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The fundamental reason for reasons fundamentalism

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Abstract Reasons, it is often said, are king in contemporary normative theory. Some philosophers say not only that the vocabulary of reasons is useful, but that reasons play a fundamental explanatory role in normative theory—that many, most, or even all, other normative facts are grounded in facts about reasons. Even if reasons fundamentalism, the strongest version of this view, has only been wholeheartedly endorsed by a few philosophers, it has a kind of prominence in contemporary normative theory that suits it to be described as orthodoxy by its critics. It is the purpose of this paper to make progress toward understanding what appeal Reasons Fundamentalism should have, and whether that appeal is deserved. I will do so by exploring and comparing two central motivations for Reasons Fundamentalism.

Keywords Reasons · Normativity · Explanation · Moral worth

Reasons, it is often said, are king in contemporary normative theory. The vocabulary of reasons forms a common currency in which we can formulate theses as diverse as evidentialism in epistemology and egalitarianism in political philosophy.¹ Philosophers appeal to the vocabulary of reasons in order to explain

¹ For example, Jonathan Adler (2002, 9) describes the thesis of *evidentialism* in epistemology as the view that “to (fully) believe that p one needs adequate reasons”. Similarly, according to Derek Parfit (1997, 209), one important form of *egalitarianism* is the view that “we always have a reason to prevent or reduce inequality, if we can”.

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topics as diverse as peer disagreement, self-defense, supererogation, pragmatic encroachment, legal reasoning, and the emotions, and even this is a severely abbreviated list.

But some philosophers go further. They say not only that the vocabulary of reasons is useful, but that reasons play a fundamental explanatory role in normative theory—that many, most, or even all, other normative facts are grounded in facts about reasons. Even if reasons fundamentalism, the strongest version of this view, has only been wholeheartedly endorsed by a few philosophers, it has a kind of prominence in contemporary normative theory that suits it to be described as orthodoxy by its critics.² It is the purpose of this paper to make progress toward understanding what appeal Reasons Fundamentalism should have, and whether that appeal is deserved. I will do so by exploring and comparing two central motivations for Reasons Fundamentalism.

1 The two motivations

Reasons Fundamentalism is a global thesis. Quantifying over each normative property and relation, it says that facts regarding that property or relation are ultimately, inclusively grounded in facts regarding the reason relation. So it can be argued for either directly, by directly motivating a universal claim about normative properties and relations, or indirectly, by arguing individually for what we might call *relative* priority theses—that facts about what someone ought to do are grounded in facts regarding the reason relation, that facts about what is good are grounded in facts regarding the reason relation, and so on.

There are some global, direct, considerations supporting Reasons Fundamentalism in the literature, but they carry strong commitments. For example, in other work I have argued that reductive realism in metaethics is true, that it is highly likely that at most one normative property or relation is analyzable in non-normative terms, and that of all normative properties and relations, the reason relation is the most likely to be analyzable in non-reductive terms. It follows that it is most likely that all normative properties and relations are ultimately analyzable in terms of the reason relation, and hence, given the right bridge principle between analyzability and fundamentality, that Reasons Fundamentalism is most likely to be true. This argument may be interesting to some theorists, but it is reasonable to think that it goes wrong at the first step—and even if it does not, it is hardly an ecumenical argument for a view shared by many nonreductive normative realists. Other global, direct, attempts to support Reasons Fundamentalism and similar theses are similarly controversial.

In this paper I will be concerned instead with *indirect* ways of motivating Reasons Fundamentalism. Each of these motivations is, in the first instance, an argument for the *local* priority of reasons over facts about someone ought to do. The

² Prominent proponents of something like this view have included Derek Parfit (2011), Jonathan Dancy (2004), and Mark Schroeder (2007).

priority of reasons over facts about what someone ought to do is, I believe, the *core case* for the appeal of Reasons Fundamentalism. The way in which facts regarding the reason relation seem to be helpfully explanatory of what people ought to do has seemed to some to be a model for how facts regarding the reason relation could be helpfully explanatory of many other kinds of normative fact. It is therefore worth getting straight on the appeal of this core relative priority thesis, independently of whether it generalizes to the priority of the reason relation over any other normative properties or relations. By better understanding the attractions of taking facts about what people ought to do to be grounded in facts about reasons, we can understand *what it would take* for these attractions to generalize.

This paper considers and compares two arguments for the relative priority of the reason relation over facts about what someone ought to do. The first is what I call the *classical argument*, as it derives from W.D. Ross's presentation in *The Right and the Good* and is widely familiar. The basic idea of the classical argument is that the best way to account for the difficulty of formulating modally sufficient conditions on what someone ought to do is that facts about what someone ought to do are in fact grounded in a competition between distinct factors that can weigh in different directions.

The classical argument contrasts with the other central motivation for the relative priority of reasons, which I call the *fundamental argument*. Whereas the classical argument emphasizes the role of reasons as explainers of what we ought to do, the fundamental argument draws on both this role *and* on reasons' role in deliberation and action. According to this argument, facts regarding reasons must have explanatory priority because this is required in order to explain the distinction between doing what you ought to do, and acting *well*—the distinction, in the moral case, between acting rightly and acting with moral worth. The most promising and general accounts of acting well require, I argue, that the norm in accordance with which one is acting well is determined by the balance of facts regarding the reason relation.

2 Setup

In order to get clearer on the thesis for which we are considering arguments, we must triangulate on the relevant sense of 'reason', the relevant sense of 'normative', and the relevant sense of fundamentality or priority at stake. None of these tasks is trivial, but in this section I will do my best to gesture toward what I will have in mind.

As many have noted, 'reason' is said in many ways. It is standard to distinguish, for example, between normative, motivating, and explanatory reasons, and has become common to distinguish between objective and subjective normative reasons. Explanatory reasons are simply answers to 'why' questions, and so may be safely set aside as not essentially normative. Motivating reasons—the reasons *for which* someone does something—are not what reasons fundamentalists have in mind, either. It is reasons in the *normative* sense that are said to come first, among

normative properties and relations—reasons in the sense of considerations that *count in favor*.

