HALLVARD LILLEHAMMER

The Idea of a Normative Reason

Two Constraints on Normative Reasons

Recent work in English speaking moral philosophy has seen the rise to prominence of the idea of a normative reason[1]. By 'normative reasons' I mean the reasons agents appeal to in making rational claims on each other. Normative reasons are good reasons on which agents ought to act, even if they are not actually motivated accordingly[2]. To this extent, normative reasons are distinguishable from the motivating reasons agents appeal to in reason explanations. Even agents who fail to act on their normative reasons can be said to act on reasons insofar as their actions are rationally intelligible. Thus, when it is said that agents may never use violence in self-defence, this is naturally interpreted to mean that there are powerful normative reasons not to use violence even in self-defence, even though some agents *would* use violence in self-defence. Normative reasons are reasons to pursue *ends*, where by ends I mean a subset of objects of possible desire, such as taking a stroll or giving all your money to charity. The set of objects of possible desire might include items that are not straightforwardly ends of action. For example, you might want the world to be a better place, or want a secure basis in knowledge of relevant facts to be assigned the highest priority in the assessment of people's preferences. Objects of possible desire are a subset of objects of possible response, where by 'response' I mean the whole range of prepositional attitudes, including desires, preferences, beliefs, commitments and so on. I use the term 'option' to refer to objects of possible response in this wider sense.

Recent philosophical claims about the grounds of normative reasons can be divided into two strands. Each strand takes as its starting point what is perceived to be a fundamental constraint embodied in normative reason attributions. The first constraint is that it matters to whether you have a normative reason to pursue

---

[1] See e.g. Darwall (1983), Smith (1994), Korsgaard (1995) Parfit (1997), Dancy (2000).
[2] See e.g. Smith (1994)

some end *what that end is*[3]. I call this the *realist condition*. The realist condition is suggestive of the claim that ends provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature as ends. Thus, one might reasonably think that if Jack has a reason to not torture Jill, this is because of what torturing Jill consists in, and not because he does not want to, does not want to want to, or would not want himself to want to if he thought about it, and so on. According to defenders of the realist condition, denying this condition would be as absurd as to think it never matters to whether a joke is funny what that joke is. I call the metaphysical thesis that options provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature *normative realism*. According to the normative realist, agents have normative reasons to pursue their desires only on the condition that these desires have appropriate contents[4].

In the recent literature, normative realism has emerged as the main competitor to accounts postulating a different constraint as fundamental to normative reason attributions[5]. According to this constraint, there is a rationally intelligible link between the existence of normative reasons and sound exercises of practical reasoning. I call this the *rational intelligibility condition*. The rational intelligibility condition is suggestive of the view that ends provide normative reasons by being favourably responded to in circumstances of rational deliberation[6]. Thus, one might reasonably think that if no exercise of sound practical reasoning would make Jack want to torture Jill, then he has no normative reasons to do so. To defenders of the rational intelligibility condition, rejecting this condition would be as absurd as to think there could be an undetectably funny joke. I call the metaphysical thesis that options provide normative reasons only in virtue of being responded to in conditions of rational deliberation *rational dispositionalism*[7]. According to the rational dispositionalist, agents have normative

---

[3] See e.g. Grice (1967), Parfit (1984), (1997), Dancy (2000).

[4] Some who call themselves realists about normative reasons say that reasons are provided by *facts* or *states of affairs* (c.f. Dancy (2000)).

[5] See e.g. Harman (2000), Williams (1981), Korsgaard (1995), Smith (1994).

[6] See e.g. Williams (1981), Scanlon (1982), Korsgaard (1995), and Smith (1994).

[7] A form of rational dispositionalism has also been defended by appeal to a putative link between normative reasons and motivating reasons. For discussion, see e.g. Williams (1981), Dancy (2000), and Bittner (2001). The debate concerning normative versus motivating reasons is orthogonal to the issues explored in this paper. I therefore make only passing reference to it in what follows.

reasons to pursue desires only on the condition that these desires would be endorsed in rationally favourable circumstances.

On the face of it, the realist and rational intelligibility conditions are mutually inconsistent. If ends provide reasons in virtue of their nature, what is to stop this nature from being such as to outrun the best possible efforts of finite agents to grasp them as reason-giving in rational deliberation? Some ends are very complex, as are the individual and social conditions in which they are contemplated. Contemporary politics presents individuals, states, and other institutions with options of a complexity that is demonstrably beyond the power of most ordinary human beings to understand[8]. Yet the rational intelligibility condition appears to constrain the extension of normative reasons by facts about what is within the grasp of finite agents who reason soundly. In what follows, I explore the significance of this apparent conflict between the realist and rational intelligibility condition. I argue that the relationship between the two conditions is more complex than some of the recent literature on the subject suggests. In particular, I explore a number of ways in which both conditions can be accommodated on realist terms.

Dispositionalism and Response Dependence

The standard reading of rational dispositionalist accounts of normative reasons makes these reasons *response dependent*[9]. On a response dependent account of some entity (a colour, say), the nature and existence of that entity is constituted by the responses of agents to the world in some non-trivially defined set of favourable circumstances[10]. Thus, for example, someone might reasonably

---

[8] Ends fall under descriptions, some of which are more readily graspable than others. What is to stop the reason giving character of some given end from only being revealed by a description the grasp of which is beyond finite beings like us? For present purposes, I shall assume that divine providence is not an answer.

[9] See e.g. Pettit (1990), Wright (1992), Johnston (1989) and (1993), Lillehammer (2000).

