Normative Facts

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This paper is about normative facts: what they are and particularly why we should believe that they obtain. What, first of all, do I mean by "normative facts"? A normative fact is, I take it in accordance with the usual understanding of the concept of a fact, what corresponds to a true normative statement.[1] Different kinds of statements can be found in the realm of normative statements: value-statements ("it is good to be in Japan"), reason-statements ("Paul has good reasons to be nicer to his rich brother") and ought-statements ("You ought to keep your promises"). Thus we would have accordingly "value-facts", "reason-facts" and "ought-facts". These are the facts that correspond to the appropriate statements. By this I just mean the thing that is the case, provided that the statement in question is true. The fact does not have to be a extra-linguistic entity.

The claim I will defend here is the following: There are normative facts (value- reason- and ought-facts), facts which are independent of whether we think they obtain or not. I will call this doctrine *normative realism*.

[1] See Skorupski (2000), p. 134.

1. The Expressivist Challenge

In a certain sense this claim seems to trivially true: In a everday perspective we do not have any difficulties with statements of the kind: 'It is a fact that you ought to do x', or with 'It is a fact, that you have good reason to stop smoking'.

But those who are familiar with the metaethical discussion know very well that the claim that there are normative facts is not trivial at all. Different philosophers hold the view that there are no such things as normative facts.[2] According to them, normative statements have no truth-value (they are neither true nor false) and thus, they cannot correspond to anything 'out there' in the world. The talk of 'it is a fact that you ought to do x' is misleading. There is no fact corresponding the statement 'you ought to do x'. According to *ethical noncognitivists* normative statements do not refer to anything, they rather express an inner, noncognitive state of the person who utters the statement. Normative statements have an *expressive meaning*, they are not stating facts. They are thus like commands 'Do x' and 'Don't do y'. Someone who says, for instance, 'It is good to be in Japan' makes clear that he likes to be here or that he has a positive attitude towards being here.

But why should we believe in this expressivist analysis of normative statements? Why should we not accept the view that there are normative facts, in accordance with the way we talk about these issues? Why should we think that we go wrong when we say that it is fact that you ought not kill? Or put it this way. What is wrong with normative realism?

I think the main reason to be sceptical about normative realism is the following: Someone who holds the view that "You ought to do x" does not have a genuine belief unlike someone who holds the view that, for instance, the earth is round, which is a purely descriptive statement. Descriptive statements

[2] See Ayer (1936), p. 102-120; Stevenson (1937).

have, as Michael Smith puts it, another *direction of fit* than normative statements have.[3] Descriptive statements have to fit the world. Normative statements on the other hand do not have to fit the world. It is rather the other way round: The world has to fit them. Take the following example: I think that you ought to write a paper. The fact that you have not done it yet is no reason for me to rethink my view that you ought to write a paper. This is of course not the case with regard to descriptive statements: Seeing that my computer has a virus is indeed a good reason to drop the view I hold that my computer is virus-free. Normative statements do not refer to something that is supposedly the case; this is why they do not have to fit the world: They tell you what you should do, not what you did or what you are about to do. If so, normative realism - this the expressivist conclusion - cannot account for the normativity of normative sentences. The expressivist can do so: Normative statements express subjective states such as desires the world must fit with.[4]

In addition to this, normative anti-realists think that normative realism is also unable to account for the *motivational force* of normative statements. What is meant by that? Normative statements are not just telling what you ought to do, what you should aim at, they are also able to move into action, to get you to do what you supposed to be doing. And we are at least sometimes moved by the content of normative statements, that is we respond to them the way we should do, for instance, we do what we ought to do, or we acquire a positive attitude towards something we see as valuable. But how could that be possible, if - as normative realists assume - normative statements just state normative facts? How could a fact-stating proposition motivate you to act in a certain way? Expressivists think of course that fact-stating proposition cannot motivate you. And they therefore not fact-stating, because they do motivate us

[3] See Smith (1987), p. 51.

[4] See Smith (1987), p. 55.

to act in certain ways.

Thus, so the argument goes, normative realism cannot account for the normativity as well as for the motivational force of normative statements. This is what Mackie has in mind, when he says:

> "Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values (normative facts) would have to be. The form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an ovverriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and make him pursue it. An objective good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it, not because of any contingent fact that this person, or every person, is so constituted that he desires this end, but just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it. Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it. Or we should have something like Clarke's necessary relations of fitness between situations and actions, so that a situation would have a demand for such-and-such an action somehow built into it."[5]

Mackie, of course, thinks that there is no such thing like to-be-pursuedness or not-to-be-doneness built into facts: Facts do not have any normative properties nor do they have a motivational force. With regard to the motivational force Mackie thinks - in accordance with David Hume - "that reason - in which at this stage he includes all sorts of knowing as well as reasoning - can never be an 'influencing motive of the will'"[6].