Yet counting in favor may also be said in more than one way. When there is petrol in Bernie's glass, that counts against his taking a sip, in the sense of making it less advisable. But when he reasonably believes that it is gin, something counts in *favor* of his taking a sip, at least from his own point of view, for it is a more *rational* thing for him to do (even if not advisable). We may call the first way of counting of favor the *objective* sense of 'reason', since in this sense what count in favor are facts, independently of the agent's grasp of them, whereas we may call the second way of counting in favor the *subjective* sense of 'reason', since in this sense counting in favor correlates with what the agent *takes* the facts to be, rather than with what they actually are.³

Many—probably most—theorists who attach a central explanatory role to reasons hold that *objective* reasons are fundamental, and subjective reasons are to be analyzed in some way in terms of objective reasons. But others hold that it is subjective reasons that are fundamental and explanatory, and that objective reasons are to be analyzed in some way in terms of subjective reasons. And a third view is possible—that objective and subjective reasons are both to be analyzed or understood in terms of some common core—what we might call *core reasons*.⁴ I will not discriminate between any of these views in this paper. Neither of the arguments that I will consider—the classical argument nor the fundamental argument—will support any of these views over the others. So I will use the word 'reason' indiscriminately throughout, for either objective reasons or subjective reasons. Proponents of reasons fundamentalism will need to work out amongst themselves which sorts of reasons are ultimately fundamental. The central features that objective and subjective reasons have in common will emerge in what follows.

As I will be using the term, 'reasons fundamentalism' denotes the thesis, not that reasons are absolutely fundamental, but that they are *most* fundamental, among the class of normative properties and relations. It is the thesis that every normative property or relation must be explained in terms of reasons, or as it is sometimes put, in a phrase that would make my title less cute, that reasons come *first*. So in particular, as I am understanding the thesis, reasons fundamentalism is a thesis that can be accepted both by Derek Parfit (2011), who claims that reasons are irreducible and non-natural, and by me, even though I have claimed in the past (Schroeder 2007) that they are reducible claims that they are reducible in terms of intuitively naturalistic properties such as desire, promotion, and explanation.

Some proponents of reasons fundamentalism, including me in previous work (Schroeder 2007), understand it as a thesis about the nature or *real analysis* of normative properties. I will not assume this here, or build it into the characterization of reasons fundamentalism. Instead, provided that we are careful, we may take the

³ Here I follow Schroeder (2008). Many philosophers talk in terms of *possessed* reasons or reasons you 'have', but this talk is contentious and naturally interpreted as incorporating substantive commitments about the relationship between objective and subjective reasons, so it is best avoided.

⁴ Dancy (2000) is naturally interpreted as accepting this view. See the discussion in Schroeder (2018a, 294–295).

most general thesis of reasons fundamentalism to be a thesis about *grounding*—that every normative fact is grounded, at least in part, in facts about reasons. Then Schroeder (2007) may be safely interpreted as assuming that facts about grounding are themselves grounded in real analyses of properties. If (and only if) that further assumption is right, will a thesis about the role of reasons in the analysis of other properties follow from reasons fundamentalism as I am defining it here.

Of course, we must note that some care is required in order to adequately formulate reasons fundamentalism in terms of grounding, for a variety of reasons. Most saliently, facts about reasons are themselves normative, and proponents of ‘grounding’ talk typically assume that grounding is irreflexive, which makes it trivially false that all normative facts are grounded in facts about reasons. I’ll assume that we can solve this problem by formulating our thesis in terms of the reflexive closure of the grounding relation, or saying that all *other* normative facts are grounded in facts about reasons.

Another obstacle is that grounding is also typically taken to be a relation among *facts*, and the classification of complex facts as normative or non-normative is itself a complicated issue.⁵ I’ll assume, again, for purposes of inclusiveness, that some way of finessing such issues is forthcoming, and that we do have in hand a more precise way of characterizing reasons fundamentalism in terms of grounding. I won’t further concern myself here with how this finesse might work, except to note that less ecumenical characterizations of reasons fundamentalism in terms of the real analysis of properties do not obviously share this difficulty.

3 The classical argument

The classical argument for reasons fundamentalism comes from W. D. Ross’s *The Right and The Good*. Ross noted that for essentially any plausible universal generalization about what people are morally obligated to do, it is possible to construct apparent counterexamples. But Ross also observed a pattern in what it takes to construct such intuitive counterexamples. You do so by considering cases in which more than one morally important factor is at stake. For example, in order to construct counterexamples to the principle that you should never lie, it helps to consider cases in which the truth is very harmful. And in order to construct counterexamples to the principle that you should always do what will produce the greater happiness, it helps to consider cases in which you can produce a marginal increase of happiness by committing a great injustice.

We can go further than Ross, in laying out the circumstantial evidence. It is sometimes permissible to break promises. For example, if you promise not to be late to our next meeting but run across someone who has fallen down and needs assistance getting back up while cutting it close for our meeting, it is okay to break your promise and be just a little bit late. Or if you have promised to come to my wedding but there is a mass shooting earlier that morning and you are the only

⁵ See, for example, Prior (1960).

available emergency room physician, again, it is okay to break your promise and miss the wedding. Moreover, if there is a mass shooting just before our meeting, it is okay if you are late for the meeting. But someone falling down and needing help getting back up does not make it okay for you to miss my wedding. In general, in order to justify breaking a more important promise, you need a better excuse.

This could be a coincidence—it could be, for example, that there is one absolute rule forbidding breaking a promise to be late for a meeting unless someone has fallen down and needs your assistance or there has been a mass shooting and you are an emergency room physician, and another absolute rule forbidding breaking a promise to attend a wedding unless someone there has been a mass shooting and you are an emergency room physician. But these absolute rules seem to leave a powerful explanatory generality on the table—and this simple example vastly undersells the power of the generality—promises of intermediate importance may be broken for mediumly good cause or excellent cause but not for minor cause, similar points apply to different promises, and the same sorts of generalizations apply to cases in which it is permissible to lie, cases in which it is permissible to treat someone unfairly, cases in which it is permissible not to help someone you could easily help, and so on and so on.