[10] Non-trivial because it is always possible to define the set of favourable circumstances for the detection of some entity as that set of circumstances in which the entity is detected. See e.g. Pettit (1990). On this definition, all entities become response dependent, and the distinction between response dependence and response independence collapses. I shall take the response dependence of an entity to entail that some non-trivial definition of the favourable circumstances in question is available. On this reading, the unavailability of any such definition entails response independence. I remain neutral on the question whether the existence of a non-trivial definition entails response dependence. The issue here

think that something is red just in case it would be seen as red by normal observers in standard visual conditions[11]. It is a corollary of claims to response dependence that it makes no sense to say that the world contains the entities in question independently of the possible responses of agents in favourable circumstances. Thus, a response dependent account of the colours entails that the nature and existence of the colours is determined by the nature responses agents have to an independent physical reality that is intrinsically non-coloured.

On a natural reading of rational dispositionalism, the nature and existence of normative reasons is determined by which ends would be favoured by agents in conditions of sound rational deliberation. This view has a sound motivation. If normative reasons are to guide agents towards rational action, then it is natural to think that reasons are recognisable as such in practical reasoning. If reasons were not so recognisable, their practical function as guides to improve, correct, and evaluate action would be impossible. One might therefore think there is no intelligible content to the idea of normative reasons obtaining independently of the responses of agents who deliberate soundly, and thus merely in virtue of the nature of ends themselves[12]. This fact has produced a conflict in the recent literature between response dependent accounts of normative reasons and various forms of normative realism[13]. The line of thought implicit in this conflict seems to be as follows: the realist condition entails normative realism; the rational intelligibility condition entails rational dispositionalism; therefore we are forced to choose between the realist condition and normative realism on the one hand, and the rational intelligibility condition and rational dispositionalism on the other. This line of thought is mistaken. For one thing, there is a consistent way for the dispositionalist to accommodate the realist condition on response

---

is one of explanatory priority, and raises questions beyond the scope of the present paper.

[11] See e.g. Jackson (1998).

[12] There is logical space for accounts of normative reasons that remain response dependent while rejecting the rational intelligibility condition. Thus, what we might call a *full information dispositionalist* would define normative reasons in terms of agent responses in conditions of full information. For a critical discussion of this view, see e.g. Gibbard (1990). No purely response dependent account is consistent with the claim that ends provide normative reasons purely in virtue of their nature as ends.

[13] For a realist account, see e.g. Parfit (1997). The opposing view is clearly present in Scanlon (1982) and Korsgaard (1995).

dependent terms. It is consistent with a response dependent account to claim that agents ought to reason *as if* ends give rise to normative reasons in virtue of their nature, even if (speaking strictly) they do not. It is at least logically possible that agents in rationally favourable conditions would favour the option of *reasoning as if* ends provide reasons in virtue of their nature (even if speaking strictly they do not). As I have shown elsewhere, the dispositionalist can accommodate the realist condition by treating it as a substantial, or first order, constraint on practical reasoning[14].

Nevertheless, I think there are grounds to be worried about any purely response dependent account of normative reasons. These grounds suggest that normative realists have been right to reject dispositionalism insofar as it involves a claim to pure response dependence. Some of these grounds pertain to rational dispositionalism in particular. Others pertain to any purely response dependent account of normative reasons.

Two worries arise with respect to rational dispositionalism in particular. The first concerns the conception of sound practical reasoning embodied in the dispositionalist account. The question here is whether we can make sense of the idea of sound practical reasoning without assuming that there are some response independently defined constraints on the result, such as consistency or coherence, by which sound practical reasoning must be guided. After all, sound reasoning is not just reasoning we believe, or hope, or wish to be sound. The second worry concerns the rational dispositionalist commitment to the notion of a capacity for sound practical reasoning. The question here is whether we can account for the existence of such capacities while retaining both the response dependence of normative reasons on the one hand, and the claim that only some kinds of practical reasoning are sound on the other. After all, different agents are disposed to reason differently at different times and places. Yet any account restricting the relevant reasoning capacity to those who endorse reason-giving ends would not qualify as purely response dependent, on grounds of triviality[15].

Even if there are satisfactory answers to these particular questions, there are general grounds to believe that no account of normative reasons can be purely response dependent. As I have argued elsewhere, the problem arises because a response dependent account only seems able to explain the reason giving privilege of

---

[14] See Lillehammer (2002).

[15] I return to this strategy in the discussion of what I call 'the relational view' below.

ends if some *responses* to ends are rationally privileged in the sense of having the property of conferring rational privilege on ends. If no such privilege exists at the level of responses, agents will have no reasons to favour some ends over others, because on a purely response dependent account all rational privilege derives from responses to ends. The question then arises of what explains the rational privilege of the responses that generate reason-giving privilege for ends. This question gives rise to a dilemma[16].

Either the rational privilege of responses is itself response dependent or it is not. If it is, then dispositionalism faces a regress or circularity problem. Regress results if the rational privilege of reason-giving responses is said to derive from a higher order set of *responses to responses* to ends. The question is then whether the rational privilege of this higher order set of responses is response dependent or not. This question reinstates the dilemma to which the escape to a higher order was meant to be the answer. Circularity results if the rational privilege of responses is said to derive from their endorsement of themselves. The question is then how any set of responses to ends could gain rational privilege merely in virtue of being self-endorsing. On both the regress and circularity option, pure response dependence makes the rational privilege of both responses and ends inexplicable.

