

The Grounding Problem of Equal Respect: A Theistic Alternative to Constitutivism

Kevin Jung

In this paper, I explore three theories of value to illuminate how nontheistic and theistic accounts may differ in grounding human dignity: neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism, Kantian constructivism, and a theistic account of good simpliciter. The theistic account of good simpliciter that I offer adapts Robert Adams's notion of the transcendent Good as the Excellent. In this account, I explain how Adams' thesis that goodness is a property consisting in a sort of resemblance to God may be understood in a new way, using ideas drawn from contemporary mathematics and quantum mechanics. On my account, we must value human beings neither because such valuing would be beneficial or necessary for human flourishing nor because it is a logical outcome of anything we care to value. Rather it is because we recognize the property of self-similarity in all of us, which may be understood as a resemblance to God as good simpliciter.

1. Introduction

Can we explain normative reasons in wholly non-normative terms by characterizing them as a specification of the kind of action, agency, or other features that we essentially exercise or possess as human species? If we can, we may justify certain normative claims, such as moral obligations, in virtue of explaining certain non-normative facts about us after all. In this paper, I consider two contemporary versions of constitutivism to illustrate some difficulties a metanormative theory may face when attempting to ground the normativity of moral obligations in non-normative facts. Constitutivism is not the only approach that makes such an attempt, and the difficulties to be identified should give us reason to consider other approaches. I present a theistic grounding of moral obligations as one alternative.

Constitutivists argue that we can ground normative claims in non-normative facts about our agency or action in virtue of a non-causal explanation. They attempt to justify normative facts by appealing to the constitutive features of things that we are allegedly all committed to or cannot escape in virtue of being agents. In contrast, I will argue that no non-normative facts can sufficiently ground (i.e., determine or instantiate) normative facts, even

though the latter are both epistemically and metaphysically supervenient upon the former.¹ If this is right, no facts about the natural world, including about human agency, can successfully explain what makes universal moral claims (e.g., there is a reason to treat every human being with equal respect) normative. I offer a theistic metanormative account of certain normative facts that are deontological in kind (hereafter, moral obligations). My account is metaphysically realist in that moral obligations are part of reality and thus cannot be derived from what is constitutive of our agency, and also epistemically realist in that knowledge of moral obligations is held to be accessible to most rationally competent agents via due rational reflection upon natural facts as well as through divine commands understood as the expression of divine desires.

Regarding the grounding problem of normativity, moral obligations are grounded not in natural facts but in God's relevant desires. This makes divine desires, not divine commands, the determining ground of normative reasons for action. On this theistic view, the normative force of treating each person with equal respect is metaphysically grounded in God's desires, although it can be epistemically overdetermined by natural reason and divine commands.

2. Reasons for Action and the Ground of Normativity

Before I explain what constitutivism is, I need to situate it in the wider context of many contemporary metanormative theories about reasons for action. First-order normative theories concern standards of rightness, goodness, or rationality that determine how one should arrive at normative judgments (e.g., "It is wrong to deny them the same treatment"). Metanormative theories concern the *nature* (e.g., "What is the nature of moral obligations?) of first-order normative questions and judgments. In what follows, I shall focus on the nature of the normativity of actions since my central question in this paper is what grounds the normative judgment that there is reason to treat all human beings with equal respect.

In metaethics, reasons are understood as considerations that stand in favor of beliefs or actions. Reasons for belief have to do with epistemic rationality, and reasons for action have to do with practical rationality. Since I focus on reasons for action in this paper, I should note two rival schools offering different solutions for the grounding problem of reasons for action: reason-based and *rationality*-based accounts. According to *reason*-based accounts, reasons for action are explained in terms of what would give us decisive (sufficient) reasons for doing something.

This can be done broadly in two ways. Subjective theories about reasons hold the view that we have decisive reason to do whatever would best realize our present desires (or aims) or our informed ones under ideal conditions. In contrast, objective theories about reasons claim that reasons for action derive their normative force not from our desires or aims but from "the facts that give us reasons to have these aims. These are the facts that make these aims relevantly good, or worth achieving."² Thus, in the case of subjective theories, it is often said that our present or informed desires give us reasons for action, whereas, in the case of objective

¹ As an analogy, not all instances of killing a person instantiate a murder, even though the normative judgment of murder is epistemically and metaphysically supervenient upon the descriptive fact of killing a person.

² Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45.

theories, it is commonly argued that the value of the objects of our desires or the fittingness of our attitudes toward an object is what gives us reasons for action.

