Toward a Reasons-First View of Normative Background Conditions

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Abstract

Background conditions are thought to explain how objects can have value in virtue of certain features and how reasons can consist in certain facts. The following paper provides an account of what background conditions are and what effect they have on normative features. It defends the idea that if values depend on reasons, then there is nothing really surprising or mysterious about the presence of background conditions in normative explanations. Background conditions turn out to be a natural and predictable result of normative hierarchies that treat reasons as metaphysically fundamental relative to other normative features. The account is also shown to have advantages over competing accounts in that it is able to capture the functional criteria that characterize background conditions while remaining theoretically parsimonious.

Keywords Background conditions · Normativity · Value · Jonathan Dancy · Reasons · Enabler · Disabler

1 Introduction¹

Background conditions are thought to explain how objects can have value in virtue of certain features and how reasons for responses can consist in certain facts. The following paper provides an account of what background conditions are and what effect they have on

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normative features. It defends the idea that if values depend on reasons, then there is nothing surprising or mysterious about the presence of background conditions in normative explanations. In other words, background conditions are a natural and predictable result of views that treat reasons as metaphysically fundamental relative to other normative features. Those who agree that values depend on reasons should be happy to acknowledge the existence of background conditions.

The philosopher who is most responsible for drawing attention to the phenomenon of background conditions in the literature on normativity is arguably Jonathan Dancy (1993, 2004). He admits in his discussions that for all that he has said about the phenomenon over the years, he has not provided an account of what normative background conditions are or what makes them possible.² Dancy (2004: 38) instead hopes that the idea of normative background conditions can be illustrated and supported by looking at substantive examples.³ Two such examples will be used as inspiration and motivation for the account that is about to be developed. The first deals explicitly with value while the other deals with reasons:

JOKE: A person tells a joke at the expense of a colleague at work and gets a big laugh. The joke is funny because it is witty and unexpected. These are the factors in virtue of which the joke is funny. However, the joke is also such that, had the colleague not been present to hear it, it would not have been funny at all. The colleague's presence functions as a background condition, ensuring that the joke's wittiness and unexpectedness play the role of value-makers.

PROMISE: A person has promised his friend that he will water her plants while she is on holiday. The fact that he has made this promise is the sole reason for him to fulfil it. However, if his friend were to release him from his promise, the fact that he has made it would no longer be a reason. The fact that she refuses to release him from his promise functions as a background condition, ensuring that the fact that he has made the promise to water the plants is a reason.

Dancy (2004: 38–39, 172) also states that the background conditions of value are not bearers or makers of value, while the background conditions of reasons contribute to the presence of reasons without being parts of whatever facts constitute them. These observations amend the intuitive understanding supplied by the examples with some explicit functional criteria that help demarcate the relevant concept of background conditions:

² Dancy's main focus tends to differ from the one in this paper because what he is ultimately interested in is the implications that background conditions might have for the rightness and wrongness of certain actions. Although the account about to be developed is more widely applicable its main focus is initially, and for most of what follows, on value and reasons.

³ The first example described here is borrowed from Dancy (2004: 172). To make the example more compelling more needs to be said about what the joke is, but since Dancy is a philosopher and not a comedian he should probably be forgiven for the lack of detail. It is also worth mentioning that Dancy briefly considers jokes that are not funny unless the person is absent when they are told. Apparently, he does not think that these are quite as illustrative of the phenomenon he has in mind: "In these cases, I would think, their presence is part of the ground for the cruelty; it is part of what makes telling the joke cruel rather than delightful. So here we are not dealing with enablers at all. But there are other jokes which are only amusing if their butt is present, and which, in that case, are amusing to everyone present, to the butt as much as to everyone else; if the butt was not there, that would take all the fun away" (2004: 172). The second example described here is borrowed from Nozick (1968: 36) but cases on the same general theme have been explored by Dancy (2004: 38–39) as well.

- (1) A factor plays the role of a background condition for a value if and only if the factor is part of a normative explanation for why that value is instantiated without the factor being a bearer or maker of that value.⁴
- (2) A factor plays the role of a background condition for a certain reason if and only if the factor is part of a normative explanation for why that reason is instantiated without the factor being a part of the reason itself.

