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Sophia Moreau and Liam Murphy

Speaker: **Sarah Moss, University of Michigan**
Paper: **Normative Reasons**

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Normative Reasons

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What are normative reasons? Why do they come in different strengths? How are normative reasons connected with explanations of normative facts? In this paper, I defend an account of normative reasons that answers these questions. I explain how my account improves on existing theories; in particular, I use my account to solve several difficult problems for John Broome's account of reasons.

The first half of this paper is about justification. The second half is about reasons. But before we dive into the contentious philosophical literature on these topics, we're going to warm up by discussing a handful of more mundane relations. What does it take for something to *surround*, *illuminate*, *cover*, or *support* something else?

1 Some background on makative relations

Suppose that some objects stand in the following relations:

(1) a. The houses surround the park.
b. The lights illuminate the football field.
c. Kudzu vines are covering our garage.
d. The columns support the bridge.
e. A federal grant supported their research.

As a result, the second object has an ordinary property:

(2) a. The park is surrounded.
b. The football field is illuminated.
c. Our garage is covered.
d. The bridge is supported.
e. Their research was supported.

These facts are related in a special way. As we might put it,

(3) a. The houses are making it the case that the park is surrounded.
b. The lights are making it the case that the football field is illuminated.
c. Kudzu vines are making it the case that our garage is covered.

1. Thanks to Selim Berker, Nico Cornell, Andy Egan, John Hawthorne, Scott Hershovitz, Chris Kennedy, Artūrs Logins, Gideon Rosen, Mark Schroeder, Eric Swanson, the Michigan Ethics Discussion Group, and the Michigan SynSem Discussion Group for helpful discussion of earlier drafts.

d. The columns are making it the case that the bridge is supported.
e. A federal grant made it the case that their research was supported.

Or more briefly, we might say,

(4) a. The houses make the park surrounded.
b. The lights make the field illuminated.
c. Kudzu vines make our garage covered.
d. The columns make the bridge supported.
e. A federal grant made their research supported.

What is the nature of this making relation? For instance, what does it take for some houses to *make* a park surrounded?

At first glance, one might be tempted to identify this making relation with a relation of counterfactual dependence—for instance, the relation that holds just in case if the houses hadn't existed, then the park wouldn't have been surrounded. But that's not quite right. Suppose that some houses surround a park, and that if the houses hadn't existed, then some apartment buildings would have been constructed in their place. As a matter of fact, the houses make the park surrounded. But that's not to say that if the houses hadn't existed, the park wouldn't have been surrounded. The making relation obtains, but the counterfactual dependence relation doesn't.

For philosophers of causation, this example will have a familiar ring to it. At first glance, one might be tempted to identify causation with counterfactual dependence. But on reflection, these relations can come apart. In cases of preemption and overdetermination, the causation relation obtains, but counterfactual dependence doesn't.[2] This is an interesting respect in which our making relation resembles causation.

In fact, that's just the beginning. 'Surround', 'illuminate', 'cover', and 'support' have several interesting features in common with *causative* verbs.

1.1 A quick introduction to causative verbs

Let me fill in some background for non-linguists. Causative verbs include verbs such as 'melt', 'open', 'break', and 'kill'. According to standard theories of causatives, the meanings of these verbs can be broken into components, where one of these components is a shared part of the meaning of all causatives—namely, the CAUSE relation. For instance, (5-a) has the structure represented in (5-b):

(5) a. *X* melts *Y*.
b. *X* CAUSE [*Y* BE melted]

2. For discussion, see chapter 3 of Paul & Hall 2013.

To melt something is to CAUSE it to be melted. To open something is to CAUSE it to be open. To break something is to CAUSE it to be broken. To kill something is to CAUSE it to be dead.[3]

A widely recognized hallmark of causative verbs is that they give rise to distinctive readings of sentences like the following:

(6) a. Jones melted the butter again.
b. Jones opened the door again.
c. Jones broke the window again.
d. Jones killed the discussion again.

The adverb 'again' triggers the presupposition that something has happened at least once before. Accordingly, the sentences in (6) have readings on which they presuppose that Jones has taken some action before. For example, (6-a) has a reading on which it presupposes that Jones melted the butter before. However, this sentence also has an alternative reading—known as a *restitutive* reading—on which it carries a significantly weaker presupposition. Say that Smith melts a stick of butter and then puts the melted butter in the fridge. The butter hardens. Then Jones takes it out and melts it. In the context of this example, it can sound perfectly fine to say (6-a):

(6-a) Jones melted the butter again.

Why does this sentence sound fine, even though Jones did not melt the butter before? The idea is that since 'melt' is a causative, (7-a) has the structure represented in (7-b):

(7) a. Jones melted the butter.
b. Jones CAUSED [the butter BE melted]

As a result, 'again' can take wide scope as in (8-a) or narrow scope as in (8-b):

(8) a. Again [Jones CAUSED [the butter BE melted]]
b. Jones CAUSED [again [the butter BE melted]]

These readings have different presuppositions. When 'again' takes wide scope, 'Jones melted the butter again' presupposes that Jones melted the butter before. But when 'again' takes narrow scope, the sentence merely presupposes that some state obtained before—namely, the state of the butter being melted. This repetitive/restitutive ambiguity is evidence that 'melt' has multiple components to its meaning—the CAUSE relation and the state of being melted.[4]

3. A word of caution: CAUSING is not causation. Roughly speaking, CAUSING is an especially *direct* sort of causal relation. For more on the difference between CAUSING and causing, see §7.2.
4. For a classic discussion of the repetitive/restitutive ambiguity and causatives, see VON STECHOW 1996.

The same goes for other causative verbs. Each sentence in (6) has a restitutive reading on which it merely presupposes that some state obtained before, which is evidence that the verbs in these sentences have CAUSE as a component of their meanings. By contrast, it is more difficult to hear restitutive readings of 'again' sentences with non-causative verbs. If we know that a pair of pants has never fit Jones before, then it will sound odd to say,

(9) Those pants fit Jones again.

To sum up: According to standard theories of causatives, we can draw a meaningful distinction between causative and non-causative verbs. To melt something is to CAUSE it to be melted. To open something is to CAUSE it to be open. But to fit someone is not to CAUSE them to be fitted.

1.2 Introducing makative verbs

Back to our verbs of interest: 'surround', 'illuminate', 'cover', and 'support'. As I said, these verbs have several interesting features in common with causative verbs. Here is one interesting feature: Just like causative verbs, these verbs give rise to restitutive readings of 'again' sentences. Say that an army general wants to lay siege to a village, cutting off access to supplies. A battalion of soldiers surrounds the village for several days, but the villagers kill them off. If another battalion of soldiers marches up and surrounds the village, then the general can say,

(10) Our reinforcements are surrounding the village again.

This sentence has a restitutive reading, a reading on which it does not presuppose that the second battalion of soldiers surrounded the village before, but merely that the village was once surrounded. The same goes for our other verbs of interest. The following sentences have restitutive readings:

(11) a. The backup lights are illuminating the football field again.
b. The most recent crop of kudzu vines is covering the garage again.
c. Those temporary struts are supporting the bridge again.
d. An emergency fund drive is supporting our project again.

These data suggest that just like causatives, our verbs have meanings that can be broken into components. Just as causative verbs denote relations that involve CAUSING, our verbs denote relations that involve a making relation. For instance, (12-a) has the structure represented in (12-b):

(12) a. *X* surrounds *Y*.
b. *X* MAKE [*Y* BE surrounded]

To surround something is to MAKE it surrounded. To cover something is to MAKE it covered. And so on. Let's introduce some terminology and say that these verbs are *makative* verbs, and that the relations that they denote are *makative* relations.[5,6]

There is another significant feature that our makative verbs have in common with causatives. Both denote relations that back explanation. Causative verbs denote relations that back causal explanations. We often explain why something is melted by talking about what melted it, we explain why something is open by talking about what opened it, and so on. These causal explanations can be brief or extensive. For example, we might answer the question 'Why is the pickle jar open?' by saying,

(13) a. Because of Jones.
b. Because Jones removed the lid.
c. Because Jones removed the lid, and no one has put the lid back on yet.

Similarly, we often explain why something is surrounded by talking about what surrounds it, we explain why something is covered by talking about what covers it, and so on. These explanations can be brief or extensive. For example, we might answer the question 'Why is the garage covered?' by saying,

(14) a. Because of the kudzu vines.
b. Because the kudzu vines are thirty feet long.
c. Because the kudzu vines are thirty feet long, and they are growing up the side of the garage, and the garage is only fifteen feet tall.

Explanations are judged according to different standards in different contexts.[7] In some formal contexts, we may need to mention a lot of facts in order to count as explaining why something is covered. But in less formal contexts, it can be enough to simply mention the objects that cover it. For instance, we can say that the garage is covered because of the kudzu vines. We can say that objects are surrounded, illumi-

5. A note on terminology: Byrne 2021 uses the term 'MAKING', but he uses the term differently than I do. For Byrne, 'MAKING' simply denotes CAUSING. Byrne is not specifically interested in MAKING; rather, he is interested in the relationship between CAUSING and causing, which I discuss in §7.2 of this paper.
6. A side note for linguistics nerds: For all I argue, makative verbs may turn out to be one sort of causative verb. At first glance, most theorists wouldn't classify my makative verbs as causatives, since causative verbs are typically assumed to be eventive in aspect, whereas the verbs in my examples are stative. But Maienborn & Herdtfelder 2017 argue that "the case of stative causation has been widely neglected," and that "there is in fact a stative variant of causation on a par with eventive causation" (317). Another apparent difference between makatives and causatives is that some instances of MAKING seem to involve metaphysical dependence rather than causal dependence. But Bar-Asher Siegal & Boneh 2020a point out that linguists "do not always distinguish between causation and other types of dependencies, such as grounding" (11), and they go on to argue that causatives "do not necessarily encode causal relations. . . Some denote also grounding relations" (44). If that's right, makative verbs may turn out to be causatives in this extended sense. For the purposes of this paper, it doesn't matter whether makatives are causatives, and we needn't settle the relationship between MAKE and CAUSE.
7. For discussion, see Bromberger 1966, van Fraassen 1980, and Lewis 1986.

nated, covered, and supported because of the objects that surround, illuminate, cover, and support them.

2 Justifying as a makative relation

We have examined several makative relations—surrounding, illuminating, covering, and supporting. I think that another relation belongs on this list. It's the relation of *justifying*. Here are some ordinary examples of facts justifying actions and attitudes:

(15) a. There is rain in the forecast. That justifies packing an umbrella.
b. There are people starving in Africa. That justifies donating to Oxfam.
c. The building is on fire. That justifies running outside into the street.
d. Every emerald ever discovered has been green. That justifies believing that the next emerald discovered will be green.

As a result, the actions and attitudes are justified:

(16) a. The action of packing an umbrella is justified.
b. The action of donating to Oxfam is justified.
c. The action of running outside is justified.
d. The belief that the next emerald will be green is justified.