A few things are worth noting about these theories here. Let me briefly discuss some well-known objections to them to set the stage for constitutivism and my theistic account. Regarding subjective theories about reason, while it is true that people desire certain things more than others and desires have a motivational force, it is not clear why the satisfaction of these desires gives us a decisive reason to do it. After all, desires can be unstable, ill-informed, and even harmful to agents.³ Objective theories about reason, in contrast, face different sorts of challenges. Critics raise objections ranging from questioning the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value to which things possess intrinsic value. In recent years, there has been robust discussion about the so-called the Wrong Kind of Reason problem (WKR) in response to some who advance the fitting attitude theory of value (FA). FA is an objective theory of value, but unlike value-based theories, which derive normativity from the value of an object (specifically, its value-featuring properties), FA insists that we analyze what is valuable (or what we have reason to value) in terms of the fittingness of a pro-attitude. If it is *fitting* to favor an object based on its natural properties, then the object is valuable for its own sake, rather than if we find something intrinsically valuable, it is fitting to favor it. FA theorists want to avoid deriving normativity (reasons for action) from normativity (what is valuable). In doing so, they pass the “buck” of deriving normativity to non-normative properties of a thing that provide reasons for valuing it.⁴

The problem with FA, according to WKR, is that “it appears that in some situations we might well have reasons to have pro-attitudes toward objects that are not valuable. Or vice versa: we might have reasons not to have pro-attitudes toward some valuable objects.”⁵ If an evil demon threatens me in order to get me to admire him, this does not make the demon valuable even though I may nonetheless have reason to have a pro-attitude toward him. The upshot of this example is that value-based theories can have difficulty distinguishing the right kind and the wrong kind of reason to value something as long as a reason to do something is analyzed in terms of a fitting attitude. Later in the paper, I return to this particular problem in discussing my theistic account of normativity.

In the case of *rationality*-based accounts, claims about reasons for action must be settled by claims about rational agency. This is because proponents of this view consider the reasons we have to act to be decided by the requirements of rational agency.⁶ Unlike reasons-based accounts, rationality-based accounts do not have to appeal to what reasons people actually

³ For critiques of desire-based theories of reason, see Richard Kraut, “Desire and the Human Good,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 68, no. 2 (1994): 39–54; Thomas M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 113–23; Parfit, *On What Matters*, 73–82.

⁴ Scanlon famously said, “to call something valuable is to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it.” Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 96.

⁵ Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, “The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value,” *Ethics* 114, no. 3 (April 2004): 392.

⁶ Thomas Scanlon expresses a rationality-based rationality in the following general form: “The fact that *p* is a reason for a person to do *a* when and because rationality requires such a person to count this fact in favor of doing *a*.” Thomas M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

have or would ideally have to derive the normativity of action since rationality-based accounts are more interested in articulating what a rational agent must be inescapably committed to in order to arrive at any normative content for action. In the next section, I introduce the constitutivist view of practical reason as a rationality-based view of value that grounds normativity in what is already true of the agent.

3. Varieties of Constitutivism about Practical Rationality

According to rationality-based views of normativity, what counts as considerations in favor of doing something is not what reasons the agent has—what the agent treats as reasons—but what is required of the agent by virtue of being a rational agent. Constitutivists claim that “we can justify certain normative claims by showing that agents become committed to these claims simply in virtue of acting.”⁷ This view assumes that agency necessarily has a certain constitutive feature (e.g., aim, principle, or the fact of one being of the human species) that explains why certain events are intentional actions and sets a normative standard for what reason we have to value X. While there is no consensus among constitutivists about what thing is the constitutive feature of our agency, they agree that this constitutive feature functions as a goodness-fixing kind and specifies the ordering of valuing in dealing with first-order desires. For instance, consider a common analogy involving playing chess. Chess players aim at checkmate (E). E is the constitutive feature of chess-playing (O), and it serves as a goodness-fixing kind. E specifies the ordering of what to value in O, meaning that any actions involving the movement of pieces, such as pawns, should be ranked in light of their contribution to E. If constitutivists are correct, the normativity of action is generated by the natural fact that we are agents. There are many versions of constitutivism in the contemporary literature. Given space constraints, I will limit myself to considering just a couple of constitutivist accounts to illustrate some main features of constitutivism.