If the rational privilege of responses is not response dependent, then it must obtain in virtue of the nature of these responses, such as their being reasoned, coherent, and reflectively stable. The existence of such response independent rational privilege among responses implies the existence of a response independent ground for normative reasons. Its commitment to a response independent ground for normative reasons implies that dispositionalism collapses into a form of normative realism on

---

[16] The dilemma may not arise for a response dependent account on which either a) there are unproblematic external (e.g. pragmatic) criteria for the selection of appropriate responses, or on which b) it is not required that the responses in question be normatively privileged in any interestial sense. In Lillehammer (2001), I argued that normative reasons fail to satisfy either condition. Attributions of colour may satisfy both a) and b). The case of humour is less clear. The apparent conceivability of different senses of humour suggests that the normative privilege of the relevant responses is restricted by the social role of humour in a given community of speakers, and thus that humour satisfies at least one of a) or b). Either way, there is an indefinite number of imaginable predicates for which the associated response would obviously not be normatively privileged in any substantial sense. An example: X is a Blip *iff* next Tuesday I want to sit on X.

which the reason-giving force of ends is grounded exclusively in the rationally privileged nature of responses to ends[17]. On this horn of the dilemma, the dispositionalist succeeds in accounting for the reason giving properties of ends without claiming that ends themselves provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature. However, as a purely response dependent alternative to normative realism, this form of dispositionalism is incoherent.

Normative realists may therefore have been right to reject pure response dependence. What is more questionable is the failure of realist writers to account for the thoughts embodied in the rational intelligibility condition. While some realists may wish to reject the condition outright, this would be unfortunate. Merely dismissing the rational intelligibility condition would leave its pre-theoretical appeal unaccounted for. This would provide no answer to those who find the idea of an option generating normative reasons in virtue of its nature alone as mysterious as the idea of an undetectably funny joke. To those of the latter disposition, the admission that normative reasons are necessarily response independent would be an admission that normative reasons necessarily do not exist. We need an account of what role, if any, the rational intelligibility condition can play on realist terms.

Normative Realism and the Rational Intelligibility Condition

The normative realist could account for the rational intelligibility condition in more than one way. Here I consider five.

A. *The Dispositional View*

As objects of possible response, responses to ends are options on the same basis as the ends we normally have in mind when we reason practically. The argument against pure response dependence therefore suggests that any account of normative reasons must appeal to the nature of options at some point, whether they be responses to ends or ends themselves. An account of normative reasons that explained the existence of reasons merely in terms of the rational privilege of certain responses is therefore a form of normative realism. I call this form of normative realism *the*

---

[17] I discuss this version of normative realism further below under the heading 'the dispositional view'.

dispositional view. According to the dispositional view, ends acquire reason-giving status by being favourably responded to by agents in circumstances that are rationally privileged in virtue of their nature. Thus, if Jack has a reason to join the army, this is ultimately because he would approve of himself doing so in rationally favourable conditions, not because of any intrinsic fact about being a soldier. This is the form of realism we end up with if we give up on the pure response dependence I attributed to rational dispositionalism above.

The dispositional view can make some sense of the rational intelligibility condition on realist terms. On this view, ends provide normative reasons only by being intelligibly linked to exercises of sound practical reasoning, and not in virtue of their nature alone. To this extent, the dispositional view retains what is perhaps the most powerful thought behind the rational intelligibility condition, and thereby response dependence with respect to ends[18]. The dispositional view is not, however, consistent with the response dependence of options as such, given the response independent rational privilege of some responses to ends. The dispositional view therefore cannot claim that the rational intelligibility condition applies to the fundamental grounds of normative reasons. I shall return below to the question whether the rational intelligibility condition is as plausible with respect to responses as it is with respect to ends.

The dispositional view is not consistent with the realist condition. On the dispositional view, ends do not provide normative reasons in virtue of their nature, but only in virtue of being favourably responded to in rationally privileged circumstances. To that extent, whatever explanatory advantage the dispositional view gains with respect to the rational intelligibility condition, it loses with respect to the realist condition. True, the dispositional view is logically consistent with the aforementioned dispositionalist claim that agents in rationally privileged circumstances would want agents to reason *as if* ends provide reasons in virtue of their nature[19]. Yet adopting this strategy has no obvious explanatory pay-off once the claim to pure response dependence has been abandoned. True, the dispositional view is consistent with the realist condition provided it is restricted to responses to ends. However, adopting this strategy might reasonably be thought to impose an

---

[18] There is evidence that some writers have been attracted to this view. See e.g. Brower (1993).
[19] See Lillehammer (2002).

arbitrary restriction on the range of options capable of response independent rational privilege. As a strategy to account for the rational intelligibility condition on realist terms the dispositional view therefore has limited appeal.

B. *The Mutual Independence View*

The obvious realist response is to claim that *all* options can be independently sufficient grounds for the existence of normative reasons. I call this *the mutual independence view*. On the mutual independence view, the fact that a career involves being a torturer may itself be sufficient to generate a reason for Jack not to pursue it. Equally, the fact that Jack would not want to be a torturer if he was sober and knew what he was doing may be sufficient to generate a reason to not do it. Given the regress or circularity problem faced by any purely response dependent account of the rational privilege of responses, the realist might construe both ends and responses as response-independent sources of normative reasons. It is then a further question whether the reasons generated in these two different ways can be compared or aggregated along a common measure, which kinds of reason take priority when they conflict, and how agents can come to know this in practical reasoning[20].

