

Quasi-Dependence

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Quasi-realism about the normative is the project of starting with an expressivist account of simple normative sentences such as “Kicking dogs is wrong” and from those meager resources earning back our right to more complex, realist-sounding discourse such as “If it’s true that kicking dogs is wrong, then it must also be true that kicking cats is wrong.” Many keys have been typed over the fortunes of this program. But it appears to have gone unnoticed that there is an important lacuna in the program as it exists today. The goals of this essay are to identify that lacuna (§1), to make a proposal about the best way to fill it (§2), and finally to note a problem for the proposal I develop (§3).

1. A Lacuna

Although quasi-realism aims to be an account of both *normative thought* and *normative talk*, I shall follow the common practice of focusing primarily on what it says about the latter. Quasi-realists start by providing an expressivist treatment of simple normative sentences along the following lines:

(E₁) To (sincerely) say, “Kicking dogs is wrong,” is to express state of mind M,

where M is a “desire-like” or “intention-esque” or “non-representational” attitude (for short: an attitude).

Having offered an account of what we are up to when we utter simple normative sentences, quasi-realists go on to provide similar treatments of more complicated sentences that it is sometimes thought only realists can make sense of, such as:

- (1) It’s true that kicking dogs is wrong.
- (2) If kicking dogs is wrong, then kicking cats is also wrong.
- (3) Kicking cans is not wrong.
- (4) I believe that kicking trees is wrong, but I might be mistaken about that.
- (5) It’s not the case that (kicking dogs is wrong because we disapprove of it).

Notice the last item on this list. Accounting for thought and talk about the mind-independence of normative matters has, from its inception, been a central aim of the quasi-realist project, for two reasons. First, claims of mind-independence are among those supposed hallmarks of realist speech that quasi-realists have sought to provide an account of, thereby showing these claims not to be hallmarks of realist speech after all. Second, providing an account of what statements of mind-independence mean is an essential step in quasi-realist attempts to fend off the perennial complaint that their view is objectionably “subjectivistic.” Consider the classic Euthyphro question: is kicking dogs wrong because we disapprove of it, or do we disapprove of it because it is wrong? It’s tempting to suppose that expressivists must respond to this dilemma by accepting its first horn, thereby committing themselves to kicking dogs being wrong because of our attitudes. It’s also tempting to suppose that avoiding the dilemma by accepting its second horn is a mark of realism: that precisely what distinguishes realism from other metanormative positions is its distinctive answer to the Euthyphro question. But if quasi-realists can provide an account of what we are up to when we say sentence (5) that allows them to sincerely utter those words without reneging on their commitment to expressivism, then both of these tempting thoughts are mistaken: expressivists need not embrace the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, and embracing the second horn does not make one a realist.

As is often the case with quasi-realism, ur-quasi-realist Simon Blackburn has set the agenda here. Blackburn’s general strategy for handling claims of mind-independence—which most other quasi-realists, including Allan Gibbard, endorse as well—can be broken up into four steps.¹ First, Blackburn takes a typical statement of mind-dependence such as

(6) Kicking dogs is wrong because we disapprove of it

to be equivalent to the following subjunctive conditional:

(7) If we didn’t disapprove of kicking dogs, then doing so wouldn’t be wrong.

Second, Blackburn invokes his quasi-realist account of subjunctive conditionals to tell us the state of mind expressed by sincere utterances of (7). (Exactly which state of mind that is need not concern us.) Third,

¹ See Blackburn 1981, 179–80; 1984, 217–19; 1993, 152–53, 172–74; 1998, 74, 296, 311–12; 2010, 32–33, 111–13; and Gibbard 1990, 164–66.

Blackburn invokes his quasi-realist account of negation to tell us the state of mind expressed by sincere utterances of (7)'s negation, namely:

- (8) It's not the case that (if we didn't disapprove of kicking dogs, then doing so wouldn't be wrong).

So, given the equivalence of (6) and (7), we now know the state of mind expressed by sincere utterances of

- (5) It's not the case that (kicking dogs is wrong because we disapprove of it).

Fourth, Blackburn argues that the quasi-realist can consistently assert (5) by making a quietist move. He points out that, given the quasi-realist account of their meaning, (5) and (6) both qualify as "first-order," "internal," or "normative" statements *within ethics*, rather than "second-order," "external," or "metaethical" statements *about ethics*. As Blackburn puts it, "Talk of dependency is moral talk or nothing" (1993, 173). Moreover, Blackburn insists, (6) is a piece of moral talk that is repugnant—he opposes the state of mind it expresses—whereas (5) is a perfectly admirable bit of moral talk—he favors the state of mind it expresses. So Blackburn denies (6) and assents to (5), and he trusts the same is true of other quasi-realists as well.

Critical responses to Blackburn's account of mind-independence have almost exclusively focused on this final step. The standard objection is that Blackburn is neglecting an external/metaethical way of reading (6) to which quasi-realists are committed, even if he is correct that quasi-realists can deny (6) when it is given an internal/normative-ethical reading.² Moreover, there is room to resist the second and third steps of Blackburn's proposal, insofar as they rely on contentious parts of the wider quasi-realist program. After all, providing a quasi-realist account of subjunctive conditionals with normative content is just as difficult as providing such an account of indicative conditionals. (That's why Blackburn's story about both sorts of conditionals has changed over the years.) And, of course, there are well-known challenges facing quasi-realist accounts of negation.

However, there is a more fundamental flaw with Blackburn's account of mind-independence. The key problem arises during its very first step. It is simply not true that "Kicking dogs is wrong because we

² See Rasmussen 1985, Cassam 1986, and Moore 2002, among other places. For a reply to the standard objection, see Köhler 2014. For a different sort of objection to the quietist step in Blackburn's account of mind-independence, see Zangwill 1994, and for a reply to that objection, see Sinclair 2008.

disapprove of it” (= “ p because q ”) has the same meaning as “If we didn’t disapprove of kicking dogs, then doing so wouldn’t be wrong” (= “ $\sim q \Box \rightarrow \sim p$ ”). As it is put these days, grounding is not counterfactual covariation.³ The counterexamples here are plentiful, and well known.⁴ For instance, to adapt an old example of Michael DePaul’s (1987), suppose hedonistic act-utilitarianism is correct, and A is an act that maximizes happiness (and hence is required). Then the following are all true:

- (9) If A didn’t maximize happiness, then it wouldn’t be required.
- (10) If A weren’t required, then it wouldn’t maximize happiness.
- (11) A is required because it maximizes happiness.

