

*The World is Not Enough\**NATHAN ROBERT HOWARD<sup>†</sup> 

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**Abstract**

Throughout his career, Derek Parfit made the bold suggestion, at various times under the heading of the “Normativity Objection,” that anyone in possession of normative concepts is in a position to know, on the basis of their competence with such concepts alone, that reductive realism in ethics is not even possible. Despite the prominent role that the Normativity Objection plays in Parfit’s non-reductive account of the nature of normativity, when the objection hasn’t been ignored, it’s been criticized and even derided. We argue that the exclusively negative attention that the objection has received has been a mistake. On our reading, Parfit’s Normativity Objection poses a serious threat to reductivism, as it exposes the uneasy relationship between our *a priori* knowledge of a range of distinctly normative truths and the package of semantic commitments that reductivists have typically embraced since the Kripkean revolution.

**1. Introduction**

Twenty-two years ago, in “Reasons and Motivation,” Parfit (1997) defended his distinctive brand of Non-Reductive Realism (“non-reductivism”) in ethics<sup>1</sup>, according to which the metaphysical nature of morality — and of normativity, more generally — is not fully explicable in non-normative terms.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of defending his view, Parfit offered several objections to Reductive Realism (“reductivism”), the contrary position.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Parfit made the highly provocative suggestion that our competence with normative concepts *alone* allows us to see that it is *not even possible* for reductivism to be true. Surprisingly, however, Parfit’s bold suggestion was largely ignored at the time of the article’s publication. So too was a similar suggestion made in his later article “Normativity” (2006). Not until the publication

\*Thanks to Nate Charlow, David Copp, Stephen Finlay, Miguel Hoeltje, Daniel James, Sebastian Köhler, Janet Levin, Matt Lutz, Raphael van Riel, Neil Roughley, Mark Schroeder, and Ralph Wedgwood for helpful feedback. Thanks also to audiences at Frankfurt School of Finance & Management, New Waves in the Study of Normative Concepts Conference, Duisburg-Essen Universität, First Wuhan-Essen Metaethics Workshop; and University of Kent, The Future of Normativity Conference. We dedicate this paper to Parfit’s memory.

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of *On What Matters Volume One and Volume Two* (2011) and *On What Matters Volume Three* (2017) did Parfit succeed in provoking a response.

Parfit's "Normativity Objection," as he came to call it in *Volume Two*, has not been well received. Both Copp (2012) and Fleming (2015) argue that it provides reductivists little reason to give up their view. More recently, van Roojen (2017), responding to *Volume Three*, reaches a similar conclusion. Indeed, Sepielli (2017) tells us that "rejection" of several of Parfit's arguments against reductivism, including the Normativity Objection, is now part of the "disciplinary consensus." It will perhaps come as no surprise, then, that in response to related work on similar issues, one of us once had a journal referee tell us that Parfit's arguments against reductivism are "frankly amateurish."

We instruct our students to read the work of philosophers charitably. This lesson applies doubly when the philosopher is Parfit, the author of *Reasons and Persons* (1984). If we find one of Parfit's arguments amateurish, we must be especially careful to show that the fault lies in the argument and not in our reading of it. That is the project undertaken here. Our overarching aim in this paper is to show that there is more to Parfit's Normativity Objection ("the Objection") than its critics assume. We argue that reductivist commentators, especially those whose views rely on Saul Kripke's (1980) seminal work on meaning and reference, are right to point out that the Objection doesn't carry much force against them, at least on the various readings of it that have been put forward. However, we also argue that there is a surprisingly natural but overlooked reading of the Objection that does present a serious challenge to such reductivists.

In brief, the Objection is a dilemma, at least on our reading. Reductivists following Kripke can either model the semantics of normative terms on Kripkean natural kind terms straightforwardly, as most reductivists have done in recent decades, or less straightforwardly. If they model it straightforwardly, then reductivists embrace semantic commitments on which they *do not* answer the central question of how we have *a priori* knowledge of certain normative truths — or so we aim to establish as an intermediate conclusion in the first part of the paper. In the second part of the paper, we show that if reductivists adopt a less straightforward, more sophisticated view of the semantics of normative terms, then they must attribute meanings to those terms that are difficult to reconcile with their reductivism. To put the general thrust of this paper polemically: Decades ago, Parfit saw that Kripkean views of meaning and reference aren't a panacea for reductivism's difficulties. It's time for the rest of us to catch up.

## 2. The Normativity Objection, the First Horn of the Dilemma

### 2.1. Reductive Realism, Analytic and Synthetic

Parfit began his attack on reductivism in "Reasons and Motivation" by rebutting Analytic Reductivism ("a-reductivism"), the view that normative concepts refer to "natural" properties in virtue of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for something's falling within their extensions — conditions articulable by wholly naturalistic, descriptive definitions.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, by

apprehending the correct definition, we get clearer on the normative concept, and, as a result, we get a better grip on the natural property to which those normative concepts refer. After arguing against a-reductivism, Parfit turns to Synthetic Reductivism (“s-reductivism”), the form of reductivism with which this paper is concerned.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of s-reductivism claim that if any lesson is to be learned from 20<sup>th</sup> century ethical theorizing, it’s precisely that some normative concepts, if not all, do not fit the a-reductivist picture for some normative concepts’ reference depends on non-analytic conditions for something’s falling within their extensions.<sup>6</sup>