2. The Humean Account of Normativity

How can we - if not by referring to normative facts - account for the normativity as well as for the motivational force of normative statements? Most

[5] Mackie (1977), p. 40.

[6] Mackie (1977), p. 40.

normative anti-realists think we should do it the way David Hume did it. According to this Humean model normativity and motivation are based on desires or attitudes. And normative statements are expressions of such desires or attitudes. Some one who utters the statement 'Abortion is wrong' does not want people to have an abortion or disapproves of having a abortion (he has a negative attitude towards abortion). This is what the statement expresses.

But does it mean exactly that normativity and motivation are based on desires or attitudes? Take normativity first. I would like to focus here on a desire-account of normativity.

Desires are in a special way related to oughts and reasons: If I have a desire for x, then I think that x ought to be the case or that there are reasons for bringing about x. On the other hand, if I think that people should not have abortions I have a desire that this will not be the case. And as Michael Smith argues a desire is not something that is supposed to fit the world. It is rather the other way round: The world should fit the desire.[7] If I have a desire for x and x is not the case, there is no reason at all to give the desire. On the contrary the desire for x presupposes that x is not yet the case. Thus, desires and normative statements ('You ought to do x') have the same direction of fit. Unlike descriptive statements normative statements do not have to fit the world. This is the reason - so the Humean model tells us - why the normative meaning of normative statements can accounted for by desires and of course not by normative facts. In addition defenders of the Humean model think that this account of normativity has also the advantage of not presupposing metaphysically dubious entities such as normative facts and properties. Desires are part of the world that we know; they are - unlike normative facts and properties - the object of the natural and social sciences.

[7] See Smith (1987), p. 55: Being in a state with which the world must fit is desiring."

According to the Humean model desires can also easily account for the motivational force of normative sentences: If it is the case that someone who says 'Abortion is wrong' expresses a desire that abortion will not be carried out, he is necessarily motivated to act accordingly: Having a desire means nothing else but being motivated to act in a certain way under certain circumstances. So it seems clear how we can be moved into act by normative sentences: S who sincerely agrees that 'Abortion is wrong' is necessarily motivated to act accordingly. So far the Humean model.

3. The Instrumental Ought

But as impressive as the Humean model might look like, I think we should not accept it. Let us have a closer look at the Humean model. How are desires related to reasons and oughts?

Say, I want x to be the case. Then it ought to be the case that x: I ought to make sure that x is the case. And this is to say: I ought to do the things which have to be done in order to bring x into existence. The relation between desires and oughts (reasons) thus has the following structure:

1. I want x to be the case.
2. Y is an appropriate means to x

Thus, I ought to choose y.

This is the *instrumental account* of normativity. The ought seems to follow from the desire. But is this really the case? First of all, the way I put it, the conclusion is a *naturalistic fallacy*: A normative conclusion follows from purely descriptive premisses. This is incompatible with the widely held is-ought thesis according to which normative statements cannot be deduced from purely descriptive statements.[8] And I think that the conclusion does presuppose a

[8] See Hudson (1969).

normative premiss which is not mentioned in the given argument. The normative premiss I have in mind contains, interestingly enough, an ought which is not based on any desire.

Let me explain. Imagine a person, let us call him Paul, who wants x to be the case and sees that y is an appropriate means to bring x into existence. Paul asks the question, why he should choose y. The obvious answer: "because it is an appropriate means to get x, x that you want to be the case", is not satisfactory for him. Why should I, he is asking, take the appropriate means to my ends? The possible answer that you might give him here: Who wills an end also will the appropriate means will again not be satifactory for him, because he has not yet decided to take the appropriate means for x to be the case, he is rather asking why he should do so. Moreover, it is just not true that some one who wills an end necessarily also wants the appropriate means. One can will an end without willing the appropriate means. As Kant rightly puts it:

> "Whoever wills the end, wills (so far as reason has decisive influence on his actions) also the means that are indispensably necessary to his actions and that lie in his power."[9]

Thus the right answer to Paul's question (why should I choose y?) is: You should choose y because you *ought* to take the means to your ends. The conclusion 'I ought to choose y' follows from this normative premiss: You ought to choose the means to your ends.