The question is whether there are any factors within normative explanations that fulfil the functional criteria just outlined and if so, what makes it possible for them to do so.⁵ The paper approaches the question by outlining a more detailed picture of the aforementioned dependence of value on reasons for attitudes. The suggestion is that if an object is good, then this is because there are reasons to favor the object; if an object is bad, then this is because there are reasons to disfavor the object.⁶ The argument will be made that on this view the features that make objects valuable ought to be identified with the facts that constitute the corresponding reasons. Value-makers are facts that constitute reasons for attitudes, while background conditions should be identified with the features that afford facts with the normative property of being a reason.⁷

⁴ A value bearer is understood as an object that has value. No assumption is made regarding the ontological categories that can function as value-bearers. Exactly how to characterize makers is a more difficult question that will be addressed at several points in the upcoming discussion. Until then the discussion will have to rely on the reader's intuitive grasp of the concept. She is assumed to have such a grasp as long as she has any views about something having a normative feature in virtue of something else. For example, the reader might think that certain colors can make a painting beautiful, that generosity can make a person admirable, or that cruelty can make an act morally bad.

⁵ It will later be argued that according to the pragmatic objection, which is the main competitor to the account that is about to be developed, there is nothing that fulfils the criteria in question. People are tricked into thinking that background conditions are a unique explanatory factor by the pragmatics of evaluative talk and practices. Similar views appear, in the philosophy of science, about the intuitive distinction between causes and the background conditions that enable other factors to be causes. These views can be traced to the works of John Stuart Mill, who says that the intuitive distinction can be shown to lack objective grounds by "the capricious manner in which we select from among the conditions that we choose to denominate the cause" (1846: 198). Irrespective of what background conditions we identify, "there is hardly one of them which may not, according to the purpose our immediate discourse, obtain that nominal pre-eminence" (1846: 198). The observations made by Mill have since become part of the received view in the philosophy of science. However, theories have been developed which aim to show that although the intuitive distinction lacks objective grounds, it is not used quite as capriciously as Mill may have imagined. People's interests and expectations, and the communicative norms that they help shape, have a predictable effect on how they think about these matters. See Cheng and Novick (1991) for an overview of some of the influential theories.

⁶ This view fits well, but does not presuppose, a buck-passing account of value, on which value is taken to be the second-order property of objects being such that there are reasons to direct attitudes toward them. For more on the history of, and problems associated with, this type of account, see Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) and Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017).

⁷ Dancy (2004: 38–42) seems to take all normative background conditions to belong to roughly four types: *enablers* play a positive role in that their presence contributes in some way to the instantiation of value and reasons; *disablers* play a negative role in that their presence counteracts the instantiation of such normative phenomena; *intensifiers* and *attenuators* are those background conditions that contribute in some way in strengthening or weakening the resulting normative property, respectively (cf. also Nozick, 1968: 36–37). For example, an intensifier might make a joke more amusing or a reason to keep a promise stronger. By contrast, an attenuator might make a joke less amusing or a reason to keep a promise weaker. This makes it tempting to understand disabling as a radical form of attenuation, so that a factor is a disabler if and only if it attenuates the value of an object to the degree that it becomes neutralized. No such assumption is made here, although enablers, disablers, intensifiers, and attenuators are all taken to involve the same general kind of phenomenon, meaning that they do not require independent accounts.

The account developed here will be shown to fulfil two important aims: Firstly, it is faithful to the functional criteria that were just spelled out and which identify the general concept of normative background conditions that Dancy seems to emphasize. Secondly, the account is attractive in respect of theoretical parsimony as it avoids needlessly inflating the number of distinctions and relations figuring in commonplace assumptions concerning normative explanations. The point it makes is that normative background conditions are a natural and predictable result of views that treat reasons as metaphysically fundamental relative to other normative features. In order to make this point the account does not help itself to any distinction or relation that is not already part and parcel of current normative theorizing.

