

Facts, Ends, and Normative Reasons

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Received: 7 July 2008 / Accepted: 8 March 2009 / Published online: 31 March 2009
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Abstract This paper is about the relationship between two widely accepted and apparently conflicting claims about how we should understand the notion of ‘reason giving’ invoked in theorising about reasons for action. According to the first claim, reasons are given by facts about the situation of agents. According to the second claim, reasons are given by ends. I argue that the apparent conflict between these two claims is less deep than is generally recognised.

Keywords Normative reasons · Reasons and facts · Reasons and ends · Reasons and principles

1 The Grounding of Normative Reasons: Facts Versus Ends

It is widely agreed that when someone has a reason to perform an action there is something favouring that action. It is also widely agreed that whatever so favours the action is thereby, in some sense, ‘reason giving’. Beyond that, agreement stops. This paper is about the relationship between two widely accepted claims about how the idea of reason giving invoked in theorising about reasons for action (or ‘normative reasons’ as they are often called) is to be understood. The first claim is that reasons are given by the facts of an agent’s situation. The second claim is that reasons are given by ends. The guiding question of this paper is whether the apparent conflict between these two claims is of deep theoretical significance. The guiding hypothesis of the paper is that the answer to this question is negative.

The first claim is clearly expressed in a very influential paper by Derek Parfit. In this paper, Parfit writes: ‘When we have a reason to do something this reason is provided by the facts’ (Parfit 1997, p. 130). I shall henceforth call this the *fact-based*

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view. Many other philosophers appear to accept some version of the fact-based view. Thus, a conception of reasons as given by the facts is strongly suggested by Thomas Nagel when he writes that ‘circumstances *provide* someone with a reason to act’ (Nagel 1970, p. 15). Jonathan Dancy also appears to endorse this view when he says that an agent’s reasons are given by ‘features of the situation’ (Dancy 2000, pp. 69–70; c.f. Kolodny 2005, p. 509). Along similar lines, John Skorupski claims that reasons are given by the facts when he says that ‘the fact that the building is about to explode gives you very good reason to get out right now’ (Skorupski 1999, p. 27). Other philosophers are more ambiguous. Joseph Raz writes of ‘considerations which speak in favour of action’ (Raz 1975, p. 186). Thomas Scanlon writes of ‘a consideration that really counts in favour of the thing in question’ (Scanlon 1998, p. 76). Elsewhere, Thomas Nagel writes of ‘considerations commonly regarded as providing moral reasons’ (Nagel 1970, p. 144). If ‘consideration’ is read factively, these claims are a terminological variant of the fact-based view. If not, they are implausible.¹ Charity favours the first interpretation.

In apparent contrast to the fact-based view, some philosophers claim that reasons are given by ends. These philosophers include Nagel, who in one place writes that ‘whenever one acts for a reason... it must be *possible* to regard oneself as... promoting an objectively valuable end’ (Nagel 1970, pp. 96–97).² Christine Korsgaard defends the Kantian view that ‘if there are perfectly rational actions, there must be good ends, and... when we act under the direction of reason, we pursue an end that is objectively good’ (Korsgaard 1996, p. 116; 115, 120). The list