Consider both Moore’s Open Question Argument, historically taken as the primary obstacle to any variety of reductivism, and how s-reductivists enlist Kripke’s views on meaning and reference in their response. Some questions have a ‘closed’ feel, e.g., we know the answer to the question “Sure, Bill is a bachelor, but is he an unmarried man?” simply by understanding what’s being asked. According to Moore, however, there’s no value of *F* that makes “Sure, that thing is *F* but is it (say) *good*?” feel closed. But, Moore thought, if goodness were reducible to some natural property, then there would be a value of *F* that closed such questions. After all, it’s plausible to think that the bachelor question has a closed feel because being a bachelor is reducible to the properties of being a man and being unmarried. Thus, goodness is irreducible.

According to s-reductivists, Kripke’s theory of meaning and reference for natural kind terms provides convincing, independently motivated grounds for rejecting Moore’s argument. That theory has three components:

*Millianism About Natural Kind Terms* A natural kind term’s meaning is exhausted by its referent.

*Causal Theory of Natural Kind Reference* A natural kind term’s reference is wholly determined by an initial baptism of a paradigm instance of the kind.

*Rigid Natural Kind Designation* If a natural kind term ‘*K*’ refers to *K* actually, it refers to *K* in every world (where *K* exists).

Given the *Causal Theory*, purely causal relations associate a natural kind term with its referent. Consequently, that referent is determined wholly *a posteriori*. And given *Millianism*, a natural kind term’s meaning is wholly exhausted by its referent, hence any truths particular to uses of that term are knowable only *a posteriori*. To use the well-worn example, ‘water’ refers to H<sub>2</sub>O actually, and, therefore, necessarily. All that ‘water’ means is H<sub>2</sub>O, given the assumptions above. But since it was an *a posteriori* discovery that ‘water’ refers to H<sub>2</sub>O, and that reference exhausts the meaning of ‘water’, then that term’s meaning is knowable only *a posteriori*.

Kripke’s view reveals that Moore’s argument relies on a false assumption, namely the assumption that, necessarily, if being *F* is reducible to being *G*, then “Sure, that object is *G*, but is it *F*?” has a closed feel. Given *Rigid Natural Kind Designation* and given the fact that a substance is H<sub>2</sub>O explains why it’s water, the property of being water is reducible to the property of being H<sub>2</sub>O. But clearly the question “Sure, that

object is H<sub>2</sub>O, but is it water?” has an open feel to those who lack the *a posteriori* knowledge that ‘water’ refers to H<sub>2</sub>O. Thus, it is not the case that if being *F* is reducible to being *G*, then “Sure, that object is *G*, but is it *F*?” necessarily has a closed feel.

Kripke applied his theory primarily to a narrow class of terms including names and natural kind terms. But by applying Kripke’s view to normative kind terms, s-reductivists rebut Moore’s argument. Just as “Sure, that object is H<sub>2</sub>O, but is it water?” has an open feel for those ignorant of the fact that water is reducible to H<sub>2</sub>O, “Sure, that object is *F*, but is it *good*?” will have an open feel until we discover the naturalistic property *F* to which goodness is reducible.

Let us coin a term to discuss the view that normative terms are like Kripkean names and natural kind terms. *Simple s-reductivism* is the conjunction of three claims:

*Millianism About Normative Kind Terms* A normative kind term’s meaning is exhausted by its referent.

*Causal Theory of Normative Kind Reference* A normative kind term’s reference is wholly determined by an initial baptism of a paradigm instance of the kind.

*Rigid Normative Kind Designation* If a normative kind term ‘*K*’ refers to *K* actually, it refers to *K* in every world (where *K* exists).

We don’t claim that any prominent s-reductivist explicitly endorses simple s-reductivism.<sup>7</sup> Rather, we claim that simple s-reductivism corresponds to a popular understanding of the view — one that helps for assessing the kind of pressure that the Objection puts on s-reductivists.

## 2.2. *The First Horn, Introduced*

As mentioned, Parfit (1997: 122) introduced his basic concern with s-reductivism in “Reasons and Motivation.” But it wasn’t until he reproduced his concern 15 years later in the following passage in *On What Matters Volume One and Volume Two* (2011: 325), under the heading of the “Normativity Objection,” that philosophers began to take notice.

Of the reductive views that are both plausible and interesting, most are not analytical. But these views must still be constrained by the relevant concepts. These views are not analytical because the relevant concepts leave open various possibilities, between which we must decide on nonconceptual grounds. Many other possibilities are, however, conceptually excluded. Thus, on a wider pre-scientific version of the concept of heat, it was conceptually possible that heat should turn out to be molecular kinetic energy, or should instead turn out to be, or to involve, a substance, as the phlogiston theory claimed. But heat could not have turned out to be a shade of blue, or a medieval king. And if we claimed that rivers were sonnets, or that experiences were stones, we could not defend these claims by saying that they were not intended to be analytic, or conceptual truths. Others could rightly reply that, given the meaning of these claims, they could not possibly be true. This, I believe, is the way in which, though much less obviously, [s-reductivism] could not be true.<sup>8</sup>

Unpacking this passage through the words of one of its targets is instructive. Copp (2012: 46–49), a longtime champion of a version of s-reductivism, characterizes Parfit’s worry in this passage as Parfit’s “chief objection” to s-reductivism. According to Copp, the worry consists in “. . . one premise, the claim that normative concepts exclude the possibility that a normative property be natural.” Support for this premise, Copp notes, traces to an analogy with heat that Parfit provides — an analogy that Copp takes to be apt. For after agreeing with Parfit that HEAT<sup>9</sup> “conceptually excludes” the possibility that heat has anything to do with shades of blue or medieval kings, Copp adds “it is plausible that the concept of rightness rules out the possibility that rightness is a rocket or a mountain lion or that it is the property of being a yellow rose.”