At first sight, the mutual independence view may seem compatible both with the rational intelligibility and the realist condition. This appearance is misleading. True, the mutual independence view does accommodate the thought behind the rational intelligibility condition to the extent that some normative reasons exist in virtue of responses to ends in rationally favourable conditions. But it does not capture the idea that there can be *nothing more* to normative reasons than what follows from sound exercises of practical reasoning. The realist condition entails the existence of a source of reasons in the nature of ends themselves. On the mutual independence view, this source of reasons in the nature of ends is irreducibly distinct from the source of reasons in responses. Furthermore, as with the dispositional view, the rational privilege of responses obtains in virtue of the nature of these responses, and not in virtue of anyone's responses to these responses in rationally favourable conditions. The rational privilege of responses is as response independent as the rational privilege of ends. This opens

---

[20] For a discussion of this view, see Lillehammer (2000).

9

up the possibility of the rational equivalent of both an undetectably funny joke and an undetectably good sense of humour. If the guiding thought behind the rational intelligibility condition is the mystery of the idea of a normative reason existing independently of responses to options in rationally favourable circumstances, then the mutual independence view cannot accommodate the rational intelligibility condition after all.

C. *The Epistemic View*

Both the dispositional and mutual independence views interpret satisfaction of the rational intelligibility condition as sufficient for the existence of normative reasons. The failure of both views is suggestive of a need for a different strategy. A third way to account for the rational intelligibility condition on realist terms is to deny its status as an independent condition of correctness. The normative realist could maintain that responses to ends are rationally privileged only to the extent that they are favourable responses to ends that are response independently reason giving. I call this *the epistemic view*. The epistemic view is a realist analogue of the indirect dispositionalist strategy of accounting for the realist condition discussed above. Just as the indirect dispositionalist strategy denies the metaphysical status of the realist condition, the epistemic view denies the metaphysical status of the rational intelligibility condition. On the epistemic view, the rational intelligibility condition is construed on the analogy with an epistemic norm in the discovery of response independently reason giving ends. Thus, if Jack knows he would never wish to join the army if he reflected on it, he may have good evidence that there is no normative reason for him to joint the army, although it does not follow that he has no such reason. In this way, the epistemic view denies that there is anything to the rational intelligibility condition when considered at the metaphysical level of what it takes for normative reasons to obtain, although the condition does apply as a genuine epistemic norm of reflection or discovery.

The epistemic view succeeds in accounting for one insight embodied in the rational intelligibility condition, namely that there are rationally better and worse conditions in which to endorse ends. It does so by claiming that response dependent versions of dispositionalism turn a legitimate epistemological truth that there are privileged conditions for the discovery of facts into the metaphysical falsehood that privileged conditions for discovery are

constitutive of the facts. What the epistemic view fails to produce is an explanation of the attractions of the rational intelligibility condition that removes the apparent mystery of the idea that ends provide reasons in virtue of their nature alone. In fact, by giving a purely epistemic diagnosis of the attractions of the rational intelligibility condition, it merely brings out more strongly the concern that the realist is committed to the rational counterpart of the undetectably funny joke. Merely drawing a conceptual distinction between epistemology and metaphysics is insufficient to resolve this mystery. A convincing realist account should have more to say about the temptation to impose the rational intelligibility condition as a metaphysical constraint on normative reasons. While the option remains to attempt an explanation in terms of some natural conceptual confusion, I share the doubts of those who think this strategy has poor prospects of success[21].

D. *The Mutual Dependence View*

The realist can treat the rational intelligibility condition as a genuine metaphysical constraint on normative reasons without implying that it functions as a sufficient condition for their existence. While normative reasons could be grounded both in the nature of ends and responses, there could be a mutual dependence between the two. On this view, it is a mistake to think of the reason-giving force of ends and responses in isolation from each other. I call this *the mutual dependence view*[22].

According to the mutual dependence view, certain conditions on ends and responses are individually necessary for the existence of normative reasons without being individually sufficient for their existence. On this view, a sufficient condition for the existence of a normative reason consists in the appropriate combination of individually necessary conditions on the nature of ends and responses. Thus, while the fact that Jack's end is to

---

[21] Thus, Jonathan Dancy: 'The only way to understand the notion of meriting a response is to see a merited response as the one that would be elicited in ideal conditions. We can give no good sense to the thought that an object should merit a response which it would never receive, even if in ideal circumstances; that there should be something about a good or a right action which lies beyond the possibility of any recognition' (Dancy (1986), p.242). That Dancy also seems to think of reasons as given by what he calls 'features of the situation' only reinforces the need for an account of the rational intelligibility condition on realist terms. See Dancy (2000).

[22] There may be hints of this view in Wiggins (1991).

become a torturer may not itself provide a normative reason to not do so, it may generate a reason given the further fact that he would not favour this end in any circumstances conducive to informed, lucid, and imaginative thought. Conversely, while the fact that Jack decides to take up yoga in a sober state of mind does not itself give him a normative reason to do so, it may generate a reason given the further fact of that his end is innocent. The realist may argue that normative reasons supervene on combinations of ends and responses, neither being individually sufficient to generate normative reasons on their own.

The mutual dependence view captures the core of the realist condition in virtue of entailing the claim that it matters to the reason-giving status of an end what that end is. This deals with the fact that to deny the realist condition would seem as absurd as to deny that it matters to the funniness of a joke what that joke is. The mutual dependence view also captures the core of the rational intelligibility condition in virtue of entailing that it matters to the reason-giving status of an end in which circumstances it would be endorsed. In particular, it is consistent with the mutual dependence view that the reason-giving status of ends is constitutively linked to exercises of sound practical reasoning. This deals with the fact that to deny the rational intelligibility condition would seem as absurd as to claim there could be an undetectably funny joke. We can accept the core insights of both the realist and the rational intelligibility condition by endorsing the mutual dependence view.