Ross's explanation of all of these cases is the same. In every case, what you ought to do (all-things-considered, as Ross put it) is a matter of the *competition* between different factors. Analogizing these competing moral factors to physical forces, Ross noted how difficult it would be to find an equation for all motion, given that acceleration is actually determined in accordance with net force, and there may be a variety of different forces acting on the very same body, each of them governed by their own set of laws. Ross called these competing moral forces *prima facie duties*, and later theorists have called them *reasons*.

The story that I have just told is an approximate first pass at the classical argument for reasons fundamentalism. The classical argument gets going with the observation that some normative property or relation does not behave in the sort of simple way that one should expect of something that can be characterized by an absolute rule or generalization, but *does* behave in the sort of way that we should expect of something that is determined by the interrelation of a set of competing factors. In the first instance, it is an argument about moral obligation, but the structure of the argument generalizes. Once we see that what someone ought to do, or what is wrong, is subject to these explanatory constraints, we can start to see the same things in many places.

For example, whether someone is admirable is not subject to simple easy generalizations; someone who is an excellent piano player may be admirable, but not if they are a jerk, and even a jerk may be admirable on account of their piano playing if they are a really rare talent, but not if they are also a murderer. These are the right kinds of considerations to motivate extending the classical argument from obligation to admirableness.⁶ And it is the ambition of the proponent of the classical

⁶ This example comes from Schroeder (2010).

argument to keep extending it in this way, to every other normative property and relation.

4 Buttressing the classical argument

The most obvious weakness in the classical argument is therefore in its aspiration to generalize. Even if Ross is completely correct in his diagnosis of the source of moral obligation, the vast majority of the reasons fundamentalist's work is still cut out for her. Indeed, many philosophers do accept Ross's diagnosis of the source of moral obligation without accepting reasons fundamentalism. They hold that reasons are prior to and explanatory of obligations and more generally of what people *ought* to do or even of deontic notions more generally, but that facts about what is a reason for what are in turn grounded in facts about value, or about rationality, or about fittingness, or about virtue (just to pick four prominent examples).

Still, even Ross's diagnosis of the case of moral obligation is in contention. This is because consequentialists with pluralist axiologies can aspire to explain many of the same things.⁷ When you have a choice between keeping a promise and helping someone in need, Ross and the reasons fundamentalists will say that you are subject to competing reasons. But the pluralist consequentialist will say that you have the opportunity to realize competing values. Likewise, when you have a choice between perpetuating a small injustice and preventing great suffering for many, Ross and the reasons fundamentalists will say that you are subject to competing reasons. But the pluralist consequentialist will again say that you have the opportunity to realize competing values. Both forms of theory can diagnose the same cases, because both understand them as the product of a kind of competition. The difference is that for reasons fundamentalists, the competition happens between reasons, whereas for pluralist consequentialists, the competition is between values. So even to motivate her view about her core case of moral obligation, the proponent of the classical argument for reasons fundamentalism must locate some additional feature of reasons—over and above the fact that they compete—which can distinguish her view from that of the pluralist consequentialist, and moreover which can do so in a way that tilts the evidence in her favor.

The best answer to this problem, for the proponent of the classical argument, is that whereas what can be good or bad are *outcomes*—propositions about how things turn out to be—reasons instead support *actions*, which I conceive not as concrete events, but as a special class of *properties* of agents.⁸ The fact that *good* and *bad* are predicated primarily of propositions, whereas reasons are relations to properties, makes a very sharp prediction about which interrelations between what different

⁷ Sidgwick (1907) famously tries to use a monistic consequentialist theory, in order to explain many of the same things as Ross, but Ross has the advantage that he can offer the very same diagnosis of intuitive counterexamples to utilitarianism that he and Sidgwick both offer to intuitive counterexamples to absolute deontological principles. The advantage of pluralist consequentialism is that it can agree with Ross that it is not always best to maximize happiness.

⁸ This argument comes from Schroeder (2011).

individuals ought to do are predicted by each theory. The cases in which they come apart have come to be known in the literature as cases of agent-relative constraints and agent-relative options, and I'll focus here on the case of constraints, as the most forceful.

In a typical case of an agent-relative constraint, an agent faces the choice between performing one normally wrong action, such as killing an innocent person, or allowing two others to perform exactly analogous actions. In order to explain this in terms of the competition between values, the pluralist consequentialist must say that the result of the agent's killing the innocent person would be *worse* than the result of the other two agents killing their innocent victims. But we can make the three cases as much alike as you like aside from the fact that one has the effect of preventing the others.⁹ And so the only way for a pluralist consequentialist to accept the verdict that it is wrong to kill an innocent person even if by doing so you can prevent two others from killing innocent persons, is to postulate that although killings of innocent persons are bad, killings of innocent persons that prevent other killings of innocent persons are *more than twice as bad*—intrinsicly speaking.¹⁰

Similarly, in order to accept the verdict that you should help your own child with their homework even if the alternative is to make sure that two parents who otherwise would not help their own children with their homework, the pluralist consequentialist must hold that although helping your child with their homework is good, it is less than half as good to help your own child with their homework if anyone else's choices could have resulted in your not doing so. These are bizarre claims to make about what is good and about how good it is, so it is no wonder that pluralist consequentialists who have wanted to accept intuitive verdicts about cases of agent-relative constraints have typically denied that goodness and badness are monadic properties of states of affairs, and endorsed instead what has come to be known as *agent-relative teleology*, according to which one outcome may be better relative to me, while another is better relative to you.¹¹

The point of moving to agent-relative teleology is to break the connection between what the consequentialist needs to say about the outcomes of the first agent's action in order to explain why it is wrong apart from what consequences this has for what she must say about the consequences of the second and third agents' actions.¹² By doing so, she can say that the first agent's killing is worse relative-to-

⁹ They can't be made alike in this respect, without the first person's killing resulting in *more* killings, by preventing the preventions of killings, which undermines the force of the example.

