s wrong.
- (j) What Charlie Brown just did is the wrong thing because Charlie Brown always does the wrong thing.

These also seem evidential. They feel much more like ‘The fire is to the north because that’s where the smoke is coming from’ than ‘The fire is to the north because someone dropped a match’. But they have the canonical form of a normative explanation. And the *explanandum* is normative, so we can’t appeal to the need for information about objective determination relations before the explanation will feel real.

¹⁷ I owe this example and the next to Jamie Dreier.

We need to show instead how the pragmatic concerns invoked can account for why some normative explanations would strike us as genuinely explanatory, and others not. To do so, I want to identify two ways in which these explanations are deficient to the end of promoting social coordination.

First, (i) and (j) don't help us to reach agreement on *novel* cases. If my mom hasn't commented on it, if Charlie Brown never did it, it doesn't help us deal with the unfamiliar. One of the points of offering normative explanations, or imperatival explanations for that matter, was to give information about how to proceed in a wider range of new cases. But these 'because'-claims will contribute only minimally to that.

Of course, we might offer counterfactual versions of these principles. 'Doxxing is wrong because it's the sort of thing my mother, rest in peace, *would* call wrong'. WWCB~D (What *Would* Charlie Brown Not Do).

Before moving on, we should note that these are intermediary principles of a sort. Nonetheless, they suffer from a deficiency as principles: they are extremely *sectional*, whether in their original or counterfactual forms. They only help secure agreement on new cases among those who know my mom really well, or among those who know *Peanuts* really well. (And "get" them: I find *Peanuts* pretty much incomprehensible.)

These deficiencies noted, here is my proposal: some normative explanations seem more genuinely explanatory because they contribute to understanding, whereas others do not. The failure to provide their audience with normative understanding, then, leads to our sense that they aren't real explanations.

What is normative understanding? This is an enormous issue, well outside the scope of this paper.¹⁸ But for my purposes it will do to identify what expressivists should insist on as a minimal core of such understanding. It cannot be characterized in terms of explanatory knowledge (e.g., Sliwa 2017), nor can it be characterized in terms of an ability to give explanations (e.g., Hills 2009), both on pain of circularity. More to the expressivist's purposes would be a pragmatic characterization of understanding, as a kind of discursive know-how. This kind of understanding will answer to our basic concern with social coordination.

Such practical understanding would first involve the ability to correctly apply normative predicates to novel cases, without the guidance or assistance of another expert (or rule book, or Google). Without this ability, one cannot claim an independent understanding of the normative notions in question. In keeping with the practical and social nature of normative understanding, I will also borrow a condition Socrates thought definitive of a *techné*. Understanding involves an ability to teach understanding to others (e.g., "Protagoras").¹⁹

¹⁸ For an introduction, see (Hills 2009; and Sliwa 2017).

¹⁹ This account of normative understanding is similar to Alison Hill's (2009), modified for expressivism.

These conditions answer to the concern with social coordination that is supposed to drive normative discourse. Without an ability to independently identify the normative status of novel cases, my ability to successfully coordinate is limited to the familiar or when my guru is nearby. *Social* coordination obviously requires an ability to teach this skill to others; and long term social coordination requires an ability to teach others to teach... and so on.

This account of understanding further explains why the two deficiencies noted with the counterfactual versions of (i) and (j) seem like deficiencies. To be unable to identify novel cases vitiates understanding, and the more sectional the principles, the narrower the circle of people who can be taught to identify novel cases using them.

With all this in place, we can say that (i) and (j) feel less than fully explanatory because they do not contribute to understanding to a sufficient degree. Explanations citing counterfactual versions of the relevant principles are scarcely better. They only provide intelligible accounting and useful instruction to those very familiar with my mom or with *Peanuts*. Someone armed with these principles can teach their moral sensibility to only a very narrow range of people. (Of course, according to some virtue ethicists, true moral principles will have to be fairly sectional. But this is fine. It just means that there is a hard limit to how much understanding these explanations can provide.)

With this notion of understanding, we can also say something about philosophical normative explanations—about the sense in which they are potentially superior to everyday explanations, and about the explanatory ambitions of traditional normative theory. Everyday explanations are in many ways superior for social coordination than those citing normative theories, which are simply too contentious. But philosophical explanations—it is wrong because it treats people as mere means, or because it fails to maximize happiness—aim to provide more understanding. Ideally, they provide a single exceptionless principle, and are thus easier to learn and to teach. They make predictions about the normative status of *all* possible cases. They aim to state principles that are intelligible to and applicable by agents who lack our cultural and psychological idiosyncrasies. In these ways, they aim for a greater degree of understanding than everyday, *ceteris paribus* principles.