So the syllogism should be written in the following way:

1. One ought to choose the appropriate means to one's ends.
2. I want x to be the case.
3. Y is an appropriate means for x.

Conclusion: I ought to choose y.

[9] Kant (1981), p. 417,

If you want x to be the case you ought to choose y. But interestingly enough, this is not a desire based ought. It is just a fact that one ought to choose the means to your ends independently of whether you want to do so or not. Desires are linked to oughts due to this normative principle. So it cannot itself be based on a desire. You ought to follow it regardless of whether you want to follow it or not. Thus there were no instrumental oughts if this normative fact (the fact that you ought to choose the appropriate means to your ends) did not obtain. The normativity of the desire for x is based on a desire-independent ought.

If this is right, there is at least *one* desire-independent normative fact. It might be the only one which exists. The important point is: The normative statement mentioned does not express a desire: It rather refers to a normative fact, that is to something which is independent of whether it is desired: It is just a fact that one ought to choose the means to one's ends. If so, I do not see why the same should not apply to the other oughts, that is to oughts expressed in statements like: 'you ought not to be cruel to others', 'you ought not torture others for fun', you ought to keep your promises' and so on. If the instrumental ought is not based on desires, we can also assume that these oughts are not desire-based oughts.

4. The Motivational Force

Let me turn to the motivational force of normative statements. How can the content of normative statements move someone into action? That is to say, how can the recognition of a normative fact be motivating?

First of all, I think that there is no necessary connection between a normative content and motivation. It is possible that an agent thinks that is right to do x without being motivated to act accordingly. It is possible, to be precise, that there is no motivation at all, even though the agent thinks that x would be

the right thing to do. If this is what she believes she also believes that she ought to want to do x; but this does not imply that she wants to do so. The normative content necessarily has a normative force but not a motivating one. There are different explanations why this is so: Different unfavourable psychological states might prevent an agent from wanting to do x. An agent might suffer from a depression or from apathy or from fear to the effect that she is not able to get herself to be moved in a way she herself thinks she should be.

But then there is still the question: How can normative facts move someone into action, provided of course that normative considerations can play a role in motivating us to act or to respond to certain things in the way we ought to?

It seems that an agent just has to see that x is the right thing to do: She sees that it would be right to do x and does x for that reason. This seems a simple and natural explanation of an action. Nothing seems to be wrong with it.

Of course, there is the well-known Humean objection, according to which the given explanation of my action is indeed necessarily incomplete.[10] An agent's belief that x is the right thing to do cannot explain what she did. Beliefs have no explanatory force on their own. They need to be linked with desires to get an explanatory force. Desires are a necessary part of an action-explanation.

But I think we should not be puzzled by this objection. If it is true that we have certain desires because there are reasons to have them, then the normative considerations would also do the motivating work. I want to do x, because I think it is good to do x. As we have seen, I want to choose x. x is the appropriate means to my end y. So I want to choose x, because I ought to choose the appropriate means to my ends. This desire is based on an ought.

Oughts and reasons bring about desires and as a consequence actions. We do things, because we think that we ought to them or we think that we

[10] Hume (1978), p. 415.

have reason to do them. I do x, basically because I think it is good to do so. As John McDowell rightly puts it:

> "(I)t seems to be false that the motivating power of all reasons derives from their including desires. Suppose, for instance, that we explain a person's performance of a certain action by crediting him with awareness of some fact that makes it likely that acting in that way will be conducive to his interests ... (T)he commitment to ascribe such a desire is simply consequential on our taking him to act as he does for the reason we cite; the desire does not function as an independent extra component in a full specification of his reason, hitherto omitted by an understandable ellipsis of the obvious, but strictly necessary in order to show how it is that the reason can motivate him. Properly understood, his belief does that on its own."[11]

I think McDowell is right. We do not always need desires to explain our actions and choices. Sometimes the normative belief does the explanatory work: I do x, because I think it is a good thing to do x. Of course, I might have at the same time a desire to do x. But the desire itself has been brought about by the belief that doing x is good. It is not the case that - as Humeans assume - we find ourselves with the desires we have. There are reasons why we have certain desires: 'Why do you want to give money to the charity organisaton Oxfam?' Because it is good to help people in need'. The desire to help people might give rise to an action, but then the desire itself is based on a belief.[12]

5. Do Normative Facts Have An Explanatory Force?

A belief can motivate on its own. Explanations of actions that are not mentioning desires are not necessarily incomplete. What about the normative facts

[11] McDowell (1998), p. 79.