3.1. Korsgaard’s Constructivism

Christine Korsgaard is known for her defense of unrestricted constructivism, which takes all normative truths as constructions reached through procedural reasoning on some constitutive aim of agency. She also views reasons for action as derived from the constitutive aim. That constitutive aim is *self-constitution* which, she claims, every agent has by virtue of being an agent. To be an agent, she argues, one must have the capacity to constitute oneself as a unified agent. She bases this claim on the idea that actions aim to create a practical identity. We are not merely the cause of our actions—a movement is attributed to us as agents—but our actions also create our practical identity. We are responsible for our actions not just if we brought them about but if, in choosing our actions, our actions create a practical identity that serves as the source of reasons. For Korsgaard, “practical identity”, which she defines as “a description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking,” is not merely about a sense of oneself; it also serves as the source of normative

⁷ Paul Katsafanas, “Constitutivism about Practical Reasons,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford University Press, 2018), 367.

reasons.⁸ She argues that, in choosing an action, our choice is governed by our practical identities, which serve as “standing sources of incentives” and “principles in terms of which we accept and reject proposed actions.”⁹

But not all practical identities work the same way. Korsgaard notes two kinds of practical identity: contingent practical identities and “an essential form of practical identity, our identity as rational or human beings.”¹⁰ Though both provide reasons for action, we acquire contingent practical identities by circumstances or adopt them voluntarily. At the same time, we inherently possess a different sort of practical identity by virtue of being rational beings.¹¹ On this conception of practical identity, one necessarily is inescapable in that all rational agents are logically committed to it by virtue of willing any particular ends or valuing anything in the first-order sense. This conception of practical identity *necessarily* values rational agency in oneself and others because we, as self-conscious agents, want to bring about our intentional actions successfully. As rational beings, we not only are at reflective distance from our first-order desires when choosing to act but also must consider ways in which our actions must conform to the constitutive standards of self-constitution, the aim of agency. Analogically, a smartphone is supposed to (i.e., “ought to”) perform certain features to be a “smartphone,” and these features are constitutive of the practical identity of a smartphone. Similarly, Korsgaard thinks that our practical identity as rational beings generates normative standards of action.

For Korsgaard, successful self-constitution demands that we allow ourselves (or others) to act only for ends that we (or they) want to bring about and voluntarily set for ourselves (or themselves): “A good action is one that constitutes its agent as the autonomous and efficacious cause of her own movements.”¹² Thus, she claims that we must conform to hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. On the one hand, a hypothetical Imperative is a constitutive principle of action because conformity to it constitutes you as “the *cause* of that end.”¹³ Also, an agent is efficacious “when she succeeds in bringing about whatever state of affairs she intended to bring about through her action.”¹⁴ On the other hand, a categorical Imperative is another constitutive principle of action, one concerned with the question of the self-determination of the act as one’s own: “an agent is autonomous when her movements are in some clear sense self-determined or her own.”¹⁵ Autonomy requires that our actions express the principles we have freely chosen, and efficacy requires that we do not merely cause an action but that we be able to identify it as *ours*.¹⁶ However, both the autonomy and efficacy principles of action rest on the Formula of Humanity as an End in itself in that no rational action is possible unless the agent must first find their own humanity valuable.

⁸ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

⁹ Korsgaard, 22.

¹⁰ Korsgaard, 22.

¹¹ Korsgaard, 24.

¹² Korsgaard, xiii.

¹³ Korsgaard, 68.

¹⁴ Korsgaard, 82.

¹⁵ Korsgaard, 83.

¹⁶ Korsgaard, 84.

3.2. Foot's and Hursthouse's Aristotelian Naturalism

The idea that normative facts can be explained by facts about the constitutive feature of agency or agents is also found in some Aristotelian versions of ethical naturalism. In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot tries to extract normative facts (or human goods) from the standards of success necessary for the flourishing of the human species. Just as there is natural goodness and defect in all living things regarding their proper functioning, she argues that moral evaluation of human action should be understood in terms of the distinct kind of natural beings that we are.

Foot's naturalistic ethics breaks away from both G. E. Moore's non-naturalism and varieties of non-cognitivism (e.g., emotivism, prescriptivism, and expressivism) that arose in critical reaction to Moore, who treated goodness as a "simple" and "indefinable," non-naturalistic property.¹⁷ On Foot's view, moral judgments are supposed to neither represent a reality independent of human attitudes nor merely express the conative state of the individual speaker. Moore's non-naturalism makes the mistake of taking goodness as a non-natural property and conceiving goodness as a predicate ("as if 'X is good' could be taken as the standard form of predication for it").¹⁸ In contrast, non-cognitivism makes the mistake of treating moral judgments as conditions of utterance about an individual speaker's subjective state. An unfortunate consequence of non-naturalism is failing to understand goodness in natural terms, and an unfortunate consequence of non-cognitivism is taking an agent's desires as reasons for action. Foot's position, then, is straightforward: practical rationality can only be understood in terms of our excellences and defects with respect to the kind of living things that we are. Foot rejects the view that we must first start from a desire-satisfaction or self-interest theory of action to explain the rationality of action. Nor does she believe that practical rationality should be subsumed under the umbrella of morality, as if moral considerations must always override all other normative judgments.