Big picture moral theorizing should be seen as akin to certain projects of *legal codification*, such as the Napoleonic Code or Model Penal Code—that is, it is a project of codification that also aims to synthesize, simplify, and rationalize existing custom (legal in one case, normative in another), partly with aims of increasing general intelligibility and regional uniformity. They promote understanding by reducing a mass of low-level judgments and rules to a small number of general principles, from which the status of particular cases can be derived. Ideally these rules will be stated in terms whose application calls for minimal interpretation.

The tie between explanation, understanding, and the aim of social coordination also shows how the theory here could be adapted to handle particularist normative explanations. The theory here, which makes normative explanation a matter of subsumption to more general principles, is resolutely anti-particularist. I'm happy with this for the most part: *moral* particularism seems like an invitation to rampant

bias and special pleading (see McKeever and Ridge 2006: chapters 8 and 9). But I must admit, particularism about aesthetic values looks more plausible. I might tell you that *Mad Max: Fury Road* was awesome, partly for the guy playing a flame-throwing guitar from the back of a war-rig. But this does not commit me to thinking that a flame-throwing guitar would contribute to the awesomeness of all, or even most movies, or most normal movies, or movies under normal conditions, etc.

If aesthetic explanations truly are particularist in this way, then the purpose of such explanations cannot be to identify more general principles. But explanations could still serve to promote understanding. The point of citing flame-throwing guitars as an *explanans* isn't to identify a *prima-facie* good-maker of the cinematic, but rather to try to make certain features of the movie psychologically salient to interlocutors.²⁰ We make these features salient, in order produce a sort of gestalt in others, so they share our reactions. (Though honestly, if you have to *point out* the flame-throwing guitar, all is probably already lost.) But these explanations also aim at inculcating a certain aesthetic sensibility, so that the interlocutors can identify future good movies (or good movies of the same genre, etc.) on their own. Finally, one models how to give these highly particularized explanations, so that interlocutors are better able to answer objections and teach the sensibility to others. Although if explanations work like this, the intelligibility of these answers may be much more highly constrained than in more principled normative domains.

To summarize, a pragmatic notion of understanding—as a kind of discursive know how—follows naturally from normative discourse's function of promoting social coordination. By appealing to it, we can distinguish those normative 'because'-claims that should seem genuinely explanatory from those that should feel merely evidential. By introducing pragmatic understanding we also gain resources to accommodate normative theories that are unprincipled, and so don't conform to the basic picture offered here.

4.3. Objections

Before moving to the final task of discussing how to handle claims such as 'I believe lying is wrong because it is wrong', I will address a few objections.

The Unity of 'Because'. The proposal here is a nonstarter because it posits a distinctive meaning for the word 'because' when it occurs in normative contexts. This is exactly the sort of thing that counts against the compositionality of an expressivist semantics, and the sort of solution expressivists are supposed to avoid (e.g., Schroeder 2008).

But I have not proposed a distinctive normative meaning for 'because'. It is the same sense of 'because' as the one we use in mathematical explanation and in imperatival explanations. And while in general, yes, expressivists should try to make sure they aren't positing ambiguity among terms to solve problems, we should note that there are multiple apparent senses of 'because' whether one is an expressivist or not. There is a causal 'because', a 'because' of grounding, a 'because' of basing, an evidential

²⁰ Compare with (Walden, *op. loc. cit.*).

‘because’, an imperatival and a mathematical ‘because’. I don’t doubt that advocates of normative grounding will eventually be able to give us a unified account of these seemingly different uses of ‘because’. But there is no reason at present to suspect my account will be less hospitable to a unified theory.²¹

*This Is Just the D-N Model.*²² The account proposed here bears strong resemblance to the Deductive-Nomological Model of scientific explanations. On this account, explanations are deductive arguments, which explain their conclusion by showing how it follows from a general scientific law—which is one of the premises—along with more particular circumstances. But the D-N Model was found defective in numerous respects. Why is this theory better?

First, some of the ways in which the D-N Model was found inadequate were specific to *scientific explanation*. Statistical explanations could not be assimilated to a kind of deductive argument, for example. But neither mathematical or purely normative explanations make use of statistical explanations, so that objection does not apply. Another objection is that not all scientific explanations are arguments (Suppe 1989: 174-5). But I haven’t made any claims about scientific explanations. Since some mathematical proofs are explanatory, there are explanations that are arguments. I propose that imperatival and normative explanations are arguments as well.

Finally, there is the difficulty of giving an informative characterization of what a scientific law is (*ibid.*). There might be a similar difficulty in saying what a normative law is, but thankfully my account does not rest on normative laws. One standardly explains a normative fact by citing more general properties from which the moral status of the more specific group follows, but no difference between the general claims that are laws and those that are mere generalizations is needed. As I’ve noted, real-life normative explanations frequently implicitly appeal to intermediate normative principles, which should be thought of as helpful generalizations rather than laws.