¹ Many philosophers *identify* reasons with facts. Joseph Raz writes: ‘Only reasons understood as facts are normatively significant’ (Raz 1975, p. 18; c.f. Raz 1999, pp. 22–23). Russ Shafer-Landau writes: ‘that some act is (say) fiendish... just *is* a reason not to undertake it’ (Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 204). John Broome writes: ‘A pro tanto reason for you to F is a fact that plays the F-favouring role’ (Broome 2004, p. 55). Other philosophers equivocate. G. R. Grice writes: ‘It will save verbiage if I speak of the proposition as a reason for acting... Whenever I speak in this way, it is shorthand for referring to either the truth of the proposition or the truth of the proposition that A has good reason for judging it true’ (Grice 1967, pp. 17–20). Stephen Darwall says that ‘reasons for someone to do something are a subclass of the things that can be said, asserted, considered, judged, and so forth’ (Darwall 1983, p. 31), but then goes on to say that ‘[a] fact is a reason for someone if he would be motivated by it on considering it as he rationally ought’ (Darwall 1983, p. 199). Judith Jarvis Thomson writes that ‘any interesting claim we can make about reasons on the supposition that they are propositions has an equally correct or incorrect analogue about reasons on the supposition that they are facts. That is why I take it... that what is in question here is (mere) regimentation’ (Thomson 2001, p. 26). John Broome claims that the fact-based definition ‘tightens up’ loose talk of considerations (Broome 2004, p. 41). This move is arguably too quick. Propositions that give the contents of propositional attitudes are either true or false, yet they can be invoked to explain action either way. Facts identified with (true) propositions or their truth-makers can only explain action if suitably targeted by a propositional attitude, yet they can arguably justify action either way. The question evaded by the equivocators is whether the ‘reasons’ they appeal to in explanation and justification respectively are the same kind of thing. This is a controversial question (c.f. Smith 2004; Dancy 2000). Fortunately, we can ignore it here. The focus of the the present paper is the question of a reason’s justificatory grounds (I prefer to avoid the controversial terminology of ‘truth-makers’ in this context). This is a distinct question from the question of its identity conditions (c.f. Skorupski 1999, p. 58, who identifies reasons with a four-place relation ‘between a fact, a person, a time and a type of action, belief or feeling’ (Skorupski 1999, p. 58). This does not stop him from saying that reasons are given by the facts.) .

² Nagel also says that rational agency ‘requires the acceptance of universal practical principles’ (Nagel 1970, p. 108). I shall return to this complication below.

of philosophers who apparently think that reasons are given by ends also includes E. J. Bond, who writes that ‘to believe that one has a reason for... doing something... is to believe that there is something of value to be achieved... by doing it’ (Bond 1983, p. 2; quoted in Dancy 2000, p. 30). Warren Quinn writes that ‘what rationalizes or makes sense of the pursuit of a goal... is some way in which the goal in question seems good’ (Quinn 1993, p. 232; quoted in Dancy 2000, p. 30). A similar interpretation arguably makes best sense of Michael Smith’s (potentially equivocal) claim that reasons are best thought of as ‘propositions to the effect that this or that course of action is to some extent worth doing’ (Smith 2004, pp. 60–61). Finally, in the course of a discussion of what he calls the ‘present aim theory’ of rationality, Parfit writes that ‘my reason is not my desire but the respect in which what I am doing is worth doing, the respect in which my aim is *desirable*’ (Parfit 1984, p. 121).³ This claim is also evocative of the view that reasons are given by ends. This interpretation is reinforced by Parfit’s remarks in a later paper, where he writes: ‘We have reason to try to achieve some aim when, and because, it is relevantly worth achieving’ (Parfit 1997, p. 130). He labels this account of the grounds of reasons ‘value-based’ (Parfit 1997, pp. 127–128). On one possible reading of Parfit’s claim, reasons are value-based because they are grounded in valuable ends.

In this paper, I shall refer to the view that reasons are given by ends as the *end-based view*. Not all end-based views of reasons are value-based. What qualifies an end as reason giving may or may not be that it is valuable. Thus, it might be said more modestly that ‘an agent has a reason to promote some end only if that end is of some appropriate kind’, or that ‘only desires with the appropriate contents provide normative reasons’ (Lillehammer 1999, p. 123). These claims are compatible with the possibility that the conditions for being included in the appropriate kind requires only the possession by an end of some purely formal feature such as consistency (c.f. Parfit 1984, p. 119), or some modal feature such as being actually desired (c.f. Williams 1981, pp. 101–112). Dancy is therefore right when he warns (for very different reasons) against the temptation to infer from the claim that an end is reason giving to the claim that it is reason giving because it is valuable (Dancy 2000, pp. 29–30).⁴

Those who defend a fact-based view say that reasons are given by the facts of an agent’s situation. These are the kind of facts we appeal to when we say why we do and why we ought to perform various actions. Thus, the award of damages can be explained by the fact that someone has been caused to suffer against their will. Advice against drug taking can be justified by the fact that drug use leads to addiction and other forms of involuntary dependence. Advice to suspend judgement on complicated issues when drunk can be justified by the fact that one would not

³ Parfit adds: ‘Even if a reason is not a desire, it may depend on a desire’ (Parfit 1984, p. 121). The distinction between the identity conditions of reasons and their grounds is arguably close to the surface in this passage.