However, Copp then reminds us that Parfit aims to establish far more than the claim that *some* reductive theses cannot be true, *e.g.*, that a component of morality, such as rightness, has little to do with medieval kings, rockets, or yellow roses. Copp reminds us that Parfit aims to show that *all* reductive theses concerning *every* aspect of morality and normativity more generally cannot be true — or, at the very least, all of the “most plausible and interesting” ones. (Parfit 2011: 325)

But it is far from obvious, Copp suggests, that our competence with a normative concept like RIGHT can establish quite so much, even if it is possible that it establishes that rightness isn’t a rocket. Compare the intuition that rightness is not a rocket to the intuition that rightness is not, as Copp (2007) argues elsewhere, conforming to standards that enable societies to meet their needs. Copp’s preferred naturalistic reduction of rightness is immediately more plausible than the reduction of rightness to rockethood. This difference in *prima facie* plausibility, Copp suggests, should make us doubt Parfit’s claim that our competence with RIGHT can reveal the impossibility of s-reductivism.

We agree. But we also think Copp misses something important in Parfit’s discussion of s-reductivism. Parfit appears to suggest that sentences like ‘sonnets are not rivers’ are similar to sentences involving normative terms like ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ in that their truth is *knowable a priori*. For Parfit, that’s because the truth of both of these sentences is analytic. Of course, s-reductivists disagree, or at least, simple s-reductivists do. For on simple s-reductivism, the meaning of ‘rightness’ is its referent and that referent is determined *a posteriori*. Thus, the sentence ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ is a *synthetic* truth that is knowable only *a posteriori*.

Compare ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ to the similar claim that ‘Bill is not a yellow rose’. Is *that* claim analytic? Surely not. After all, on Kripkean assumptions, Bill exhausts the meaning of the proper name ‘Bill’ and we haven’t told you what ‘Bill’ refers to. Given your ignorance about the name’s referent, the sentence might be true. We could have named our favourite yellow rose ‘Bill’ just as easily as we could have named one of our pet dogs ‘Bill’. The Kripkean semantics for natural kind terms sketched above resembles the semantics of names in this respect. So, unless we undertake the appropriate *a posteriori* investigations, we’re not in a position to know whether ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ is true, at least on simple s-reductivism.

As a result, rather than resembling the truth of ‘sonnets are not rivers’, the truth of ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ more closely resembles the truth of ‘Bill is not a yellow rose’, assuming that we’ve named a yellow rose ‘Bill’. *That* strikes us as a serious issue for simple s-reductivism. Contra Copp, then, Parfit is not best understood as offering an objection consisting in a single, unsupported premise. Instead, Parfit’s discussion of s-reductivism highlights an implausible commitment of a familiar form of the view: that the truth of sentences like ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ is not knowable *a priori*.<sup>10</sup>

The problem we take Parfit to be highlighting is so obvious that it’s easy to suspect we’ve missed something. But it turns out that the issue of how some *a priori* knowable normative truths are *a priori* knowable has received almost no attention from friends of s-reductivism.<sup>11</sup> Why this is the case is an interesting question. Two answers come to mind. One is that many card-carrying s-reductivists embrace versions of s-reductivism that resemble simple s-reductivism.<sup>12</sup> As such, they maintain that the truths expressed by sentences like ‘rightness is not a rocket’ really are knowable only *a posteriori*, and hence they see challenges of the sort we are advancing as locating a feature not a bug of their view. However, we find it so plausible that sentences like ‘rightness is not a rocket’ are knowable *a priori* that admitting otherwise amounts to a *reductio* of views that too closely resemble simple s-reductivism.

Another explanation can be extracted from a recent discussion of related issues in Schroeter and Schroeter (2013: 5, original emphasis):

Most semantic externalists [which is another label for views about reference and meaning that we’re discussing] . . . agree that reference entails epistemic access of some sort: the reason why it is absurd to suppose your term ‘water’ refers to Julius Caesar or to strawberry jam is because your use of the term affords no epistemic access whatever to those things: the ability to refer seems to entail *some* knowledge of what it is one is referring to.<sup>13</sup>

Schroeter and Schroeter appear to be suggesting that, at least from the perspective of s-reductivism, reference and epistemology go hand-in-hand. And since s-reductivists aren’t shy about explaining how reference for normative terms is supposed to work, it might be that s-reductivists also take themselves to have explained much else that needs explaining when it comes to the epistemology of normativity. In particular, it could be that in offering an explanation of how all the individual terms in ‘rightness is not a yellow rose’ refer, they take themselves to have also explained everything that needs explaining about the knowability of this sentence’s truth. That could be why friends of s-reductivism have said so little about the issue of *a priori* knowability. Of course, we think this has been a mistake: explaining the referential properties of normative terms doesn’t settle a range of epistemic issues involving them, including, especially, the epistemic issue of how the truth of some sentences containing normative terms is knowable *a priori*.