Furthermore, (15) and (16) are related in a special way. As we might put it, the justifying fact *makes* the action or attitude have the property of being justified. The fact that there is rain in the forecast makes the action of packing an umbrella justified. The fact that there are people starving in Africa makes the action of donating to Oxfam justified. And so on. What exactly does that mean? The answer is simple: Justifying an action involves making it justified in the same sense that surrounding an object involves making it surrounded. In other words, justifying is a makative relation.

Just like our other makative verbs, 'justify' gives rise to restitutive readings of 'again' sentences. Say that an army has deployed troops in order to stabilize a region after a war. After several years of peace, the general is about to withdraw the troops, when the enemy launches a series of missile strikes against local schools and hospitals. Then the general might say,

(17) A series of missile strikes is justifying our presence in the region again.

This sentence has a reading on which it presupposes that a series of missile strikes justified the military's presence before. But the sentence also has a reading on which it carries a significantly weaker presupposition—namely, that the military's presence

was once justified. Similarly, each of the following sentences has a restitutive reading:

(18) a. His sincere apology justified our confidence in him again.
b. The most recent drug trials are justifying our initial hypothesis again.
c. The increase in highway traffic is justifying the use of local roads again.

These sentences can sound fine even if the subject of the sentence has never justified the relevant action or attitude before, as long as that action or attitude was at some point justified. These restitutive readings suggest that 'justify' has a meaning that can be broken into components. A sentence of the form (19-a) has the structure represented in (19-b):

(19) a. *F* justifies ϕ-ing.
b. *F* MAKE [ϕ-ing BE justified]

To justify an attitude or action is to MAKE that attitude or action justified.[8]

In addition to the availability of restitutive readings of 'justify' sentences, there is a second reason to think that justifying is a makative relation. Relations of support come in many flavors. Steel beams physically support a bridge. Federal grants financially support a research project. A therapist emotionally supports her clients. Each of these relations involves MAKING something supported—physically, financially, emotionally, and so on. Among the many flavors of support, there are relations of *normative* support. Justifying is a relation of normative support. Support relations are makative relations. Hence justifying is a makative relation.

As we have seen, makative relations back explanation. Accordingly, we can often explain why something is justified by talking about the facts that justify it. These explanations can be brief or extensive. For example, we might answer the question 'Why is our military presence in the region justified?' by saying,

(20) a. Because of the fact that there are ongoing missile strikes.
b. Because there are ongoing missile strikes against civilian targets, and our presence in the region is preventing those strikes from escalating.
c. Because there is an ongoing series of missile strikes against civilian targets, and our presence in the region is preventing those strikes from escalating, and there is no better way to prevent that escalation.

8. A side note for linguists: This paper has presented a standard introductory view of causatives, according to which they are a proper subclass of transitive verbs with a syntactic structure that enables them to license restitutive readings of 'again' sentences. Strictly speaking, my account of justifying does not depend on these assumptions. When Jones melts some butter, she bears a distinctive sort of causal relation to the fact that the butter melted, where this relation is direct and backs explanation. When some houses surround a park, they bear a distinctive sort of making relation to the fact that the park is surrounded, where this relation is direct and backs explanation. This making relation can play its intended role in my account of justifying, whether or not the introductory view of causatives is correct.

In some formal contexts, we may need to mention a lot of facts in order to count as explaining why something is justified. But in less formal contexts, it can be enough to simply mention the facts that justify it. For instance, we can say that the action of packing an umbrella is justified because of the fact that there is rain in the forecast, that the action of donating to Oxfam is justified because there are people starving in Africa, and so on. We can say that actions and attitudes are justified because of the facts that justify them.

"But wait," you might be thinking. "This discussion is missing something. For a fact to *make* an action justified, it has to be *true* that the action is justified. And there are plenty of justification relations that can hold between a fact and an action, even when it's *not true* that the action is justified. For instance, the fact that you are hungry can give you some justification to go to a dinner party, even when that justification is outweighed by stronger reasons against your going. How should we understand these relations of merely partial justification?"

The next two sections of this paper are devoted to answering this question.

3 Some background on gradable relations

'Surround', 'illuminate', 'cover', and 'support' have another feature in common. They are *gradable* verbs. These verbs can combine with a wide variety of degree morphology. For instance, they occur with comparatives:

(21) a. The new fence surrounds the park *more than* the old one did.
b. Those lamps illuminate the field *at least as much as* the floodlights do.
c. The vines are covering the garage *about as much as* they did last year.
d. The steel beams support the bridge *a lot more than* the wooden ones did.
e. The university supported our project *less than* we had expected.

They can be arguments of degree modifiers:

(22) a. The houses *completely* surround the park.
b. The lights *almost* illuminate the football field.
c. The kudzu vines *partially* cover the garage.
d. Those columns *barely* support the bridge.
e. That federal grant *fully* supports our project.

They occur with measure phrases:

(23) a. *To what extent* do the new houses surround the park?
b. Those street lamps illuminate the football field *to some extent*.
c. I don't like *how much* those vines are covering our garage.

d. *How well* do those columns support the bridge?
e. Is the federal grant really supporting our project *that much*?

All of this behavior indicates that these verbs have an underlying scalar structure. According to standard semantic theories of gradability, these verbs denote functions that map individuals onto degrees on a scale—intuitively, the degree to which those individuals stand in some relation.[9] The relevant scale is provided by context. For instance, 'support' denotes a function that measures the strength of the support relation being talked about at a context, which could be measured in pounds, in dollars, or in some more abstract sort of degree.

Each of our gradable verbs has a corresponding gradable adjective.[10] These adjectives can combine with comparatives, degree modifiers, and measure phrases:

(24) a. The park is *more* surrounded *than* it used to be.
b. The football field is *barely* illuminated.
c. The garage is *half* covered.
d. The bridge is supported *to some extent*.
e. Their research project is *fully* supported.

As we might informally put it, the relation of surrounding comes in degrees, and so does the property of being surrounded. The relation of illuminating comes in degrees, and so does the property of being illuminated. And so on.

Here is one more significant feature that our ordinary verbs have in common: When used with a plural subject, they can have non-distributive readings. Consider the following examples:

(25) a. China and India surround Nepal.
b. The cell phones are illuminating the stadium.
c. The leaves are covering the sidewalk.
d. Those wooden beams support the bridge.
e. Alice's siblings supported her until she found a job.

In each case, some objects collectively make it the case that a certain state obtains:

(26) a. Nepal is surrounded.
b. The stadium is illuminated.
c. The sidewalk is covered.
d. The bridge is supported.
e. Alice was supported.

9. For an introductory discussion of semantic theories of gradability, see Kennedy 1999. For discussion of gradable verbs, see Bolinger 1972, Bochnak 2013, and Fleischhauer 2016.
10. For a classic discussion of the scale structure of deverbal adjectives, see Kennedy & McNally 2005.

This can be true even if no individual object single-handedly makes it the case that the relevant state obtains. In other words, when objects surround, illuminate, cover, or support another object, this can be an *essentially collective* enterprise.

Having noted that our ordinary verbs are gradable and that they have non-distributive readings, we can make some interesting and useful distinctions. In particular, we can distinguish the following properties:

Verbing to some extent: X verbs Y to some extent.

Being among some verbers: X is among some objects that collectively verb Y.

Although these properties often go together, they can come apart in both directions. For instance, suppose that some construction workers are building a fence around the tiger enclosure at the zoo. They build a segment of fence that goes halfway around the enclosure, and then they take a lunch break. The initial fence segment surrounds the enclosure to some extent. However, the enclosure is not yet surrounded *simpliciter*, and the fence segment is not among any plurality of objects that collectively surround it. Hence *verbing to some extent* is not sufficient for *being among some verbers*. Conversely, a single point on a circle is among some objects that collectively surround its center. But given any two points in the plane, neither surrounds the other to any extent. In particular, a single point on a circle does not surround the center of that circle to any extent. Hence *being among some verbers* is not sufficient for *verbing to some extent*.

In fact, we can go further. In rare cases, X can be among some verbers of Y even though X itself pulls in the other direction, bearing the *opposite* of the verbing relation to Y to some extent. A sauna and a cold plunge can together satisfy an athlete, even though each activity individually frustrates her. The four strings of a tensegrity table can together support the top of the table as it hovers above its base, even though each individual string pulls the tabletop downward. A massive data dump can cover up a crime, even though individual bits of the data expose it. A set of floodlights can together obscure the text of a road sign, even though each individual light illuminates it. These examples serve to further illustrate that *being among some verbers* can come apart from *verbing to some extent*.

To sum up, we can distinguish three relations:

(27) a. X verbs Y
b. X is among some objects that collectively verb Y, and
c. X verbs Y to some extent.

These distinctions will come in handy in what follows.

A final matter of side interest: Just as the relation of surrounding can be a collective enterprise, the same goes for the relation of *surrounding to some extent*. For instance, several points might collectively surround the center of a circle to some extent, while failing to fully surround it. Hence in addition to the three relations mentioned above, there is also the relation of *being among some objects that collectively verb Y to some extent*. This fourth relation will not play a central role in our discussion, but it seems worth mentioning, if only to round out our inventory of ordinary relations.

4 Justifying as a gradable relation

Back to justification. Like 'surround', 'cover', 'illuminate', and 'support', the verb 'justify' is gradable. This verb can combine with a wide variety of degree morphology.[11] For instance, 'justify' occurs with comparatives:

(28) a. The term "long-awaited" has often been used in rock circles for an album, but surely few have justified it *more than* Steely Dan's *Two Against Nature*.
b. Nothing could have justified it *less than* your manner has.
c. It brings back again those dark days of the war, but with a thrill that justifies it *as much as* it can be justified.

'Justify' can be an argument of degree modifiers:

(29) a. The embarrassment that the Führer had suffered, they believed, would *at least partially* justify whatever might follow.
b. [T]he villain of the piece... is also attributed convincing motives and emotions that *somewhat* justify her inflexible pursuit of revenge.
c. Yet his achievements, whether in life or literature, *barely* justify the passionate eulogy which they won from contemporaries.

'Justify' occurs with measure phrases:

(30) a. The man had... contempt of the rest of the common room, but they justified it *to some extent*.
b. But how long does a meter maintain its full efficiency and usefulness? *How well* does it justify the use of metals and the labor employed in its manufacture?
c. We do not really know with this poem either how much it reflects reality or *how much* it justifies critics referring to him as "a poor traveling poet."

11. The sentences in (28)–(30) are all from published sources; the emphasis on degree morphology is mine.

All of this behavior indicates that 'justify' has an underlying scalar structure. As uttered at a context, 'justify' denotes a function that measures the degree to which various facts justify actions or attitudes, where this degree corresponds to the strength of the justification relation being talked about at that context.

'Justify' is a gradable verb. Similarly, 'justified' is a gradable adjective. This adjective can combine with comparatives, degree modifiers, and measure phrases:

(31) a. Over goes Rakitic and the red card that follows is *as justified as* the challenge was futile and brainless.

b. Defence analyst David Perry of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute said those concerns are *completely justified* given the Trump administration's penchant for using whatever means necessary to get foreign countries to buy U.S. products.

c. But *how justified* were fan fears that Leeds would be starting the new season with a new man in the dugout for the eighth year in a row?