But the following is false:

- (12) A maximizes happiness because it is required.

In other words, we have counterfactual covariation in both directions, but grounding/dependence in only one direction. So “ p because q ” is not even coextensive with “ $\sim q \Box \rightarrow \sim p$,” much less are the two equivalent in meaning.⁵

Because of their mistaken identification of grounding with counterfactual covariation, quasi-realists have, so far, failed to provide us with an account of what talk of mind-*dependence* comes to. They have told us what counterfactuals such as (7) mean, but they have not told us what dependency claims such as (6) mean. Indeed, the problem is worse than that. It’s not just talk of the ways in which the normative might depend on the mental that quasi-realists have neglected, but moreover talk of any sort of a dependence (or grounding, or non-causal explanation) relation between normative and other matters, mental or otherwise.

Quasi-realism as developed by Blackburn and his allies does not even have a story to tell about what (11)

³ Actually, the point is more often summarized as the claim that grounding is not *counterfactual dependence*, but in my opinion the very examples which demonstrate the point also show that so-called “counterfactual dependence” is no form of dependence at all. For that reason I prefer to talk of *counterfactual covariation*.

⁴ See Berker 2018, §§2–3, for a survey.

⁵ Could Blackburn resist my argument here by only taking (6) to entail (7), and giving up on the reverse entailment? After all, the DePaul counterexample only targets the sufficiency of the latter for the former, not its necessity. So perhaps all Blackburn needs to show that quasi-realists are not committed to moral mind-dependence is the claim that (6) entails (7), together with the claim that they reject (7) in favor of its negation. However, there are three problems with this reply. First, quasi-realists not only want to avoid a commitment to moral mind-dependence, but also seek to provide an account of what talk of mind-dependence come to, and this reply does not help them with the latter task. Second, without such an account it is not clear why quasi-realists should think that (6) entails (7). And, third, cases of explanatory overdetermination and of explanatory preemption (among others) cast doubt on the claim that (6) does in fact entail (7).

means. They currently lack an account of normative ‘grounding’-talk all together, whether formulated using the expressions ‘because’, ‘grounds’, ‘depends on’, ‘in virtue of’, ‘makes the case’, or any of the other standard idioms. And insofar as everyday speech is rife with talk of what makes acts right or wrong, why people are praise- or blameworthy, in virtue of what our institutions are just or unjust, this oversight is a serious lacuna in the quasi-realist program.

2. A Proposal

There is hope, though. There exists a natural expressivist-friendly account of normative ‘because’-talk that quasi-realists can embrace without conflating grounding and counterfactual covariation.

The key to this account is a contrast between two different uses of the word ‘because’. First, there is the use of ‘because’ that has been our main focus so far, namely its use in sentences that express non-causal explanations of one sort or another, as in

(13) That act is required because it maximizes happiness.

(14) That banner is red because it is crimson.

(15) Xanthippe is a widow because Socrates died.

I will call this first use *the ‘because’ of grounding*, since ‘grounding’ is the standard term among metaphysicians for the sort of ‘because’-relation (I will be assuming it is a relation) picked out by sentences such as these. Second, there is the use of ‘because’ in sentences that express rationalizing explanations of an action or mental state of one sort or another, as in

(16) He went to the store because there was a sale.

(17) I believe that p because q .

(18) She dislikes him because he’s an inveterate liar.

I will call this second use *the ‘because’ of basing*, since ‘the basing relation’ is the standard term among epistemologists for such a ‘because’-relation when its explanandum is a belief, as in (17).⁶

This terminology will serve our purposes, but it must be admitted that it is, in some ways, less than

⁶ In extending the epistemologist’s term to the more general relation, I follow Neta forthcoming.

ideal. After all, grounding and basing are the same metaphor! To make matters worse, some authors use ‘grounding’-talk to pick out what I will be calling basing,⁷ and there are times when ‘basing’-talk is a perfectly natural way of referring to grounding, as when we speak of the ultimate basis of morality, or when we say that one normative reason is more basic than another. However, ‘grounding’ and ‘basing’ each have enough of an entrenched history in recent analytic philosophy that I have found them to be handy labels for the distinction at issue here. In my experience, philosophers quickly glom onto the distinction I aim to be making by means of these two terms, despite their common metaphorical lineage.

I introduced the grounding-versus-basing distinction using the word ‘because’. However, in each case we can use other expressions to pick out the same relation. Indeed, it is striking that many of the expressions standardly used to refer to grounding can also be used to refer to basing. In the case of grounding, not only can we say that one fact obtains *because of* another, but we equally well can say that the first fact obtains *in virtue of* the other, that the first fact *depends on* the other fact, or that the other fact *is what makes* the first one obtain. And in the case of basing, not only can we say that I hate a certain politician *because of* certain features of his personality, but we equally well can say that I hate him *in virtue of* those features, that my hatred *depends on* those features, or that those features *are what makes* me hate him so. Grounding and basing are both said in many ways—and in many of the same many ways.⁸

Grounding has, of course, become an extremely hot topic in metaphysics—so hot that we are starting to experience a backlash from those exasperated by the revolutionary zeal of grounding’s advocates. My own take (see Berker 2018) is that while appeals to grounding in metaphysical theorizing might, perhaps, be something new, appeals to grounding in ethical theorizing are not new at all—such appeals have been a staple of the subject for much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (though not, of course, under that name). If you countenance talk of right-*making*, if you take hedonistic act-utilitarianism to be the view that acts are required *because* they maximize happiness, if you think accounts of value can be criticized for

⁷ See, for instance, Clark 1963.