### 2.3. From Simple to Sophisticated S-Reductivism

On our reading, Parfit's Objection pressures s-reductivists to explain how some normative truths are *a priori* knowable. S-reductivists then face a choice-point: they can say that those truths are *synthetic a priori knowable* (as in the epistemic category) or *analytic a priori knowable*. Because the epistemic category of the synthetic *a priori* is controversial, we assume that the best path forward for s-reductivists involves the latter route.<sup>14</sup> This route involves modifying some of the three central claims of simple s-reductivism. In doing so, simple s-reductivists become *sophisticated* s-reductivists who deny that normative kind terms function straightforwardly on the model provided by Kripke.

Which of the three claims of simple s-reductivism should sophisticated s-reductivists modify? Historically, one of the core tenets of reductivism is that normative properties are reducible to natural ones. This core thought constrains *how* s-reductivists can be sophisticated. For example, it will likely not be fruitful for s-reductivists to deny *Rigid Normative Kind Designation*, since that would make normative kind terms puzzlingly disanalogous to natural kind terms. As a result, we suspect that s-reductivists will find it more appealing to modify or deny *Millianism About Normative Kind Terms* and the *Causal Theory of Normative Kind Reference*.

Indeed, some philosophers sympathetic with s-reductivism, who have commented on issues related to the Objection, seem to reject the *Causal Theory of Normative Kind Reference* explicitly. According to that principle, features of the paradigm instances of the substance initially baptized by a term fix the reference of subsequent uses of that term. But there are other ways of fixing a term's referent that are consistent with s-reductivism, *e.g.*, we might imagine that normative kind terms are associated with an *a priori* reference-fixing description.<sup>15</sup> Consider 'water' again. It could be that the term is associated with a description, such as 'the stuff in our taps, lakes, and streams', and that the term necessarily designates whatever actually satisfies the description. Since H<sub>2</sub>O actually satisfies that description, 'water' necessarily designates H<sub>2</sub>O.

Sophisticated s-reductivists could claim, likewise, that not only do *a priori* reference-fixing descriptions partly determine how normative terms refer, but they also play a role in making the relevant normative truths knowable *a priori*.<sup>16</sup> For example, it could be that 'rightness' is associated with a description such as *the actions of the action-type that a maximally informed observer would desire to perform*, which would constrain the causal chains relevant to reference determination. In turn, such a description would also make the truth of the sentence 'rightness is not a yellow rose' knowable *a priori*, in part because it's plausibly *a priori* that a yellow rose isn't an action-type.

To be clear, we don't offer this description as a serious candidate for such a reference-fixing description for rightness. Instead, we offer it merely to illustrate how *a priori* reference-fixing descriptions could do the epistemic work that s-reductivists need done.<sup>17</sup> Though we think it is possible for an *a priori* reference-fixing description to do this work, in the second half of the paper, we will argue that sophisticated s-reductivists still face a version of the Objection. Showing this requires us to read a bit more into the Objection than Parfit likely had in mind. But, in any case, we

think Parfit was on the right track, and that the reductivist-unfriendly conclusions we draw from his remarks are deeply Parfitian.

### 3. The Normativity Objection, the Second Horn of the Dilemma

#### 3.1. Stage setting

We've been arguing that, on our reading of Parfit's Objection, s-reductivists face a dilemma: either they are simple s-reductivists, implausibly renouncing *any a priori* knowledge of normative truths gained in virtue of our competence with normative (and natural) concepts alone, *i.e.*, implausibly renouncing all analytic knowledge of normative truths, *or* they are sophisticated s-reductivists and they must attribute meanings to normative kind terms that are, we will argue, difficult to reconcile with their metaphysical commitments. On one way of thinking about the challenge, s-reductivists must explain *how* their view is synthetic enough to avoid the Open Question Argument without being *so* synthetic, as it were, as to imply that we have *no* analytic knowledge of normative truths. We take ourselves to have already argued for the first horn of the dilemma. We'll now address the second.

We'll begin where the simple and sophisticated versions of s-reductivism differ. Sophisticated, but not simple, versions of s-reductivism allow for the possibility of analytic knowledge of certain distinctively normative truths<sup>18</sup>, perhaps via the role that *a priori* reference-fixing descriptions play in both determining reference and partially constituting the meanings of normative terms (for simplicity, we'll speak only of 'meaning' without also mentioning such descriptions from here on). Which truths are knowable analytically is an interesting question. We suspect those will differ between different sophisticated s-reductivist accounts. Nevertheless, considering particular sentences helps us to identify some truths for which all sophisticated s-reductivists should want to account. We'll start with some sentences from mathematics that appear to parallel sentences containing normative terms, for reasons that will become clear.<sup>19</sup>

Consider the following claims:

- 1a. That it's Monday does not explain why seven is prime.
- 1b. That it's Monday does not explain why each even integer greater than two is the sum of two primes.
- 1c. The fact that seven is prime is not even partly grounded in the fact that it's Monday.