2 Situating Background Conditions in the Normative Hierarchy

Some prefatory observations about the nature of reasons are needed, among which is the observation that reasons are facts. Whenever there are reasons for responses, facts (hereafter referred to as ‘reasons-facts’) must obtain that constitute the reasons in question. Facts can be understood minimally as entities with a propositional character that can be picked out by *that*-clauses.⁸ For instance, that a person has promised a friend to water her plants when she is on holiday is a fact and it is a reason. Another important observation is that facts cannot be endowed with the normative property of being a reason unless something makes the facts reasons (hereafter referred to as ‘reason-makers’). Just as there cannot be values without value-makers there cannot be reasons without reason-makers.

A normative hierarchy is a structure of normative features such that some normative features depend on others for their instantiation. For example, consider the aforementioned reasons-first view of the normative hierarchy, on which values are taken to depend on reasons for attitudes.⁹ This means that if an object is good, then there are reasons to favor the object in some way; if an object is bad, then there are reasons to disfavor the object in some way. The question to be considered is how it might be possible for normative explanations to feature such things as background conditions. The argument will be made that the reasons-first view seems to invite certain answers to this question. In order to see what these answers are, it helps to first get clearer about what the reasons-first view implies for the nature of value-makers.

For objects to have value there must be something that makes them good or bad. In addition, the reasons-first view entails that if objects have value, then there must be reasons to direct certain attitudes towards the objects. Given these assumptions it is tempting to suggest that the role of value-makers is played by the facts that constitute

⁸ Whether facts should be understood as obtaining states, true propositions, or as a *sui generis* type of entity is an issue on which nothing in this paper hinges. For an overview on the metaphysics of facts, see (Mulligan and Correia 2017).

⁹ The challenge with which this paper grapples is that of finding out whether there are explanatory factors that fit well with the examples and the functional criteria that were outlined in the introduction and which demarcate the relevant concept of background conditions. The purpose of the paper is not to try to capture the broader philosophical contributions that Dancy has made and so the fact that he himself is not a proponent of the reasons-first view is no problem. The reasons-first view should here be understood as the view that (i) reasons are a (metaphysically) fundamental normative phenomena and (ii) there are no other (metaphysically) fundamental normative phenomena. Dancy (2004: 34) seems at one point to endorse (i) but not (ii).

reasons for attitudes. People are of course permitted to speak as if things like features can make objects good or bad, but what plays the role of value-makers are facts about the objects having the features in question. This means that it is not the wittiness and unexpectedness of the joke that makes it amusing but rather the fact that the joke *is* witty and unexpected.¹⁰ After all, it is the fact that the joke is witty and unexpected that constitutes the reason to be amused by the joke in the first place.

If this is on the right lines, then accounting for normative background conditions in a way that captures the examples and functional criteria spelled out in the introduction becomes a relatively simple matter. On the present account the background conditions of value are not the bearers of value or the makers of value, for they are instead constituted by the factors that make facts reasons for attitudes. This means that the background conditions of value are reason-makers. For example, the presence of the colleague is a background condition for the value of the joke that is being told at his expense. This does not entail that his presence is part of an amusing situation or that his presence makes the joke amusing. Instead, the presence of the colleague is what makes the fact that the joke is witty and unexpected a reason to be amused by the joke.

This shows how the presence of the colleague can have explanatory relevance for the value of the joke without being conceived as part of the joke or as part of what makes the joke amusing. The account thereby accommodates the functional criteria that characterizes the relevant concept of background conditions without having to rely on any hitherto unfamiliar metaphysical relations. The next step is to explain more clearly how the account is meant to be applied to the background conditions of reasons themselves. To this end, it helps to revisit the second example involving the reasons that a person has to fulfil a promise to a friend. It will be shown that if reasons are treated as the bedrock of normativity, then their background conditions may behave somewhat differently from the background conditions of value.