⁴ Not all philosophers will accept either a fact-based or an end-based view. These objectors arguably include neo-Kantians such as Onora O’Neill, whose account of reasons ‘focuses on principles rather than ends’ (O’Neill 1996, p. 56; c.f. Korsgaard 1997). I shall remain largely silent about this issue in what follows. The main question of this paper is whether, and if so how, the fact-based view and the end-based view are mutually compatible, not whether either of them is true.

trust one's drunken judgement when sober. It follows that the facts appealed to in the justification of action are not exhausted by presently salient features of an agent's actual circumstances. They also include historical, prospective, and modal facts, including facts about the probable future effects of merely possible courses of action.⁵

Those who defend an end-based view are committed to the idea that it is the features of ends that determine whether or not those ends are reason giving. For present purposes we can think of an end as *any object of possible desire*. Thus, reasoning about ends is not confined to objects of possible desire actually endorsed. It also involves the indefinite number of merely possible desires between which an agent must choose at any given time. To evaluate the reason giving status of an end is to evaluate the normative significance of a set of possibilities, including the various states of affairs the agent could aim to bring about. To say that ends are normatively significant is, for these purposes, to say that an agent's reasons depend on the content of her possible desires, for example whether these desires involve the realisation of something valuable.⁶

2 Are End-Based Reasons Really Fact-Based?

Is the claim that reasons are given by ends compatible with the claim that reasons are given by the facts of an agent's situation? Let us first consider whether the two claims can be reconciled by trying to explain the reason giving status of ends in terms of the reason giving status of facts.

If facts are reason giving, then it is these facts that explain why agents have the reasons they have. Ends are objects of possible desire. The contents of desire are

⁵ One challenge for a fact-based view is to explain how it is possible for facts about an agent's situation to give rise to reasons. This difficulty is not solved by pointing out that the status of a given fact as reason giving depends on the presence of a background of so-called 'enabling' facts among the agent's circumstances (c.f. Dancy 2004). This response merely postpones the question of how a more inclusive set of facts, including enabled and enablers, can be reason giving. One response is to point out that some of the facts that make up an agent's circumstances are facts either about that agent's existing ends or about ends the agent would favour in certain counterfactual circumstances. Dancy, for example, writes that 'The only way to understand the notion of meriting a response is to see a merited response as the one that would be elicited in ideal conditions. We can give no good sense to the thought that an object should merit a response which it would never receive, even if in ideal circumstances; that there should be something about a good or right action which lies beyond the possibility of any recognition' (Dancy 1986, p. 242). On this view, the necessary connection between reasons and the ends favoured by agents in ideal circumstances is what explains how it is possible for any set of facts about an agent's circumstances to give rise to reasons for action. I shall return to the significance of this possibility below.

⁶ One challenge for the end-based view is to explain how the features of an object of merely possible desire can give rise to a reason for action. The grounding of reasons in ends themselves apparently entails the possibility of a reason giving end the normative status of which obtains regardless of any attitude towards it on the part of the agents to whom the reason applies, including their potential for discovering its status as such. For reasons parallel to those given in the previous footnote, this claim is likely to meet with some suspicion. Once more, it may be suggested that reasons are better thought of as grounded in ends favoured by agents in ideal circumstances (c.f. Dancy 1986). I shall return to the significance of this issue below.

generally propositional in form.⁷ In consequence, much talk about ends can be translated into talk of facts about ends. Suppose you want revenge. Then it is true that you want revenge. So it is a fact (in a suitably minimal sense) that you want revenge. Suppose (for the sake of illustration) that reasons are given by the ends that agents actually desire. Then we can say that an agent's reasons are given by facts about what that agent actually desires. Facts about what an agent actually desires are facts about that agent's situation, understood so as to include facts about her psychological states. So the claim that reasons are given by actual ends is accountable for in terms of the idea that reasons are given by facts about the situation of agents.