Euthyphro’s Revenge. In his influential (1987) paper, Michael DePaul asks us to consider the case of the eighteenth-century moral philosopher, William Paley. Paley was both a utilitarian and a divine command theorist (1785/2002: book II). So, it would seem, he is committed to the following three claims. Necessarily, X is right if and only if X maximizes happiness. Necessarily, X is right if and only if God commands X. Necessarily, God commands X if and only if X maximizes happiness.

Does my theory have the resources to let us say whether, on Paley’s view, God commands acts because they are right, or that they are right because God commands them? After all, both ‘X is right because it maximizes happiness’ and ‘X is right because God commands it’ should strike us as genuinely explanatory on my view, both potentially contribute to understanding. But being able to make sense of the Euthyphro dilemma is one of the central motives for introducing normative

²¹ There is no reason why the theory given here would not be compatible, for example, with van Fraassen’s (1980, chapter 5) account of the meaning of ‘because’-claims.

²² Thanks to Matt Lutz and Timothy Perrine for discussion on this point.

grounding. If you can't make sense of that, you haven't shown that normative grounding is dispensable.²³

First, I want to call attention to some philosophical bait-and-switch. Expressivists are told they must make sense of the normative 'because', or else our theory is overly revisionary of normative discourse. A theory is offered which accounts for explanation in ordinary normative discourse—and then it is objected that it fails to deliver verdicts in extremely arcane cases that it takes philosophical training to even formulate. Even if this is so, the objection can no longer be that expressivism is unacceptably revisionary. Perhaps certain philosophical theories of the normative are too strange, or more likely, too *sparse*, to support the kinds of explanation claims their authors would want to make. But this is hardly a case of rejecting a central part of the discourse.

To be clear, it's not that the Euthyphro dilemma itself is too arcane. But it may have no answer within the stipulated, three-part normative theory just given. This theory insists that God commands what He commands necessarily. If we accept that God commands contingently, then we can easily say God's commands explain what is right, with the injunction to maximize happiness following from the more general injunction to do whatever God commands.

And even if God does necessarily command what he commands, we still would be able to say more, if the theory had more detail. For purposes of exposition I have been treating the Kantian principle as explanatory bedrock. But a Kantian would not regard it as so. Why is it wrong to treat people as mere means? Because, the Kantian will say, an act is wrong only if every agent has decisive reason against it, regardless of their contingent aims, and in order to act at all one must aim to treat humanity as an end in itself, so that this aim is not contingent. This is a further normative explanation, and on my account it further subsumes moral verdicts to more general normative principles of rational action. Similarly, consequentialists, when they argue that the good is prior to the right, are subsuming our moral verdicts to a special case of nonmoral evaluation, and subsuming our verdicts about actions to our verdicts about events more generally.

If we read Paley, this is exactly how he explains why it is God's commands, rather than maximizing happiness, that is ultimately most explanatory. Paley writes:

...[L]et it be asked, Why am I obliged to keep my word? and the answer will be, "Because I am urged to do so by a violent motive" (namely, the expectation of being after this life rewarded, if I do, or punished for it, if I do not), "resulting from the command of another" (namely, of God).

This solution goes to the bottom of the subject, as no further question can reasonably be asked.

Therefore, private happiness is our motive, and the will of God our rule.

²³ Thanks to Pekka Väyrynen for raising this objection.

(1785/2002: Book II, section 3)

In other words, Paley explains the obligation to maximize happiness in terms of God's commands in precisely the way I have argued he should, by *subsuming* moral injunctions to those of self-interest. A special relation of metaphysical dependence is not needed.²⁴

There is also an important lesson: overly simplified theories lack the structure necessary to support explanation. But, to emphasize again, the goal is to account for actual normative discourse. And that discourse is based on theories or sensibilities which are reasonably structured—as Paley's theory turns out to be, when we turn to the details.

5. Conclusion

Human explanatory practice allows us to provide explanations that convey no information about objective determination relations. This is what the examples of imperatives and explanatory mathematical proofs show. The expressivist should argue that normative explanations are of this kind as well. Typically they are a form of generalizing explanation, and always, when they seem genuinely explanatory, they provide information that answers to what expressivists regard as the central function of normative discourse, information that both supports and allows participants to shape social coordination. This fits with the general expressivist project. We describe how normative explanatory speech acts function to communicate commitments, and then say this use exhausts what there is to say about normative explanation.

There is an upshot to this as well. It allows for a genuinely metaphysical difference between quasi-realism and realism. Real properties figure in grounding relations. But the quasi-real is neither fundamental nor derivative: it stands outside the hierarchy of fundamentality.

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²⁴ But see (Väyrynen *forthcoming*, section 5) for an example of how an advocate of metaphysical dependence could account for Paley's explanatory strategy.

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