Anyone who both grasps what day of the week it is and believes that the truth of the Goldbach conjecture or of whether some integer is prime depends on or is explained by whether it's Monday is simply incompetent with the mathematical concepts involved. No one who understands the thoughts expressed by these claims could doubt their truth. True, understanding the thought that it's Monday or that seven is prime doesn't require knowledge of its truth – either could be cogently doubted under the right circumstances. But as long as one also grasps EXPLAIN, then, we claim, 1a is analytically knowable. The same goes for 1b and 1c.<sup>20</sup> Precisely how sentences like 1a-c are analytically knowable is vexed — it's an issue that we



cannot possibly hope to adjudicate fully here on our own. Fortunately, however, Fine (2005: Chapter 9) defends a picture of the metaphysics of modality that, if extended in an intuitive way, not only entails that 1a-c are analytically knowable but also explains why that's so in a way that gives force to our reading of Parfit's Objection.<sup>21</sup> Or so we'll now argue.

### 3.2. *Grounding What's Analytically Knowable in Ethics and Elsewhere*

There aren't many uncontroversial claims about the nature of metaphysical inquiry, but one candidate for the least controversial has to be that it is at least partly concerned with the study of relative fundamentality. For example, molecules are constituted by but do not constitute atoms. One appealing lesson to draw from such an asymmetry is that atoms are metaphysically prior to, or more fundamental than, the molecules that they constitute. A molecule depends on its constituent atoms for its existence in a way that the atoms don't depend on the molecule for their existence. One way to express this thought is to say that molecules are *grounded* in atoms but not *vice versa*.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there are applications for grounding beyond the context of atoms and molecules. We can, for example, seek an answer to the question of what makes or grounds *the necessity of necessary propositions*, like the necessary propositions expressed by 1a-c. On a standard picture, necessary propositions are necessary propositions *because* of how things are *at every world*. For example, the proposition that either Socrates exists or he doesn't is necessary because every world verifies one of the disjuncts and a disjunction's truth-value is explained by the truth-values of its disjuncts. The proposition's necessity, therefore, depends on quantifying over possibilities. Following usage suggested by Fine's terminology, we'll call necessary propositions that are necessary because of how things are at every world '*worldly necessities*'.

Philosophers have tended to think that all necessities are worldly. Fine, however, calls our attention to a different way of grounding a proposition's necessity. His idea is that, in contrast to worldly necessities that are necessary *because* of how things are at every world, there are necessary propositions that are necessary *regardless* of how things are at any world.<sup>23</sup> Fine uses the example of the necessary proposition that Socrates is self-identical to illustrate the difference. According to Fine, that Socrates is self-identical is a necessary proposition *regardless* of how things are at any world — the proposition's necessity doesn't depend on quantifying over possibilities. Fine calls such necessities *unworldly necessities*, and he offers an evocative vignette that we find helpful for grasping this novel but intuitive distinction:<sup>24</sup>

[ . . . ] we might think of the possible circumstances as being under God's control; it is what he decides upon in deciding whether to create one possible world rather than another. Thus he can decide whether Socrates exists or not and so he can do something that will guarantee that Socrates exists or does not exist. But there is nothing he can do that will guarantee that Socrates is self-identical or that 2+2 is equal to 4; these are the [unworldly] facts that provide the framework in which he makes the decisions that he does, not the facts yet to be decided. (2005: 325)<sup>25</sup>

In sum, each disjunct of the necessary proposition *that Socrates exists or he doesn't* is grounded in how things are at each world, for whether Socrates exists is contingent. This makes it a worldly necessity. By contrast, the necessary proposition that Socrates is self-identical is not grounded on how things are at each world. This makes it an unworldly necessity — its truth is grounded in something essential to particulars, namely, their self-identity.

With Fine's distinction between *worldly* and *unworldly* necessary truths in place, we end up with a natural explanation of why the necessary truths expressed by 1a-c are knowable analytically. Mathematical truths, like that seven is prime, are unworldly. Like the unworldliness of the truth that Socrates is self-identical, they are not made true by possibilities like that it's Monday. That is, the conditions under which seven is prime is true don't involve contingent spatiotemporal facts; much like whether Socrates is self-identical, whether it is the case that seven is prime is wholly independent of who or what is where when.

Furthermore, on the assumption that there is a close association between truth conditions and meaning<sup>26</sup>, and given that the worldly/unworldly distinction involves a distinction in how the relevant propositions are made true, that the truth expressed by 'seven is prime' is unworldly is part of its meaning. For that reason, 1a-c are analytically knowable. Now that we have several plausible examples of necessities from outside of ethics that are analytically knowable in virtue of their relationship to unworldliness on the table, we can now put the finishing touches on Parfit's Objection.