¹⁰ Many agent-relative teleologists arrive at their view more quickly, assuming that it is the *only* way to capture these cases of constraints. But as Oddie and Milne (1991) have shown, that is not exactly right. What *is* true, is that the assumptions required in order to reconcile constraints with traditional, agent-neutral consequentialism become increasingly implausible as assumptions about a notion of goodness about which we have some independent grasp. See Nair (2014) for a particularly good discussion of this point, and Setiya for a defense of the view that killings that prevent killings really are much worse than killings that do not.

¹¹ On Agent-Relative Teleology, see especially Sen (1983), Dreier (1993), Smith (2003), Louise (2004), and Portmore (2014).

¹² Compare especially Samuel Scheffler's reasoning in *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, particularly at (1982, **.*).

her than the other two killings are, without needing to say that she is in some way special. According to the agent-relative teleologist, every agent's killings are worse-relative-to her than any other agent's killings, so since each agent ought to act so as to produce the result that is best-relative-to her, that is why each agent's permissible action is subject to a doing/allowing distinction.

So agent-relative teleologists can recapture the possibility of agent-centered constraints by making their rankings of states of affairs relative to agents. But this is very much like ranking properties, which of course, is what the reasons fundamentalist would have us do.¹³ Explaining obligations in terms of reasons is therefore the original way of doing agent-relative teleology. Indeed, it is probably better, because it is less flexible. According to the reasons fundamentalist explanation, each person ought not to kill, even in order to prevent two killings, because the reason not to kill is stronger than the reason to prevent a killing. That is, it is explained by a unitary fact. Whereas according to the agent-relative teleological explanation, it is because *for each person*, the outcome of that person killing is worse relative to that person than the outcome of any other person being killed. But that means that the agent-relative teleologist needs to appeal to separate facts about every agent in order to explain something that the reasons fundamentalist can explain with a simple comparison between two reasons.

I conclude that the full version of the classical argument for reasons fundamentalism must appeal to more than the idea that reasons compete. It must also appeal to the idea that reasons are *property-oriented*, rather than *outcome* or *proposition-oriented*, and make heavy weather out of fine distinctions between reasons and agent-relative values—all just in order to cover what is supposed to be the very core case for reasons fundamentalism.

5 Interlude: features of reasons

In the last two sections, I have laid out the core of the classical argument for reasons fundamentalism, and showed how it tries to generalize from the core case of moral obligation. I also showed how it depends on the idea that reasons compete or balance in the determination of what people ought to do, and I argued that this is not enough—in order to provide differential support for reasons fundamentalism over pluralist consequentialism, it must also appeal to the idea that reasons are *property-oriented*, rather than *outcome-oriented*, and in turn rely on fine distinctions between reasons and agent-relative values. But my goal is to contrast the classical argument with another motivation—the fundamental argument. In order to better appreciate what makes the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism more central to the attractions of reasons fundamentalism, it will help to see what features of reasons this argument leaves out.

¹³ Dreier (2011), Oddie (2018), Milona and Schroeder (2019).

In practice, normative reasons for action are widely associated with playing two different prominent theoretical roles.¹⁴ One of these roles is as explainers of what we ought to do, and this is the role that is featured by the classical argument for reasons fundamentalism. But reasons are also widely associated with a second role, as the proper objects of attention in deliberation. This role for reasons plays no obvious role at all in the classical argument.

Yet the idea that normative reasons play a role in deliberation or reasoning, or that when we are reasoning well, the reasons for which we act *are* or are closely associated with the normative reasons for us to act, is quite pervasive. Bernard Williams (1979), for example, famously maintains that it is central to the concept of a reason that there must be a *sound deliberative path* from recognizing that reason to acting on it. Similarly, building on but qualifying what Williams says, Christine Korsgaard (1986) equally famously maintains that if there is a reason for you to do something, then insofar as rationality has influence on your actions, you will be motivated to act for this reason.

A whole family of newly popular views now maintains that this deliberative role for reasons is central, and indeed that the nature of reasons can be analyzed in terms of it. For example, according to both Kieran Setiya (2014) and Matty Silverstein (2016), who develop this idea in different ways, this is what reasons *are*—they are premises of sound deliberative inferences.¹⁵ According to Jonathan Way (2017), reasons are premises of good reasoning. And according to Alex Gregory (2016), normative reasons are simply good motivating reasons.

The exact shape of the deliberative role for reasons is highly contested. For example, there are fairly compelling examples of normative reasons that *cannot* be good motivating reasons, cannot be premises of good reasoning, cannot motivate you if you are rational, and cannot be the subject of beliefs which trigger good dispositions of practical thought.¹⁶ This is because some reasons are what have come to be called *elusive*, in the sense that finding out about them makes them go away. For example, for someone who loves successful surprise parties thrown in his own honor, but hates unsuccessful surprise parties, the fact that there is a hitherto-unsuspected surprise party waiting for him in the next room is a reason to go into the next room, but it can't be a reason for which he could rationally act, because he couldn't learn about it without making it false. So count me high on the list of the most prominent skeptics about whether the deliberative role for reasons could be used in order to provide an *analysis* of reasons' nature. Nevertheless, there is something important and right about Williams' idea, even if some philosophers have endorsed versions of it that are slightly too strong.

So back to the classical argument. The classical argument leaves out the deliberative role of reasons entirely. But that is quite a surprising thing to do, if you

¹⁴ Compare Wedgwood (2015).

¹⁵ This is Setiya's (2014) informal gloss on his account, which he goes on to spell out more precisely in other terms, but the idea of sound inferences forms the backbone of Silverstein's (2016) account. This difference makes it likely that Silverstein's account has better prospects to avoid the objection from *elusive* reasons explained below.