These examples are from Hawthorne & Logins 2021, who cite many more naturally occurring examples of 'justified' combining with degree morphology. Hawthorne and Logins conclude that 'justified' has "all the hallmarks of a gradable adjective" (1845). A number of other authors have reached the same conclusion.[12]

The fact that 'justified' is a gradable adjective provides further evidence for the claim that 'justify' is a gradable verb. As Kennedy & McNally 2005 explain, "gradability is characteristic not only of adjectives but also of verbs and nouns, and... scalar properties are shared by categorially distinct but derivationally related expressions" (345). There are systematic and well-studied relationships between the scales used to interpret gradable verbs and their associated deverbal adjectives. As we might informally put it, the fact that *being justified* comes in degrees is related to the fact that *justifying* comes in degrees.

Here is one more significant feature that 'justify' has in common with our ordinary verbs: When used with a plural subject, it can have non-distributive readings. The premises of an argument may collectively justify believing its conclusion, even if no single premise justifies believing it. In other words, justification can be an essentially collective enterprise. Fogal & Worsnip 2024 discuss this fact at length. As they put it, "the normative support for an action or an attitude is typically provided by a whole cluster of facts" (57). A number of other authors have reached similar conclusions.[13]

12. For instance, see Goldman 1986, p. 104; Cohen 1999, p. 60; Stanley 2005, p. 77; Wedgwood 2008, p. 2; Betz 2012, pp. 237–8; Siscoe 2021; Fassio & Logins 2023; and Berker 2026, p. 6.

13. For additional arguments in defense of the cluster view, see Schroeder 2007, §7.1 and Cunningham

Having noted that 'justify' is gradable and that it has non-distributive readings, we can distinguish the following properties:

Justifying to some extent: F justifies ϕ-ing to some extent.

Being among some justifiers: F is among some facts that collectively justify ϕ-ing.

Although these properties often go together, they can come apart in both directions. For instance, suppose you are serving on a criminal jury. The defendant is charged with capital murder. The state presents exactly one bit of incriminating evidence—namely, that the defendant was seen driving away from the crime scene just after the murder was committed. This fact provides some (very modest) amount of justification for the belief that the defendant is guilty. However, that belief is not yet justified *simpliciter*, and the incriminating evidence is not among any plurality of facts that collectively justify the belief. Hence *justifying to some extent* is not sufficient for *being among some justifiers*. Conversely, suppose that you are a detective in a murder case. At the crime scene, you gather some blood samples that belong to the murderer. You send the samples off to the lab and find out that the blood is type Rh-null, which is extremely rare. As it happens, one of your prime suspects, Smith, has Rh-null blood. Together, these facts justify the belief that Smith is guilty. But taken individually, neither of the facts justifies that belief to any extent.[14] Hence *being among some justifiers* is not sufficient for *justifying to some extent*.

In fact, we can go further. In rare cases, *F* can be among some facts that collectively justify an action or attitude, even though *F* itself pulls in the other direction, justifying the *opposite* of that action or attitude to some extent. Consider the following example:

> *Goths*: You look out your kitchen window and see a group of teenagers walking down the street. You notice four facts about them: (a) they are dressed entirely in black lace formalwear, (b) they are each carrying several dog collars, (c) their hair is extremely unkempt, and (d) they are wearing heavy combat boots. You conclude that the teenagers are going to a party at the club down the street.

Just to fill out some details, suppose that your house is located near a funeral parlor, a kennel, a hair salon, and a military base. Any individual fact about the teenagers does not provide any justification to believe that they are going to a party; in fact, it provides some justification to believe that the teenagers are headed to one of those other four locations. Nevertheless, the four facts collectively justify the belief that the

2025, §1. For arguments in defense of the closely related view that reasons can be "complex facts" that have individual facts as "parts," see Broome 2004, p. 33; Dancy 2004, p. 36; and Raz 2011, p. 17.

14. Thanks to Andy Egan for this example.

teenagers are going to a party. This example serves to further illustrate that *being among some justifiers* can come apart from *justifying to some extent*.[15]

To sum up, we can distinguish three relations:

(32) a. *F* justifies ϕ-ing
b. *F* is among some facts that collectively justify ϕ-ing, and
c. *F* justifies ϕ-ing to some extent.

These distinctions will come in handy in what follows.

A final matter of side interest: Just as the relation of justifying can be a collective enterprise, the same goes for the relation of *justifying to some extent*. For instance, the fact that the teenagers are wearing black lace and the fact that their hair is unkempt might collectively justify the belief that they are headed to a party to some extent, while failing to fully justify that belief. Hence in addition to the three relations mentioned above, there is also the relation of *being among some facts that collectively justify ϕ-ing to some extent*. This fourth relation will not play a central role in our discussion, but it seems worth mentioning, if only to round out our inventory of justificatory relations.

5 From justification to reasons

For a paper with 'Reasons' in the title, this term has been conspicuously absent from our discussion so far. But now that we have discussed the relations of *justifying* and *justifying to some extent*, we can turn our attention to the facts that stand in these relations. In short, it's time to talk about normative reasons.

5.1 A survey of existing characterizations of normative reasons

What are normative reasons? There is a broad consensus that they are considerations that play a role in the justification of actions and attitudes:

> It is no accident that normative reasons are also called "justifying reasons" (e.g. Darwall 1983)... A normative reason for something just is a consideration that *justifies it, at least to some extent* or in some respect.[16]

> We'll focus here on normative reasons in the practical domain: reasons that *justify* a particular course of action.[17]

> Explanatory reasons explain, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes, while normative reasons *justify*, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes.[18]

15. If you don't like this example, see §6.2 for additional examples with a similar structure.
16. Väyrynen 2021, pp. 19, 10; my emphasis
17. Schroeter & Schroeter 2009, p. 279; my emphasis
18. Olson 2018, pp. 255–56; my emphasis

> A reason is said to be a "normative reason" for someone to act because it favours their so acting: it supports, or makes a case for, or *helps justify*, that course of action.[19]

> [W]e ordinarily refer to these favourers and disfavourers as reasons. In philosopher's jargon, they are "normative" reasons, since they *contribute to justifying* our deeds and thoughts.[20]

> [N]ormative reasons for an agent to perform a certain action or to have a certain attitude. . . count in favour of that action or attitude; in other words, they are considerations that support or *go at least some way towards justifying* that action or attitude.[21]

> [T]he class of normative reasons [is] the class of reasons that count in favour of, or provide *partial justification* for, certain responses.[22]

> [My] interest here is in normative reasons. . . As a way to get an initial purchase on the notion, I prefer to say that a reason is a consideration that *to some extent and in some way justifies* acting.[23]

According to these authors, normative reasons are considerations that play a role in justifying actions.[24] This is a standard way to characterize normative reasons. Very shortly, I will return to discuss a possible line of dissent—namely, the claim that normative reasons should be characterized not only in terms of their role in justifying actions, but also in terms of their role in *requiring* actions. But for now, I will adopt the standard view and try to make sense of it. That is, I will adopt the view that normative reasons are essentially connected with justifying, and I will spell out a precise account of that connection. In addition, I will adopt the common assumption that normative reasons are facts. In §5.4, I discuss the view that normative reasons can also include false propositions.

At first glance, the passages quoted above seem to express broad agreement about the nature of normative reasons. But if we look again, we see that there is considerable disagreement about exactly what role normative reasons play in the justification of actions. According to some theorists, normative reasons *justify*:

> We'll focus here on normative reasons in the practical domain: reasons that *justify* a particular course of action.

19. Alvarez & Way 2024, §2; my emphasis
20. Gregory 2016, pp. 2291–92; my emphasis
21. Wedgwood 2015, p. 124; my emphasis
22. Kiesewetter 2022, p. 671; my emphasis
23. Whiting 2022, p. 11; my emphasis
24. And attitudes. For simplicity, sometimes I will just talk about facts justifying actions, but readers should understand my discussion to include the justification of attitudes.

> Explanatory reasons explain, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes, while normative reasons *justify*, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes.

According to others, they *contribute* to justifying:

> A reason is said to be a "normative reason" for someone to act because it favours their so acting: it supports, or makes a case for, or *helps justify*, that course of action.

> [W]e ordinarily refer to these favourers and disfavourers as reasons. In philosopher's jargon, they are "normative" reasons, since they *contribute to justifying* our deeds and thoughts.

And according to others, they justify *to some extent*:

> [N]ormative reasons for an agent to perform a certain action or to have a certain attitude... count in favour of that action or attitude; in other words, they are considerations that support or *go at least some way towards justifying* that action or attitude.

> It is no accident that normative reasons are also called "justifying reasons" (e.g. Darwall 1983)... A normative reason for something just is a consideration that *justifies it, at least to some extent* or in some respect.

> [T]he class of normative reasons [is] the class of reasons that count in favour of, or provide *partial justification* for, certain responses.

> [My] interest here is in normative reasons... As a way to get an initial purchase on the notion, I prefer to say that a reason is a consideration that *to some extent and in some way justifies* acting.

In short, these authors suggest three different characterizations of normative reasons:

(33) a. F is a reason to ϕ just in case F justifies ϕ-ing.
b. F is a reason to ϕ just in case F is among some facts that justify ϕ-ing.
c. F is a reason to ϕ just in case F justifies ϕ-ing to some extent.[25]

Having pulled apart these proposals, we can get clear on which proposal is correct.

The first proposal is incorrect. A fact can be a normative reason to do some action, even if it is outweighed by other reasons and therefore fails to justify that action. Say that your friend is having a dinner party this evening, but you have already promised to drive your partner to the airport. The fact that you are hungry can be a reason for you to go to the dinner party, without justifying your going to the party.

In order to compare the second and third proposals, we must examine cases where *being among some justifiers* comes apart from *justifying to some extent*. Fortunately, we

25. A more precise statement of these proposals would make reference to agents. For instance, the third proposal would say that F is a reason for S to ϕ just in case F justifies S ϕ-ing to some extent. In what follows, I generally leave this reference to agents implicit.

have a ready inventory of such cases—namely, the examples in §4. These examples show that the second proposal is incorrect. First, the fact that the defendant was seen driving away from the crime scene is a reason to believe that he is guilty, even though it is not among any plurality of facts that together justify that belief. Conversely, the fact that Smith has Rh-null blood type is among some facts that together justify the belief that he is guilty, but it is not itself a reason to believe that he is guilty. Similarly, the fact that the teenagers are carrying dog collars is among some facts that together justify the belief that they are headed to a party, but it is not itself a reason to believe that they are headed to a party. To sum up, *being a reason to ϕ* is not the relation of *being among some facts that justify ϕ-ing*. These relations come apart in both directions.

5.2 A substantive positive account of normative reasons

The third proposal is correct. A fact is a normative reason to do some action just in case that fact justifies that action to some extent. This proposal tracks our intuitions about each of our examples. First, the fact that the defendant was seen driving away from the crime scene is a reason to believe that he is guilty, and it justifies that belief to some extent; in particular, given the fact that the defendant was seen driving away from the crime scene, the belief that he is guilty is more justified than it would have been if the state hadn't presented any evidence at all. Conversely, the fact that Smith has Rh-null blood type is not a reason to believe that he is guilty, and it does not justify that belief to any extent. Similarly, the fact that the teenagers are carrying dog collars is not a reason to believe that they are headed to a party, and it does not justify that belief to any extent.