### 3.3. Putting it All Together

Just like claims about mathematics and claims about self-identity, moral principles are necessary when true. This distinguishes moral principles from merely contingent obligations. For example, suppose that utilitarianism is the true moral principle. If it is, then it is only sometimes true that we must not lie. We must not lie when, and only when, it fails to maximally promote utility. But because lying sometimes promotes utility, it is not necessary that we must not lie. That's what makes the obligation merely contingent. By contrast, if the principle of utility is true — that the unique moral duty is to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain — it is necessarily true. In that case, it is impossible that we are morally obligated to do something other than to maximally promote utility; *necessarily* we must maximally promote utility.

In light of Fine's two kinds of necessity, we can ask where moral principles fall along the distinction. Comparing the following sentences with the 1a-c sentences makes the answer vivid:

- 2a. That it's Monday does not partly explain why we ought morally to do what would maximize the balance of pleasure over pain.
- 2b. The Principle of Utility is true not even partly in virtue of the fact that it's Monday.
- 2c. The Principle of Utility is not even partly grounded in the fact that it's Monday.

- 2d. The Principle of Utility is not even true partly in virtue of the fact that we're in Chicago.  
 2e. The Principle of Utility is not even partly grounded in the fact that we're in Chicago.

Like 1a-c, if 2a-e express truths, then they are clearly knowable analytically.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it is also clear that the necessary propositions expressed by both 1a-c and 2a-e are *unworldly* — they are necessary because they are true regardless of how things are at any world.<sup>28</sup>

That the propositions expressed by 2a-e are unworldly serves as the lynchpin in our reading of Parfit's Objection. Recall that we characterized reductivism negatively at the outset of this paper, as the denial of the non-reductivist's claim that the metaphysical nature of normativity is not fully explicable in non-normative terms. This characterization doesn't tell us much about what the metaphysics of normativity looks like from the perspective of reductivism, nor does the corollary, positive characterization of reductivism as the view that normativity is fully explicable in non-normative terms. This is by design, as it captures the general approach of reductivism under one big tent, leaving space for particular versions of reductivism to differ by identifying different kinds of facts to serve as the reduction base for normative facts.

As it happens, reductivists have not been so different from each other. By far, as we've suggested throughout the paper, the most common reductive view in ethics is *Reductive Naturalism* ("naturalism"), the view that normative facts are fully explicable in terms of "natural" facts.<sup>29</sup> Like reductivism, naturalism is also a big tent, leaving space for naturalists to differentiate themselves from one another by offering different views about which facts are natural. But just as we find with reductivists, most naturalists also happen to endorse a similar kind of naturalism. In particular, according to the dominant characterization of naturalism, the natural facts that can fully explicate normative facts are those that figure in empirical or scientific inquiry.<sup>30</sup> As to what makes facts figuring in empirical or scientific inquiry suitable for figuring in empirical or scientific inquiry, however, there is little agreement among naturalists.

Nevertheless, it is surely a hallmark of the facts figuring in empirical or scientific inquiry that they are spatially and temporally located. But if so, then naturalists are in trouble, for the true moral principle is, as we've seen, an *unworldly* fact that is not made true by any world; it's not made true by any spatio-temporal facts of the kind with which empirical or scientific inquiry seems to be concerned.<sup>31</sup> Together with our assumption that there is a close connection between truth-conditions and meaning, the moral principles mentioned in sentences like 2a-e have unworldliness as part of their meaning. Moral principles have unworldliness as part of their meaning exactly in the way that 'seven is prime' does. Put another way, sentences expressing truths about moral principles have *unworldliness* as part of their content. This is why, on a brand of non-reductivism that takes Fine as inspiration, 2a-e are knowable analytically or on the basis of our competence with normative concepts alone. This is also why the impossibility of at least one highly intuitive version of

naturalism is knowable on the basis of our competence with normative concepts alone, just as Parfit argued 22 years ago.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, Parfit seems to have set out to use the Objection to show that our competence with normative concepts alone puts us in a position to know not just that a particular version of reductive naturalism is impossible, but that *every* version of reductivism is impossible. One might think, then, that we've come up short of our goal of showing that there's an underappreciated reading of Parfit's Objection that can get him everything he suggests he wants out of it.

We have two reactions to this worry that we'll offer to close out our argument. First, we don't think it's any small feat to have shown that the historically most dominant species of reductivism, or at least a view very much in the spirit of the most prominent understanding of reductivism, faces a serious challenge. Second, and more substantively, we think that our reading gets everything that Parfit *should* want out of the Objection. Reductivists who claim that moral principles are reducible to facts about the spatial and temporal location of instantiations of properties (natural or otherwise) are *recognizably* reductivist, and our version of the Objection tells against them. While reductivists can defend a version of their view on which normative facts are not reducible to facts about the spatial and temporal location of instantiations of naturalistically respectable properties, such a version of reductivism seems to us to be so close to non-reductivism that it becomes hard to see whether such a view would preserve whatever advantage the former claims over the latter.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In sum, the exclusively negative reception that Parfit's Objection has received is unmerited. Critics have failed to appreciate how the Objection illuminates certain under-discussed implications of s-reductivism. Ultimately, we've argued that the Objection is a dilemma, with each horn of the dilemma addressing a different version of s-reductivism, which differ in whether they are consistent with *a priori* knowledge of distinctively normative truths. Depending on which horn the s-reductivist faces, either she must renounce *all* such knowledge, such as the plausibly analytic truth that rightness is not a yellow rose, or she must attribute meanings to normative terms that are difficult to reconcile with reductivism, suggesting that her theory is inconsistent. Either horn forces the s-reductivist to confront unattractive and underexplored implications of her view.