⁸ I shall, mostly for convenience’s sake, be writing as if there is a single grounding relation and a single basing relation. If it turns out there are multiple grounding relations or multiple basing relations, much of what I go on to say in this essay can be adapted accordingly.

providing the wrong order-of-*explanation*, if you believe that there is a genuine question of whether morality is mind-*dependent*—if any of these are true of you, then you’re “down with grounding.” But being down with grounding doesn’t require one to agree with every claim about the notion currently being put forward by metaphysicians working on the topic. So if you have doubts about whether grounding is transitive, or if you deny that grounding is a form of necessitation, or if you reject the idea that existential generalizations are always grounded in their instances, this doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re an opponent of grounding; most likely it just means that you disagree with certain substantive assumptions about grounding’s nature that have quickly become dogma among groundologists. To truly be an opponent of grounding in normative disciplines is to give up on explanatory claims in those disciplines all together—an almost outlandishly radical position, it seems to me. Indeed, that is why it is so important that quasi-realists be able to give an account of normative ‘grounding’-talk: the idiom of grounding suffuses our thought and talk about the normative.

Basing has an interestingly different history from grounding. There is no denying that basing has been a continuous subject of investigation among analytic philosophers, but that investigation has been fractured across a variety of disparate subfields, each of which tends to focus on only certain kinds of basing. I mention here four such subfields. First, a central task in the philosophy of action is to provide an account of the ‘because’ of basing when its explanandum is an action (see Wilson and Shpall 2012). Second, epistemologists have, since the Gettier era, studied the ‘because’ of basing when its explanandum is a belief as well as the related distinction between propositional and doxastic justification, one popular proposal being that doxastic justification just is propositional justification plus proper basing (see Korcz 2015). Third, the recent literature on the nature of inference can be seen as an investigation of one canonical way in which beliefs can be based other beliefs (see Boghossian 2014). And, fourth, theorizing in the reasons-and-rationality literature about what gets called, variously, ‘motivating reasons’, ‘operative reasons’, ‘the agent’s reasons’, and ‘reasons for which’ just is theorizing about the basing relation—“Agent A’s reason for ϕ -ing was that p ” being another way of saying “Agent A ϕ -ed because p ” (see Alvarez 2012).

Because research on the ‘because’ of basing has been spread out across so many subfields, the basing

relation has not often been studied in its full generality. As a result, even though we have at our disposal some extremely sophisticated theories about, say, the basing of beliefs or the basing of actions, there are certain abstract questions about the nature of basing itself that are rarely asked. Here I have in mind questions about the logic, metaphysics, semantics, etc. of basing that are correlates of various familiar questions about the logic, metaphysics, semantics, etc. of grounding that have been intensely debated in recent years.⁹ For instance, just as we can ask whether grounding is transitive, asymmetric, and irreflexive, so too can we ask whether basing is transitive, asymmetry, and irreflexive. Just as we can ask whether grounding is a relation or a connective, so too can we ask whether basing is a relation or a connective. And just as we can ask whether instances of the grounding relation can themselves be grounded, so too can we ask whether instances of the basing relation can themselves be based. Similarly, many of the distinctions that are standardly drawn with respect to grounding have direct parallels with respect to basing. For instance, just as it is important not to conflate *joint grounding* (as when the fact that $p \& q$ is grounded in the fact that p and the fact that q , taken together) with *overdetermined grounding* (as when the fact that $p \vee q$ is grounded in the fact that p and the fact that q , each separately), so too is it important not to conflate *joint basing* (as when a belief that q is based on a belief that $p \supset q$ and a belief that p , taken together) with *overdetermined basing* (as when a belief that $p \vee q$ is based on a belief that p and a belief that q , each separately). Relatedly, just as we want to draw a distinction between *partial* and *full grounding* (as when the fact that $p \& q$ is only partially grounded in the fact that p , but fully grounded in that fact together with the fact that q), so too do we want to draw a distinction between *partial* and *full basing* (as when a belief that q is only partially based on a belief that $p \supset q$, but fully based on that belief together with a belief that p). And just as it is natural to distinguish between *immediate* and *mediate grounding* (i.e. between the relation that obtains when some things directly ground a thing and the relation that obtains when some things ground a thing just because they ground other things that in turn ground the thing), so too is it natural to distinguish between *immediate* and *mediate basing* (i.e. between the relation that obtains when some things serve as the direct basis

⁹ Investigation of those questions about grounding was spearheaded by the widely-cited triumvirate of Fine 2012, Rosen 2010, and Schaffer 2009. For overview of the torrent of research that followed, see the essays in Raven forthcoming.

for an action or mental state and the relation that obtains when some things serve as the basis for an action or mental state just because they serve as the basis for other things that in turn serve as the basis for that action or mental state).

Even though many of these distinctions are not, I claim, often drawn with respect to basing, and even though many of the general questions I mentioned have not, I maintain, been frequently asked about basing, there is one general question about the nature of basing that has been the subject of sustained inquiry in almost every mini-literature devoted to the topic. That question is this: what is the ontological category (or categories) of the basing relation's relata? I have been assuming—and will continue to assume—that basing is a one-many relation, so that it is always a single entity that is based, but its basis could be either a single entity or a plurality of entities taken together. I have also been assuming—and will continue to assume—that the thing based is either an action or a mental state.¹⁰ These two assumptions are innocuous enough. However, when it comes to the ontological category of the entities that serve as bases, it is impossible to make any uncontentious assumptions: here discord reigns. According to *mentalism*, only mental states serve as bases.¹¹ (So on this proposal, “I believe that p because q ” is often shorthand for “I believe that p because I believe that q .”) According to *factualism*, it is facts that constitute the bases of our actions and mental states. (So on this proposal, “I believe that p because q ” is often shorthand for “I believe that p because of the fact that q .”) According to *propositionalism*, our actions and mental states are based on propositions. According to *disjunctivism (about the basing relation)*, in the Good Case our actions and mental states are based on facts, whereas in the Bad Case they are based on mental states (or, perhaps, facts about mental states). And there are yet more possibilities beyond these.

It is difficult to discuss basing without taking a stand in this debate concerning the ontology of bases. So, for the time being, I will be assuming that mentalism is correct. I do this for two reasons. First, I think this view is a natural one for expressivists to take: philosophers of a broadly Humean persuasion tend to

¹⁰ Rather than, say, a fact or proposition about some action or mental state.