One person refuses to relieve another of his promise and this is relevant to the issue of whether the latter has any reason to fulfil it. The question is whether this relevance can be explained in a way that accommodates the examples and functional criteria spelled out in the introduction. In this context the relevant criterion entails that the fact that one person refuses to relieve another of his promise should not be conceived as part of his reason to fulfil the promise. Instead, the fact that one person refuses to relieve another of his promise should be conceived as a factor that affords the relevant reason-fact with the normative property of being a reason. Whether this is enough to establish the factor as a background condition hinges on an apparent asymmetry in Dancy's observations and the functional criteria that are derived from them.

Dancy takes the background conditions of value to be distinct from both the bearers of value and the makers of value. What is interesting is that when he talks about the background conditions of reasons, he becomes somewhat less discerning. Dancy takes the background conditions of reasons to be distinct from reasons-facts, but he does not

¹⁰ This is perhaps a surprising implication given that proponents of the reasons-first view, or at least buck-passers who understand value in terms of reasons, have often identified it as an advantage of the analysis that it is compatible with pluralism about the bearers of value (Anderson 1993; Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004). In other words, the reasons-first view entails that all manner of things can be good or bad, including facts, objects, events, properties, and so on. That this pluralism about the bearers of value is won at the cost of pluralism about the makers of value might well be seen as a significant cost. One way of getting away from the conclusion that only facts are value-makers is by denying that only facts can be reasons.

go so far so as to distinguish background conditions from reason-makers (2004: 39). This suggests that he takes the background conditions of reasons to have a different structure from the background conditions of value.¹¹ Perhaps this view can be justified by a direct appeal to the reasons-first view. If reasons constitute the bedrock of normativity, then it is not surprising that their background conditions behave differently from the background conditions of value.

In other words, it is tempting to suggest that while the background conditions of reasons are not to be conflated with reasons-facts, there is no pressing need to distinguish background conditions from reasons-makers. The temptation to take Dancy at his word also stems from the fact that although there are, on the reasons-first view, plausible examples illustrating a distinction between background conditions and reason-facts, there are not as many plausible examples illustrating a distinction between background conditions and reason-makers.¹² For example, in the promise case, it is unclear exactly what factor is meant to be afforded the role of being a reason-maker, unless it is the fact that one person refuses to relieve another of his promise.

On the account just developed, the background conditions of value and the background conditions of reasons should both be identified with whatever factors make facts into reasons for attitudes. A possible objection to the account might be that it is not as generally applicable as it should be. For example, consider a value-first view on which reasons for attitudes depend on the presence of value rather than the other way around. If there are reasons to favor a certain object, then this is because the object is good; if there are reasons to disfavor a certain object, then this is because the object is bad. The objection states that if the pattern of explanation just defended is applied to a value-first view, then some of the functional criteria that are meant to demarcate the relevant concept of background conditions cannot be captured.

If facts constitute reasons for attitudes, then there must be something that afford the facts with the normative property of being a reason. The value-first view adds that if facts constitute reasons for attitudes, then there must be some valuable object towards which the attitudes are to be directed. These assumptions make it tempting to suggest

¹¹ Dancy discusses his own version of the promise example in which he takes the promisors' capacity to fulfill the promise as a background condition. The idea is that where people are in some sense incapable of keeping their promises when they are made, the fact that they make them does not constitute a reason to keep them. Dancy writes: "That I promised to do it is (in this context at least) a reason in favour of doing it. I am not going to argue for this; it is an assumption of the example. What I am going to argue for is that none of the other premises [e.g., Dancy's being able to keep the promise] is a favourer. They play other roles; they are relevant, but not in the favouring way" (2004: 39). Dancy nowhere explicitly states that background conditions cannot be a part of what *makes* something a reason. This may be because he takes value-makers to play the same role in his theory of value as reasons does in his theory of rightness (Dancy 2004: 170 fn 4). These interpretative questions are set aside here, as is the problem of how to understand the connection between reasons and rightness.