In its simplest form, the mutual dependence view would be applied to all options equally, i.e. both to ends and responses. The view would then be consistent with the claim that the rational privilege of responses to ends is partly a matter of the nature of these responses, but it would deny that the nature of the responses themselves is sufficient to imbue them with rational privilege with respect to other responses. Only if responses would be favourably responded to in appropriate circumstances will they possess the rational privilege to generate normative reasons to promote the ends they favour. An unrestricted mutual dependence view would apply to options at all levels: ends, responses to ends, responses to responses to ends, and so on. At no stage would normative reasons be purely response dependent. Yet at each stage, facts about responses would be relevant to whether an agent has a normative reason. In this way, the mutual dependence view might be thought to reconcile the realist and rational intelligibility conditions by undermining the claim to mutual independence that gave rise to the

apparent conflict between them. I shall return the comparative merits of restricted versus unrestricted versions of mutual dependence below.

The mutual dependence view is a form of normative realism on which four separate kinds of property combine to generate normative reasons. The first kind of property deserves the name 'intrinsic'. The three other kinds are more appropriately labelled 'extrinsic'. First, options have intrinsic properties. Thus, if Jack desires to torture Jill, it is an intrinsic feature of his end that it is one of torture. Second, options have extrinsic properties in virtue of their relations to other options. Thus, if Jack desires to torture Jill, it may be an extrinsic property of his end in this sense that he desires to perform an act contrary to his underlying life-project. Third, options have extrinsic properties in virtue of the relation of their objects to other facts about the context in which they are to be pursued. Thus, if Jack desires to torture Jill, it may be an extrinsic property of his end in this sense that he desires to torture the girl who would be queen. Fourth, options have extrinsic properties in virtue of their relation to the responses of agents. Thus, if Jack desires to torture Jill, it may be an extrinsic property of his end in this sense that he actually favours it but would not do so if he was thinking clearly, knew the relevant facts, had less violent friends, or whatever.

The first three kinds of property (one intrinsic, two extrinsic) are definable independently of the responses of agents to the options they are properties of. They are properties appealed to as normatively relevant by all forms of normative realism, and properties an interest in which naturally lends support to the realist condition. The fourth kind of property is defined in terms of the responses of agents to options in various circumstances. They are the kinds of property appealed to by response dependent theories, and an interest in which naturally lends support to the rational intelligibility condition. According to the mutual dependence view, each kind of property is relevant to the generation of normative reasons. Pre-theoretically, this is as it should be. If we were presented with a list of these four kinds of property as among the ones relevant to the existence of normative reasons and were then told either that a) only one of them (pure response-dependence) or b) only three of them (pure response independence) are genuinely relevant to their existence, we might legitimately experience a sense of surprise. The metaphysical pay-off of endorsing the mutual

13

dependence view suggests that this pre-theoretical response is correct.

The Explanatory Burdens of Mutual Dependence

A. *Supervenience or Entailment?*

While it may capture much of rationale for the rational intelligibility condition, the mutual dependence view generates explanatory burdens. The main pay-off of the view is its avoidance of the claim that the nature of an option is itself sufficient to generate normative reasons. It secures this pay-off by claiming that it is only if responded to in favourable circumstances that options generate normative reasons. While this ensures compatibility with the rational intelligibility condition, it does raise the further question of what could be meant by the claim that the constitutive elements of a complex of conditions jointly sufficient to generate normative reasons are each themselves *normatively significant* in virtue of being individually necessary for the generation of normative reasons. What does the normative significance of the nature of an option consist in if not the generation of normative reasons? While normative significance does not entail normative reason-hood on the mutual dependence view, a defender of the rational intelligibility condition might be suspicious about the idea of an option being normatively significant independently of the responses of agents to it. If so, the question arises whether the condition cannot be equally applied with respect to *normative significance* as with respect to *normative reasons*. The worry would be that normative significance obtaining independently of the sound exercise of practical reasoning is as mysterious as normative reasons obtaining in this way.

This worry might be well founded if the notion of normative significance were understood so as to assign a *pro tanto* rational weight to options, thus implying the existence of a shadowy normative entity (a normative reason in miniature) existing independently of the relation between the option and the responses of agents to it. The worry might be equally well founded if the notion of normative significance were understood so as to assign *prima facie* rational weight to options, absent contrary conditions to which the options would generate normative reasons. There is some evidence that this way of thinking about normative significance is embedded in moral discourse. From a pre-theoretical point of view,

the idea that we should avoid instigating a universal nuclear holocaust, for example, might seem sufficiently grounded in the nature of the end itself to generate rational weight to the option of avoiding it regardless of any circumstance it might be favoured[23]. Yet treating the notion of normative significance on the model of *pro tanto* or *prima facie* reasons would make normative significance too much like normative reason-hood to avoid inconsistency with the rational intelligibility condition.

Fortunately, there are alternative realist models of normative significance. The fact that two elements, A and B, give rise to some property F when found together in a certain context does not entail that either A or B possess any degree of F-ness when they occur on their own, with elements other than A or B, or in contexts where other elements interfere with the characteristic effects of combining A and B. To take one analogous case, mental states may supervene on a subset of non-mental states in determinate contexts without any of those non-mental states possessing any mental properties when occurring outside that context[24]. By analogy, normative reasons might be thought to supervene on the nature of options and responses without either options or responses possessing rational weight when occurring in isolation[25]. If so, the normative significance of the nature of options need not consist in their possession of any rational weight in virtue of which they combine with agent responses to generate normative reasons. Rather, the normative significance of the nature of options consists in nothing more than the truth of the counterfactual that if they would be matched by appropriate responses in certain circumstances, normative reasons thereby exist to pursue those options. The normative significance of options would not then be understood in terms of *pro tanto* or *prima facie* rational weight, but rather in terms of being a potential subset of a supervenience base for a normative reason. Just as some physical states might be 'mentally relevant' because when combined in determinate ways with certain other physical states of the human brain they give rise to mental states, so some options might be 'normatively relevant' because if matched by agent responses in certain circumstances they generate normative reasons.