¹¹ Or, in a variant, only mental states *and actions* serve as bases (to make room for Michael Thompson's [2008] “naive action theory,” on which actions are sometimes explained by other actions).

assume it, and arguably Blackburn himself endorses it.¹² Second, the proposal I shall go on to make on expressivists' behalf is most easily explained when one assumes mentalism. But partisans of the other views need not fret: my proposal is compatible with those views as well, as I shall eventually demonstrate.

All expressivists should be “down with basing”: they should admit that our attitudes, pro and con, can be based on other things. As Blackburn puts it, “there can be no question” that we often bear attitudes such as desire and admiration toward objects “because of their naturalistic properties” (1993, 122; see also 1984, 182). Moreover, in Blackburn’s case in particular, there is special reason why he should allow that attitudes can have bases, for that idea plays a key role in his argument that expressivists can explain why it is a conceptual truth that normative properties supervene on underlying properties, whereas realists cannot.¹³ So not only is it independently plausible that the sorts of attitudes that expressivists take to be expressed by simple normative sentences such as “Kicking dogs is wrong” are held on the basis of other mental states, but moreover those expressivists who are convinced by Blackburn’s argument from supervenience for their view are committed to this idea.

Thus expressivists should grant that the attitudes expressed by normative sentences have bases. And once they do, an account of normative ‘grounding’-talk immediately suggests itself. We have two sorts of dependencies here. On the one hand, normative facts can depend on—in the sense of being grounded in—further facts. On the other hand, attitudes can depend on—in the sense of being based upon—other states of mind. So why not take talk of the former to involve an expression of the latter?

This basic thought can be implemented in a variety of ways. Here I focus on one particularly straightforward way of developing the thought. Let us assume a simplified version of Blackburn’s expressivism, so that if I say, “Kicking dogs is wrong,” I express a certain sort of disapproval—call it ‘disapproval_w’—of kicking dogs. In other words, we have:

¹² Blackburn often characterizes a person’s moral sensibility by means of a function whose output is an attitude and whose input is “[a state of] belief . . . [and] more generally . . . awareness” (1984, 192) or, in later versions, “a representation” (1998, 5). Moreover, Blackburn clearly intends this function to tell us the basis on which the outputted attitude is held (see, for instance, Blackburn 1998, 99). It is only a short step from here to mentalism, at least when it comes to the bases of our attitudes.

¹³ See Blackburn 1993, 122, 137. In effect, Blackburn argues that (i) the attitudes expressed by normative sentences will only serve our needs and purposes if they are based on natural properties, and (ii) it is a conceptual truth that the basing relation obeys a constraint that is the analogue for attitudes of supervenience for properties.

(E₂) To (sincerely) say, “Kicking dogs is wrong,” is to express *disapproval_w of kicking dogs*.

Let us also assume that ‘kick’, ‘dog’, ‘cause’, and ‘pain’ are all nonnormative terms, so that

(E₃) To (sincerely) say, “Kicking dogs causes them pain,” is to express *a belief that kicking dogs causes them pain*.

Finally, let ‘because_g’ designate the ‘because’ of grounding, and let ‘because_b’ designate the ‘because’ of basing. Then the proposal I want to consider on behalf of quasi-realists goes as follows:

(E₄) To (sincerely) say, “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain,” is to express *disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of a-belief-that-kicking-dogs-causes-them-pain*.

So if I say to you, “The wrongness of kicking dogs is grounded in the pain it causes them,” I thereby, on this proposal, give expression to the following complex state of mind: one in which I have an attitude of *disapproval_w* toward kicking dogs that is based on a belief that kicking dogs causes them pain. In slogan form: talk of normative grounding is the expression of attitudinal basing.¹⁴

My proposal here should not be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that it is *the basing relation itself* that is being expressed, whatever that might mean. (Can relations be expressed?) I am also not suggesting that it is *the fact that there is a basing relation between the attitude and the belief* that is being expressed. Rather, my suggestion is that what is being expressed is a certain *complex state of mind* that contains within it the attitude, the belief, and the obtaining of a basing relation between them. The fact that this complex state is partially constituted by two states of mind is no barrier to the complex itself also being state of mind. If we analyze preference-for-X-over-Y as greater-approval-of-X-than-of-Y, then a given state of preference will be composed, in part, of two separate states of approval-or-disapproval-to-a-certain-degree, but we would not for that reason deny that preferring is a state of mind. Similarly, in the case at hand, the fact that the attitude-plus-belief-plus-basing conglomerate it composed, in part, of two separate states of mind is not a reason to deny that the conglomerate itself is a state of mind. Indeed, what could the state of *disapproving_w-of-kicking-dogs-because_b-one-believes-that-doing-so-causes-them-pain* be *other* than a state of one’s mind? It is not a state of other people’s minds, or of one’s environment.

¹⁴ And, correspondingly, thought about normative grounding is itself attitudinal basing: to think *that kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain* just is to *disapprove_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of a-belief-that-kicking-dogs-causes-them-pain*.

Moreover, the fact that this complex state of mind is partially constituted by an attitude of disapproval_w and by a state of belief yields a nice feature of my proposal: it makes it particularly easy for quasi-realists to explain why “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain” entails both “Kicking dogs is wrong” and “Kicking dogs causes them pain.”¹⁵ One cannot sincerely utter the first of these sentences without also harboring the mental states that would be expressed by sincere utterances of the second and third sentences; so to assent to the first sentence while denying the second or third is to exhibit a clashing set of attitudes or mental states. (I set to one side the familiar issue of whether clashing attitudes are enough like inconsistent beliefs to be a marker of logical failure.) Thus my proposal allows quasi-realists to account for an undeniable feature of the ‘because’ of grounding, namely its double factivity: the fact that “*p* because_g *q*” entails both “*p*” and “*q*,” even when “*p*” is a normative sentence. That is one virtue of the account.