¹² There is an additional complication regarding the background conditions of reasons that ought to be addressed. The account just developed entails that the background conditions of reasons are just reason-makers. This may appear too indiscriminate given the functional criteria spelled out in the introduction. Reconsider the fact that a person promises a friend to water her plants, which constitutes a reason on part of the promisor to fulfill his promise. The fact is arguably a reason not only in virtue of the fact his friend refuses to relieve him of it but also in virtue of the fact that he made the promise to begin with. More precisely stated, then, the suggestion is that a factor constitutes a background condition for a reason if and only if it is part of what makes it a reason without being part of the reason. This makes it clear that background conditions are actually not required for the presence of value and reasons. If an object is valuable, or a fact constitutes a reason, then there must be reason-makers present. However, not all reason-makers are background conditions.

that the role of reason-makers is played by the values that objects have. People may find it convenient to speak in broader terms, as if all manner of objects can constitute reason-makers, but it is ultimately the values that objects have that play the reason-making role. For example, this means that it is the amusing nature of the joke that makes the fact that the joke is witty and unexpected a reason to be amused. The value-first view just turns the reasons-first view on its head.

If this is on the right lines, then accounting for background conditions in a way that accommodates the functional criteria emphasized in the introduction becomes more difficult. The criterion suggesting that the background conditions of reasons are not reason-facts is clearly preserved, as is the criterion that the background conditions of value are not value-bearers. Problems arise when it comes to the criterion which states that background conditions are distinct from value-makers. This is so because on the account developed here the background conditions for a fundamental normative feature *is* constituted by whatever factor plays the role of a maker of that feature. The value-first view states that value is a fundamental normative feature and so the background conditions of value must be identified with its makers after all.¹³

This result can be regarded as a drawback of the account developed here or as a drawback of the value-first view. That is to say, it may be that the account is indeed not as generally applicable as it should be, or that the value-first view needs to be amended in order to satisfy all the functional criteria. With regard to the first possibility, it should be mentioned that the account can be adjusted to other views of the normative hierarchy, as long as they do not identify value as a normative fundamental feature. After all, it is specifically the placement of value at the bottom of the normative hierarchy that results in difficulties when trying to distinguish the background conditions of value from its makers. This means that although the account just defended may not be perfectly general it is still likely to be quite general.

Of course, another way of avoiding these issues is by adjusting the functional criteria that were derived from the observations of Dancy and outlined in the introduction. Perhaps the relevant intuition is not that background conditions are distinct from value-makers but rather that background conditions for non-fundamental normative features are distinct from the makers of those features. This intuition is as easily captured by the value-first view as it is by the reasons-first view, given the pattern of explanation that has just been defended.¹⁴ The obvious worry with the suggestion is that people's intuitions about the kinds of examples that are emphasized in this discussion are very

¹³ There is another potential downside with the value-first view that relates to its implication for reason-makers. Reconsider the promise example: The fact that a promisor has made a promise is a reason for him to fulfil it. According to the value-first view, this fact is made into a reason by a value. Now, while this is not directly entailed by the value-first view, it is tempting to suggest that in this context the relevant value is one that gets promoted or realized by fulfilling the promise in question. The problem is that there may be many good things that get promoted or realized by the fulfilment of the promise. Exactly which value should be identified as a maker of the relevant reason is unclear. The value-first view involves some indeterminacy that can only be overcome by pursuing substantive stories that link a conception of reason-makers with more specific ideas about what values are to be promoted in different contexts (cf. Maguire 2016).

¹⁴ Similar rephrasings could be done for the other functional criteria. For example, it might be claimed that the intuition is not that background conditions are distinct from reason-facts, but rather that background conditions for fundamental normative features are distinct from the bearers of those features, i.e. the bearers of value or the bearers of the normative property of being a reason.

unlikely to be all that metaphysically fine grained. From an intuitive point of view, it is perhaps best to leave the functional criteria as is.

It should be remembered that the paper took its point of departure from the observations of Dancy and assumed that he is right about the functional role of background conditions. The argument was then made that his observations fit well with a reasons-first view of the normative hierarchy. In fact, the argument went further and suggested that the kind of background conditions that seem to be of interest to Dancy turn out to be a natural and predictable result of normative hierarchies that treat reasons as metaphysically fundamental relative to other normative features. That background conditions may not be a natural and predictable result of other normative hierarchies poses no problem for this argument and so perhaps many of the issues just discussed can be set aside for the time being.