¹⁶ Schroeder (2007, chapter 2).

are trying to construct the best argument for taking reasons to be fundamental. After all, if you are trying to argue that reasons are fundamental, you should want to give considerations that contrast reasons with other normative properties and relations—otherwise, your argument will have a hard time discriminating the conclusion that you want to support from competitor hypotheses. It may be good at supporting some *family* of views, but bad at discriminating among the members of that family.

So if a deliberative role is central to reasons, then it is likely that by offering an argument that ignores the deliberative role of reasons, you are leaving substantial argumentative resources on the table. And so it should be no surprise that, because the classical argument leaves the deliberative role for reasons on the table, it has a hard time distinguishing its preferred conclusion from alternative hypotheses. Yet that is exactly what we have seen, in considering the weaknesses of the classical argument. One of the central weaknesses of the classical argument is the trouble it faces in successfully distinguishing reasons fundamentalism from creative twists on pluralistic consequentialism, such as agent-relative teleology.

The fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism does not leave these argumentative resources on the table. It takes full advantage of both traditional roles for reasons: their role in competing to explain what we ought to do, and their role in deliberation. This makes it what we should expect, from a central motivation for reasons fundamentalism.

6 Interlude: acting, feeling, and thinking well

The fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism begins with the contrast between doing the right thing and acting *well*. This distinction is familiar from Aristotle's distinction between acting from virtue and merely acting in accordance with virtue, and from Kant's distinction between doing the right thing and acting with moral worth. It is one thing to do the right thing, but it is another to act well. If you act well, in this sense, you do the right thing, but you can do the right thing without acting well.

The difference between acting well and merely doing the right thing is agreed on all hands to depend on *how* you act, and not merely on *what* you do, unless we individuate actions very finely. In particular, whether you act well depends in some way on your motives. Theorists have disagreed widely, however, about which motives are relevant to acting well.

According to Paulina Sliwa, for example, the motive that is required in order to act well is the desire to do the right thing as such. According to Sliwa, you act well—with moral worth—just in case you know what is right, and you do it on the basis of that knowledge, out of an explicit desire to do the right thing.¹⁷ Sliwa's view explains why acting well entails doing the right thing, because knowledge is factive, and so you cannot satisfy her condition for acting well unless your action really is right. Similarly, according to Zoë Johnson King, acting well requires doing

¹⁷ Sliwa (2012, 2016).

the right thing *deliberately*. Again, for Johnson King, this means that you do the right thing out of a desire to do the right thing *as such*.¹⁸

Both Sliwa and Johnson King offer as the best general support for their views the claim that their views best capture the way in which acting well requires that you must do the right thing in a way that is *non-accidental*.¹⁹ This is an attractive argument, because it is clearly true that people who act well do not do the right thing merely by luck, and it is clearly true that the best examples of people doing the right thing but not acting well—like Kant's selfish shopkeeper—are clearly examples in which in some sense the agent is merely lucky that it turned out that he did the right thing, given that his motives were orthogonal.

There is a popular objection to views about acting well like Sliwa's and Johnson King's by which I do not think we should be persuaded. According to this objection, the desire to do what is right *as such* is morally objectionable in some way, and being moved by this desire actually constitutes a kind of *vice*.²⁰ (As Howard (2019) has noted, it is quite startling that the concept of acting well could be so poorly understood that the two leading views hold of one and the same motive that it is essential to all moral worth and that it is a vice!) For reasons that I have advanced elsewhere, I don't believe that this is a good objection, and I will set it aside here.²¹

There is, however, a much better objection to Sliwa's and Johnson King's accounts of acting well. And that is that they fail to generalize in the way that we should expect of an adequate account of the relationship between acting well and doing the right thing. That is because acting with moral worth and doing the morally right thing are just a special case of an extremely diverse range of well/right contrasts. There is a similar contrast between acting rationally and doing the thing that it is rational to do, believing justifiedly and believing the thing there is justification to believe, fearing appropriately and fearing the thing it is appropriate to fear, and even knowledge and believing the right thing. For short, the distinctions between acting, feeling, and thinking rightly, versus acting, feeling, and thinking *well*.²²

Each of these relationships are very similar. If you act rationally, then you must be doing something that it is rational to do, but not conversely. Acting rationally imposes a condition not just on *what* you do (unless we individuate what you do very finely so as to include motives), but on *how* you do it, and in particular on your motives. And when you act rationally, it is no accident that you do something that it is rational for you to do. Similar points for each of the other distinctions, and indeed for many, many more. For example, if you fear appropriately, then you fear what it is appropriate to fear, but not conversely. Whether you fear appropriately depends not just on what you fear, but how you fear it, and in particular on the reasons for which you fear it. And if you fear appropriately, it is no accident that you fear what

¹⁸ King (2020).

¹⁹ Sliwa (2016), King (2020).

²⁰ Compare Smith (2003, chapter 3), Arpaly (2002b).

²¹ See especially Schroeder (2007, chapter 2) and (2009).

²² Compare Schroeder (2018b).

it is appropriate to fear. If you believe justifiedly—what epistemologists call with *doxastic justification*—then you believe what you have justification—what epistemologists call *propositional justification*—to believe. But whether you believe justifiedly depends not just on what you believe, but how you believe it, and it is no accident that you believe what you have justification to believe. And similarly, if you know, you believe what it is correct to believe, but not conversely. Whether you know depends not just on what you believe but how you believe it, and if you know, it is no accident that you believe the correct thing.