Foot contends that "the evaluation of human life depends also on essential features of specifically human life."¹⁹ In her view, the form of "X is good for Y" is no longer about how X would *satisfy* Y or whether X has the non-natural property of goodness but about how X would be a *constitutive* content of a flourishing human life. For instance, Foot explains that human parents who fail to teach their children the skills necessary for flourishing are defective for not giving the children the tools they would need for this goal.²⁰ More generally stated, her point is that forms of goodness appropriate to the human species are to be evaluated in terms of the necessary conditions for human flourishing. In fact, Foot treats judgments of goodness and badness as "a special grammar when the subject belongs to a living thing, whether plant, animal, or human being."²¹ Good and bad are *attributive adjectives* whose standards are intrinsic to the nouns that they modify: "natural goodness, as I define it, which is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics, and operations, is intrinsic or 'autonomous' goodness in that it depends on the relation of an individual to the 'life-form' of its species."²²

¹⁷ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 15.

¹⁸ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁹ Foot, 14.

²⁰ Foot, 15.

²¹ Foot, 26.

²² Foot, 26–27.

In his naturalistic ethics, similar to Foot's, Richard Kraut also articulates the meaning of goodness this way. For something (G) to be good for a living thing, S, is to "refer to the conformability or suitability of G to S. It indicates that G is well suited to S and that G serves S well."²³ This implies that while human beings and non-human animals share many biological inclinations, what is good for humans is not identical to what is good for other animals. Humans are rational animals "capable of using reason to make choices and to mold our desires and emotions," which makes the human good "an object of rational choice."²⁴ That is to say, the achievement of this good also "requires the training of desires and emotions so that they take appropriate objects as determined by reason."²⁵

This last point also explains why Foot's naturalism is Aristotelian and does not align well with those ethical views that try to naturalize normative properties in terms of the language of reproductive fitness.²⁶ Like Aristotle, Foot is concerned with human flourishing as the end of moral life and with the necessary conditions of flourishing suitable for human animals. We share many biological tendencies with other animals but also differ from them in that we are *rational* animals that can perceive goods that are suitable for distinctively human flourishing. Those who recognize certain considerations as compelling reasons for action (reason-recognition) and act on them (reason-following) in view of human goodness possess virtues.²⁷ This is why Foot seeks to derive normative facts from the constitutive features of the human species as living things and yet, as Rosalind Hursthouse notes, wants to "explicitly disavow any intention to use the terms 'function' or 'species' in the technical senses of evolutionary biology."²⁸ Hursthouse argues that Foot is not using the term species in the Darwinian biological sense. For Foot, the human good is far richer than the life of survival and reproduction; it "contains many goods which have nothing to do with either, and the human good is 'deep happiness.'"²⁹

In her ethics, Hursthouse continues Foot's denial that normative facts are accessible from "a neutral point of view."³⁰ Like Foot, Hursthouse wants to navigate between non-naturalism and subjectivism, insisting that moral objectivity is still possible without this objectivity being non-natural and scientific in kind. She concedes that "the truth of the judgment [that this action is right] does depend in some way on human interests and desires."³¹ However, she rejects the view that what determines the truth of moral judgments depends on the agent's interests and desires or social construction. Hursthouse believes that we can still establish objectivity concerning moral judgments not from a neutral point of view but from "the Neurathian procedure" by which she means that "validation must take place

²³ Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 94.

²⁴ Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good," 47.

²⁵ Kraut, 47.

²⁶ For a Darwinian critique of realist theories of value, see Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–66.

²⁷ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 12–13.

²⁸ Rosalind Hursthouse, "The Grammar of Goodness in Foot's Ethical Naturalism," in *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, ed. Micah Lott (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2018), 341.

²⁹ Hursthouse, 346.

³⁰ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 241.

³¹ Hursthouse, 240.

from within an acquired ethical outlook.”³² The main idea is that forms of goodness appropriate to the human species and necessary for human flourishing cannot be simply read off the book of nature as if they are “brute givens” but require “a coherent account of the roles the character traits on the list [the standard list of the virtues] play in our lives, an account that coheres not merely with our ethical outlook but with all the empirical and other facts that we bring into play.”³³ As Hursthouse insists, “ethics is not a branch of biology.”³⁴ The key is that we are “rational” animals that can rightly see what things are worthy of love, that is, what “we can see as good, as something we in fact enjoy and that reason can rightly endorse.”³⁵

3.3. Problems with Constitutivism

I have thus far discussed two different accounts of constitutivism about practical rationality. In this section, I mention a few objections raised against them to show what types of challenges constitutivist accounts of practical rationality may face in general.