The next section presents a more difficult objection which rests on a denial that background conditions can be meaningfully distinguished from value-bearers, value-makers, and reasons-facts. Instead of trying to account for the distinct role that is meant to be played by background conditions within normative explanations, the objection tries to explain away any intuitions suggesting that there are factors that play this role in the first place. It will be shown that although the objection fails to undermine the account of background conditions just developed, the objection involves some theoretical nuances that make it worthy of independent consideration. In particular, some of its suggestions about the susceptibility of intuitions about background conditions to pragmatic concerns are true and important.

3 The Pragmatic Objection

The pragmatic objection insists that background conditions of value are just parts of the valuable object or what makes the object valuable, while the background conditions of reasons are parts of the facts that constitute the reasons. That background conditions are ever treated differently from other factors is understood to depend on what speakers know and expect out of the normative explanations that they communicate to each other.¹⁵ Against this objection, the argument will be made that while the way people think and talk about background conditions is affected by pragmatic concerns, this does not mean that normative features are not also subject to the kinds of indirect effects that background conditions are meant to involve. The account developed in the previous section accounts for these effects while remaining relatively theoretically parsimonious.

To come to grips with the pragmatic objection it helps to first distinguish two different senses of explanation, one of which is metaphysical and the other communicative. When an art critic says of a beautiful painting that its value depends on its unique arrangements of colors and shapes, the art critic seems to have in mind a metaphysical sense of explanation. What is meant is that the beauty of the painting somehow results from its unique arrangements of colors and shapes. When her interlocutors say that the art critic *herself* has done a good job at explaining why the painting has value, they will instead have a communicative sense of explanation in

¹⁵ Among the many philosophers to express sympathy toward the pragmatic objection are Crisp (2000: 43–44), Raz (2006: 110), Strandberg (2004: 238), and Fogal (2016: 91).

mind. What is meant is that the art critic has successfully managed to impart a sufficient understanding to her interlocutors of why the painting has value.

This rough characterization of two different senses of explanation can be used to clarify the pragmatic objection. The objection states that the concept of background conditions plays a distinct role for the activity of communicating normative explanations. However, when it comes to the metaphysical issue of what factors are responsible for giving rise to value and reasons, there is really no such thing as background conditions. Rather than pointing to the structure of normative explanations, proponents of the pragmatic objection want to explain the usefulness of talking about background conditions by pointing to people's interests and knowledge. What emerges is a picture on which the distinction between background conditions and other explanatory factors is a pragmatic tool of emphasis.

The general idea underlying the pragmatic objection is that there is always some wide consideration that explains the presence of value and reasons. More narrow factors within this wide consideration are emphasized as particularly salient while others are deemphasized and treated as background conditions. Where the line is placed between background conditions and other explanatory factors is determined by the interests and knowledge of people engaged in the activity of communicating normative explanations. However, the pragmatic objection entails that in reality all parts of the wide consideration play the same role in explaining the presence of value and reasons.¹⁶ Consider for the moment the implications of this line of reasoning for the kinds of examples with which the paper started.

The first example involves an amusing joke being told at the expense of a colleague whose presence is required for the value of the joke. When people attempt to communicate an explanation for why a joke made at the expense of a colleague is amusing, they are perhaps unlikely to mention his presence as part of the explanation. Proponents of the pragmatic objection would insist that this is not because his presence is not part of the joke or what makes the joke amusing, for it is rather a matter of his presence being a common or expected part of this kind of situation. Mentioning the presence of the colleague will in many contexts seem redundant and might therefore fly in the face of communicative norms.¹⁷ When people are asking why the joke is amusing they want an explanation in terms of the features of the joke itself.