Now let us apply each of Sliwa's and Johnson King's theories to each of these distinctions, in order to see what they suggest. According to the analogue of Sliwa's theory, we should expect that in order to act rationally, you must know what it is rational to do, and do it out of a desire to do what is rational *as such*. This is absurd. Not all rational action is motivated by a desire to act rationally. Indeed, Sliwa's only reason for thinking that morally worthy action is motivated by the desire to do the right thing as such, is that that this is the right sort of desire to rationally cooperate with knowledge of what is right, in order to produce rational motivation to do that thing. But if Sliwa's theory of moral worth and the analogue of her theory for acting rationally were both true, then it would follow that it is impossible to ever act both rationally and with moral worth, because these require incompatible motives!

Similarly, the analogue of Sliwa's theory for fearing appropriately would be that you fear appropriately just in case your fear is motivated by a knowledge of what it is appropriate to fear and the desire to fear what it is appropriate to fear. Again, I think, this is a bizarre thing to think. It vastly overgeneralizes fear and requires that it be sensitive to beliefs about appropriateness, rather than just to perceptions and beliefs about things like danger. And Sliwa's theory cannot very well apply to knowledge! It can't be that what makes a belief knowledge is that you know that it is knowledge and believe it out of a desire to know, on pain of regress.

Likewise, Johnson King's theory of moral worth does not extend well to most of the other analogues of moral worth, let alone to all of them. The analogue of her view for the case of acting rationally would be that you act rationally, as opposed merely to doing the thing it is rational to do, when you act deliberately so as to act rationally—i.e., with the goal of acting rationally. Again, I think, this is absurd. We don't need to have beliefs about what is rational in order to act rationally, and the only reason for thinking that beliefs about what is rational and a desire to act rationally would make it rational to act in that way is that we accept a *general* background principle about how beliefs and desires make it rational to act, independently of what you believe is rational.

Similarly, Johnson King's account does not generalize well to appropriate fear or to knowledge. Fearing appropriately cannot be deliberately fearing the thing it is appropriate to fear, with a belief about what it is appropriate to fear and the goal of fearing it as such. And knowing cannot be deliberately believing what is knowledge, out of a belief that something would be knowledge and the goal of knowing. And similar points go, I suggest, for many of the other natural analogues of moral worth—all of the other cases of acting *well*.

I conclude that neither the knowledge constraint nor the deliberate constraint can be an adequate way of capturing the sense in which each concept of acting *well* is

subject to a non-accidentality condition. Since each of these concepts is subject to such a condition, and in analogous ways, only a theory that can apply to all of them can be an adequate account of this condition. The competing idea that moral worth is acting for *right reasons* is such an account.

7 Right reasons

According to *right reasons* accounts of moral worth, acting with moral worth is a matter of the right kind of *match* obtaining between the reasons *for which* you act—that is, your motivating reasons for action—and the reasons *for* you to act—that is, your normative reasons. You must do the thing, intuitively, for the reasons that make it right. According to Korsgaard (1996, 60), for example,

Kant is analysing the good will, characterised as one that does what is right because it is right, in order to discover the principle of unconditionally good action. The assumption behind such an analysis is that *the reason why a good-willed person does an action, and the reason why the action is right, are the same*. The good-willed individual does the right thing because it is the right thing, so if we can discover why the good-willed person does it, we will have *ipso facto* discovered why it is the right thing.

In the case of moral worth, right reasons accounts have been recently prominently endorsed and developed by Julia Markovits and Nomy Arpaly.²³ In the case of knowledge, right reasons accounts are one of the most promising historical responses to the Gettier problem, giving rise to a family of views that came to be known as *defeasibility* theories, because of the issues that came up in finessing what the right matching relationship is.²⁴ And in the case of doxastic justification, right reasons views have long been the dominant view.²⁵

There are different ways of trying to make this broad idea precise. For example, perhaps you do not need to act for *all* of the normative reasons for you to act, in order to act with moral worth, but only for enough of them—and there may be different ways of spelling out just how many are enough.²⁶ Or perhaps it is compatible with moral worth that you also have redundant motives for your action—that among the reasons for which you act are non-moral reasons—so long

²³ Markovits (2010, 2012), Arpaly (2002a, b), Arpaly and Schroeder (2013). An important fellow traveler is Stratton-Lake's (2000) *symmetry thesis*, though Stratton-Lake follows what he takes to be Kant's view in imposing a further condition on moral worth that is inspired by Barbara Herman and Marcia Baron's distinction between primary and secondary motives.

²⁴ See especially Lehrer and Paxson (1969), Lehrer (1970), Klein (1971), Annis (1973), Ackerman (1974), Johnsen (1974), Swain (1974), Olin (1976), and Barker (1976). For a fairly comprehensive discussion of the problems confronted in this attempt to answer the problems posed by Gettier (1963), see Shope (1983), and for discussion of how defeasibility analyses of knowledge are a kind of right reasons account and diagnosis of where implementations of this idea in the 1970's went wrong, see Schroeder (2015).

²⁵ Alston (1985).

²⁶ This is a familiar issue from the Gettier literature—see, for example, Swain (1981, chapter 4).

as your moral reasons play a sufficiently prominent role—and again, there may be different ways of spelling out just what makes this role sufficiently prominent.²⁷ But each of the ways of spelling out this idea share a common core—that moral worth comes from the right *matching* relationship between the reasons for which you act, and the moral reasons for you to act.

In contrast to Sliwa's and Johnson King's views about moral worth, the right reasons account of moral worth generalizes smoothly to all of the analogous concepts of acting well in some respect. Acting rationally, on this view, is having the right matching relationship between the reasons for which you act and the reasons that make it rational. Believing justifiedly—with *doxastic* justification—is having the right matching relationship between the reasons for which you believe and the reasons that make it a justifiable belief—which make it *propositionally* justified. Knowing is having the right matching relationship between the reasons for which you believe and the reasons that make it correct to believe. Fearing appropriately is having the right matching relationship between the reasons for which you fear and the reasons that make it appropriate to fear. And so on, and so on.