The first objection concerns the metanormative project of grounding normative principles in descriptive facts about agency. Constitutivists often start with identifying the constitutive feature of agency and then develop a procedure aimed at delivering normative truths by specifying a set of values or principles that make the constitutive feature possible. Such a procedure can take a variety of forms, such as “employing principles of formal or instrumental rationality; mutually disinterested utility promotion behind a “veil of ignorance”; transparent and reasoned discussion among persons regarded as “free and equal”; or pursuit of (narrow or wide) reflective equilibrium.”³⁶ In Korsgaard’s case, there are principles that all rational agents must affirm in order to constitute themselves as unified agents. No agent can supposedly escape these principles because they are all necessary conditions for being unified agents.

But why should I be an agent? asks David Enoch. What if I don’t care about self-constitution? Enoch imagines a “shmagent” – “a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not of shmagency) of self-constitution.”³⁷ Just as not every chess player aims or must aim at checkmate—it is conceivable that some chess players don’t care about the game itself or winning it—one does not have to aim at self-constitution at all in acting. Enoch’s more significant point is that any aim said to be a constitutive feature of agency or action requires a reason to do it. He writes, “If a constitutive-aim or constitutive-motives theory is going to work for agency, then it is not sufficient to show that some aims or motives or capacities are constitutive of agency. Rather, it is also necessary to show that the “game” of agency is one we have reason to play, that we have reasons to be

³² Hursthouse, 165. “Neurathian” is a term attributed to Otto Neurath’s image of ship-rebuilding in his antifoundational account of knowledge.

³³ Hursthouse, 241.

³⁴ Hursthouse, 22.

³⁵ Hursthouse, 223.

³⁶ Hallvard Lillehammer, “Constructivism and the Error Theory,” in *The Continuum Companion to Ethics*, ed. Christian Miller (Continuum, 2011), 69.

³⁷ David Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won’t Come from What Is Constitutive of Action,” *The Philosophical Review* 115, no. 2 (2006): 179.

agents rather than shmagents.”³⁸ Put otherwise, Korsgaard’s metanormative project of justifying normative principles in *naturalistic* terms of the constitutive aim of agency fails because that constitutive aim itself is *normative*! If this objection is right, many similar constitutive attempts to ground normative facts (e.g., our moral obligation to treat all human beings with equal respect) in descriptive facts about agency are doomed to fail.

What about the attempt to ground normative facts in descriptive facts about human flourishing? Can the notion of the human species function as a goodness-fixer kind, specifying normative facts? Critics take note of the Aristotelian teleology at work in Foot’s and Hursthouse’s ethics. Foot, for instance, is unapologetic about her use of the connection between Aristotelian categoricals and evaluation. Certain features in a given species have to do with self-preservation, nourishment, and reproduction of the individual member, even if not “not all general propositions about a species have to do with the teleology of living things of this kind.”³⁹ That is to say, many features of a life form can be given teleological explanations for their functions in terms of positive consequences for the bearers without presupposing some intentional design by the will of the deity.⁴⁰ However, can these teleological explanations sufficiently generate the normative force of reasons for action? Many people do not care about what would be considered human goods by Foot, including the good of having children.⁴¹ To put this more precisely, not only is there a wide range of human actions that do not always serve a teleological function in the Aristotelian sense, but many seem to find reasons insufficient to play such a function. This is why Scanlon says, “given the heterogeneity of natural properties that can provide reasons it is not plausible to suppose that there is some natural property, amounts of which determine the relative strength of all reasons.”⁴²

Foot’s and Hursthouse’s teleology can also open the door to a different kind of criticism.

Michael Smith, who himself subscribes to a different kind of constitutivism, points out that with “so much emphasis on human goods, Foot’s view thus builds an implausible human chauvinism into morality.”⁴³ Why is her view vulnerable to the charge of human chauvinism? Because human beings serve as a goodness-fixer kind that specifies what reasons we have to act. Thus, both excellences and defects in making us realize the human good (i.e., human flourishing) become virtues and vices. While Foot’s version of constitutivism, with its focus on goods that are integral to human flourishing, thus avoids both the egoistic and relativistic tendencies of some subjectivist ethics, including some Humean forms of constitutivism, it suffers from a “species-specific ranking” that orders normative facts around distinctively human interests.⁴⁴

I have thus far briefly considered some versions of grounding normative reasons. Next, I want to present my theistic alternative.

³⁸ Enoch, 186.

³⁹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 31.

⁴⁰ Foot, 31–32.

⁴¹ Michael Smith, “Constitutivism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (Routledge, 2017), 377.

⁴² Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, 110.

⁴³ Smith, “Constitutivism,” 377.

⁴⁴ Smith, 377.

