Can Streumer simply avoid Supervenience?*

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Abstract. In his defence of an error theory for normative judgements, Bart Streumer presents a new 'reduction' argument against non-reductive normative realism. Streumer claims that unlike previous versions, his 'simple moral theory' version of the argument doesn't rely on the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive. But this is incorrect; without supervenience the argument does not succeed.

Bart Streumer has recently defended an error theory for all normative claims.[1] Streumer's argument is by elimination: he offers original arguments against all competing meta-ethical views.

A major such competitor is non-reductive realism about the normative. This view holds that there are irreducibly normative properties, which are not identical to natural or descriptive properties.

To see Streumer's argument against non-reductive realism, first consider Frank Jackson's famous reduction argument against that view. Jackson's argument depends on the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive:

(S) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the instantiation of descriptive properties in W and W* is exactly the same, then the instantiation of normative properties in W and W* is also exactly the same.[2]

Jackson's main idea is this: given a normative predicate such as 'is wrong', the truth of supervenience allows us to construct a highly artificial descriptive predicate that is necessarily co-extensive with the normative predicate.[3]

Now, consider the following criterion of property identity:

(N) Two predicates ascribe the same property *iff* they are necessarily coextensive.[4]

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[1] Streumer (2017).
[2] Streumer (2017), p. 25.
[3] Jackson (1998), pp. 122–3.
[4] Streumer (2017), p. 30.

If this criterion is correct, then the normative predicate and its artificial descriptive counterpart ascribe the same property. This implies that non-reductive realism is false, at least assuming that the 'shared' property is a descriptive one.

There are obviously many places to object to this argument. For example, one might object to the distinction between normative and descriptive predicates, or to the criterion of property identity (N).

But one of its (apparently) less controversial aspects is the supervenience claim (S). But (S) has recently been questioned.[5] Streumer offers a new version of the reduction argument, which putatively 'does not appeal to any claim about supervenience at all.'[6]

If Streumer's version of the reduction argument indeed avoids appeal to supervenience, then this is significant even for non-error theorists.

Most obviously, it would add to the stock of arguments against non-reductive realism, and reduce their dependence on (S). Critics of non-reductive realism (including both error theorists, and other brands of realist) should welcome a new argument against that view, especially one which relies on weaker assumptions.

In this note, however, I'll argue that Streumer's argument indeed relies on supervenience. The dependence is more opaque than in Jackson's version of the argument, but without something akin to (S), the argument fails.[7]

In the next section, I describe Streumer's new argument. Later, I'll show how it relies on (S).

1   Streumer's Simple Moral Theory Argument

To get the argument going, we first assume that some simple moral theory is correct.[8] By way of example, take hedonistic act-utilitarianism:

Utilitarianism. Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it maximises happiness.[9]

Since 'maximises happiness' is a descriptive predicate, Utilitarianism says that 'is right' is co-extensive with a descriptive predicate ('maximises happiness'), and that this co-extension holds across all possible worlds. In other words, Utilitarianism implies:

Right-Description Necessity. The predicate 'is right' is necessarily coextensive with a descriptive predicate.[10]

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[5]See Väyrynen (2017) for discussion and references.

[6]Streumer (2017), p. 26. The argument is at pp. 30–35; an earlier version appeared in Streumer (2013), pp. 315ff.

[7]Dunaway (2015), especially pp. 640ff, has also tried to get reduction without supervenience. I will not discuss his view here, because I am evaluating whether Streumer's argument is a *distinctive* refutation of non-reductive realism which avoids supervenience.

[8]The normative property in question throughout is that of moral rightness, but the argument is intended to extend to all normative properties.

[9]Streumer (2017), p. 30.

[10]As Streumer (2017), p. 31, puts it: "If [Utilitarianism] is correct, the predicate 'is right' is

Now, applying (N), Right-Description Necessity in turn implies that rightness and a descriptive property (in this case, maximising happiness) are the same property. So non-reductive realism is false.

We reached this conclusion by assuming that the correct moral theory is simple, and that it is Utilitarianism. But the conclusion wouldn't be very interesting if it relied on these assumptions. So Streumer appeals to the following principle:

(W) Whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties cannot depend on which first-order normative view is correct.[11]

If (W) is true, then nothing hung on the truth of Utilitarianism, or more generally on the truth of a *simple* first-order moral view. So the assumptions can be dropped, but the conclusion—that non-reductive realism is false—stands.

The supervenience claim (S) did not explicitly feature in this argument. But, I'll argue, the argument nevertheless depends on (S): its conclusion applies only to moral theories which imply the truth of supervenience. In particular, the modal operator 'necessarily' in Utilitarianism smuggles in the supervenience claim. First-order moral theories which do not smuggle in supervenience do not imply Right-Description Necessity, and so the argument fails for them, and thus (W) is false.

2 Reduction-Friendly Theories

The heart of my criticism is this: Right-Description Necessity amounts to supervenience, and the argument succeeds only for that restricted set of first-order moral theories which entail Right-Description Necessity. Therefore, the argument covertly relies on (S).