This family of right reasons accounts predicts that we should get concepts of acting (or having some attitude) *well*, wherever we are responsive to reasons—that is, wherever we can be properly described as doing things or having some attitude for a reason, or on the basis of reasons. Whenever this is so, we can intelligibly ask whether the reasons for which we do this or have this attitude match the reasons to do it or have that attitude, and hence there will be some interesting concept of acting or feeling/thinking *well*, in addition to the question of whether we do or feel or think the right thing.²⁸ That is why this strategy can make sense of the way in which the family of acting or thinking *well* generalizes—the weakest point of both Sliwa's and Johnson King's strategies for understanding moral worth.

The *right reasons* accounts also make sense of the very specific sense in which acting well imposes a constraint not on just on *what* you do, but on *how* you do it, and in particular on your motives. And the way that it does so—despite being different from the way that Sliwa's and Johnson King's accounts do so—explains why when you act well, it is in some sense no accident or coincidence that you do the right thing. Because the reasons for which you act are also the reasons that make the action right, it could not be a coincidence that you do the right thing.

So right reasons accounts of various concepts of acting and feeling or thinking well have a lot going for them. But while some questions about how, exactly, to best formulate the *matching* relationship at the heart of such accounts can be bracketed, others are more pressing. Seeing the contours of one of these problems and one of the most promising lines of response will, finally, set us up for the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism. This problem arises from cases in which

²⁷ Again, though not explored in recent literature on moral worth, similar issues have long been part of similar discussions in epistemology. See especially Lehrer (1974, chapter 6).

²⁸ Schroeder (2018b).

agents' motivating reasons match their normative reasons, but only in a superficial way.

For example, suppose that Alicia realizes that if she is not careful in how she gets off of her bike, she could knock Bob over, and for this reason, she is careful how she gets off of her bike. So far, so good for the right reasons account of moral worth—one of the reasons to be careful in how she gets off of her bike, indeed one of the moral reasons in this case, is that she could knock Bob over if she is not. And that is the reason for which she is careful. So it looks like she should get credit for doing the right thing. But suppose that she doesn't really care about whether Bob is hurt (for example, by being knocked over), but only about whether she touches Bob (for example, because she has a phobia about germs). Her desire not to touch Bob is what leads her to respond to the fact that she could knock him over if she is not careful in getting off of her bike by being careful. Intuitively, she should not get moral credit for being careful in this case.²⁹

The answers given by Nomy Arpaly and Julia Markovits to cases broadly like this one are very similar. What matters, according to these theorists, is not whether your *incidental* motive matches some *derivative* reason to do what you do, but rather, whether your *ultimate* motive in acting matches the *ultimate* or *most fundamental* reason to do that thing.³⁰ Alicia's case doesn't respect that constraint, because in Alicia's case, the motive to not knock Bob over is not her ultimate motive, but only derivative from her goal of not touching him. If in some other circumstances she could knock him over without touching him, this goal would not affect those circumstances. Likewise, the reason to be more careful is not a fundamental reason, but rather a derivative one, derivative from the reason not to hurt someone. In alternative situations in which someone would not be hurt by being knocked over, this derivative reason would not apply. And so that is how proponents of right reasons accounts of moral worth propose to solve this problem.

8 The fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism

We now have the resources to put onto the table what I call the *Fundamental Argument* for reasons fundamentalism. This argument, as I have advertised, allots a special and significant role for *both* of the central roles of reasons—their explanatory role, that they compete in the determination of what you ought to do, and that their deliberative role, that they can be acted on. Like the classical argument, it works in the first instance to establish a priority relationship between

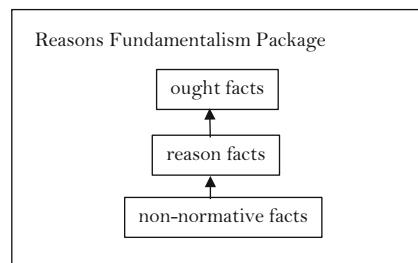
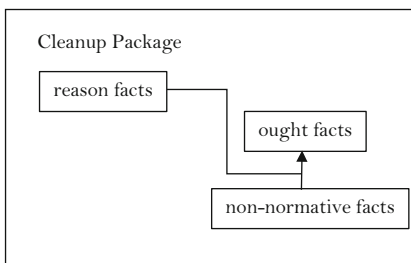
²⁹ Compare Markovits' (2010, 227) case of the altruist and the reward-seeker, who both rush into a burning building for the reason that there is a child who needs to be saved. Arpaly's (2002a, 240) case of Steve plays a similar role, though she uses it to make more points.

³⁰ Markovits: "We should understand the Coincident Reasons Thesis as pronouncing an action morally worthy whenever the noninstrumental reasons for which it is performed coincide with the noninstrumental reasons that morally justify its performance" (2010, 230). A similar feature comes out in Arpaly and Schroeder's (2013) view that moral worth is exhibited by agents who act on intrinsic desires whose objects correspond to the reasons as articulated by the true moral theory.

reasons and *particular* normative properties or relations, one by one. But it is the aspiration of the argument that it generalizes, and the argument remains interesting even if it only establishes that reasons are *relatively* fundamental—that is, more fundamental than many other normative properties and relations—rather than that they are the most fundamental among normative properties and relations.

The main assumption of the fundamental argument is the right reasons account of the nature of moral worth and analogous notions of acting, feeling, and thinking well. This account, of course, is controversial, but in the last few sections I have endeavored to lay out some of the principal reasons why it is attractive, why it does not have some of the bad consequences sometimes claimed of it, and in particular, why it is so much more promising and general than its competitors with regard to each of the notions of acting, feeling, or thinking well to which it applies. It is the assumption that the right reasons account is on the right track, from which the fundamental argument proceeds. Hence, we can see how the fundamental argument relies centrally on the deliberative role for reasons, because the deliberative role for reasons is in turn central to the right reasons account. Only if normative reasons can be the reasons for which we act, feel, or think, can right reasons accounts get up and running, since they rely crucially on this idea.