Though we find the Objection forceful, we've noted at least five places where the s-reductivist can resist it. First, she can endorse simple s-reductivism and embrace the first horn, renouncing *all a priori* knowledge of distinctively normative truths. Second, she can maintain simple s-reductivism and claim that normative truths like that rightness is not a yellow rose are *a priori*, but deny that they are analytic. This forces her to develop a view about synthetic *a priori* knowledge of the normative. Third, she can argue that there is a difference between the truth that rightness is not a yellow rose and the truth that the fact that it's Monday does not explain why the true moral theory is true, such that the former is *a priori* but the latter isn't. This will force her to say more about the meanings involved in moral principles than she has.

Fourth, she may choose to contest Fine's distinction between worldly and unworldly necessities and take on board some additional, purely metaphysical commitments over-and-above her metaethical commitments. Finally, she may broaden the base of facts to which normative truths are reduced to include more than facts about who or what is where when. In broadening that base, she risks her claim to naturalism, the preservation of which is the motivation behind many reductivist theses. None of these ways of resisting the Objection has been adequately explored but, given the Objection, reductivists now *must* develop their view in one of these directions. Parfit's Normativity Objection pushes reductivists to be clearer than they have been about their own view. This is its legacy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> We use the phrase 'ethics' in the way that many philosophers use the neologism 'metanormativity' to talk about the nature of moral normativity but also of normativity more generally.

<sup>2</sup> Parfit's view evolved over his career. But this is a longstanding component.

<sup>3</sup> It might sound incoherent to characterize reductivism as the view that the normative (*e.g.*, normative properties, relations, facts, etc) is fully explicable in terms of the "non-normative" (*e.g.*, non-normative properties, relations, facts, etc.). But it is not, as we'll discuss toward the end of the paper. In the meantime, feel free to substitute 'natural' anytime we mention 'non-normative' if that sounds less incoherent. We'll also discuss the relationship between the nature of the 'natural', for exegetical reasons, toward the end of the paper.

<sup>4</sup> Again, we'll say more about the distinction between the 'normative' and the 'natural' toward the end of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> See Boyd (1988) and Brink (1989) for canonical statements of s-reductivism. See Sayre-McCord (1997), Copp (2000), and van Roojen (2006) for important developments of s-reductivism.

<sup>6</sup> See Laskowski and Finlay (2017) for an overview of this history.

<sup>7</sup> Though we'll suggest that it is possible to better understand part of the state of the debate about s-reductivism on the assumption that many do.

<sup>8</sup> See also Parfit (2017: 72), for his most recent and posthumous statement of the Objection.

<sup>9</sup> Small caps denote concepts.

<sup>10</sup> As Lutz and Lenman (2018, original emphasis) confirm in the SEP entry on "moral naturalism": "Synthetic naturalists claim that *all* moral claims are synthetic claims, knowable by empirical methods" and, later, "because this reduction of reasons will take the form of a *synthetic* reduction, there end up being no conceptual connections between the normative and the natural." Russell (2017: 255) takes issue with s-reductivism along these lines.

<sup>11</sup> We count ourselves among friends of reductivism who have only recently begun thinking about the issue seriously, even though one of us defends a brand of s-reductivism that is broadly similar to simple s-reductivism in Laskowski (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Further evidence that this understanding of s-reductivism is common is found in van Roojen's (2015: 221, our emphasis) metaethics textbook: "Cornell Realists [*e.g.*, s-reductivists like Boyd and Brink cited above] *certainly do deny* . . . that knowledge of identity or constitution relations in the moral realm are *a priori* accessible."

<sup>13</sup> In their example, Schroeter and Schroeter mention Julius Caesar. Though they are not explicit, Schroeter and Schroeter are surely referencing the so-called "Julius Caesar" problem inherited from Frege (1884). On his way to formulating Axiom V, Frege suggests defining 'zero' with Hume's Principle, on which the number of the members of F is the same as the number of members of G iff there is a bijection between the members of F and G. But Frege goes on to reject Hume's Principle on the grounds that it doesn't give us a criterion for the application of 'zero', thereby leaving it implausibly open that Julius Caesar is the number zero. We see the problems that Parfit raises for s-reductivism as related to the Julius Caesar problem, and since no solutions to that problem enjoy widespread support, we are

further encouraged to think that Parfit has his finger on an important but underappreciated problem for s-reductivism.

<sup>14</sup> Though we set aside *synthetic a priori* knowledge of normative truths, it may be natural for simple s-reductivists to appeal to such knowledge. However, to our knowledge, no sustained discussion of the synthetic *a priori* as it relates to post-Kripkean reductive projects in ethics exists, perhaps because of the strong epistemic commitments that such a project involves. There is probably much to learn from such a discussion.

<sup>15</sup> See Schroeder (2005), which defends a version of reductivism against Parfit's arguments. In footnote eleven, he explicitly discusses such descriptions for the term 'God'. However, given the article's broader context, this is also an oblique discussion of a similar possibility for normative kind reference.

<sup>16</sup> Finding a role for such descriptions to play isn't incompatible with a Kripkean theory of reference. See Stanford & Kitcher (2000).