We can restate the third proposal using the language of *pro tanto* justification. As used in discussions of normative reasons, '*pro tanto* justify' typically denotes the relation of justifying an action to some extent, as illustrated in the following passages:

> A *pro tanto* justification may only justify the belief to a certain degree.[26]

> *Pro tanto* justification has force not just at first sight but even in the face of contrary reasons (much as a physical force still exists when a contrary force overcomes it).[27]

According to Chang 2013, the standard view is that a fact is a normative reason just in case it stands in this *pro tanto* justifying relation to some action or attitude:

> According to the standard view, a reason is a consideration that inherently "counts in favor" of feeling, believing, or acting/intending, where "counting in favor of"

26. Graham 2006, pp. 104–5
27. Chituc & Sinnott-Armstrong 2020, pp. 278–79

> is a matter of being at least pro tanto justificatory in the performance of an action or in the having of an attitude.[28]

Hence the standard view of normative reasons is our third proposal: A fact is a normative reason to do some action just in case it justifies that action to some extent.

As it stands, this proposal is rather abstract. That's where my paper comes in. We can apply the first four sections of this paper to expand this abstract idea into a substantive account of normative reasons. My account of normative reasons consists of two claims. The first connects reasons and justifying:

> F is a normative reason to ϕ just in case there is some degree to which F justifies ϕ-ing,

where the relevant degree structure is familiar from semantic theories of gradability. The second claim connects justifying and MAKING:

> F justifies ϕ-ing just in case F MAKES ϕ-ing justified,

where the relevant MAKING relation is the shared component of the meaning of makative verbs. Putting the claims together: F is a normative reason to ϕ just in case there is some degree to which F MAKES ϕ-ing justified.

5.3 Are normative reasons connected with justifying?

So far, we have been exploring the standard view that normative reasons are essentially connected with justifying. Against this view, Joshua Gert and Chris Tucker argue that in fact, normative reasons should be characterized in terms of two distinct roles.[29] A fact may be a reason in virtue of justifying an action to some extent, or a fact may be a reason in virtue of *requiring* an action to some extent. According to Gert and Tucker, normative reasons have two kinds of weight, justifying weight and requiring weight. According to Tucker 2025, "A reason's justifying weight for ϕ is how hard it pushes ϕ toward permissibility. A reason's requiring weight for ϕ is how hard it pushes the alternative, not-ϕ, toward impermissibility" (31).

Berker 2026 argues that Gert and Tucker are making a mistake. In particular, Berker argues that it doesn't make sense to talk about the extent to which a reason requires an action. As he explains,

> It would be one thing if requiredness were gradable, or if there were an underlying scale of comparative requiredness (or comparative closeness to being required) along which an action or attitude can vary: then, perhaps, we could make sense

28. Chang 2013, p. 204. Chang is using 'reason' to refer specifically to normative reasons in this passage.
29. Gert 2003, 2004, 2007; Tucker 2022, 2025

> of pushes along that dimension. But given that requiredness is not gradable, and there is no such underlying scale, what is this spatial pushing metaphor supposed to come to? (25)

Meanwhile, Gert and Tucker argue that it *does* make sense to talk about the extent to which a reason requires an action. For instance, Gert 2007 argues that "if it makes sense to ask how much a reason can require, then it makes sense to talk about its requiring strength" (540).

For present purposes, I am not going to take sides in this debate. Suppose that Gert and Tucker are correct, and it makes sense to talk about the extent to which a fact requires an action. Then readers may adjust my account accordingly. Justifying reasons will be facts that MAKE an action justified, while requiring reasons will be facts that MAKE an action required. The justifying strength of a reason will be the degree to which it justifies an action, while the requiring strength of a reason will be the degree to which it requires an action. Each of these degrees will be measured on a scale that is understood in degree semantic terms. In short, readers may replay the central arguments of this paper with the relation of requiring in place of justifying, and with the property of being required in place of being justified, and the upshot of the arguments will remain the same.

Similarly, suppose that reasons are not essentially connected with justifying or requiring, but with *right-making*. Again, my account can be adjusted accordingly. A fact will stand in the basic normative support relation to an action just in case that fact MAKES the action right, and a fact will be a normative reason to do an action just in case the fact and action stand in this relation to some degree. Similarly, we could say that good-making is the relation of MAKING an action good, and that a fact is a normative reason to do an action when the fact and action stand in this relation to some degree. And so on. In the rest of this paper, I will assume for simplicity that reasons are facts that play a role in justifying actions. If necessary, readers may adjust my account to match their preferred view of which normative support relations are essentially connected with reasons. And of course, if you are among the many theorists who take reasons to be essentially connected with the relation of justifying, you may adopt my account without making any adjustments at all.

5.4 Are normative reasons facts?

Jones is holding a glass of clear liquid. She thinks that the liquid is water. As a matter of fact, it's kerosene. Jones is thirsty. She is about to lift up the glass and take a drink. Is that what she ought to do?[30]

30. For the original version of this classic example, see Williams 1981, p. 102.

The natural answer: It depends on what you mean. There may be some sense in which Jones ought to drink the liquid in the glass, since she believes that it will quench her thirst. But there is definitely some sense in which she ought to refrain from drinking it, since drinking the kerosene would make her very sick. Subjectively, she ought to drink the liquid. Objectively, she ought to refrain from drinking it. Corresponding to these subjective and objective normative facts, there are subjective and objective relations of normative support. In other words, there are subjective and objective reasons.[31] Drinking the liquid would make Jones sick, and that is an objective reason for her to refrain from drinking it. An informed friend might tell her about this reason by saying, "You shouldn't drink that liquid—*it's kerosene!*" A fact can objectively justify an action, whether or not you know about it. In the good case, you know about the facts that objectively justify your doing various actions, and these reasons play a role in making your actions subjectively justified. In the bad case, you end up drinking glasses of kerosene.

For ease of discussion, this paper will focus on objective reasons. There's an objective reason for Jones to pour out the liquid in the glass—namely, that drinking it would make her sick. For what it's worth, there's also an objective reason for her to *drink* the liquid—namely, that she would thereby come to have some potentially useful knowledge of what kerosene tastes like. Although there are reasons on both sides of the issue, the sickness fact carries more weight than the knowledge fact. All things considered, the sickness fact justifies the action of pouring out the liquid, and that's the action that's justified *simpliciter* for Jones. These are the objective justification relations and facts that I am interested in. It is not unusual for discussions of normative reasons to focus on relations of objective support. As Howard & Schroeder 2024 observe, "When philosophers use the expression 'normative reason', they nearly always intend to be talking about objective reasons" (16). In their survey of the literature on normative reasons, Alvarez & Way 2024 simply "use 'normative reason' to mean 'objective normative reason'." At the end of the day, my account of reasons is general; it applies to any sort of reason, subjective or objective. But a full discussion of subjective reasons would take us too far afield from the main arguments of this paper, so I will leave it for another time.

Having restricted our attention to objective support relations, we can safely adopt an assumption that is often made in the literature on normative reasons—namely, that normative reasons are facts.[32] At first glance, this assumption might seem controver-

31. For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between subjective and objective reasons, see Wedgwood 2015, p. 128 ff.; Schroeder 2018, p. 293; and Howard & Schroeder 2024, p. 15 ff.

32. Cunningham 2025 observes that "the orthodox view is that normative reasons are facts" (433); see his paper for a survey of relevant literature.

sial. According to some theorists, normative reasons may include false propositions; for instance, they argue that if Jones believes that the glass contains water, then that false proposition may count as a normative reason for her to drink the liquid in the glass. But when it comes to the debate about whether false propositions can be reasons, the question under discussion is whether false propositions can be subjective reasons for action, not whether they can be objective reasons. For present purposes, we can sidestep this debate. Whatever we say about subjective reasons, it's plausible that objective reasons are facts.

A final nitpicky point: Actually, not all normative reasons are facts. That's because some reasons are *collections of facts*. For example, recall that what justifies your belief that the teenagers are going to a party is a collection of four facts. Taken together, these facts are a reason to believe that the teenagers are going to a party, even though none of the individual facts is a reason for you to believe it. For ease of discussion, sometimes I will talk as if reasons are facts. But strictly speaking, reasons can also be collections of facts.

5.5 A comparison with Broome

Let me position my account in relation to existing theories of reasons. Very briefly: Like many theories of reasons, my account has an explanationist component. Among explanationist theories, my account most closely resembles the account of reasons defended by John Broome.

On my account, facts justify an action just in case they stand in the MAKING relation to a certain normative fact—namely, that the action is justified. As discussed in §1.2, the MAKING relation backs explanation. Hence my account of the justifying relation is an *explanationist* account in the broad sense articulated in Berker 2026:

> A family of views... have come to be known as "explanationist" views. In general, such views define (or analyze, or account for) [a normative support relation] in terms of what explains (or grounds, or in some other way makes it the case that) an action or attitude has some normative status not involving reasons. Different forms of explanationism focus on different statuses that are being explained (or grounded, or made the case), and also on different types of explanatory glue that link the... reason to the normative status being explained. (9)

On my explanationist account of justifying, the normative status being explained is the status of being justified, and the explanatory glue is the MAKING relation.

A word of caution: I am not defending an explanationist account of what it takes for a fact to be a normative reason. For instance, I am not arguing that a fact is a normative reason just in case it stands in the MAKING relation to some normative fact. For all I argue, that claim might turn out to be correct.[33] But my account of

33. See §7.4 of this paper for discussion.

normative reasons states that a fact is a normative reason just in case there is some degree to which it MAKES an action justified, and it doesn't immediately follow from this claim that normative reasons stand in the MAKING relation to any normative fact.

At a high level of abstraction, my account of normative reasons has the same shape as the account defended by John Broome. Broome distinguishes between two kinds of reasons—namely, perfect reasons and *pro tanto* reasons. Perfect reasons are facts that make it the case that you ought to do something:

> A [perfect] reason for N to F is an explanation of why N ought to F. In other words, a *[perfect]* reason for you to F is something that makes it the case that you ought to F.[34]

By contrast, *pro tanto* reasons provide a weaker form of normative support for actions:

> Besides perfect reasons, there must be reasons of another normative sort, because we often say some fact X is a reason for you to Φ, when it is not the case that you ought to Φ. In these cases, X evidently does not explain the fact that you ought to Φ, since there is no such fact. So X is evidently not a perfect reason. A reason of this second sort is often called a '*pro tanto* reason'.[35]

Both Broome and I think that there are two significant relations of normative support. The first is a strong support relation, while the second involves merely *pro tanto* support. For Broome, the strong support relation is *being a perfect reason*, while for me, it's the relation of *justifying*. On both of our accounts, the strong support relation is the more basic relation, and the *pro tanto* support relation is in some respect derivative from it. Furthermore, the strong support relation involves a fact standing in some sort of explanatory relation to a normative fact. Broome defends an explanationist account of perfect reasons: A fact is a perfect reason just in case it explains an ought fact. I defend an explanationist account of justifying: A fact justifies an action just in case it MAKES that action justified. According to both of our accounts, when the strong support relation obtains, it necessarily follows that some normative fact is true.