---

[23] See e.g. Lillehammer (1999a).

[24] For my purposes here, entities of class A are said to supervene on entities of class B where changes in As entail changes in Bs but not *vice versa*. See Blackburn (1993), (1998), and Jackson (1998).

[25] See e.g. Crane (2002).

The supervenience of normative reasons on conditions relating to options and responses could be thought to necessarily generate familiar problems about how normative properties can depend on non-normative properties without being entailed by them[26]. This would be a mistake. First, the mutual dependence view does not entail that normative reasons have a non-normative supervenience base. The supervenience of normative reasons on the nature of options and responses is compatible with the supervenience base being normatively specified. The specification of the nature of ends could appeal to the existence of values, such as sentient justice or happiness. The specification of responses to ends could appeal to standards of good reasoning, such as consistency or coherence. If so, the supervenience of normative reasons on the conditions in question would be a relationship within the domain of normativity. This claim is consistent with (although it does not entail) the further claim that any supervenience of normative properties on natural properties is 'philosophically uninviting'[27]. Second, the mutual dependence view is compatible with the claim that the relationship between the nature of options and responses on the one hand, and the existence of normative reasons on the other, is one of entailment. Mutual dependence can obtain if some combinations of options and responses collectively necessitate the existence of normative reasons. In fact, this is the most natural interpretation of the claim that certain ends and responses are collectively sufficient for the existence of normative reasons. If so, the mutual dependence view is immune to worries about supervenience even if the nature of options and responses is non-normatively specified[28].

The normative realist is clearly committed to some degree of dependence of the normative on the non-normative. Ends classified as valuable will fall under at least some non-normative descriptions that distinguish them from other ends. Responses classified as rationally favourable will fall under some non-normative descriptions that distinguish them from other responses. Agents who soundly exercise their capacity for practical reasoning do so in

---

[26] The issue of supervenience in ethics receives extensive discussion in Blackburn (1993) and (1998), Smith (1994), and Jackson (1998).

[27] Blackburn (1993). Blackburn (1998) contains an argument against response dependence without reduction in ethics. This argument is directed at the account defended in Smith (1994). An analogous argument could be formulated against a supervenience-based mutual dependence view. .

[28] This view is consistent with, although it does not entail, the account given in Jackson (1998).

a world where their deliberative context has some normatively neutral description, whatever terms they themselves may use to describe it. Jack desires to torture Jill on some day of the week. He does so either in Barcelona, Madrid, Cambridge, Frankfurt, or somewhere else in the universe. Either he is drunk or he is not, and so on. The normative realist should ultimately have some story to tell about the relationship between normative and non-normative properties, whether or not this is a story about supervenience or entailment. Whatever this story turns out to be, it will not affect the main question of this paper. The question whether normative properties can supervene on non-normative properties is orthogonal to the question whether normative reasons can be response independent. The former question arises for any account of normative reasons, whether it takes a response independent form or not[29].

B. *Restricted and Unrestricted Mutual Dependence*

The mutual dependence view faces a more serious problem. The application of mutual dependence to all options gives rise to a regress or circularity problem at the level of responses to ends. On an unrestricted mutual dependence view, the rational privilege of responses depends on two factors: their nature as responses *and* their being favourably responded to in conditions rationally favourable for the endorsement of responses. Both factors are individually necessary for the existence of the rational privilege of responses. The question then arises of what explains the rational privilege of the (second order) responses to responses to ends that are necessary to make the (first order) responses to ends rationally privileged. On an unrestricted mutual dependence view, the rational privilege of these second order responses must be a matter *both* of their nature as responses *and* the fact that they would be endorsed in conditions favourable for the rational endorsement of (second order) responses. For any order of response, part of the answer will be the nature of the responses in question. This part of the answer does not generate a regress or circularity problem. But equally, for any order of response, part of the answer will be the endorsement of the responses in conditions rationally favourable for the endorsement of responses of the relevant order. This part of the

---

[29] This fact seems to be recognised in Jackson (1998), but not in McFarland and Miller (1998).

answer does generate a regress or circularity problem, just as it did for the purely response dependent views discussed above. As with pure response dependence, the endorsement by responses of themselves is viciously circular. Yet the endorsement of any response of any arbitrary order by some response of a higher order merely postpones the problem by kicking it up one level. The unrestricted mutual dependence view is therefore unable to account for the presence of responses in the set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the existence of normative reasons. It follows that the existence of normative reasons is just as inexplicable on an unrestricted mutual dependence view as it is on a purely response dependent view.

The regress or circularity problem is avoided if the mutual dependence view is restricted to some proper subset of options. On the simplest version of a restricted mutual dependence view, the rational privilege of ends is mutually dependent on ends and responses, but the rational privilege of responses is purely a function of the nature of those responses. This restricted mutual dependence view should be distinguished from the dispositional view, which it resembles but does not entail. Both the dispositional view and the restricted mutual dependence view entail that responses to ends have response independent rational privilege. There the similarity ends. The dispositional view claims that the response independent rational privilege of responses to ends is sufficient to generate normative reasons to pursue those ends. The restricted mutual dependence view claims that the response independent rational privilege of responses is only sufficient to generate normative reasons to pursue ends given further conditions relating to the nature of ends. In this way, the restricted mutual dependence view might be thought to accommodate both the realist condition and the rational intelligibility condition without running up against the regress or circularity problem facing the unrestricted mutual dependence view.