<sup>17</sup> Nor is it a coincidence that we do not defend any other particular *a priori* reference-fixing description to associate with 'rightness'. Doing so is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of defending this sort of sophisticated s-reductivism, as is evidenced by the fact that champions of *a priori* reference-fixing descriptions outside of ethics, such as Chalmers (1996: 59), even punt on the issue.

<sup>18</sup> By 'distinctively normative truths' we mean truths that are not knowable, *e.g.*, through grasp of logical concepts. For example, even the simple s-reductivist might claim that the fact that either an act is wrong or it isn't is knowable by grasping the meaning of negation and disjunction.

<sup>19</sup> Parfit (2017: 72) himself uses such analogies each time he motivates the Objection. Laskowski (2018) suggests that his use of such analogies are inadequate. We take ourselves to be improving on Parfit's use of such analogies.

<sup>20</sup> We don't claim everyone knows that 1a-c express truths. Some people don't fully grasp philosophically sophisticated concepts like EXPLAIN. These people lack analytic knowledge of the thoughts expressed by 1a-c. However, once one grasps all the concepts expressed by 1a-c and how those concepts compose the thoughts that those sentences express, the truths expressed by 1a-c are analytically knowable.

<sup>21</sup> Fellow travelers of Fine include Skarsaune (2015) and Fogal & Risberg (manuscript).

<sup>22</sup> In our experience, many philosophers tend to assume that claims about grounding are exotic, involving suspicious, advanced philosophical machinery. This is likely due to the tremendous amount of recent attention that grounding has received, much of the discussion of which is technical. But while the precise, formal nature of grounding itself has been the recent focus of renewed interest, grounding claims themselves are a highly familiar form of metaphysical explanation that have been with us since at least Aristotle. See Berker (2019).

<sup>23</sup> Fine uses the word "transcendental" in characterizing this notion. We depart slightly for ease of exposition.

<sup>24</sup> "... a worldly [necessity's]... truth-value always turns favourably on how things turn out, while a [unworldly necessity's]... truth-value does not turn on how things turn out." (2005: 325)

<sup>25</sup> Fine (2005: 322-324) also motivates his distinction through an analogy with tensed sentences. According to Fine, we can draw an intuitive distinction between sentences that are true at a time *because* of how things are at that time and sentences that are true at a time *regardless* of how things are at that time, or, indeed, any time. For example, 'Socrates is self-identical' is true whenever 'Socrates is drinking hemlock or he isn't' is. But only the latter's truth depends on how things are at the relevant time. By contrast, the truth of 'Socrates is self-identical' is independent of how things are at any particular time.

<sup>26</sup> That there is a connection between truth-conditions and meaning is yet another controversial issue that we do not have the space to defend. But we take it that the assumption has a rich enough history to permit us to demur on the issue.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, utilitarianism is likely false, so 2a-e may not express truths. But we're using utilitarianism as a stand-in for the true moral principle. We could just have easily replaced 'principle of utility' with 'categorical imperative'.

<sup>28</sup> Parfit has long emphasized that mathematics serves as a fruitful parallel for theorizing about ethics. We agree, as we find the similarities between sentences 1a-c and 2a-c striking. Note, however, that Parfit often appears to suggest that in arguing against s-reductivist views, he is arguing *merely* by analogy. We are illustrating that he can do more.

<sup>29</sup> See, *inter alia*, Shafer-Landau (2003), McPherson (2015), and Lutz & Lenman (2018).

<sup>30</sup> For example, it is often said that natural facts are those that are found in empirical or scientific explanations. It is also often said that natural facts are those that are discoverable via empirical or scientific inquiry. See Dowell (2013) for more on the different ways that these relations to empirical or scientific inquiry tend to be cashed out.

<sup>31</sup> To be sure, the relationship between truth-makers and necessary propositions is controversial. Since anything necessitates a necessary truth, it might seem that *everything* is a truth-maker for a necessary truth. Or, if we find this implication implausible, we might conclude that *nothing* is a truth-maker for a necessary truth. But this is where we find Fine's distinction between transcendental and merely necessary truths especially fruitful. Surely it is intuitive that certain contingent states of affairs involving Socrates and hemlock, whether actual or merely possible, play a role in making the thought expressed by "Either Socrates is drinking hemlock or he isn't" true and don't play that role in making the thought expressed by "Seven is prime" true.

<sup>32</sup> Facts about the spatiotemporal distribution of instantiations of natural properties form the basis for naturalistic reduction of *all* truths in the metaphysics of at least one prominent reductivist: Lewis' Humean Supervenience – see Lewis (1986, 1991, 2001). We take this as evidence that our argument against s-reductivism is on target.

<sup>33</sup> We claim that our reading gets everything that Parfit should want, because we suspect that there is very much at stake in the debate between non-reductivists and reductivists. But it's worth noting that, if responding to our reading of the Objection puts pressure on reductivists to collapse the distinction between their view and non-reductivism, Parfit himself would have very much welcomed such a result. For in the twilight of his career, Parfit came to think that reductivists, non-reductivists, and expressivists are all climbing the same metaethical mountain, as it were, and that there is no substantive dispute among these views.

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