A second virtue of the account is that it gives quasi-realists the resources to draw all of the standard distinctions with respect to grounding mentioned earlier. Consider the distinction between partial and full grounding. Not only is this distinction theoretically useful, but it tracks a familiar distinction that that we make in everyday speech. Suppose I said I would return your book on Tuesday, and it is now Tuesday. Then a partial explanation of why I ought to return your book is that it is Tuesday, whereas (let us suppose, simplifying somewhat) a full explanation would cite both its being Tuesday and the fact that I told you I would return it then. What I am I up to when I say these things? The quasi-realist can explain the distinction here in terms of the analogous distinction between partial and full basing relations, like so:¹⁶

(E₅) To say, “I ought to return the book in part because_g today is Tuesday,” is to express *approval_o-of-returning-the-book in part because_b of a-belief-that-today-is-Tuesday*.

(E₆) To say, “I ought to return the book entirely because_g (today is Tuesday, and I said I would return the book then),” is to express *approval_o-of-returning-the-book entirely because_b of a-belief-that-today-is-Tuesday and a-belief-that-I-said-I-would-return-the-book-then, taken together*.

In a similar way, quasi-realists can account for the distinctions between (talk of) joint and overdetermined grounding and between (talk of) mediate and immediate grounding by appealing, on the attitude side of things, to the corresponding distinctions between joint and overdetermined basing and between mediate

¹⁵ Or, at least, it makes it no more difficult for them to explain these two entailments than to explain any other entailment.

¹⁶ From this point on, I often drop the ‘(sincerely)’-qualifiers to reduce clutter.

and immediate basing. But everyone who theorizes about the basing relation should countenance the three distinctions mentioned here (partial vs. full basing, joint vs. overdetermined basing, immediate vs. mediate basing). So quasi-realists get for free the corresponding distinctions in our talk of grounding, if they adopt my proposal.¹⁷

A third virtue of the proposal is how versatile it is: how easily it can be adapted to other forms of expressivism (beyond Blackburn's) and to other forms of dependence (beyond simple normative-on-nonnormative dependence). For instance, the proposal can be readily applied to Gibbard-style expressivism, since planning states have bases: we plan things for reasons. Thus a Gibbardian can hold that

(E₇) To say, "Packing now is the thing to do because_g otherwise we will miss the train," is to express *a-state-of-planning-to-pack-now because_b of a-belief-that-otherwise-we-will-miss-the-train*.

Even more importantly, the proposal can easily be adapted to handle claims of normative-on-normative dependence, in addition to claims of normative-on-nonnormative dependence. Suppose that

(E₈) To say, "That outcome is bad," is to express *disapproval_b of that outcome*.

Then a Blackburn-style quasi-realist can insist that

(E₉) To say, "Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it leads to bad outcomes," is to express *disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of one's-disapproval_b-of-the-outcomes-to-which-it-leads*.

The proposal can also be modified to handle claims of second-order dependence, if we allow that there is such a thing as second-order basing. Suppose a critic of quasi-realism were willing to grant that quasi-realists can consistently accept

(19) Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain

but thought instead that quasi-realists are committed to endorsing

(20) Our love of dogs makes_g it the case that (kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain).

A quasi-realist could then retort that, on her view,

(E₁₀) To say, "Our love of dogs makes_g it the case that (kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain)," is to express *(disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of a-belief-that-doing-so-causes-them-pain) because_b of a-belief-that-we-love-dogs*.

¹⁷ Quasi-realists can also use my proposal to account for more controversial distinctions sometimes made with respect to grounding. Philosophers who deny that grounding is a form of necessitation often make a distinction between (metaphysical) grounds and (metaphysical) enablers and disablers. Quasi-realists can recover this distinction by appealing to a corresponding distinction between (psychological) bases and (psychological) enablers and disablers.

Moreover, our quasi-realist could insist, she does not possess this basing structure among her attitudes. So she does not endorse (20), nor is she required by her acceptance of quasi-realism to do so.

This last point reveals a fourth virtue of the proposal being offered here: it allows quasi-realists to hold onto Blackburn’s quietist story about why quasi-realists are not committed to the mind-dependence of the normative. My proposal tells us the state of mind expressed by statements of mind-dependence, whether they be statements of dependence-at-the-second-order on our mental states such as (20) or statements of dependence-at-the-first-order on our mental states such as

(21) Kicking dogs is wrong because_g I disapprove_w of it.

And in either case, the commitment expressed by such a statement is an engaged, ethical position internal to moral thought, not a disengaged, purely-metaethical position that takes a stand on ethical practice from a “sideways, theoretical perspective” (Blackburn 1993, 177).¹⁸ So quasi-realists can complain that (21) is a repugnant first-order moral claim to which they are opposed, because the state of mind it expresses is despicable. The details of this complaint will differ from the details of the complaint lodged by Blackburn when he was working with his counterfactual way of understanding (21): rather than expressing our opposition to attitudes of disapproval_w toward kicking dogs that disappear in certain counterfactual scenarios, we now will be inveighing against attitudes of disapproval_w toward kicking dogs that are held in the actual world on a given basis. But the heart of Blackburn’s story about why quasi-realists are not mind-dependence theorists can remain the same.

Which brings me to the fifth and final virtue of the proposal that I shall mention: how metaphysically lightweight it is. The proposal offers quasi-realists an account of normative ‘grounding’-talk (and other related idioms) which makes use of no materials other than the usual ones employed by quasi-realists (“desire-like” attitudes, an expression relation, etc.) plus the basing relation. Moreover, as already explained, quasi-realists should be fine with the idea that the attitudes expressed by normative sentences have bases—that they are held for reasons. And to say that these attitudes are held for reasons is not to say

¹⁸ Hence (20) is first-order in one sense (it falls within normative ethics) but second-order in another sense (it concerns a second-order dependency).

that the reasons for which they are held are good or bad reasons. So—I would claim—I am not appealing to anything normative in providing an account of what we are up to when we engage in normative ‘grounding’-talk. Therefore the picture I present here is fully compatible with the naturalistic ambitions of quasi-realist expressivism—assuming, that is, that a naturalistic story can be told about mental states and their bases, which those with naturalistic ambitions owe us anyway.