The story just sketched is arguably even more convincing in the case of the promise example. When communicating explanations for why a person has reason to fulfil a promise, people are unlikely to mention the fact that the promisor has not been released

¹⁶ Raz speaks of the wide consideration in terms of a "complete reason" (2006, 2011), Crisp in terms of an "ultimate reason" (2006, 2007), and Fogal in terms of a "normative cluster" (2017). The extent to which differences between proponents of the pragmatic objection is a matter of language rather than deep philosophical disagreement is often unclear. That many such exegetical nuances must be overlooked here is no problem since it is the general features of the pragmatic objection that matter. However, fairness requires mentioning that some proponents of the pragmatic objection seem far less pragmatic than others. One possible example is Crisp, who explicates his notion of an ultimate reason in terms of a distinction between derivative and non-derivative reasons. He states that certain reasons are "non-ultimate or derivative, and depend for their normative force on certain higher-order reasons which can be seen to subsume them into a single generalist form" (Crisp 2007: 44). This opens up the door for an interpretation stating that for each non-ultimate reason there is always an ultimate reason that serves as its background condition. If this is right, then perhaps Crisp would only deny that ultimate reasons can ever be subject to background conditions.

¹⁷ The norms that have just been alluded to could be explained in broadly Gricean terms, for they are the norms that discourage speakers from being more informative than is required by communicative context (cf. Cheng and Novick 1991: 88–91).

from his promise. According to the pragmatic objection, this does not mean that the fact that the promisor has not been released from his promise is not a part of his reason to fulfil it. The fact in question is deemphasized because it is such a common or expected part of this kind of situation. When people communicate explanations for what reasons there are for a person to commit a certain act, mentioning that the person promised to commit that act seems to be enough. Adding that the person has not been released from his promise is just likely to elicit impatience.

Some of the observations underlying the pragmatic objection are intuitive. It seems undeniable that pragmatic concerns, and the communicative norms that they help shape, influence how people communicate normative explanations. The factors that are treated as background conditions in one context may well be treated as value-makers in another context, given a corresponding change in people's interests and knowledge. However, as Fogal points out in his discussions (2017: 100), this is compatible with the possibility that background conditions nevertheless play a distinct role within normative explanations. As intuitive as the observations are, then, they do not undermine the belief that there are explanatory factors fulfilling the functional criteria that characterize normative background conditions.

The account developed in the previous section does not employ any distinction or relation that is not already part and parcel of current normative theorizing.¹⁸ Proponents of the pragmatic objection presumably agree that whenever facts are reasons, there are other factors that make them into reasons. They should therefore find that there is little to no cost to the acceptance of normative background conditions unless, of course, they are skeptical of the reasons-first view. There are certainly worries associated with the view in question, but it would be disappointing if the pragmatic objection turned out to hinge on such worries. The pragmatic objection would seem less of an objection and more of a theoretical diagnosis to be offered alongside independent considerations against the reasons-first view and its implications.

Perhaps proponents of the pragmatic objection could acknowledge the indirect effects on normative features that were described in the previous section while denying that such effects can be used to explain the substantive examples offered of normative background conditions. There is something very troubling about this strategy. For example, the response amounts to little more than an insistence that the presence of

¹⁸ The point about not needlessly inflating the number of distinctions and relations figuring in commonplace assumptions concerning normative explanations is important. Ralf Bader (2016) has recently developed an account of normative background conditions that appears to be as robust as the one developed in this paper, but which seems to do less well in respect of parsimony. While his views are wonderfully sophisticated in their details, many of them seem to rely on a few key notions, among which is the notion of *conditional grounding*. When something like a non-normative feature fully explains some normative feature, the latter is normally assumed to be metaphysically necessitated by the former. By contrast, when a non-normative feature conditionally grounds some normative feature, additional factors need to be present for the latter to be metaphysically necessitated by the former. Now, the account developed here could be seen as an elaboration on what is involved in one thing conditionally grounding another, but it is very likely that Bader has more in mind. When he speaks of conditional grounding, he is presumably talking about something more general and metaphysically demanding than the relatively simple mechanisms that were needed to spell out the present account. If this is right and Bader does indeed have something more in mind, then perhaps he has more than he needs in order to understand the phenomenon of normative background conditions. In other words, his notion of conditional grounding incurs a theoretical cost that, at least partially, outweighs its explanatory benefit. The account developed in the previous section aims to show that background conditions are a natural result of a reasons-first view. It builds on the assumption that there is a distinction between reasons and the normative property of being a reason. It also builds on the assumption that the normative property of being a reason has its explanations, so that there are reason-makers in addition to value-makers. These assumptions do not foist more mystery on philosophers than what they are already burdened by.