Although our accounts have the same basic shape, Broome and I disagree about many substantive details. First, our explanationist accounts feature different sorts of normative facts. For Broome, the relevant normative fact is an ought fact. For me, it's the fact that an action is justified. Also, we use different types of explanatory glue to link reasons to these normative facts. For Broome, the glue is the relation of *explaining* or *making it the case*. For me, the glue is the MAKING relation.[36] Finally, we defend very different accounts of the *pro tanto* support relation. For Broome, *pro tanto* reasons

34. Broome 2013, p. 50. Broome uses 'perfect reason' for these reasons in his earlier work, and 'pro toto reason' in his later work. For consistency, I'll use 'perfect reason' throughout.
35. Broome 2004, p. 36
36. See §7 for discussion of the differences between explaining, making it the case, and MAKING.

arise only when the explanation of an ought fact takes a particular form—namely, when what you ought to do is determined by weighing up the reasons that count for and against an action, just as you would weigh up concrete objects on a physical scale. Broome 2004 argues that *pro tanto* reasons are facts that play a certain role in weighing explanations:

> [A] *pro tanto* reason for you to Φ is a fact that plays the for-Φ role in a potential or actual weighing explanation of why you ought to Φ, or in a potential or actual weighing explanation of why you ought not to Φ, or in a potential or actual weighing explanation of why it is not the case that you ought to Φ and not the case that you ought not to Φ. (40–1)

According to Broome, *pro tanto* reasons have a very specific job description—namely, they are facts that play the above-mentioned role in weighing explanations of ought facts. I defend an alternative account of *pro tanto* reasons. For me, *pro tanto* reasons are facts that justify actions to some degree, where the relevant degree structure is familiar from semantic theories of gradability.

John Broome's work has been a lightning rod for critics of explanationist theories of normative support relations. There are several well-known objections to his account. These objections have led some theorists to abandon the project of understanding normative reasons in terms of explanatory relations. In my view, this is a mistake. We can do better than Broome. In the rest of this paper, I discuss the most common objections raised against Broome. In §6, I discuss problems for his account of *pro tanto* reasons. In §7, I discuss problems for his account of perfect reasons. Fortunately, my account solves each of these problems. On behalf of explanationists, I am going to dismantle the battered lightning rod and construct something more durable in its place.

6 A better account of normative reasons

There is a relentless drumbeat that one hears throughout critical discussions of explanationist theories of reasons. The drumbeat goes like this: F can be a reason for you to ϕ even when it's false that you ought to ϕ. And in that case, F doesn't explain the fact that you ought to ϕ, since there is no such fact. Hence it's false that F is a reason for you to ϕ just in case F explains why you ought to ϕ. As the critics have put it,

> Broome begins with the idea that a reason is an explanation of why you ought to do something. However, this seems not to allow that reasons can be defeated.[37]

> Explanationist proposals... face a number of well-known problems... If ϕ-ing is not required, there is nothing that makes ϕ-ing required. But, of course, outweighed reasons are still reasons.[38]

37. Alvarez & Way 2024, §2.2
38. Berker 2026, p. 10.

> The problem that defeated reasons pose... is simple. Explanations are *factive*: p cannot explain q if not-q. So, when p is a defeated reason—when p is a reason for A to ϕ, but countervailing reasons make it the case that A ought not to ϕ—p cannot explain why A ought to ϕ.[39]

> Since the "reason why" construction is factive in the sense that "p is a reason why q" can only be true if q is true, the explanation approach—at least in its simplest form—fails.[40]

> [S]ome philosophers... suggest that 'a reason for s to ϕ' is analyzable as roughly *an explanation why s ought to ϕ*. But this can't be exactly right, because... a reason for s to ϕ doesn't entail s ought to ϕ.[41]

> Given that the relevant *makes it the case that*-relation is factive, the view implies that there are no reasons for actions and attitudes that ought not to be done or had. And that's implausible.[42]

This is just a sample of the many instances of this complaint in the literature.[43]

As many theorists acknowledge, this relentless drumbeat does not pose a challenge for Broome. The drumbeat refutes the following claim:

> A fact F is a reason for you to ϕ just in case F explains why you ought to ϕ.

But Broome doesn't endorse this claim. Broome says that F is a *perfect reason* for you to ϕ just in case F explains the fact that you ought to ϕ. But, Broome says, "Besides perfect reasons, there must be reasons of another normative sort, because we often say some fact X is a reason for you to Φ, when it is not the case that you ought to Φ."[44] In addition to perfect reasons, there are many additional facts that are merely *pro tanto* reasons for action, and these facts include opposed reasons that count in favor of actions that you ought not do.

Similarly, the relentless drumbeat does not challenge my account of reasons. If a fact justifies an action, then it follows that the action is justified. But on my account, a fact can be a normative reason to do some action, even when that action is not justified. That's because a fact can justify an action to some degree, without that action being justified *simpliciter*. This is just a special case of a general feature of many gradable relations—namely, that X can verb Y to some degree, without Y being verbed.

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39. Wodak 2020, p. 273
40. Magidor & Hawthorne 2018, p. 132
41. Finlay 2014, p. 90
42. Fogal & Risberg 2023b, p. 2586
43. Additional instances can be found in Schroeder 2007, p. 35; Raz 2011, p. 19; Brunero 2013, p. 808; Fogal 2016, p. 286; Whiting 2018, p. 2195; Logins 2022, p. 97; and Behrens 2025, §4.
44. Broome 2004, p. 36

6.1 Broome's account is disjunctive.

"But still," some critics contend, "Broome is in trouble. The problem is not that Broome defends a false account of reasons. The problem is that in order to avoid defending a false account, Broome has to draw a distinction between reasons that explain ought facts and reasons that don't. Hence Broome is forced to defend a disjunctive account of reasons, which is unattractive." As the critics have put it,

> Whether we understand Broome to be claiming that 'normative reason' is ambiguous or simply that there are two very different ways of being a normative reason, this is an unattractive feature.[45]

> What I find most unattractive about Broome's view is that he posits two normative senses of the count-noun *reason*: *pro toto* and *pro tanto* senses. This move, it seems to me, multiplies senses beyond necessity and lacks a basis in either our ordinary or distinctively philosophical uses of the word.[46]

> [O]ne might also think that the very fact that Broome's view entails the existence of two radically different sorts of reasons counts somewhat against the view... It doesn't seem to fit well with our ordinary way of talking about reasons.[47]

This is just a sample of the many instances of this complaint in the literature.[48]

As I see it, these passages identify two problems for Broome. The first problem is that Broome says that the term 'reason' has multiple senses, which it doesn't. The second problem is that Broome fails to capture the intuitive thought that there is some basic feature that all reasons have in common. According to Broome, there are simply two normative support relations that facts bear to actions, neither of which is a subspecies of the other. Broome himself admits that these concerns have some merit. He says that "having two senses of 'a reason' complicates the discussion of reasons. But... we have to put up with the complication."[49]

Let me spell out why Broome thinks that we have to put up with the complication. There is a simple view of reasons that Broome rejects. The simple view is that to be a reason just is to be a *pro tanto* reason. This is a unified view of reasons. It reflects the standard view that normative reasons are considerations that justify actions to some extent. It's an attractive view, and even Broome himself seems tempted by it. As Broome observes, we seem to use 'reason' to refer to *pro tanto* reasons:

> All I tried to do in my book was explain what people mean by 'reasons'. I think

45. Kearns & Star 2008, p. 45
46. Nebel 2019, p. 462
47. Logins 2022, p. 96
48. Additional instances can be found in Schroeder 2007, p. 36; Kearns & Star 2015, p. 239; Magidor & Hawthorne 2018, p. 133; and Fox 2021, p. 6290.
49. Broome 2004, p. 42

> they often refer to what philosophers call 'pro tanto reasons'.[50]
>
> I think that, when philosophers speak of reasons, they are most often thinking of *pro tanto* reasons.[51]

However, Broome rejects the unified view. According to Broome, some perfect reasons do not play any role in any potential or actual weighing explanation of an ought fact. Given Broome's account of *pro tanto* reasons, it follows that some perfect reasons are not *pro tanto* reasons, and hence that not all reasons are *pro tanto* reasons.[52]

By contrast, the unified view is consistent with my account of reasons. In fact, it's entailed by my account. For any gradable verb, the relation of *verbing* entails the relation of *verbing to some degree*. If some houses surround a park, then they surround that park to some degree. If some lights illuminate a football field, then they illuminate that field to some degree. And so on. If some facts justify an action, then they justify that action to some degree. The term 'reason' has just one sense. A fact is a reason to ϕ just in case it is a *pro tanto* reason to ϕ. Not all *pro tanto* reasons are justifying reasons, but all justifying reasons are *pro tanto* reasons.

If there is something unusual about the relationship between justifiers and reasons, perhaps it's the following: Although the relation of being a reason is more general than the relation of justifying, the latter relation is more basic. Again, it is helpful to compare justifying with other gradable relations. The relation of surrounding is more basic than the relation of surrounding to some extent. In just the same way, the relation of justifying is more basic than the relation of justifying to some extent. These are distinct relations. But it doesn't follow that the verb 'justify' has different senses, or that there are two radically different sorts of reasons—just as we shouldn't think that the verb 'surround' has different senses, or that there are two radically different relations of surrounding. In short, my account captures the fact that there is just one sense of 'reason', and my account entails that there is some basic feature that all reasons have in common.

6.2 Weighing is a bad metaphor for how reasons combine.

Broome draws an analogy between weighing reasons and weighing concrete objects. But the analogy only goes so far. If you put together some concrete objects, their collective weight will equal the sum of their individual weights. That isn't true for reasons. For instance, when you put together some reasons, their collective weight can

50. Broome 2015b, p. 233
51. Broome 2004, p. 42
52. For further discussion of why Broome rejects the unified view, see Broome 2004, p. 42 ff.

be greater than the sum of their individual weights. Consider the following example from Keeling 2023:

> You want to buy a plant that requires infrequent watering and that flowers in the summer. Your friend suggests a particular plant. You ought to get the plant just in case it requires infrequent watering and it flowers in the summer. These reasons are individually insufficient but together sufficient. (28)

Suppose that you have a slight desire to buy a plant that meets just one of your conditions, and you have a strong desire to buy a plant that meets both. Then the collective weight of the fact that a plant requires infrequent watering and the fact that it flowers in the summer could be greater than the sum of the individual weights of these facts, when considered as reasons to buy the plant. In fact, we can give more dramatic examples: A plurality of facts can collectively justify an action or attitude, even though none of the individual facts justifies it *to any extent*. Suppose that you flip two coins, a penny and a nickel. The fact that the penny landed heads and the fact that the nickel landed heads together justify your believing that they landed the same way, even though neither individual fact justifies that belief to any extent. As Dancy 2004 puts it, "There will be many cases where a favourer is a complex no part of which is itself a favourer" (39).