A restricted mutual dependence view might be the most plausible form of normative realism considered so far. Yet this view also has associated costs. First, the restriction on mutual dependence might be considered an arbitrary device to avoid the regress or circularity problem faced by the unrestricted mutual dependence view. To turn things on their head, a defender of the dispositional view might argue that if it is *not* arbitrary for the mutual dependence view to restrict response independent rational privilege to responses, then surely it is not arbitrary for the

18

dispositional view to make exactly the same restriction. While there may be some truth in this complaint, it does not favour the dispositional view over a mutual dependence view. While the mutual dependence view accounts for the realist condition as applied to ends, the dispositional view is committed to construe the rational privilege of ends merely as a function of the rational privilege of responses. Thus, where the mutual dependence view differs from the dispositional view, this difference favours the mutual dependence view. It follows that regardless of whether the restriction of response independent rational privilege to responses is arbitrary, the mutual dependence view trumps the dispositional view.

Yet the restriction on response independent rational privilege could be worse than arbitrary. It is natural to think that just as there is no sense to the idea of an undetectably funny joke, there is no sense to the idea of an undetectably good sense of humour. If what counts as funny is necessarily within our reflective grasp, then surely what counts as good conditions for appreciating what is funny is also necessarily within our reflective grasp. Yet the restricted mutual dependence view seems to deny the analogous inference for normative reasons. On the restricted mutual dependence view, normative reasons are necessarily within the range of practical reasoning in virtue of the response dependence of reason-giving ends. However, given the response independent rational privilege of responses to ends it is consistent to suppose that the rational privilege of responses transcends the scope of practical reasoning. The restricted mutual dependence view therefore saddles the normative realist with a rational analogue of the undetectably good sense of humour[30]. Given the alternative of regress or circularity, the normative realist may decide to live with this consequence. After all, no pre-theoretical consideration is philosophically sacrosanct. Who is to say that the complex nature of our reasoning capacity could not in principle be beyond our reflective grasp, and thus make non-decidable for us the question of what counts as the best conditions for its exercise? What evidence do we have to suggest that we are necessarily capable of fully grasping our rational nature? It would not be the first time in the history of philosophy that a constitutive feature of our moral agency was thought to be beyond our grasp[31]. While this response verges on

---

[30] The same consequence was drawn for the mutual independence view above.
[31] Kant's so-called 'defence' of morality springs to mind. See e.g. Kant (1956).

the desperate, it might conceivably be considered worth the cost in the absence of a more satisfactory alternative.

Response Dependence as a Relational Complex

One might suspect that the problems arising for the various versions of normative realism considered so far all have the same explanation. These views all claim that ends and responses bring irreducibly distinct elements to the grounds of normative reason claims. The mutual dependence and mutual independence views both postulate irreducibly distinct sources of normative reasons in responses to ends and ends themselves. The dispositional and epistemic views postulate an irreducibly distinct source of normative reasons in responses only or in ends only, respectively. It might be thought that the problems faced by these four versions of normative realism are avoidable by denying the commitment to irreducibly distinct sources of normative reasons. Instead, the response dependence of reason-giving ends could be construed as a relational complex consisting of ends and responses, where neither element is claimed to possess normative significance apart from its relation to the other. I call this *the relational view*. The relational view is similar to the mutual dependence view in that certain features of ends and responses to ends constitute individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the existence of normative reasons. Yet the relational view differs from the mutual dependence view in one crucial respect. On a mutual dependence view, an end is reason-giving just in case it is *both* of a certain nature *and* appropriately responded to in rationally privileged circumstances, where both conditions are capable of independent specification. Furthermore, on an unrestricted mutual dependence view, a response is rationally privileged just in case *it* is both of a certain nature and appropriately responded to in rationally privileged circumstances, where both conditions are capable of independent specification. It is this commitment to independent specification that generates the regress and circularity problem for the unrestricted mutual dependence view. On a relational view, by contrast, an end is normatively significant just in case it is appropriately responded to in rationally privileged circumstances. A response is normatively significant just in case it issues in the endorsement of reason-giving ends. On this view, neither condition is capable of independent specification. Thus, Jack may only have a reason to take up yoga if he would want to do so in conditions of

calm, rational reflection. But equally, Jack only has a reason to do what he would want in conditions of calm, rational reflection if they would make him favour such reason-giving ends as taking up yoga. Jack's normative reasons are grounded in a relational complex in which ends and responses are 'mutually fitted' to each other[32]. The metaphor of mutual fittingness directs our attention away from the quasi-mechanical metaphors underlying the accounts of normative reasons considered above. According to these metaphors, response dependence involves a 'source' of reasons in responses that somehow 'generate' normative privilege and then 'transfers' it down to ends as if in a carriage on rails. The mutual dependence view involves two independent 'sources' of normative reasons, each functioning as a mini-generator of the raw materials of normative significance. It is partly this quasi-mechanical picture that generates the regress or circularity problem for the rational dispositionalist. The relational view re-conceptualises the mutual dependence of normative reasons on ends and responses in terms of an irreducible relational complex in which the quasi-hydraulic metaphors of 'generation' and 'transfer' have no place.

The relational view avoids the two main problems facing the mutual dependence view. First, there is no need for an independent account of the supervenience base of normative reasons. Given that normative reasons are grounded in a mutually fitted relational complex of ends and responses, there is no further question of how their normative relevance can be independently specified. Second, the relational view avoids the regress or circularity problem in the form this is faced by the unrestricted mutual dependence view. On the relational view, the rational privilege of responses just consists in their endorsement of reason-giving ends. It is therefore not even partly a matter of these responses themselves being favourably responded to. The regress is blocked before it begins. At the same time, the relational view retains the response dependence of reason-giving ends. Finally, both the realist and the rational intelligibility condition have consistent interpretations on the relational view. On this view, both the nature of ends and the nature of responses to them constrain the extension of normative reasons. It is just that neither constraint can be understood except in relation to the other.