4. A Theistic Account of Normative Reasons

On my account of normative reasons, normative reasons and motivating reasons are distinguished, which is not uncommon among some philosophers. Motivating reasons are what the *agent* takes to favor her actions, whereas normative reasons are considerations that count in favor of someone acting in a certain way. Unlike the former, the latter does not require the agent's beliefs or desires. Put otherwise, a motivating reason explains what someone's reason for acting (e.g., my desire to stay dry is the reason for bringing an umbrella) is, and a normative reason is the reason that justifies one's doing something (e.g., the principle of confidentiality is the reason *in the light of* which I won't divulge sensitive information). What gives us normative reasons are facts, i.e., true propositions, and thus they differ from motivating reasons, which are subject-given. In the context of respecting human persons, I hold this distinction to mean that the reason for treating other persons with equal respect should be grounded not in the presence of certain of the agent's desires or beliefs but in the relevant fact itself, understood as a true proposition.

Now the question is, "How do we obtain these facts that can sufficiently ground normative reasons, and what is the nature of these facts?" My view on this question may be briefly stated as follows:

(T1) Normative facts supervene *epistemically* upon, although neither analytically nor metaphysically identical to, non-normative facts.

(T2) *Some* normative facts of a deontological nature can be *epistemically* overdetermined by different sources of moral knowledge.

(T3) Some deontological moral facts are *metaphysically* grounded in God's relevant desires.

Let me elaborate on these three points. (T1) expresses, in short, the idea that normative facts are epistemically supervenient upon non-normative facts. Very roughly, the idea is that after due reflection upon the relevant natural facts, most rational human beings can form normative judgments that have positive epistemic status in virtue of their non-inferential justification. Unlike the cognitivism of ethical naturalism, however, normative facts or properties are not identical to natural facts or properties in terms of meaning or the nature of properties. Thus, my view stands in the ethical non-naturalism school of thought that may be broadly construed as moral realist and intuitionist.⁴⁵ What this school argues for is the epistemic autonomy of morality, supporting the view that moral knowledge is not historically contingent but available to those who examine the relevant natural facts seriously to arrive at normative facts. In other words, one does not have to be a religious person, much less a believer in a particular religious tradition, to have moral knowledge taken as at least justified true moral belief.

Contrary to common mischaracterizations, most contemporary intuitionists do not claim that all moral truths can be immediately known to everyone. Epistemic fallibility is fully

⁴⁵ For contemporary intuitionists, see Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right: A Theory of Intuition and Intrinsic Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Parfit, *On What Matters*; Noah Lemos, *Common Sense: A Contemporary Defense* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

compatible with ethical non-naturalism (intuitionism), as most defenders of this theory are modest foundationalists. Foundationalism refers to the view that beliefs can be justified when they receive strong support from other beliefs that are properly basic (i.e., justified non-inferentially), thus avoiding an infinite regress of supporting epistemic beliefs (i.e., those that require the activity of showing one's justification) as opposed to basic beliefs (i.e., non-epistemic beliefs requiring only the *state* of being justified). Unlike strong foundationalism, according to which all justified beliefs are infallible and indubitable, modest foundationalism holds that justified beliefs can be revised in light of countervailing basic beliefs.

It is important to note that ethical non-naturalism need not be at odds with divine command theory. One may hold without contradiction that some normative facts, i.e., the moral facts of the deontological kind (or simply obligations), may also be epistemically available through divine commands. What (T2) expresses is the idea of the epistemic overdetermination of some moral facts. Roughly, the idea of epistemic overdetermination is that some of our beliefs could be overdetermined, i.e., "have more than one justification, each of which is sufficient to justify the belief in question in the absence of the others."⁴⁶ The kind of epistemic overdetermination relevant to (T2) is epistemic overdetermination by different sources. For instance, the second table of the Ten Commandments, often understood as divine commands, may be an additional source of our moral knowledge, which is otherwise also available through natural reason. Again, the sort of divine commands I have in mind applies only to our knowledge of rightness and wrongness, not goodness and badness. Not only is it not necessary for a theory of rightness to be tied to a theory of the good, but also a divine command theory (broadly construed) that seeks to explain the nature of the good in virtue of the concept of divine command must face the arbitrariness objection in the Euthyphro dilemma. As Robert Adams shows in his *Finite and Infinite Goods*, it is possible to develop a theory of the good independently of a divine command theory, which I won't discuss in this paper.⁴⁷

As for (T3), I argue that obligations can be *metaphysically* grounded in God's relevant desires. Consider Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, known as the Humanity Principle: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."⁴⁸ If deontological properties are metaphysically grounded in divine desires (in distinction from divine commands), we may view the Humanity Principle as indeed grounded in what God desires for us to do. On this view, the reason for *X* being required is not in *X* being *commanded* by God – which could raise the question, "What grounds the normativity of the command?" – but in *X* being *desired* by God, who is understood as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (I will shortly answer the next obvious question, "What grounds the normativity of divine desires?"). But this does not mean that God's commands should play no role in our moral knowledge. As Christian Miller notes, the divine desire theory acknowledges "that God's commands play an important

⁴⁶ Albert Casullo, "Epistemic Overdetermination and A Priori Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005): 47.