[12] One could even argue that desires are never needed for the explanation of actions. All actions can be explained by referring to beliefs. This is what Jonathan Dancy thinks; see Dancy (1993). I will not enter this discussion between mixed and pure cognitivism here.

themselves? Do they have a motivational force? What role do normative facts play in explaining actions? I think that we go on the wrong assumption that normative facts have an explanatory force as well as on the wrong assumption that they *should* have an explanatory force. They are related to the things which have an explanatory force with regard to actions. But they are not themselves equipped with such a force, because it is just not what they are. What moves someone into action are the things that constitute normative facts. Let me explain.

Take the following example: I help a person who is in need.
Suppose this is the right thing to do in the given situation, and that I also believe that it is the right thing to do. What does explain my action? What moves me into action? We have different candidates here. One might say: I helped him because I saw that it was the right thing to do, or I helped him, because I saw that he was suffering, or because I could not stand seeing him being miserable.

The question is: What role does the normative content 'It is right to help this person in need' play in explaining my action? We could say: I helped him, because I saw it was the right thing to do. If so, the actions seems to be explained by the rightness of the action in question.

We explain actions by giving the reasons that brought them about. The rightness of an action is not such a reason.[13] The term 'right' refers to the fact that there are such reasons. If an action is right there are reasons to carry it out.

To explain an action is to make the action understandable. Why did I help the person in need? The answer 'because it was right to do so' would be too unspecific to make this particular action understandable. An explanation of an action has to specific in the sense that it has to make at least the kind of action carried out understandable. This applies to explanations such as: 'I helped him,

[13] See also Schaber (2004), p. 115.

because he was in need' or 'I helped him, because otherwise he would have died'. These reasons I was acting for could also be the reasons that make the action in question right. They might be the right-making properties. In this way motivating reasons can be related to the rightness of an action. But the rightness itself is not motivating. Such an explanation would be too unspecific in order to make this kind of action (helping another person) understandable.

6. Gaut's Objection

Berys Gaut argues that a full explanation of an action cannot be given without referring to normative concepts such as 'good' or 'right'.[14] Take the explanation: 'S helped A, because A was in need'. One might say that this would not be a satisfactory explanation if it were not clear beforehand that helping another person in need is a good thing to do. As Gaut puts it:

> "It turns out then on closer inspection that one canot eliminate reference to va lues in giving a full explanation of one's reasons for choosing."[15]

The underlying idea is the following: The answer to the question 'Why did S help A?' might be 'Because A was in need'. But why is this a reason for acting the way S did? Well, because it is a good thing to help a person in need. So might think that the inevitable reference to 'good' or 'right' in full explanations of actions show that good or right have an explanatory force with regard to actions.

Take the counterfactual test of explanatory relevance[16]: If one wants to know whether x has an explanatory force with regard to occurrence of y on has to ask whether the explanandum would have occurred even if the putatively

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[14] See Gaut (2002).

[15] Gaut (2002), p. 151.

[16] See Sayre-McCord (1986), p. 272.

explanatory fact had not obtained, other things being equal. Provided now of course that we are - as some philosophers assume - always guided by the good, then good seems to fulfill the counterfactual test of explanatory relevance: 'The action x would not have been chosen if it were not good or right to choose x'.

Or so Gaut thinks.

7. Enabling Conditions

But as a matter of fact, even if we were indeed always guided by the good, 'good' and 'right' had no explanatory force. 'Good' and 'right' do not fulfill the counterfactual test of explanatory relevance. It is rather the belief about good (or about right) which does: 'S wouldn't have chosen x if S did not believe that doing x was good'. Thus *beliefs* about good or right seem to be part of the explanation of actions.

But a closer look makes clear that not even beliefs about good or right are part of the explanations of actions. They are rather just *enabling conditions* of actions. One has to distinguish between being a proper part of an explanation and being required for the explanation to go through, which is not a part of the explanation. The latter is an enabling condition.[17] That I have not been killed a month ago is a fact in the absence of which I would not have written this lecture. But, of course, this fact does not explain my writing this paper. Or take another example: I would not have arrived here in Japan if my plane from Zurich had been kindnapped by a terrorist group. But then of course again: this is not the reason why arrived here. In this sense it might be true that beliefs about 'good' and 'right' are enabling conditions of actions, provided that we are always guided by the good. But even if this was true, good and right would not in any way illuminate us as to why an action had been chosen by an agent.

[17] See Dancy (2000), p. 127.