Yet reasons are not universally thought of as given by actual desires. More plausibly at least, reasons are given by the ends agents would have in some set of ideal or otherwise favourable circumstances. On this view, some of the ends that give rise to reasons are objects of merely possible desire. Much talk about objects of possible desire can be translated into talk of facts about objects of possible desire. Suppose you would desire revenge if you knew what your colleagues have been up to. Then it is true that you would desire revenge if you knew what your colleagues have been up to. So it is a fact (in a suitably minimal sense) that you would desire revenge if you knew what your colleagues have been up to. Suppose (for the sake of illustration) that reasons are given by the ends that agents would have in a state of full information. Then an agent's reasons would be given by facts about what that agent would desire in a state of full information. Once more, facts about what agents would desire in a state of full information can be understood as facts about their situation, including facts about their psychological states. So the claim that the reasons of agents are given by the ends they would have in a state of full information is accountable for in terms of the idea that reasons are given by facts about an agent's situation, with one caveat: on this view, the facts required are modal facts. Yet there is nothing about the fact-based view as such that conflicts with the grounding of reasons in modal facts, provided the notion of an agent's situation is understood broadly enough to include such facts (which, surely, it should be).

Yet reasons are not universally thought of as given by the ends agents actually have or would have in some set of ideal or otherwise favourable circumstances. Some philosophers claim that reasons are given by ends themselves, regardless of which circumstances agents would possibly favour them in (c.f. Lillehammer 2003). In response, it might be pointed out that as ends are objects of possible desire, a set of ideal or favourable circumstances can always be defined as that set of circumstances, whichever it is, that would issue in the endorsement of reason giving ends (c.f. Pettit 2002). If so, the grounds of reasons are co-extensive with the ends that agents would favour in circumstances thus described, and reasons are given by facts about what agents would desire in those circumstances. Once more, talk of reasons being grounded in ends can be translated into talk about reasons

⁷ It is natural to think that the contents of all desires are propositional in some sense. Thus, my wanting beer is arguably equivalent to my wanting that I have it. There are subtle complications, but it is probably safe to ignore them here.

being grounded in facts about an agent's situation, the facts in question including a potentially infinite disjunction of modal facts about the attitudes of agents to different ends in circumstances where the ends endorsed in those circumstances are reason giving. We should concede that a set of circumstances meeting these conditions is in principle definable at some level of abstraction. Yet given the assumption that the reasons in question are grounded in ends themselves, any such description would be gruesomely gerrymandered and explanatorily vacuous. A better proposal is to translate all talk of ends themselves into talk of facts about those ends. Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that an agent's reasons are given by the intrinsic nature of the ends available to him in his present circumstances. Once more, on this view some of the ends giving rise to reasons are objects of merely possible desire. Once more, talk of objects of merely possible desire can be translated into talk of facts about objects of merely possible desire. Suppose taking revenge on your colleagues would involve the suffering of third parties. Then it is true that taking revenge on your colleagues would involve the suffering of third parties. So it is a fact (in a suitably minimal sense) that taking revenge on your colleagues would involve the suffering of third parties. Facts about the intrinsic nature of the ends available to agents in their present circumstances are facts about the situation of those agents. So the claim that the reasons of agents are given by the intrinsic nature of the ends available to them in their present circumstances is accountable for in terms of the idea that reasons are given by facts about the situation of agents, including modal facts about what would be involved in realising different objects of possible desire. Once more, there is nothing about the fact-based view that prevents the grounding of reasons in such modal facts, provided the notion of an agent's situation is understood broadly enough (which, surely, it should be).

The admission of modal facts about what would be involved in realising some object of possible desire as part of the grounds of reasons does not exclude the admission of other facts, modal or non-modal, as further grounds of such reasons. Thus, while the fact that taking revenge on one's colleagues would involve the suffering of third parties (an extrinsic feature of that end) might ground a reason to not take revenge, the fact that one's colleagues have been plotting and scheming behind one's back (a historical feature of the situation) may ground a contrary reason in favour of revenge. The second of these reasons is not on the face of it grounded in the nature of ends. If so, this might be thought to favour the view that reasons grounded in ends are only one sub-class among a wider class of reasons grounded in facts about the agent's situation. The upshot would now seem to be that the fact-based view is able to capture a wider range of possible grounds of reasons than a view that explains those grounds purely in terms of the nature of ends. If so, the fact-based view has a *prima facie* claim to explanatory primacy over the end-based view. Indeed, it would then be reasonable to think the debate between facts versus ends as the grounds of reasons is internal to the fact-based view. In that case, there is no deep tension between the claim that reasons are grounded in facts and the claim that reasons are grounded in ends. What superficially looks like two different ways of accounting for the grounds of reasons now begins to look like two different

ways of expressing of the same truth, namely that an agent's reasons are given by the facts of her situation.