Also, when you put together some reasons, their collective weight can be less than the sum of their individual weights. Here's an example from Nair 2016:

> Suppose I am deliberating about an afternoon run, and that both heat and rain, taken individually, function as reasons to not run; still, the combination of heat and rain together might function as a weaker reason to not run (say, because the heat is less onerous when there is rain). (59)

Here the collective weight of two reasons together is less than the sum of their individual weights; in fact, their collective weight is less than the weight of either reason taken individually.

In fact, we can go further. In rare cases, collecting reasons can change their polarity. A plurality of facts can be a reason to refrain from performing an action, while each individual fact is a reason to perform it. Here's an example from Horty 2012:[53]

> [S]uppose... that both heat and rain, taken individually, function as negative reasons, arguing against a run; still, the combination of heat and rain together might function as a positive reason, favoring the run as refreshing. (61)

In summary, weighing reasons is not like weighing concrete objects. The normative weight of a plurality of facts does not necessarily equal the sum of their individual

53. Both this example and the previous example from Nair 2016 are originally due to Prakken 2005.

normative weights.[54]

This observation has been a major source of discontent for critics of Broome. They argue that the disanalogy between normative and physical weights puts pressure on Broome's account of *pro tanto* reasons:

> The explanation account... faces a deeper worry: placing weights on a scale is simply the wrong model for how to think about reasons for-and-against ϕ-ing.[55]

> The third problem we'll consider... concerns the idea of normative weighing explanations. These explanations are supposed to be analogous to mechanical weighing explanations (cf. Broome, 2013: 52)... however, the analogy is not obviously apt.[56]

> [N]ormative reasons don't respect the simplest of the principles that apply to weight and weighing. Without these, however, it is not clear in what sense the analogy with weight is still theoretically useful.[57]

As I see it, there are actually two problems here. The first is that Broome introduces a deficient metaphor for the way in which reasons combine. The second problem is that Broome fails to explain *why* the metaphor is deficient. Broome agrees with these critiques. As he admits,

> [W]e need a fuller account of the arithmetic of weights, which allows them to be combined. Among the difficulties is that weights are obviously vague and they obviously need not combine in anything like an additive fashion. I do not know whether a cogent account of weighing explanations can eventually be given.[58]

Unfortunately, Broome's account does not help us understand why normative weights do not add up like physical weights do.

By contrast, my account of reasons does help us understand this fact. It's a general fact about many gradable relations that when a plurality collectively verbs an object to some degree, that degree is often *not* equal to the sum of the degrees to which each member of the plurality verbs that object. A playground can be half surrounded by a hedge and half surrounded by a fence, but if the fence runs alongside the hedge for a stretch, the playground may be only two-thirds surrounded by the hedge and fence together. A sauna and a cold plunge can each hardly satisfy an athlete, while together they satisfy her to a great extent. And so on. Degrees of justification exhibit the same lack of additivity as degrees of other gradable relations. The metaphor of mechanical

54. Additional examples can be found in Kagan 1988, p. 18; Pollock 1995, pp. 101–2; Prakken 2005, p. 86; Schroeder 2007, pp. 125–6; Horty 2012, p. 61; Magidor & Hawthorne 2018, p. 133; Finlay 2019, p. 64; Nair 2021, pp. 43–44; Logins 2022, p. 100; Keeling 2023, p. 24; and §4 of this paper.
55. Magidor & Hawthorne 2018, p. 133
56. Fogal & Risberg 2023a, p. 57
57. Logins 2022, p. 99
58. Broome 2018, p. 312

weighing is deficient as a model for measuring the strength of reasons because it is generally deficient as a model for measuring degrees of gradable relations. In addition to explaining the deficiency of the metaphor of mechanical weights, my account provides a variety of better metaphors to guide our thinking about how the weights of reasons combine. Any of the ordinary relations discussed in this paper would provide a better model for how degrees of collective justification are related to the degrees of justification provided by individual facts.

6.3 Broome fails to give an informative account of *pro tanto* reasons.

According to Broome, F is a *pro tanto* reason to ϕ just in case F plays the *for-ϕ role* in a weighing explanation of an ought fact. But what does it take for a fact to play this role? According to several critics, Broome does not adequately address this question:

> [S]aying that reasons to ϕ are facts that *play a for-ϕ role* doesn't sound all that different from saying that reasons to ϕ are considerations that *count in favor of ϕ-ing*. And, more importantly, it doesn't seem to be any more informative than saying this.[59]

> Broome's account of *pro tanto* reasons in terms of weighing explanations seems not to provide a non-circular, informative account of what it is for some fact to count in favor of, or be a reason for, ϕing.[60]

> Without the analogy with weight, it doesn't seem that there is much of substance left in Broome's... view, given how crucial weighing explanation is for this account.[61]

According to these critics, Broome fails to give an informative account of what it takes for a fact to play the *for-ϕ role* in a weighing explanation, and so Broome fails to give an informative account of *pro tanto* reasons. Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star sharpen this objection, stating that "Broome has not provided us with a full-blooded analysis of reasons," where an analysis is *full-blooded* just in case "it analyzes one concept in terms of a separate concept that we can understand without having to understand the first concept."[62]

Fortunately, my account describes the relation of being a reason using concepts that we can understand independently. My account states that F is a reason to ϕ just in case there is some degree to which F MAKES ϕ-ing justified. The relevant relation of MAKING is a shared component of the meanings of all makative verbs. The relevant

59. Brunero 2013, p. 813
60. Nebel 2019, p. 461
61. Logins 2022, p. 101
62. Kearns & Star 2008, p. 43, 42

concept of *degree* is a general concept used in degree semantic theories of gradable expressions.

Because my account makes use of concepts that play roles in other theories, my account entails that such theories may have surprising consequences for our thinking about reasons. At the risk of getting too much into the weeds, I will give one example: According to the bold semantic theory defended by Burnett 2017, absolute gradable adjectives have strict semantic values in every context. For instance, there is some strict sense in which the property of being surrounded does not really come in degrees, any more than the property of being hexagonal comes in degrees. 'Justified' is an absolute gradable adjective. Hence according to Burnett's theory, there is some strict sense in which the property of being justified does not really come in degrees.[63] All justified actions are equally justified, and all unjustified actions are equally unjustified. Similarly, the relation of justifying does not really come in degrees. A fact justifies an action to some degree if and only if it justifies that action *simpliciter*. Against the background of my account, this view has significant consequences for our thinking about reasons. For instance, this view entails that there is some strict sense in which a fact is a reason to do some action if and only if it justifies that action. As measured in a given context, every reason will have the same strength—namely, full justificatory strength. Again, I am not arguing that Burnett is right, but merely mentioning her view in order to illustrate that my positive account is a genuinely informative account of reasons.

6.4 Broome fails to explain why reasons have weights.

We have been discussing the objection that Broome fails to give an informative account of the *polarity* of reasons—that is, an account of what makes it the case that a fact is a reason to do some action, as opposed to a reason against it. A closely related objection is that Broome fails to give an informative account of the *weight* of reasons:

> [A]s well as having a polarity, reasons have a strength, and it is not obvious that Broome can make sense of that. It might appear that he can, because of the analogy with weight... But this ignores the fact that we have an independent conception of weight, which is not to be identified with the ability to contribute to weighing explanations.[64]

> A related worry is that Broome... seems to believe it is a brute fact that reasons simply have certain weights of some kind. What these weights are seems to be a mystery.[65]

63. This application of Burnett's view to 'justified' is discussed in Hawthorne & Logins 2021. For detailed development of a related argument against the gradability of justification, see Logins 2024.
64. Dancy 2015, p. 182
65. Kearns & Star 2008, p. 44

> [W]hile Broome's account assumes that reasons have 'weights' that determine what an agent ought to do, [it is] silent on our central question—namely, what *it is* for a reason to have a certain weight. And it's hard to see how the view could be modified so as to answer this question without violating the spirit of Broome's ought-centric approach. Here again we see the difficulty of analyzing the *gradable* notion of weight in terms of some *non-gradable* notion (in this case, that of ought).[66]

According to these authors, Broome fails to explain why some reasons count more strongly in favor of an action than others—or in other words, why reasons come in varying degrees of strength.

By contrast, my account explains why reasons have varying degrees of strength. As I argued in §4, 'justify' is a gradable verb. The relation of justifying comes in degrees. The strength of the justification that a fact provides for an action is the degree to which that fact justifies that action, in a specific technical sense—namely, the degree measured on the scale used to interpret the gradable verb 'justify'. A reason is a fact that justifies an action to some degree, and the weight of the reason is the degree to which it justifies that action. There is nothing mysterious about the fact that some reasons for an action are stronger than others, since that is just to say that some reasons justify an action more than others. And this fact is just as ordinary as the fact that some lights illuminate a field more than others, that some vines cover a garage more than others, that some columns support a bridge more than others, and so on.

7 A better account of the explanatory glue

On my account, F is a normative reason to ϕ just in case there is some degree to which F MAKES ϕ-ing justified. This account has two basic components: a degree structure and the MAKING relation. The previous section highlighted the merits of the first component of my account. By identifying reasons as facts that justify to some degree, we can solve a number of problems for Broome's account of reasons. This section will highlight the merits of the second component of my account. By identifying justifying reasons as facts that MAKE an action justified, we can solve a number of problems for Broome's account of the explanatory glue that connects perfect reasons with normative facts.

To briefly review, both Broome and I defend explanationist accounts of a strong normative support relation. Broome defends an explanationist account of what it takes for a fact to be a perfect reason, while I defend an explanationist account of what it takes for a fact to justify an action. Our accounts use different sorts of explanatory

66. Fogal & Risberg 2023b, p. 2586

glue to connect these reasons with the normative facts that they explain. Broome says that the glue is the relation of explaining or making it the case, whereas I say that the glue is the MAKING relation. In this section, I discuss several problems for Broome's account, and I argue that my account can solve these problems.

But first, a brief clarification: I said that Broome identifies the relevant glue as the relation of explaining, and also as the relation of making it the case. Broome takes these accounts to be equivalent. According to Broome 2013, "To say that X explains Y is also to say, in different words, that X makes Y so; the relation of explaining is the relation of making so" (48). This is a very controversial take. A lot of metaphysicians would say that these relations are not identical; rather, making relations are worldly determination relations that *back* explanation.[67] In what follows, I will separately discuss the relation of explaining and the relation of making it the case. Unfortunately, neither of these relations is well-suited to play the role of the glue in explanationist theories of normative support relations.

7.1 The glue is not the relation of explaining.

According to Broome, if a fact explains why you ought to do something, then it is a reason for you to do it:

> Something that explains an ought is a reason, and something that explains specifically why N ought to F is a reason for N to F.[68]

According to Broome, a fact is a perfect reason for you to ϕ just in case it explains why a certain normative fact obtains—namely, the fact that you ought to ϕ.