Actions are not chosen because they are good or right. Actions are chosen for other reasons, also for reasons that make actions good or right

My claim that the property 'right' has no explanatory force is compatible with the fact that actions are explained by reasons. The claim is also compatible with the fact that I can be motivated by normative reasons for action. Some clarifications are needed here about the relation between reasons and normative facts.

Take my helping another person in need. The action in question has certain properties that provide us with reasons for carrying it out; for instance the property of preventing the other person from great harm. This is a reason for action, that is to say, it is something which speaks in favour of doing it. It is something that explains why it is good to act accordingly. Helping another person in need is good, because it prevents the other person from great harm. The fact that 'It is good to help another person in need' is a normative fact which has no explanatory force. Whereas 'Doing x prevents the other person from great harm' plays a role in explaining the action in question. But it is not a normative fact, it is only *a normatively relevant fact*.[18]

I have a reason to help another person in need is also a normative fact that has no explanatory force. I helped the other person, because I had a reason to do so is not an explanation of the action. It just points to the fact that there is a reason speaking in favour of the action, for instance, that by doing so one prevents another person from great harm. And the same applies to ought-statements 'I ought to do x' draws your attention to the fact that there are reasons for doing x, maybe even strong and requiring reasons for doing x. But the ought itself is not explaining my doing x. I did x, because I was obliged to do it, is too unspecific to explain my doing x. The statement 'I ought to do x' points to reasons that have a binding force.

[18] See Parfit (1997), p. 124.

The fact that normative properties and facts do not have an explanatory force should not come as a great surprise. Normative facts such as 'It is good to do x' or 'You ought to do y' are just normative and not natural facts. And this is how they differ from natural facts, that is, facts which are object of the natural and social sciences: Unlike natural facts they do not explain anything.[19] Of course, normative facts are not independent of the natural world. They are rather constituted by natural facts and properties. It is good to help another person in need, because doing so prevents another person from harm. The goodness of the action depends upon the prevention of harm. But goodness is not part of the world, because otherwise it could have an explanatory force. But it has not such a force: It points towards reasons for action and choice. It does not itself move us into actions. What moves us into actions are the natural things which constitute the normative facts, for instance, the suffering that could be prevented by helping the person who is in need (or other things of course like my feeling better afterwards). That normative facts do not move us into action should again not come as a surprise. Normative facts are normative by nature: they are not about what we do, they are rather about what we *should* do. The assumption that normative facts have to account for the motivational force of normative statements is part of a naturalist view. But I think that normativity cannot be naturalized. Normative facts are facts sui generis. They are not part of the fabrique of the natural world. They are not object of the natural and social sciences. They are the genuine object of normative theories (moral and other normative theories).

8. The Best Account of Normativity

Let me turn to the question I started with: Why should we believe in the existence of normative facts? It is not that we have to assume them in order to

[19] See also Schaber (2004), p. 112.

explain certain beliefs, actions and choices. We should believe that there are normative facts, because they provide us with the best account of normativity.

The normative statement “It is wrong to torture innocent people” does not express a desire or a preference or an attitude the speaker has. It is rather a fact that it is wrong to torture innocent people. The statement points towards reasons for responding and action. It tells you that you have reasons for not acting this way. This is how we understand normative statements: They are reason-giving. Thus if you accept that it is wrong to torture innocent people you accept at the same time that you should not act this way.

This has nothing to do with motivation. The statement “It is wrong to torture innocent people” has just a normative meaning. There is no necessary connection with motivation. If the statement is true, you have reasons for not torturing innocent people, but you might not be motivated in the appropriate way or you might even be motivated to do what you should not do. If reason guides you, you are motivated to do what you should do. But this is not always the case. There is practical irrationality: situations where we know that we ought to do x, but we are not in the least inclined to do so. But that does not change the fact that we ought to do x. We ought even if we do not want to or even if we think we ought not. This is at least the way we conceive of normative statements and their contents. And the idea that here are normative facts fits perfectly well with this understanding of normative statements.

But what about the different directions of fit, I mentioned at the beginning? Do normative and descriptive statements have different directions of fit? Descriptive beliefs have to be changed or abandoned if they turn out to be wrong. Normative beliefs too. They have to fit the normative world. And as trivial as it might sound , they have just to fit the normative world. If Paul thinks that torturing innocent people is a good thing he should change his view. Torturing innocent people is wrong whether we think so or not, whether we are in favour of it or not. It is wrong because of what it brings about: harm and

humiliation. These are the propeties that make this type of action wrong. And if we think otherwise we are wrong. Our belief would not fit the facts, which are there independently of what we think and feel. This is what normative realism claims, and as I argued rightly so.

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