3 Are Fact-Based Reasons Really End-Based?

Secondly, let us investigate whether the reason giving status of the facts of an agent's situation can be explained in terms of the reason giving status of ends. According to the end-based view, it is features of ends that explain why agents have the reasons they have. Much talk about the facts of an agent's situation can be translated into talk about the features of ends. Suppose the fact that taking revenge would cause pain gives you a reason to refrain. Then the pain involved in the taking of revenge can be said to provide a reason to refrain. The cruelty involved in revenge is a feature of the end of taking revenge (arguably an extrinsic feature of that end). So the end of taking revenge can be said to give you a reason to refrain in virtue of its (extrinsic) features. Likewise, suppose the fact that keeping your promise would be honourable gives you a reason to keep the promise. Then the value of honour involved in promise keeping gives you a reason to keep your promise. The honour involved in keeping your promise is a feature of the end of promise keeping (an intrinsic feature of that end). So the end of promise keeping provides you with a reason to promote it in virtue of its (intrinsic) features. Arguably, all of this is just to say that the reasons in question are grounded in the features of ends.

As we have already seen, however, not all talk of the facts about an agent's situation that might reasonably be thought to ground a reason is easily translatable into talk about the nature of reason giving ends. The fact that you made the promise in the first place might, for example, be taken to provide you with a reason to keep it. This fact is an historical feature of your situation, not a feature of any end. In response, it might be argued that the fact that you made the promise, while not itself a feature of an end, could still be reason giving indirectly in virtue of the fact that the end of promise keeping is reason giving. Likewise the reason giving status of the fact that someone is in pain, or that someone is faced with a life of poverty, could be reason giving indirectly in virtue of the fact that some ends (e.g. the end of universal benevolence) are reason giving. On this view, historical facts can be reason giving for an agent in virtue of the further fact that there is some end available to the agent that in virtue of its (internal or external) features makes the historical facts provide the reasons they do. Historical facts are therefore reason giving only because they present an occasion for realising ends that in virtue of their (intrinsic or extrinsic) features are reason giving. If so, the explanatory primacy attributed to the fact-based view in the previous section is arguably unreal. For even though not all talk about the facts of an agent's situation can be easily translated into talk about reason giving ends, the status of any fact as reason giving is nevertheless accountable for on the assumption that there are reason giving ends to which the existence of those facts stands in a suitable relation. What superficially looks like two different ways of accounting for the grounds of reasons now seems to be little more than two different ways of expressing the same basic truth, namely that reasons are given by ends.

4 A Potentially Troublesome Commitment

If the fact-based view and end-based view are interchangeable in the way suggested, it is tempting to conclude that they are little more than terminological variants of each other. If so, we should be permitted to appeal to either of them at our own convenience. This would be a nice result. Unfortunately, things are not quite that simple. So far I have bracketed one potential complication. This is that one of the views could reasonably be thought to entail a set of independently controversial claims that the other does not. In particular, it might be thought that this complication afflicts the end-based view.⁸

When formulated in terms of talk about facts, the end-based view entails that some reasons are grounded in facts about the nature of ends. Some of these facts are extrinsic facts about ends. Included among these extrinsic facts are facts about the attitudes of agents towards ends in actual or counterfactual circumstances. Thus, it might be an extrinsic fact about the end of being left alone that it is actually desired by one of your colleagues, say. As interpreted by some of its proponents, however, the end-based view entails that some of the facts about ends that provide reasons are intrinsic facts about those ends. Thus, it is an intrinsic fact about the end of being left alone that it requires solitude. The status of intrinsic facts about ends as reason giving bears no interesting relation to the attitudes of agents, whether actual or counterfactual. As already noted, the fact that some gerrymandered set of possible circumstances exists in which agents would favour those ends is of no comfort if the order of normative explanation runs asymmetrically from end to attitude. At least some paradigm versions of the end-based view are therefore committed to the grounding of reasons in facts about ends that bear no interesting relation to the responses of agents to those facts in actual or counterfactual circumstances. As previously noted, the idea of a fact generating reasons regardless of the responses of agents to those facts in actual or counterfactual circumstances is very controversial (Dancy 1986, p. 242). To countenance this idea is to embrace the equivalent in the domain of reasons of a non-detectably funny joke (c.f. Wright 1992; Lillehammer 2003). Although there are no doubt some philosophers who are happy to embrace this possibility, there are also many who are not. It follows that the choice between a fact-based and an end-based view may not be as trivial as hitherto suggested. This might be thought to speak in favour of adopting the view that incurs the less troublesome commitment. The fact-based view, although it is consistent with the claim that some facts provide reasons regardless of the actual or counterfactual responses of agents to those facts, does not entail that claim. The end-based view, at least in some of its paradigm manifestations, apparently does. It would seem to follow that the end-based view carries with it a problematic commitment that the fact-based view does not. This looks like a comparative attraction of the fact-based view.