⁴⁷ See Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 46.

epistemic role in communicating how human beings are to behave, but it is certain prior mental states themselves,” desires in this case, “which are the metaphysical basis for deontic properties.”⁴⁹

Now let’s try to illustrate the idea of metaphysically grounding some normative facts in divine desires by way of analogy. Imagine that what underlies our universe is what the astrophysicist Sylvester James Gates and others call error-correcting codes, similar to computer codes, embedded in reality.⁵⁰ Being neither a scientist nor a mathematician, I will not try to explain, much less prove or disprove, this claim. But this theory of physics might help us imagine how a normative fact, such as the Humanity Principle, might be metaphysically grounded in a divine desire. If there is God who created the universe using something like a computer code, the code must reflect the programmer’s desires, namely, God’s. Those who are somewhat familiar with a programming language would know that programming languages contain command lines. A command line is a text-based user interface used to run programs. It takes in commands and passes on to the computer’s operating system to run. The point here is that it is not the commands that ground the normativity of action but the programmer’s desires expressed in those commands. Once we understand the ground of normativity this way, we may also see moral obligations as grounded in divine desires.

Finally, I would like to discuss a possible advantage of my theistic grounding of moral obligations over other non-theistic accounts, including those of constitutivism. Earlier, I discussed the Wrong Kind of Reasons objection, often raised against the fitting attitude theory of value (FA). As some philosophers have pointed out, it is sometimes appropriate to value an intrinsically valuable object, but we may do so for the wrong reason (e.g., obeying God out of fear). If so, it is possible to have both the fitting attitude and the suitable object of value, but we may still have the wrong reason. On my theistic account, what determines the fitting attitude toward an object of value must match the *nature* of the object that is considered valuable in itself. Thus, I derive normativity (moral obligations) from normativity (God’s commands) and derive the normativity of God’s commands *ultimately* from the normativity of God’s desires whose desires are taken as good in themselves.

Now, critics may ask what grounds the normativity of God’s desires. What makes God’s desires good in themselves? It is crucial to note that I do not reduce the question about the *nature* of goodness to the *meaning* of goodness by taking the latter as an attributive adjective (i.e., good in terms of a thing’s function or a thing’s contribution to another thing).⁵¹ Most contemporary secular theories of the good thus err, in my view, by asking, “What is goodness good for?”⁵² This question already takes it for granted that we can skip the question about the archetype of goodness—a metaphysical question, “What makes something intrinsically

⁴⁹ Christian Miller, “Divine Desire Theory and Obligation,” in *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Yujin Nagasawa and Erik J. Wielenberg (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), 105–24.

⁵⁰ C. F. Doran et al., “Relating Doubly-Even Error-Correcting Codes, Graphs, and Irreducible Representations of N-Extended Supersymmetry” (arXiv, May 30, 2008); Natalie Wolchover, “How Space and Time Could Be a Quantum Error-Correcting Code,” *Quanta Magazine*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-space-and-time-could-be-a-quantum-error-correcting-code-20190103/>.

⁵¹ Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956): 34.

⁵² Christian Piller, “What Is Goodness Good For?” in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Volume 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

good?" —and instead focus on the problem of the meaning of goodness in terms of "goodness-for." What do I mean by the *archetype* of goodness? I think that Adams is right in insisting that goodness is explained as a property consisting in a sort of resemblance to God, who is the transcendent Good itself.⁵³ For Adams, God is the transcendent Good, whose goodness is independent of whether it has a utility that serves as the basis for our valuing. He rejects those accounts of goodness, like the ones we considered earlier, that try to fix the reference of goodness to the valuing attitudes of the agent or some natural properties. Another word that Adams uses for the transcendent Good is excellence, which he likens to beauty. Just as people can experience beauty (e.g., in the sight of auroras in the Nordic night sky), even when the objects of beauty don't hold any utility for us, goodness is treated as an irreducible and attractive property inherent in the object. As such, it is worthy of love or admiration for its own sake. He then suggests that all goodness of the non-instrumental kind, including moral goodness, is to be explained as a sort of resemblance to the transcendent Good, the standard and exemplar of goodness.