Where does this leave us? I have been proposing that quasi-realists view normative ‘grounding’-talk as the expression of attitudinal basing, and I have been pointing out the many virtues of this account, including its ability to explain the factivity of grounding, the ease with which it recovers standard distinctions made with respect to grounding, its adaptability to many forms of expressivism and to many forms of dependence, its compatibility with quietist accounts of why normativity can be mind-independent for expressivists, and the metaphysical austerity of the materials with which it works. So this proposal has a lot going for it. It is, if I may be so bold, what quasi-realists *should* say about explanatory talk in the normative realm.¹⁹

3. A Problem

Which is not to say that the proposal being broached here is problem free. Indeed, this proposal (and others like it) face a number of potential challenges.

Some of these challenges are instances of more familiar worries for quasi-realist expressivism. For instance, how do we extend my proposal to negated normative ‘grounding’-claims? And is it problematic if

¹⁹ Indeed, I think that, if anything, the puzzle is why Blackburn didn’t endorse this account of normative ‘dependence’-talk, given what he does say about how expressivists are to explain the supervenience of the normative on the nonnormative (1993, 122, 137). It was those passages that inspired me, while teaching Blackburn’s quasi-realism four years ago, to think up my proposal.

More recently, I was grieved to discover that C. S. Jenkins (2005, 206–7) and Neil Sinclair (2008, 264–65) in passing make somewhat similar proposals. So they deserve credit for being the first ones to discuss a proposal of roughly this sort in print. However, there are important differences between their versions of the proposal and mine. Instead of my appeal to the basing relation, Jenkins speaks of “the standards” according to which we hold attitudes such as moral censure, whereas Sinclair prefers to say that our attitudes are “responses” to features of the things toward which they are directed. Moreover, Jenkins and Sinclair combine what I take to be our central insight with other elements that I consider to be in tension with that insight. After appealing to (the nonnormative notion of) a person’s standards when formulating a proposal much like mine, Jenkins slides into using ‘standards’ in a normative sense when she (mistakenly, in my opinion) summarizes her proposal as follows: “In asking what makes it the case that p [for a normative ‘p’], we are asking what standards have to be met in order for p to be correctly asserted” (2005, 207). She then goes on to identify what makes something the case with that thing’s “sufficient conditions,” which conflates grounding and necessitation. Sinclair, on the other hand, combines a proposal much like mine for talk of mind-*dependence* (2008, §2) with a version of Blackburn’s mistaken counterfactual account for talk of mind-*independence* (ibid., §3), which strikes me as an odd mixture of views.

we end up giving different accounts of ‘grounding’-talk when at least one relatum is normative and of ‘grounding’-talk when neither relatum is normative? Other challenges are unique to this proposal. For instance, what are we to make of cases in which an attitude appears to be held on a testimonial basis (or on the basis of an inference in which the premises don’t serve as grounds of the conclusion), but in which it is implausible to attribute a belief in the corresponding grounding claim to the holder of that attitude?

These are all significant worries. But I will not be addressing them here, for two reasons. First, I have been presenting my proposal in a way that largely abstracts away from the details of particular expressivist proposals, and addressing some of these concerns requires going into the specifics of how a quasi-realist should think about negation, inference, the attitudes expressed by normative sentences, etc. Second, I have been presenting only one way of developing my general thought that quasi-realists should take normative ‘grounding’-talk to be the expression of attitudinal basing, and some ways of replying to these objections involve varying that proposal so as to complicate its letter but preserve its spirit.²⁰

Instead, I want to focus on another potential problem for my proposal that hews closer to the sorts of issues we have been considering so far. My proposal allows quasi-realists to tell a natural, expressivist-friendly story about many ‘because’-sentences. Many, but not all. Consider again the Euthyphro question: “Is it wrong to kick dogs because I disapprove_w of it, or do I disapprove_w of it because it is wrong?” The whole point of quasi-realist accounts of (thought and talk about) mind-independence is to answer the Euthyphro question in the right way. However, that involves not just *denying* the first horn of this dilemma but also *assenting to* its second horn. We have given quasi-realist expressivists the resources—once they wheel in their preferred account of negation—to explain what we are up to when we say,

(22) It’s not the case that (kicking dogs is wrong because I disapprove_w of it).

But we have not yet said how they can explain what we are doing when we say,

²⁰ For instance, one way of responding to the worry about attitudes held on the basis of testimony or non-ground-tracking inference is to revise my proposal so that ‘grounding’-talk only expresses complex states of mind featuring certain sorts of basing relations, rather than any basing relation whatsoever. (Maybe only non-inferential, non-testimonial basing is at issue, or maybe only basing-on-the-natural-properties-of-objects.) Another way of replying is to deny that the problematic sort of basing can occur, once we focus on the specific variety of attitude that expressivists take to be expressed by simple normative sentences, with its special connection to action, etc. (Maybe that sort of attitude cannot be based on testimony, and this is why there is something problematic about normative testimony.) I discuss all of the objections that I here set to one side in greater detail in a companion piece to this essay titled “Grounding for Expressivists.”

(23) I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because doing so is wrong.

What could this sentence mean, for an expressivist?

It is important to notice that, although (22) features the ‘because’ of grounding, (23) features the ‘because’ of basing. (It is not as if (23) offers an alternative to functionalist accounts of mental states such as disapproval.) In other words, the Euthyphro question does not employ a univocal sense of ‘because’: its first half concerns grounding, its second half basing.²¹ Thus, although my account of normative ‘grounding’-talk commits quasi-realists to a certain way of reading (22) (given what they say about negation), my account does not, on its own, commit them to any particular account of (23). Nevertheless it is difficult to endorse my proposal without understanding (23) in a certain way.

Recall that we are right now assuming mentalism, so that only mental states can serve as bases of attitudes. (Soon we shall discharge that assumption.) Given mentalism, (23) must be taken by expressivists to be shorthand for:

(24) I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I believe that doing so is wrong.²²

(24) contains two embedded sentences attributing to oneself a certain mental state: one to the left of the ‘because_b’, and the other to the right. Let us consider what each of these sentences comes to, for an expressivist, when said on its own. The embedded sentence on the left is easy:

(E₁₁) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs,” is to express *one’s belief that one disapproves_w of kicking dogs*.