Utilitarianism has the following structure: necessarily, an act x is right *iff* $\Phi(x)$, where Φ is a descriptive predicate. In other words, Utilitarianism ascribes a necessary and sufficient condition Φ for rightness, where Φ is *descriptive*, and says that this biconditional holds necessarily. Call a first-order moral theory with this structure 'reduction-friendly'.

Clearly, a reduction-friendly moral theory implies Right-Description Necessity.

But Right-Description Necessity entails supervenience. To see this, suppose that two worlds W and W* are such that all descriptive properties are the same. Φ is a descriptive property, so the same acts are Φ in W and W*. Therefore, and applying our reduction-friendly theory of the normative property in question, the same acts have that normative property in W and W*. But this is just a statement of (S).

So Streumer's chosen example happens to be one which implies supervenience. But couldn't the argument work with some *other* simple moral theory—one which doesn't imply (S)?

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necessarily coextensive with the descriptive predicate 'maximizes happiness.' " I take this—and the other necessity claims in play—to involve a kind of metaphysical necessity: moral theories which violate it are not *logically* incoherent.

[11]Streumer (2017), p. 31.

To see why not, consider some other putative moral theories. These examples show that a moral theory which is not reduction-friendly either fails to entail Right-Description Necessity (and is silent on the question of supervenience), or entails the falsity of Right-Description Necessity (and the falsity of supervenience).

First:

Simpler Utilitarianism. For all actions X in the actual world, X is right if and only if X maximises happiness.

Simpler Utilitarianism is a universally quantified biconditional, with no modal content. It says that an act in our world is right *iff* that act has a descriptive property Φ (maximising happiness). But Simpler Utilitarianism doesn't say anything about rightness in other possible worlds.

For this reason, Simpler Utilitarianism implies neither Right-Description Necessity nor supervenience. It is compatible with Simpler Utilitarianism that in some other possible world, actions are right *iff* they have some other descriptive property (such as minimising utility or being done on a Tuesday), or that there is *no* descriptive predicate that is co-extensive with rightness in that world.

Because Simpler Utilitarianism is not reduction-friendly, it doesn't imply Right-Description Necessity, and Streumer's argument does not go through.[12]

Second, a more extreme example:

Completeness. Every logically possible distribution of rightness over descriptive properties is realised in some possible world.

Completeness implies the falsity of Right-Description Necessity.

Here's why. It is logically possible that the normative property of being a right action is co-extensive with the descriptive property of being an act done on Tuesday; it is logically possible that the normative property of being a right action is co-extensive with the descriptive property of being an act done on a Wednesday.

Now, consider two possible worlds which are descriptively identical, and in which Bart Streumer buys a cup of coffee on some Wednesday. According to Completeness, Streumer's act of buying a coffee is wrong in one world (because done on Wednesday, not Tuesday), and right in the other world (because done on Wednesday).

So if Completeness is the correct moral theory, then Streumer's argument fails, because the correct moral theory doesn't imply Right-Description Necessity. Completeness also implies that (S) is false, because the two possible worlds are descriptively identical, but differ normatively.

These examples show how the argument fails more generally. The structure of the argument is that if we assume a simple moral theory such as Utilitarianism, then we see that Right-Description Necessity is true, and therefore by appeal to (N) that non-reductive realism is false. Then (W) tells us that the choice of

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[12]But, as I'll argue in section 3, Simpler Utilitarianism is the kind of theory which makes (W) look plausible.

Utilitarianism played no logical role, and thus that we can drop the assumption of that particular moral theory, yet keep the conclusion that non-reductive realism is false.

But if I'm right, then the work in the argument is done not by the simplicity of Utilitarianism, but by its reduction-friendliness. And this reduction-friendliness *does* play a logical role in the argument: if the true moral theory is not reduction-friendly, then non-reductive realism is not refuted. So the assumption that the true moral theory is reduction-friendly cannot be dropped—and reduction-friendliness implies (S).

An anonymous reviewer has suggested the following ingenious response to my criticism: what if there's some conceptual constraint on what counts as a moral theory? Perhaps such a constraint—for example, the ability to ground counterfactuals, or universalisability—would rule Simpler Utilitarianism and Completeness ineligible to be moral theories, let alone possibly correct moral theories?

As a dialectical point, that this would be a somewhat desperate move for Streumer, because his argument is intended to apply to *all* normative properties; moral rightness is here a placeholder. So to do the work he intends it to do, any conceptual constraint mustn't be limited to morality only.

Nevertheless, might the argument succeed even if it can't do all the work that Streumer envisages? Here's a general argument why that cannot be so. Suppose that there is such a conceptual constraint. Here's a dilemma.

If the conceptual constraint restricts moral theories to the reduction-friendly (and so supervenience-implying) ones only, then the argument is not independent of supervenience after all. The argument relies on a conceptual truth that all moral theories imply supervenience. It covertly assumes (S), by relying on conceptual constraints which entail (S).