In spite of its apparent advantages, the relational view also has associated costs. First, there is an obvious circularity embodied in the allegedly mutual constraining effect of ends and responses.

---

[32] The relational view provides a potentially more plausible interpretation of Wiggins (1991).

Second, a regress or circularity problem can be raised with respect to the relational complex as a whole. According to the relational view, the existence of normative reasons depends on the contents of some such complexes. Other complexes do not give rise to normative reasons. It follows that some complexes are rationally privileged over others. In virtue of what does this rational privilege obtain? Either the rational privilege of these complexes is response dependent or it is not. If it is, then the relational view is faced with a regress or circularity problem regarding the rational privilege of reason-giving complexes of ends and responses. If it is not, then some complexes of ends and responses are rationally privileged in virtue of their nature. If they are, then the relational view is committed to the rational analogue of an undetectably good sense of humour in the sense of undetectably fitting pairs of ends and responses. If the response independent rational privilege of either ends or responses is reflectively unattractive, there are no grounds to prefer the response independent rational privilege of response-end complexes.

There might be independent grounds to think the relational view is a better version of normative realism than the restricted mutual dependence view. In particular, the relational view might be found attractive to the extent that it avoids the problems associated with normative relevance, supervenience, or entailment. Nevertheless, its vulnerability to regress or circularity does not recommend it as an improvement on the restricted mutual dependence view.

Conclusion

In the end, the normative realist is left with a commitment to the possibility of an undetectably good sense of humour. Given the pre-theoretical attractions of the rational intelligibility condition, it is difficult to see this as an attractive view. The alternative is to give up on the concept of a normative reason as jointly defined by the realist and rational intelligibility condition. This would arguably amount to abandoning the pre-theoretical concept of a normative reason. Although I do not wish to recommend this alternative here, it is worth noting the possibility that this is the conclusion we shall have to draw in the end[33].

---

[33] For two recent attempts to abandon the normativity of reasons, see Lillehammer (1999b) and Bittner (2001). Lillehammer (1999b) argues that we can consistently conceive of the idea of normative reasons as a confused

References

Bittner, R.: 2001, *Doing Things for Reasons*, Oxford University
    Press, Oxford.
Blackburn, S.: 1993, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford University
    Press, Oxford.
Blackburn, S.: 1998, *Ruling Passions*, Oxford University Press,
    Oxford.
Brower, B.: 1993, 'Dispositional Ethical Realism' *Ethics* 103, 221
    225.
Crane, T.: 2002, *The Elements of Mind*, Oxford University Press,
    Oxford.
Dancy, J.: 1986, 'Two Conceptions of Moral Realism' *Proceedings
    of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volume 60,167 87.
Dancy, D.: 2000, *Practical Reality*, Oxford University Press,
    Oxford.
Darwall, S.: 1983, *Impartial Reason*, Cornell University Press,
    Cornell.
Gibbard, A.: 1990, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Oxford University
    Press, Oxford.
Grice, G. R.: 1976, *The Grounds of Moral Judgement*, Cambridge
    University Press, Cambridge.
Jackson, F.: 1998, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Oxford University
    Press, Oxford.
Johnston, M.: 1989, 'Dispositionalist Theories of Value'
    *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,*Supplementary
    Volume 63, 139-74.
Johnston, M.: 1993, 'Objectivity Refigured' in Haldane, J. and
    Wright, C. Eds., *Reality,Representation, and Projection*
    Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Kant, I.: 1956, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Translated by L. White
    Beck, Macmillan Publishing Company, London.
Korsgaard, C.: 1995, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge
    University Press,Cambridge.

---

commitment embodied in moral discourse. Bittner (2001) argues that the
confusion does not consist in an erroneous common sense commitment to the
existence of normative reasons, but in a philosophically erroneous interpretation
of reasons as normative. A third response to inconsistency in metaphysics is to
go non-factualist about the relevant discourse. For this strategy, see Blackburn
(1993), (1998).

Lillehammer, H.: 1999a, 'Analytical Dispositionalism and Practical Reason' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2,117-133.

Lillehammer, H.: 1999b, 'Normative Antirealism' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37, 201-225.

Lillehammer, H.: 2000, 'Revisionary Dispositionalism and Practical Reason'. *Journal of Ethics*. 4, 173-190.

Lillehammer, H.: 2002, 'Moral Realism, Normative Reasons, and Rational Intelligibility' *Erkenntnis*, 57, 47-69.

McFarland, D. and Miller, A.: 1998, 'Response-Dependence without Reduction?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76, 407-425.

Parfit, D.: 1997, 'Reasons and Motivation' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supplementary Volume 71, 99-130.

Pettit, P.: 1990, 'Realism and Response Dependence', *Mind* 100, 587-626.

Scanlon, T.: 1982, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism' in A. Sen and B. Williams (Eds.) *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 103-28.

Scanlon, T.: 1998, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Smith, M.: 1994, *The Moral Problem*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Wiggins, D.: 1991, 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life', in

Wiggins, D., *Needs, Values, Truth* 2nd Ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 87-137.

Wright, C.: 1992, *Truth and Objectivity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Faculty of Philosophy
University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue
Cambridge CB3 9DA
UK
Hl201@cam.ac.uk