Moreover, for Blackburnian expressivists of the sort we are now considering, the standard way of handling the embedded sentence on the right is as follows:²³

(E₁₂) To say, “I believe that kicking dogs is wrong,” is to express *one’s belief that one disapproves_w of kicking dogs*.

Hence each of the embedded sentences, if said by itself, expresses the same state of mind. So, when we put

²¹ This raises the interesting issue, not often discussed, of why it might be thought that the Euthyphro question presents us with exclusive and exhaustive options, as would be needed if that question constitutes a genuine *dilemma*.

²² Strictly speaking, it is compatible with mentalism that (23) is shorthand for a sentence in which the explanans is a mental state other than belief with the same content, such as “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I have an intuition that doing so is wrong.” However, mentalists *who are expressivists* cannot provide that gloss for (23)—one of the whole points of the expressivist program is to avoid appealing to a faculty of intuition in one’s moral epistemology.

²³ See Blackburn 1993, 184–85; Blackburn 1998, 70; Rosen 1998, 393–94; and Schroeder 2010, 88.

(E₁₁) and (E₁₂) together, it is difficult to resist concluding that

(E₁₃) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I believe that doing so is wrong,” is to express *one’s belief that (one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs)*.

However, this is a terrible result! In uttering (23), I clearly am not attributing to myself a self-based attitude.²⁴

The obvious response is to renounce mentalism and try to avoid the result by endorsing an alternative account of the ontological category of bases. Let us focus on how matters proceed if we accept propositionalism instead of mentalism. (Parallel issues arise for factualism, disjunctivism, etc.) There are two issues to keep track of here. The first is whether it is even possible to offer a version of my quasi-realist account of ‘grounding’-talk when we assume propositionalism. The second is whether that account gets into trouble when we attempt to extend it to ‘basing’-talk.

Concerning the first issue, here is the obvious way of adapting my proposal to propositionalism:

(E₁₄) To say, “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain,” is to express *disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of the-proposition-that-kicking-dogs-causes-them-pain*.

This propositionalist variant of my proposal possess many of the virtues I cited for its mentalist cousin: it is metaphysically lightweight; it allows quasi-realists to go quietist about talk of mind-dependence; it is readily adaptable to non-Blackburnian forms of expressivism; it allows quasi-realists to make sense of various distinctions with regard to ‘grounding’-talk by appealing to analogues of those distinctions with regard to basing. But with two of my cited virtues, complications arise.

First, although it is clear how quasi-realists can explain, given (E₁₄), why “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain” entails “Kicking dogs is wrong,” it is less obvious why that first sentence entails “Kicking dogs causes them pain.” Less obvious, but not entirely unobvious: if one sincerely utters “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it causes them pain,” it follows from (E₁₄) that one has a certain attitude that is based on a certain nonnormative proposition. So, plausibly, one is committed to that nonnormative proposition being true, and hence committed to not believing its negation.

Second, and more pressingly, how to extend the propositionalist version of my proposal to (talk of)

²⁴ I find it fascinating that this problem for quasi-realists is similar to the old puzzle for Kantians, raised by Ross (1930, ch. 1) and others, about how it can be our duty to do our duty for duty’s sake. I find this fascinating because quasi-realists are usually classified as part of the sentimentalist tradition, so quasi-realists and Kantians make for odd bedfellows.

normative-on-normative dependence is a delicate matter. The most flatfooted way of doing so would be to propose that

(E₁₅) To say, “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it leads to bad outcomes,” is to express *disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of the-proposition-that-kicking-dogs-leads-to-bad-outcomes*.

But it is not clear that expressivists can make sense of the notion of a normative proposition, much less make sense of what it is to express an attitude that is based on such a proposition. Expressivism offers us an account of thought with normative content and of talk with normative content, but expressivism—at least as it is traditionally construed—does not theorize about the thing itself, normative content. However, talk of normative-on-normative dependence is everywhere: to give up on providing an account of such talk would be a disastrous result for quasi-realists. So I think the best option for quasi-realist propositionalists is to resist the most flatfooted way of generalizing (E₁₄) to cases of normative-on-normative dependence and to propose the following instead of (E₁₅):

(E₁₆) To say, “Kicking dogs is wrong because_g it leads to bad outcomes,” is to express *one’s-disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of the-proposition-that-one-disapproves_b-of-the-outcomes-to-which-kicking-dogs-leads*.

This proposal leads to an unfortunate lack of unity in one’s theorizing about ‘dependence’-speech: the account of normative-on-normative dependency talk is not exactly parallel to the account of normative-on-nonnormative dependency talk. But I see no way around that result, for propositionalist quasi-realists.

We are now in a position to turn to the second issue facing quasi-realists who accept propositionalism: whether their variant of my account of ‘grounding’-talk gets them into trouble when we consider ‘basing’-talk. And, indeed, here there is once again trouble. Consider our target sentence:

(23) I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong.

We don’t want to provide an account of (23)’s meaning that is analogous to (E₁₅), namely:

(E₁₇) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong,” is to express *one’s belief that (one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of the-proposition-that-kicking-dogs-is-wrong)*,

because then we are appealing to an attitude based on a normative proposition, which is a mysterious thing for a quasi-realist. So it would appear that our only option is to provide an account of (23)’s meaning that is analogous to (E₁₆), namely:

- (E₁₈) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong,” is to express *one’s belief that (one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of the-proposition-that-one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs)*.

However, now disaster has struck: we are once again forced to say that utterances of (23) express a belief that one has a self-based attitude. So propositionalist quasi-realists fare no better than mentalist quasi-realists when it comes to providing an account of (23). In order for propositionalists to have a viable account of talk of normative-on-normative grounding, they must embrace a proposal about such talk that is close to a notational variant of the mentalist’s account of talk of normative-on-normative grounding. That in turn forces them to embrace a proposal about talk of attitude-on-normative-content basing that is close to a notational variant of the mentalist’s account of talk of attitude-on-(belief-with)-normative-content basing. Hence both sorts of quasi-realists are saddled with almost the same implausible result.