And if not—if some non-reduction-friendly moral theory meets the conceptual constraint—then my earlier criticism stands. Whatever the eligible but non-reduction-friendly moral theory, substitute it for Completeness in the counterexample, above. Because the theory is not reduction-friendly, it doesn't imply Right-Description Necessity and the argument doesn't get underway.

Now, there is one possible line of response for Streumer. He could say that if the *correct* moral theory is simple and reduction-friendly, then it need not matter that there are other possible moral theories, which are neither simple nor reduction-friendly. We just need to assume that a simple and reduction-friendly theory is correct, show that Right-Description Necessity follows, and then use (W) to generalise the conclusion (that non-reductive realism is false) to the other moral theories, including those which are not reduction-friendly.

To close off this line of response, I will criticise (W).

3   An Error Theory for (W)

My argument has been that Streumer's argument fails because it applies only to a restricted range of first-order theories.

Implicitly, I have argued that (W)—which says that whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties cannot depend on which first-order normative view is correct—is false. That's because I showed that reduction-friendly normative views imply (given some assumptions, (N) amongst them) that normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, but non-reduction-friendly normative views are either silent about the matter or imply (again, given some assumptions) that normative properties are *not* identical to descriptive properties.

In other words, I've argued against Streumer's claim that neither non-reductive realism nor its denial 'contradicts any first-order normative view at all.'[13]

To see why this is so, and why (W) is so initially plausible, first note that roughly, a first-order moral theory will tell us

(i) which objects have which moral properties, and which descriptive properties these objects have.[14]

For Streumer, this is a conceptual matter; answering (i) simply is what it is to be a moral theory. He defends (W) by claiming that instead whether non-reductive realism is true

(ii) 'seems to depend on the nature of [moral] properties.'[15]

So the argument for (W) is that (i) and (ii) are distinct; indeed, (W) arguably simply states that they *are* distinct. It's not entirely clear what notion of dependence (or lack thereof) is intended in (W). I understand it as epistemic: an answer to (i) doesn't constrain the answer to (ii), and vice versa. Perhaps this epistemic independence is grounded in a deeper metaphysical independence between the nature of some property, and the distribution of that property.

However this independence is understood, the plausibility of (W) depends on keeping (i) and (ii) distinct.

But when the correct criterion of property identity is (N), the distinction between (i) and (ii) collapses, and (W) is false. This is because (N) implies that some (ii)-type fact about the nature of moral rightness—such as whether rightness is identical to a descriptive property—depends on the (i)-type facts about whether all objects with moral rightness also, across all worlds, have a certain descriptive property.

If the (i)-type facts in question are modally strong, and tell us about how moral and descriptive properties are distributed across all possible worlds, then they can satisfy the antecedent of (N). This is just what reduction-friendly first-order moral theories do, and why it is the reduction-friendliness (and not the simplicity) that does the work in that part of Streumer's argument. (W) cannot be used to

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[13]Streumer (2017), p. 33.

[14]Compare Streumer (2017), p. 31.

[15]Streumer (2017), p. 31.

hold fixed (ii)-type facts about non-reductive realism, whilst ranging across both reduction-friendly and non-reduction-friendly answers to (i).

In slogan, (W) says that first-order theories and metaethical theories answer distinctive questions. But given (N) and modally-strong first-order moral theories, the distinction breaks down.

There are two main ways that Streumer could rescue (W).

First, he could say that (N) is false: even if our first-order moral theory says that rightness is necessarily co-extensive with a descriptive predicate, this does not imply anything about property identity. But of course then the conclusion of his argument—the falsity of non-reductive realism—would not follow, because (N) is a crucial premise in that argument.

Second, he could restrict (W) in a way which is compatible with (N):

(Weak W) Whether some normative property is identical to a descriptive property cannot depend only on what things in this possible world have that normative property.

This claim is indeed plausible, and compatible with (N). It says that, for example, whether non-reductive realism is true cannot depend only on whether Simpler Utilitarianism is correct. But as we saw with that example, Simpler Utilitarianism is not modally strong enough to entail Right-Description Necessity. A first-order moral theory which only tells us about wrongness in this possible world is not sufficient for Streumer's argument to proceed.

(Weak W) is compatible with (N), because the latter says that to imply facts about property identity, a moral theory must say something about the moral property across all possible worlds, not just this one or just a few of them.

But why does (W) seem plausible? Here is my diagnosis: first, (Weak W) is very plausible, and because of that we have failed to notice how implausible (W) is, at least in the presence of (N) and of first-order moral theories which include claims about all possible worlds; second, (W) itself is very plausible if we are not attached to (N)—both non-reductive realists and reductive realists can accept (W), but not at the same time as (N).[16]

4   Conclusion

I have argued that Streumer's attempt at reduction without (S) fails. Though the simple moral theory argument does not explicitly depend on supervenience, it succeeds only for reduction-friendly moral theories, which entail the truth of supervenience.

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[16]At least, not without conceptual constraints on what counts as a moral theory which restrict (W) to either the reduction-friendly or to the non-reduction-friendly.

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