Adams's account of goodness is metaphysically realist in that the term 'goodness' refers to an objective fact, i.e., the fact about a thing possessing the property of resembling God, not merely to a favorable attitude.⁵⁴ Goodness, understood as Godlikeness, is a property that objects of evaluation possess objectively, i.e., independently of what one may think or feel about it. This theistic account of goodness is markedly different from all others that treat goodness as an attributive adjective. I suggest that we try to understand Adams's account of goodness with the help of the property of *self-similarity*. An excellent example of this property of self-similarity is a "fractal."⁵⁵ I am proposing that we view divine goodness as the metaphysical *archetype* of all non-instrumental goodness, of which all acts of moral goodness can be viewed as temporal replicas. On this view, moral obligations such as the Humanity Principle can only be metaphysically grounded in the relevant divine desires, even as they are known to us via both natural reason and divine revelation. What then is the significance of my theistic alternative? We may understand that the normativity of moral obligations, such as giving equal respect to every human person, is metaphysically grounded in the archetype of all intrinsic goodness, i.e., divine desires. In doing so, we may avoid grounding moral obligations in the unstable quicksand of human agency where normativity is quickly reduced to contested claims about non-normative facts about us.

5. Conclusion

One of Aesop's Fables is a story of a donkey carrying a sacred image. As the image is being moved to the temple by the donkey, people bow their heads reverently, paying honor to the image. But the donkey mistakenly thought the honor was for himself. When his driver realized

⁵³ Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 14.

⁵⁴ Adams, 18.

⁵⁵ In 1975, the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot wrote an influential book on fractals that has transformed how we view the structure of nature beyond the world of mathematics. A fractal is, by definition, a figure that has the property of self-similarity. He expresses this property in the mathematical form of an equation: $z = z^2 + c$ (where z and c are complex numbers). The equational pattern, now called the Mandelbrot set, is often illustrated by natural shapes such as snowflakes, leaves, and lightning.

that the donkey had become arrogant and brash, he beat the donkey with a stick, saying, “the honor is not meant for you but for the image you are carrying.”⁵⁶

In this paper, I have tried to briefly illustrate what problems often surface when we try to ground the normativity of action in non-normative facts about human agency. Undaunted by these problems, many philosophers still work to refine their solutions. Despite many differences that distinguish their sophisticated arguments, they share the assumption that there is something about us, our agency, action, or goals, that warrants a certain normative way of treating human beings. I applaud their indomitable spirit but contend that a theistic alternative like mine can be a viable alternative in explaining the normativity of our obligations toward other human beings.

Kevin Jung, Wake Forest University
jungk@wfu.edu

Bibliography

- Adams, Robert M. 1999. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aesop. n.d. “Library of Congress Aesop Fables.” Accessed May 23, 2022. <https://read.gov/aesop/053.html>.
- Casullo, Albert. 2005. “Epistemic Overdetermination and a Priori Justification.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 19: 41–58.
- Doran, C. F., M. G. Faux, S. J. Gates Jr, T. Hubsch, K. M. Iga, and G. D. Landweber. 2008. “Relating Doubly-Even Error-Correcting Codes, Graphs, and Irreducible Representations of N-Extended Supersymmetry.” arXiv.
- Enoch, David. 2006. “Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won’t Come from What Is Constitutive of Action.” *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2): 169–98.
- Foot, Philippa. 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geach, Peter. 1956. “Good and Evil.” *Analysis* 17 (2): 33–42.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- — —. 2018. “The Grammar of Goodness in Foot’s Ethical Naturalism.” In *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, edited by Micah Lott, 25–46. Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Lewis White Beck. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Katsafanas, Paul. 2018. “Constitutivism about Practical Reasons.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, edited by Daniel Star, 0. Oxford University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kraut, Richard. 1994. “Desire and the Human Good.” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 68 (2): 39–54.
- — —. 2009. *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*. Harvard University Press.

⁵⁶ Aesop, “Library of Congress Aesop Fables,” accessed May 23, 2022, <https://read.gov/aesop/053.html>.

- Mandelbrot, Benoit B. 1989. "Fractal Geometry: What Is It, and What Does It Do?" *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* 423 (1864): 3–16.
- Miller, Christian. 2009. "Divine Desire Theory and Obligation." In *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Yujin Nagasawa and Erik J. Wielenberg, 105–24. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Moore, G. E. 1966. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. 2013. *On What Matters: Volume One*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piller, Christian. 2014. "What Is Goodness Good For?" In *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Volume 4*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen. 2004. "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value." *Ethics* 114 (3): 391–423.
- Scanlon, Thomas M. 1998. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- — —. 2014. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Michael. 2017. "Constitutivism." In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, 371–84. Routledge.
- Street, Sharon. 2006. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127 (1): 109–66.
- Wolchover, Natalie. 2019. "How Space and Time Could Be a Quantum Error-Correcting Code." *Quanta Magazine*. January 3, 2019. <https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-space-and-time-could-be-a-quantum-error-correcting-code-20190103/>.