⁸ It may be asked whether the end-based view is implicitly committed to controversial claims about the modal status of claims that attribute reason giving status to ends. For example, it might be thought that ends can only be reason giving in virtue of their intrinsic features if they possess that status necessarily. In fact, however, exactly parallel questions apply to the fact-based view once we take into account both the reason giving fact and its enablers. I shall therefore ignore this question in what follows.

A defender of the end-based view might respond to this challenge in at least two ways. One is to interpret the claim that some reasons are grounded in ends in such a way as to avoid its apparently problematic implications. If we read that claim disjunctively as grounding reasons in either intrinsic or extrinsic features of ends, then the further claim that reasons cannot be grounded in the intrinsic features of ends leaves open the possibility that they are grounded in some extrinsic features of ends, such as the feature of being the object of someone's actual or counterfactual desires. It is therefore compatible with the truth of an end-based view, in virtue of the truth of one of its disjuncts. Although clearly consistent, it might be worried that this response is too *ad hoc*. On some of its paradigm interpretations, the end-based view says that the reason giving status of an end is, at least sometimes, a function of the intrinsic features of that end. By refusing to interpret the end-based view literally, this response may fail to respect the spirit of that view.

A second response on behalf of the end-based view is to invoke an analogue of the distinction between a reason and its enablers. Thus, although the fact that an action would be an instance of pure revenge may provide a reason to avoid it, its status as a reason giving end might reasonably be thought to supervene on the existence of other facts about the agent's situation, including facts about the attitude of either her or someone else towards that action in actual or counterfactual circumstances. On this interpretation, the reason giving end itself would be explicable without reference to the responses of agents, but only because its enabling grounds are not. This response is also perfectly consistent. Yet once again one might worry that it is too *ad hoc*. On this interpretation, to say that the reason giving status of an end depends on the features of that end is little more than a roundabout way of saying that, given certain other facts, necessarily including facts about actual or counterfactual attitudes toward that end, that end is reason giving. As with the first response, there is a sense in which this idea respects the letter of the end-based view, but only by going against its spirit. If so, it would be reasonable to prefer a suitably ecumenical version of the fact-based view.⁹

The objections considered in this section are inconclusive. If the fact-based view comes out slightly ahead of the end-based view, that is mainly because of its comparative simplicity.

⁹ Another potential problem for the end-based view is that it might be thought to assume an overly teleological account of reasons and their grounds (c.f. O'Neill 1996; Hampton 1998). Thus, it might be objected that some (even if not all) reasons are given by structural features of practical principles (such as their consistency, universality or impartiality), regardless of the substantial nature of any ends the application of these principles would promote. Whether this claim constitutes an objection to the end-based view is a topic that falls beyond the scope of the present paper. It is worth noting, however, that certain attractions of a principle-based view of reasons can be captured by thinking of some reasons as given by facts about principles. Whether facts about principles are best thought of as facts about an agent's situation or not is a question I shall not attempt to address here, although it seems to be of some independent interest (c.f. Cohen 2003).

5 Conclusion

I conclude that the different attractions of the fact-based view and the end-based view are marginally better captured by the claim that an agent's reasons are given by the facts of her situation. What is gained by saying this, however, is less than clear. First, the claim that reasons are given by the facts of an agent's situation is potentially misleading, given that these facts are likely to include reasons themselves, enablers of reasons, modal facts about the responses of agents, facts about the features of ends, and possibly also facts about the features of practical principles. Second, it may be asked if the claim that reasons are grounded in the facts of an agent's situation really boils down to more than the platitude that all talk of reasons is propositional in form. I leave that question for the equivocators.

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