Against this account, some theorists argue that the glue in an explanationist theory must involve more than merely explaining why some normative fact obtains. In particular, they point out that when a fact *enables* another fact to make it the case that a normative fact obtains, the enabling fact can play an explanatory role without being a normative reason. As Schroeder 2007 puts it,

> Background conditions on reasons are explanatory reasons why some consideration is a reason for someone to do something, and hence derivatively part of the reason why it is the case that she ought to do it. But they are not among her normative reasons for doing it. (37)

Wodak 2020 raises the same objection:

> Enabling conditions such as the fact that A can ϕ partly explain why A ought to ϕ, but enabling conditions are not reasons for A to ϕ: that A can ϕ does not by itself count in favour of A's ϕ-ing. (267)

67. See for instance Audi 2012, Schaffer 2012, and Maurin 2019.
68. Broome 2015a, p. 90

A nitpicky point: As stated, these arguments do not pose a problem for Broome. In the above passages, Schroeder and Wodak point out that a fact can be part of an explanation for why you ought to do an action, without being a reason for you to do it. But Broome doesn't say that a fact F is a perfect reason to do an action just in case F is *part of an explanation* for why you ought to do it. He says that F is a perfect reason to do an action just in case F *explains* why you ought to do it.

That being said, Schroeder and Wodak are on the right track. We can develop the spirit of their objection into a genuine problem for Broome. That's because in some contexts, enabling conditions are not merely part of the explanation for why you ought to do something, but actually explain why you ought to do it. Here's an example:

> *Bowling*: Your wife would like for you to stay home and watch a movie with her tonight. You say, "I'm sorry. I would love to stay home, but I promised my colleague Victor that I would go out bowling with him."
>
> As it happens, you have been in this sort of situation many times before—your wife wanted to watch a movie, when you had already promised to go bowling with a colleague. Every other time, your promise was made under duress. A colleague had twisted your arm behind your back, pulling harder and harder until you agreed to go bowling. Your wife knows that this is a regular occurrence at your office. She says, "You don't *have* to go bowling with Victor, you know. You aren't obligated to meet up with him just because he forced you to say you would."
>
> But, you explain, this time is different: "Look, I know that usually, my promises to go out with my colleagues don't generate any genuine obligations, since they're just forced out of me at the office. But I really do have an obligation to go bowling with Victor—my promise to him wasn't made under duress!"

Perhaps every other time you had promised to go bowling with a colleague, you ought to have stayed home instead. But this time is different. You ought to go bowling with Victor. And in the context of your conversation with your wife, what explains this normative fact is *that your promise to Victor wasn't made under duress*. In other words, that's what makes sense of the fact that you ought to go bowling with Victor. This is an instance of a more general point—namely, that in some contexts, enabling conditions can explain what they enable.[69]

Bowling poses a genuine problem for Broome. According to Broome, if a fact F explains why you ought to do an action, then F is a perfect reason for you to do it. The fact that you weren't under duress when you made your promise to Victor explains

69. Here's another example from Putnam 1982: In the context of a conversation with aliens visiting from an oxygen-deprived planet, the fact that there is oxygen in our atmosphere can explain why a particular match lights on fire when you strike it.

why you ought to go bowling with him. But this fact is not itself a reason for you to go bowling with him. As Dancy 2004 explains,

> [T]he fact that the promise was not given under duress is not a second reason for doing the action, to be set alongside the first one. What is true here is that if my promise had been given under duress, I would have had no reason to keep it. (39)

The mere fact that you weren't under duress when you made your promise to Victor isn't any sort of reason for you to go bowling tonight—perfect, *pro tanto*, or otherwise.[70] The absence of duress merely enables *the fact that you promised to go bowling* to be a reason for you to go bowling—and indeed, to make it the case that you ought to go bowling. In other words, there is a reason for you to go bowling with Victor. It's the fact that you promised to go bowling with him. In normal circumstances, this fact would also explain why you ought to go bowling. But in your unusual circumstances, where most of your promises are made under coercion, it doesn't. To sum up: A fact can explain why you ought to do something, without being a reason for you to do it. Hence Broome shouldn't say that the explanatory glue that holds together perfect reasons and normative facts is the relation of explaining.[71]

Bowling illustrates that explaining and justifying come apart. An enabling condition can explain why an action is justified, without justifying that action. According to my account of justifying, this point is simply an instance of a more general point: An enabling condition can explain a fact, without MAKING it obtain. Here is another example:

> *Fertilizer*: For years, you have cultivated a modest crop of kudzu vines next to your garage. Each summer, the vines grow to be about seven feet long. But this year, your partner foolishly dumped a bucket of fertilizer next to the garage. As a result, the kudzu vines have grown to be thirty feet long, and now they are covering the garage. Your neighbor notices that the kudzu vines are out of control, and she asks you, "Why on earth is the garage completely covered this year?" In response, you explain, "Unfortunately, there is a lot of fertilizer in the soil near the garage."

The fertilizer in the soil explains the fact that the garage is covered. But the fertilizer doesn't MAKE this fact obtain. That is, (34) is false:

(34) a. #The fertilizer is covering the garage.
b. #The fertilizer [MAKES [the garage BE covered]]

70. At least, we can fill in the details of the example so that this fact isn't a reason. The mere fact that someone refrains from bullying you isn't typically a reason for you to go out bowling with them.

71. Admittedly, it might be confusing to use 'explanationist' for views on which the glue is not explanation. But such views are explanationist in the broad sense described by Berker 2026, and it's helpful to have a term for the broad class of views that he's describing, so I'll keep using 'explanationist' in his sense.

The fertilizer does not MAKE the garage covered, but merely enables the vines to MAKE the garage covered. Hence MAKING involves more than merely explaining.

On my account, MAKING is the explanatory glue that connects reasons with the facts that they justify. Hence my account captures our intuitions about enabling conditions, where Broome's account does not. Return to the case of *Bowling*. You promised Victor that you would go bowling. Even though your wife would like you to stay home, you ought to keep your promise. The action of going bowling is justified for you. The fact that your promise wasn't made under duress explains this normative fact. But it doesn't MAKE that fact obtain. That is, (35) is false:

(35) a. #The fact that you weren't under duress justifies your going bowling.
b. #The fact that you weren't under duress [MAKES [your going bowling BE justified]]

The fact that you promised to go bowling plays the role of the kudzu vines. The fact that your promise was not made under duress plays the role of the fertilizer. The latter fact doesn't MAKE your bowling justified, but merely enables your promise to MAKE it justified. To sum up: The explanatory glue that connects justifying reasons and normative facts involves more than merely explaining, and my account delivers this important result.

7.2 The glue is not the relation of making it the case.

"Wait a minute," Broome might say. "Maybe there's some cheap pragmatic sense in which the absence of duress explains an ought fact in the context of a conversation with your wife. But that's not the sort of explanation that I had in mind. I'm interested in what *really* explains the fact that you ought to go bowling, in some deeper metaphysical sense. Perfect reasons are not merely facts that *make sense* of ought facts. They are facts that *make it the case* that ought facts obtain." Could Broome maintain that F is a perfect reason for you to ϕ just in case F makes it the case that you ought to ϕ?

Against this account, some theorists object that the relation of *making it the case* is not strong enough to serve as the glue that connects perfect reasons and ought facts. In particular, they argue that in some cases, a fact F makes it the case that you ought to ϕ, but F fails to be a reason for you to ϕ, because the relevant making-it-the-case relation has the wrong sort of character. As Schroeter & Schroeter 2009 put it,

> Broome's make-it-the-case relation will sometimes pick out facts that do not constitute genuine normative reasons for action... A generic make-it-the-case relation

> (or even a constitution relation) will not suffice to single out facts that play a *justificatory role* in making an action right. (292)

As I see it, there are at least two possible objections in the neighborhood of this remark. Here is one objection: Sometimes, a fact F *causes* it to be the case that you ought to ϕ and thereby (causally) makes it the case that you ought to ϕ, but F is not itself a reason for you to ϕ. Here is another objection: Sometimes, a fact F makes it the case that another fact G obtains, where G makes it the case that you ought to ϕ. And in some cases of this sort, F thereby indirectly makes it the case that you ought to ϕ, but F is not itself a reason for you to ϕ. These objections are especially forceful when combined. Suppose that your neighbors care deeply about the welfare of non-human animals, which is causing them to foster a pet dog for the summer, which is causing a family of mice to migrate from their house into your basement, which is making it the case that you ought to buy some mousetraps. The fact that your neighbors care about non-human animals is (causally, indirectly) making it the case that you ought to buy mousetraps. But intuitively, the fact that your neighbors care about non-human animals isn't itself a normative reason for you to go out and buy mousetraps.[72] As this example illustrates, the glue that connects perfect reasons and normative facts is not just any making-it-the-case relation, but an especially *direct* making-it-the-case relation.

What relation could this be? Fortunately, my account provides an answer. MAKING is not just any making-it-the-case relation, but an especially direct making-it-the-case relation. By analogy, consider the relation of CAUSING. It's well-known that CAUSING is not the relation of causation; roughly speaking, it is an especially direct causal relation.[73] Suppose that Jones and a student are sitting in a classroom. Jones asks her student to open the classroom door, and the student obeys. As uttered in this context, (36-a) is true, while (36-b) is false:

(36) a. Jones caused the door to be open.
b. ??Jones opened the door.

Jones caused the door to be open, but she didn't CAUSE it to be open. This example illustrates an important point: CAUSING is not the relation denoted by 'cause' in ordinary language. CAUSING is more direct than causing. Similarly, MAKING is more direct than the relation denoted by 'make' in ordinary language. Suppose that Jones

72. For similar objections in this spirit, see Crisp 2015, p. 144 ff. and Behrens 2025, §3.
73. As Levin 2020 puts it, "the relation between the subevents in both lexical causatives and resultatives is taken to instantiate a special type of causation, whose hallmark is a fairly tight relation between the two subevents" (189). For a critical survey of theories of the relevant notion of directness, see Wolff 2003. Ultimately, the relation of CAUSING may not be analyzable in more basic terms. See Byrne 2023 for discussion of the relationship between CAUSING, causing, and the legal notion of proximate causation.

hates supporting her undergraduate students as they are applying to graduate programs, so she yells at her teaching assistants until they agree to support the students. As uttered in this context, (37-a) is true, while (37-b) is false:

(37) a. Jones made it the case that her students were supported.
b. ??Jones supported her students.

Jones made it the case that her students were supported, but she didn't MAKE her students supported. This example illustrates that MAKING is an especially direct making-it-the-case relation.[74] According to my account, justifying does not merely involve making it the case that an action is justified; justifying involves MAKING that action justified. Hence my account explains why merely making it the case that an action is justified is not sufficient for a fact to justify that action.

7.3 The glue is not a strong metaphysical grounding relation.

So far, we have considered two interpretations of Broome's account of perfect reasons. We have seen that the explanatory glue that connects perfect reasons and ought facts must be stronger than the relation of explaining, and stronger than the relation of merely making some fact obtain.