Thus, in the end, moving from mentalism to an alternative view about the ontological category of bases is no help with our problem: either that move causes problems elsewhere (by depriving quasi-realists of an account of normative-on-normative dependency talk), or it returns us to the same problem, in slightly different form. So let us go back to assuming mentalism and consider what options are left for quasi-realists. Another response is to resist my earlier claim that (E₁₁) and (E₁₂) commit the quasi-realist to (E₁₃). Perhaps instead of (E₁₃), the quasi-realist should propose

- (E₁₉) To (sincerely) say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong,” is to express *one’s-belief-that-one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of one’s-disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs*.²⁵

However, this proposal is not particularly plausible, for several reasons. First, it takes a sentence that appears to concern the basis of one’s attitude of disapproval_w and instead makes it have to do with the basis of *one’s belief* that one has this attitude of disapproval_w. But these two things can pull apart. For instance, suppose I believe-that-I-disapprove_w-of-kicking-dogs because (mentalists can add here: I believe that) I always feel guilty every time I kick a dog. If I have independent evidence (which, perhaps, is misleading) that I feel guilty for having done something if and only if it is wrong, I might also believe-that-(I-disapprove_w-of-kicking-dogs-because_b-doing-so-is-wrong). And yet, this last belief of mine could be mistaken. (Maybe in fact I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because my wife is a dog person and I want to curry her favor.) In such a

²⁵ Zach Gabor and Bart Streumer each independently made this suggestion.

scenario, surely I can sincerely—yet mistakenly—utter the words “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong.” (E₁₃) allows this. But (E₁₉) does not.

A second problem is that (E₁₉) does not naturally generalize to other types of ‘basing’-sentences. For instance, consider

(25) I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I disapprove_w of violence.

The direct analogue of (E₁₉) for this sentence would be

(E₂₀) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I disapprove_w of violence,” is to express *one’s-belief-that-one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of one’s-disapproval_w-of-violence*.

But this is an implausible expressivist treatment of (25): why the asymmetry in how the two mentioned attitudes are handled?²⁶ A much more natural proposal is

(E₂₁) To say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I disapprove_w of violence,” is to express *one’s belief that (one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b one-disapproves_w-of-violence)*.

However, (E₂₁) is the straightforward way of generalizing (E₁₃) to (25). So once again we are led back to (E₁₃) as the treatment of “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b doing so is wrong” that is forced upon expressivists.

I can see only one last possible response to our problem: maybe quasi-realists should deny that they need to tell a story on which it makes sense for us to say (23). On this line of thought, one should never say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because doing so is wrong.” Instead, one should cite the various properties of dog-kickings that, in one’s view, make that action wrong: “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because it causes them pain, because it is inhumane, and so on.” So, according to this line of thought, the proper reaction to the Euthyphro question is to view it as presenting us with a false dilemma: it is neither the case that it is wrong to kick dogs because we disapprove_w of it nor the case that we disapprove_w of doing so because it is wrong; instead, we disapprove_w of that activity because of various other properties it has.²⁷

I can see the appeal of this response, but I think that it ultimately does not succeed. I offer two preliminary points and then my main rebuttal. First preliminary point: the claim being made here is not

²⁶ Matters are even worse if we consider the sentence “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b I disapprove_w of kicking dogs.” Surely this does not express *one’s-belief-that-one-disapproves_w-of-kicking-dogs because_b of one’s-disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs!*

²⁷ Both Allan Gibbard and Gideon Rosen have suggested this reply to me in conversation.

that it is never acceptable to say *that one has an attitude of disapproval_w toward an action because_b that action has some-normative-property-or-other*, nor that it is never acceptable to say *that one has some-attitude-or-other toward an action because_b that action is wrong*. Everyone should be fine with the sentences “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b kicking dogs leads to bad outcomes” and “I’m surprised that you kicked that dog because_b kicking dogs is wrong.” The problem, rather, is supposed to arise only when the attitude on the left-hand side of the ‘because_b’ is precisely the one that expressivists claim to be expressed by sincere utterances of the normative sentence on the right-hand side. However, it should strike us as a little puzzling why the proposed ban only goes into effect under these precise conditions. Apparently it is fine to talk of attitudes other than disapproval_w being based on wrongness, and also fine to talk of disapproval_w being based on normative properties other than wrongness, but not fine to talk of disapproval_w being based on wrongness. But why would *that* be so? This all seems rather convenient.

Second preliminary point: advocates of this response are presenting us with their own false dilemma. “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b it causes them pain” is not incompatible with “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b it is wrong.” One way for them both to be true is for the first to be an instance of mediate basing and the second to be an instance of immediate basing: maybe my-belief-that-kicking-dogs-causes-them-pain is the basis of my-belief-that-kicking-dogs-is-wrong, which in turn is the immediate basis of my-disapproval_w-of-kicking-dogs, so that the attitude in question is directly based on the second belief and indirectly based on the first. Hence the real issue is not whether it is sometimes okay to say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b it causes them pain”; all parties can agree to that. The issue is rather whether it is never okay to say, “I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b it is wrong.”

Which bring me to the main problem with this response to the difficulties that sentence (23) presents for quasi-realists: even *if* it is never alright to say (23), quasi-realists still owe us an explanation of what we *would* be doing *were* we to utter those words. Moreover, the quasi-realist explanation we have been led to of what we would be doing were we to utter those words is patently inadequate. If indeed I should always abstain from telling others that I disapprove_w of kicking dogs because_b it is wrong, the reason I should abstain is clearly not that otherwise I would be reporting that I have a self-based attitude.

So I think we are left with a problem. I have been making the case that viewing normative ‘grounding’-talk as the expression of attitudinal basing is an extremely promising quasi-realist account of the ‘because’ of grounding (and related idioms). I see, however, no way of extending that proposal into a viable account of the ‘because’ of basing (and related idioms). My conclusion: quasi-realists have a problem with the Euthyphro contrast after all, just not where we initially expected it to be.

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