The main idea of the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism is that once we take seriously the constraints on right reasons accounts of moral worth and on acting well more generally for which I have been arguing, we will see that they lead us inexorably to the idea that the answer to which action is right must be grounded in facts about reasons. But even if the pressure toward this conclusion is inexorable, it is not obvious. On the face of it, the order of grounding might go the other way around. For example, maybe facts about what is morally right are normatively basic, grounded in non-normative facts but not in any other normative facts. It is compatible with this hypothesis that what makes something a *reason* is that it is a fact that grounds a normative fact. On this combination of views, facts about reasons are grounded in facts about *which* non-normative facts ground facts about rightness. So they are grounded in facts about rightness, rather than conversely. Facts about rightness, in turn, are grounded in facts that *are* reasons, but not the facts *that* they are reasons.



Let us call this combination of views the *Cleanup Package*, both because John Broome is one of its most explicit proponents, and because in this dialectical

context, it aspires to clean up the right reasons account of moral worth without appeal to the messiness of reasons fundamentalism.³¹

On the face of it, the cleanup package is completely consistent with right reasons accounts of moral worth. In particular, it offers us an obvious interpretation of what theorists like Julia Markovits mean, when they say that you act with moral worth only when the reasons for which you act are “the reasons why it morally ought to be performed”.³² According to the cleanup view, what the account here is saying is obviously that the reasons for which you act must be the things that ground the rightness of the action. And that is what the cleanup view says it is to be a (moral) reason for action. So the cleanup view’s package of commitments is what the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism must rule out. It must rule out the possibility that it matters what reasons you act for because what is right is grounded in the facts that are reasons, rather than because what is right is grounded in the facts about what the reasons are.

This is where the appeal to the *most fundamental* reasons in the best formulation of right reasons accounts figures in. If the cleanup package is correct, then reasons are just the things that ground facts about what is right—whatever that is. And so the *most fundamental* reasons must be just the most fundamental explainers—facts that ground facts that ground facts... and so on, all of the way up to facts about what is right.³³ But on this view, if acting with moral worth requires that the reason *for which* one acts is also the most fundamental reason *to* act, it follows that acting with moral worth is extremely, extremely demanding. Only someone with a complete understanding of the full moral explanation for what she ought to do can possibly act with moral worth—and indeed, that may not be good enough, because the most fundamental explanation may lie at some lower level.³⁴

So though the cleanup view is compatible with right reasons accounts of moral worth, it is *not* compatible with the *best* versions of right reasons accounts—versions that rule out cases of instrumental motives improperly aligning with derivative moral reasons. Daniel Star concludes from this that nothing plays both of

³¹ Broome (2004, 2013).

³² Markovits (2010, 205).

³³ Compare Daniel Star (2011, 84): “Suppose, for the sake of a simple example, that the correct moral theory is hedonistic utilitarianism (needless to say, I do not actually think this is the correct moral theory). This theory would have it that the only *ultimate* reasons are facts about pain and pleasure. If an act would increase pleasure in the world then the fact that this act would increase pleasure is an *ultimate* reason to do it, while if an act would increase pain in the world then the fact that this act would increase pain is an *ultimate* reason not to do it. Furthermore, one ought to do those acts that increase the balance of pleasure over pain (according to the theory). Now consider the fact that a particular act is a lie. This normative theory says nothing about facts that are lies. However, the fact that this act is a lie is evidence that one ought not to do it, and is thus also a *derivative* reason not to do it.”.

³⁴ Daniel Star (2011, 75): “Philosophers engaged in the project of normative ethics are not wasting their time when they search after highly general moral principles which could not be discovered or justifiably accepted through non-philosophical thinking, and which specify the good reasons on which virtuous people act, as well as provide a criterion or criteria for determining what it is that people ought to do.”.

the central roles of reasons.³⁵ Instead, we must distinguish between two distinct normative concepts—normative reasons properly speaking, which play no essential role in explaining what is right but are the proper objects of motivation in cases of moral worth, and right-making features, which are exactly what the cleanup view says reasons are, but need not be considerations that we can act on and play no essential role in an adequate account of moral worth.³⁶

But I suggest—and this suggestion is the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism—that instead we should conclude that the cleanup view simply mischaracterizes the way in which reasons explain what is right. If we go instead for the view on which facts about rightness are grounded in facts *about* reasons—not just in the facts that happen to *be* reasons—then it is easy to see how to draw this line for the most fundamental reasons. On this view, although facts about rightness are grounded in facts about reasons, and those facts about reasons are in turn grounded in other facts, so that there are other facts that offer a more fundamental *explanation* of what is right, those further facts are not themselves more fundamental reasons. They are *explanations* of what reasons there are, without being reasons themselves.³⁷

This offers us an easy answer as to why people can act with moral worth without knowing the true moral theory—it is because the true moral theory will offer some explanation of what things are reasons and how weighty they are. *But explanations of what is a reason do not themselves give more fundamental reasons.* Hence, to act for a reason, you do not need to know the explanation of why it is a reason. So given the contrast between the properly reasons fundamentalist view, on which facts about rightness are grounded in facts about reasons, and the cleanup view, on which they are grounded merely in facts that are reasons, only the properly reasons fundamentalist view can explain why moral worth could require acting for fundamental moral reasons.

That is why we should accept that facts about rightness are grounded in facts about reasons, according to the fundamental argument for reasons fundamentalism.

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³⁵ For Star (2011, 2015), reasons strictly speaking are evidence of what you ought to do—and as such they can play a role in an account of moral worth, because the right motive will always involve being sensitive to evidence of what you ought to do. Whereas the explainers of what you ought to do are more properly called ‘right-making features’, and are the proper objects of inquiry in explanatory moral theory, but bear no essential connection to worthy motivation.

³⁶ Wedgwood (2015) is also prominently skeptical that anything plays the dual roles of reasons.

³⁷ Reasons fundamentalism therefore denies what I have elsewhere called the ‘no background conditions’ view of reasons, whereas the cleanup view implies it. See Schroeder (2007, chapter 2).

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