There is one more interpretation of Broome that deserves consideration—namely, that the explanatory glue is the relation of *metaphysical grounding*. When Broome says that a perfect reason "makes it the case" that an ought fact obtains, we could take him to be saying that the reason metaphysically grounds that ought fact. According to several authors, this is exactly the right way to spell out explanationist theories of normative support relations:

> The relevant explanatory glue is the making relation—which I shall take to be the same relation that metaphysicians have dubbed 'grounding'.[75]

> [N]ormative theorists typically want to know what *makes it the case* that *S* ought to ϕ... Like many others, we take this to be an instance of a non-causal, non-pragmatic kind of explanation that commonly goes under the heading of 'metaphysical' or 'grounding' explanation. This is different from the looser, everyday notion of explanation.[76]

> [T]he relevant relation between p and q consists in some fact (represented by p) *making it the case* that Oq. As it is often put (but not by Broome): the fact represented by *p grounds* the fact that Oq.[77]

74. Having made this distinction, we can throw away the ladder used at the start of this paper: Strictly speaking, MAKING is distinct from the relation denoted by 'making' in (3) and (4).
75. Berker 2026, p. 9
76. Fogal & Risberg 2023a, p. 55
77. Zimmerman 2015, p. 157

> There are various ways to specify the "making" relation... The underlying idea is that right-makers not only modally determine but *explain* why the action in question is right. This idea can be spelled out in terms of *metaphysical ground*.[78]

The relation of metaphysical grounding is a special sort of making-it-the-case relation that holds between facts, a relation that is closely connected with explanation. According to orthodox accounts of grounding, metaphysical grounding is a very strong relation. In his influential discussion of grounding, Fine 2012 writes, "Just as metaphysical necessity is the strictest form of necessity (at least as compared to natural and normative necessity), so it is natural to suppose that statements of metaphysical ground are the strictest form of in-virtue-of claim" (38). The grounding relation described by Fine is not just rubber cement; it's super glue. Could this strong grounding relation be the explanatory glue that connects perfect reasons and normative facts?

Unfortunately, no. Out of the frying pan, into the fire. As some critics have pointed out, the metaphysical grounding relation described by Fine is too strong to be the glue that connects perfect reasons and normative facts. The grounding relation described by Fine satisfies the principle of Necessitation, which states that if Γ fully grounds F, then necessarily, if every fact in Γ obtains, then F obtains.[79] This is a strong condition. In many cases where Broome wants to say that a fact is a perfect reason that makes it the case that you ought to do some action, the perfect reason will not necessitate the relevant ought fact. Behrens 2025 points out that grounding is therefore too strong to serve as the glue in an explanationist account of normative support relations such as right-making:

> If we assume, as it is commonly done, that full grounds necessitate what they ground (*grounding necessitarianism*), the pertinent grounding claim is false... Sarah's promise is not sufficient for her act's being right. Given grounding necessitarianism, [the fact that Sarah promised] is thus not a right-maker. (3)

To spell out this problem: Suppose that Sarah promises to go to a party. According to Broome, this fact can be a perfect reason for her to go to the party. Unfortunately, this verdict is inconsistent with the super-glue grounding proposal. After all, Sarah might encounter several drowning children on her way to the party, in which case she ought to skip the party and save the children, despite the fact that she promised to go to the party. The promise fact doesn't necessitate the ought fact, so it doesn't metaphysically ground the ought fact. According to the super-glue proposal, it follows that the

78. Behrens 2025, p. 1

79. Trogdon 2025 observes that Necessitation is a "relatively orthodox assumption, imposing a useful constraint on theorizing about grounding" (3). The principle is endorsed by Rosen 2010, Fine 2012, Audi 2012, and Dasgupta 2014, among others. See §7.4 for discussion of alternative views of grounding.

promise fact is not a perfect reason. We could play the same game for nearly any perfect reason, and so we are left with hardly any perfect reasons at all.

By contrast, my account avoids this problem. MAKING is not a necessitating relation. For instance, recall our initial examples of MAKING:

(1) a. The houses surround the park.
b. The lights illuminate the football field.
c. Kudzu vines are covering our garage.
d. The columns support the bridge.
e. A federal grant supported their research.

The houses could exist without the park being surrounded.[80] The lights could exist without the football field being illuminated. And so on. These examples illustrate a general fact about MAKING: Just because some objects MAKE a fact obtain, that doesn't guarantee that the fact will obtain in every world where those objects exist. On my account, this general fact makes sense of our intuitive judgment about justifying: Just because some reasons justify an action, that doesn't guarantee that the action will be justified in every world where those reasons obtain.

7.4 Broader implications for explanationism and some remaining questions

I have discussed objections to three accounts of the explanatory glue that connects perfect reasons with normative facts, and I have defended my MAKING account of justifying reasons against each of these objections. We are nearing the end of this paper. But this is far from the end of the story. For one thing, the literature on grounding is rife with controversy. There are many different views about the nature of grounding, and some of these views give rise to additional candidates for the explanatory glue that connects reasons with the normative facts that they explain.

For instance, some grounding theorists maintain that there is a grounding relation that fails to satisfy the principle of Necessitation.[81] As some have put it, there is a more selective relation of *productive* grounding, where some but not all of the metaphysical grounds identified by Fine are among the productive grounds of a fact. In particular, background conditions do not productively ground the facts that they enable. Jonathan Dancy uses something like a relation of productive grounding in his explanationist theory of right-makers, as he explicitly distinguishes "the right-making base (the ground, as one might call it)" from the conditions that merely enable rea-

80. See https://www.thisoldhouse.com/moving-the-whole-house.

81. For instance, see Schnieder 2006, Chudnoff 2013, Leuenberger 2014, and Skiles 2015. For present purposes, we can set aside the question of whether these theorists are proposing a competing account of the grounding relation described in Fine 2012 or merely describing a second grounding relation.

sons to make an action right.[82] Taking a cue from Dancy, Fogal & Risberg 2023a suggest that productive grounding might be well-suited to serve as the glue in an explanationist theory of reasons:

> [W]e might want to distinguish grounds (understood as metaphysical 'producers') from mere background conditions... Support-explanationism can accommodate these nuances: enablers and disablers can play their characteristic roles and hence be part of the full (non-pragmatic or metaphysical) explanation of why there is a certain amount of normative support for ϕ-ing, but insofar as they aren't themselves providers or sources of that support, they won't be reasons to ϕ in the relevant sense. (62–3)

This discussion raises an important question: Assuming that there is a relation of productive grounding that fails to satisfy the principle of Necessitation, what is its relation to MAKING? Strictly speaking, these relations seem to be distinct, since productive grounding is a relation between facts, whereas concrete objects like kudzu vines can stand in the MAKING relation. But for all I have argued here, it might turn out that when restricted to facts, the relation of MAKING just is the relation of productive grounding.

Another major point of controversy among grounding theorists is whether there are in fact multiple varieties of grounding relations.[83] Fine 2012 argues that in addition to metaphysical grounding, there is a basic relation of *normative grounding* that holds between descriptive and normative facts. For instance, according to Fine, the fact that an action was done with the sole intention of causing harm normatively grounds the fact that that action is wrong. This view raises another question that I do not have space to address here: Assuming that there is a relation of normative grounding, what is its relation to MAKING? Strictly speaking, these relations must be distinct, since normative grounding is a relation only between descriptive and normative facts. But for all I have argued here, it might turn out that whenever a descriptive fact MAKES some normative fact obtain, the former fact normatively grounds the latter, and vice versa.

So far, I have compared my explanationist account of justifying reasons with its closest sibling in the literature—namely, Broome's explanationist account of perfect reasons. In closing, I want to point out that my discussion has broader implications for explanationist accounts of normative support relations. An explanationist account of a normative support relation characterizes that relation using some sort of explanatory glue and some sort of normative fact. Broome defends an explanationist account of a strong relation of support—namely, what it takes for a fact to be a perfect reason.

82. Dancy 2004, p. 45
83. See Berker 2018 for an overview of relevant literature.

By contrast, most explanationists defend accounts of a weaker support relation—namely, what it takes for a fact to be a reason. These explanationist theories are rather distant cousins of my explanationist account of justifying reasons. According to these distant cousins, all reasons explain normative facts, including outweighed reasons. As you might expect, the normative facts that get explained on these theories are not ought facts, but normative facts of some weaker variety. For instance, the explained facts might include the fact that an action is good *in some respect and to some degree*, or that an action is good *relative to some salient end*, or that there is *some normative support* for an action.[84] What exactly is the relation that holds between reasons and these weak normative facts? Different theories use different sorts of glue. But many distant cousins of my account use the same relations that Broome uses in his account—namely, the relation of explaining or the relation of making it the case.[85]

Unfortunately, these distant cousins of my account suffer from the same problems as Broome's account of perfect reasons. The relations of explaining and making it the case are too weak to serve as the glue in any explanationist theory. For instance, the fact that your promise to Victor was not made under duress explains why your going bowling is good in some respect and to some degree, but it is not itself a reason for you to go bowling. The fact that your neighbors are concerned about non-human animals is (indirectly, causally) making it the case that your buying mousetraps is good in some respect and to some degree, but it is not itself a reason for you to buy mousetraps. This is bad news for many explanationists. Fortunately, there is also good news: By adopting MAKING as their glue, explanationists can solve these problems. To sum up, I hope that my discussion helps my distant cousins develop theories that are better equipped to address objections to the explanationist program.

Suppose my distant cousins are convinced. They adopt MAKING as their explanatory glue, and they claim that a fact F is a reason just in case F MAKES some weak normative fact obtain. I claim that a fact F is a reason just in case there is some degree to which F MAKES an action justified. These claims are consistent. For all I have argued, it might turn out that whenever there is some degree to which F MAKES an action justified, F MAKES a certain weaker normative fact obtain, and vice versa. This raises additional questions that I do not have space to address here: Is my account extensionally equivalent to any of its distant cousins, identifying just the same facts as reasons? If multiple accounts are extensionally correct, is there one account that is best suited to serve as a reductive analysis of what it is for a fact to be a reason?

84. See Raz 1999, p. 23; Finlay 2014; and Fogal & Risberg 2023a, respectively.

85. As mentioned above, Fogal & Risberg 2023a are a notable exception. For examples of theories of reasons that use *explaining* and *making it the case* as their explanatory glue, see Finlay 2014, p. 95 and Cullity 2018, p. 39, respectively.

Although several questions remain open, we have made progress in clarifying the nature of normative reasons. Over the past thirty years, many theorists have given up hope of making such progress. They say that the relation of being a normative reason is a primitive that cannot be further clarified:

> Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. "Counts in favor how?" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer.[86]

> It is hard to explain the *concept* of a reason... Like some other fundamental concepts, such as those involved in our thoughts about time, consciousness, and possibility, the concept of a reason is indefinable in the sense that it cannot be helpfully explained merely by using words.[87]

This pessimism is premature. Just as scientists can better understand a creature by identifying it as a member of a species, the same goes for reasons and other normative creatures. We can better understand the relation of *justifying* by identifying it as a makative and gradable relation. Building on these observations, I have developed a novel account of normative reasons and their strength. This account solves many problems faced by existing explanationist theories of normative support relations. With the help of my account, we can better understand what *being a reason* has to do with the relation of *explaining* a normative fact.

86. Scanlon 1998, p. 17
87. Parfit 2011, p. 31. See also Schroeder 2007, Skorupski 2012, Lord 2018, and Rowland 2019.

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