the colleague *is* part of what makes the joke amusing and not part of what makes any fact a reason to be amused. Be that as it may, proponents of the pragmatic objection should agree that there must be *something* that makes the fact that the joke is witty and unexpected a reason to be amused. The question then becomes why *this* unspecified reason-maker cannot be reasonably regarded as a background condition.¹⁹

On the reasons-first view, to ask what makes an object have value is to ask what reasons there are to direct attitudes towards it. This is an existential question in the sense that it calls for an answer in terms of a certain reason-fact. The further question why this fact is a reason to begin with is a different question altogether: It is to ask what makes this fact a bearer of the normative property of being a reason. This is why it is possible to distinguish questions about the makers of a value from questions about its background conditions. To look at normative explanations from a very general perspective and suggest that background conditions come together with other factors to explain why there are values and reasons would not be false, but it obfuscates the distinct explanatory roles that are nevertheless played by these factors.

4 Concluding Remarks

Background conditions are thought to explain how objects can have value in virtue of certain features and how reasons for responses can consist in certain facts. The following paper has presented the argument that if values depend on reasons, then there is nothing surprising or mysterious about the presence of background conditions in normative explanations. On the reasons-first view, value-makers are facts that constitute reasons for attitudes, while background conditions should instead be identified with the features that afford facts with the normative property of being a reason. In addition to capturing the functional criteria that characterize normative background conditions, this understanding is relatively theoretically parsimonious and does not help itself to any hitherto unfamiliar distinctions or relations.

The pragmatic objection was described as the main objection against the view that background conditions play a distinct role in normative explanations. Instead of trying to account for this role, proponents of the pragmatic objection try to explain away any intuitions suggesting that there ever was such a role to be played. That background conditions are treated differently from other factors is understood to depend on what speakers know and expect out of the normative explanations that they communicate to each other. The argument was made that although the pragmatic objection fails to undermine the account of background conditions

¹⁹ This response applies not only to the pragmatic objection but to other accounts of normative background conditions as well. Harty (2012) has recently tried to make general sense of the phenomenon in terms of the notion of an *exclusionary reason*, which is a reason to take up certain responses in regard to other seemingly relevant normative considerations. Reconsider the example where the presence of a colleague is a background condition for the amusing nature of a joke. Harty might make sense of this kind of case by saying that *if* the colleague was absent when the joke was being told, then this fact would constitute a reason for those present to ignore or downplay their reason to be amused by the joke. There are issues here about what exactly happens to those normative considerations that are being excluded, and whether they thereby lose their normative relevance altogether, but such interpretative issues can be set aside for now. It seems undeniable that there are such things as exclusionary reasons and so the question is only whether they can be used to capture everything there is to say about normative background conditions. The account developed in the previous section predicts normative background conditions from rather simple observations, couched in terms that even Harty should be comfortable with. The account shows that there are explanatory factors that can be fittingly thought of as background conditions irrespective of the presence of any exclusionary reasons. For more on the concept of exclusionary reasons see Raz (1975).

developed in this paper, it nevertheless relies on plausible and important suggestions about the susceptibility of intuitions about background conditions to pragmatic concerns.

The extent to which the account of normative background conditions developed here is applicable to normative hierarchies other than the reasons-first view was only briefly discussed. The suggestion was made that the general pattern of explanation laid down by the account is very likely to be applicable to any view that treats reasons as metaphysically fundamental relative to other features. However, the task of demonstrating the truth of this suggestion in detail, and to account for the background conditions of other normative phenomenon, including *rightness*, *duty*, and *ought*, was left aside. Hopefully, the paper will encourage future research into the issue whether distinct explanatory roles can be captured by looking closely at the structure of specific normative hierarchies and their implications.

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