

# The Stuff That Matters<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: On one way of talking about a traditional metaethical topic, realists accept that some items appear on the list of what exists in the moral or more broadly normative domain of inquiry. They then divide over whether those items are like what science and experience suggest that all other items on the list of what exists across all domains are like – naturalistic and secular. Reductive naturalists answer this further question affirmatively. Why don't nonnaturalists? I explore the answer that it's because normative entities are "just too different" in the sense that they are countably different *things*. However, I argue that this answer rests on the subtle presupposition that the normative domain doesn't also contain uncountable entities of the sort that analytic metaphysicians call "stuff". Taking intuitions of difference seriously points the way to a novel form of metaethical reductive naturalism. The key is to identify the stuff that matters.

Keywords: metaethics, metaphysics, naturalism, nonnaturalism, just-too-different intuition, things, stuff

## 1. Introduction

It is common to think of metaphysics as organized around the twin aims of listing what exists across all domains of inquiry and describing what those items are like.<sup>2</sup> Are there numbers? How about tables? Is anything more fundamental than anything else? Moral metaphysics, or more broadly normative metaphysics, is organized around the same aims, albeit restricted to the

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<sup>2</sup> The first aim is associated with Quine (1963) and the second with Aristotle (1984), at least very broadly speaking. Schaffer (2009) characterizes these aims as in tension with one another. Contemporary metaphysical theorizing suggests, at least to me, otherwise.

normative domain of inquiry. Are there obligations? Is what is good relative to an agent or absolute? Are reasons more fundamental than obligations? You get the idea.

Normative metaphysicians' questions strike many as idle and detached. But while it might not seem like it upon first or even second glance, normative metaphysics is one of the most exciting branches of metaethics or "metanormativity" more broadly. That's right – *exciting*. Framed in the right way, normative metaphysicians can be seen as helping to settle immensely significant practical questions.<sup>3</sup> Given, for example, that negative existential claims about reasons can be unreliable, is there really *no* reason to bring children into existence?<sup>4</sup> Does disability always and everywhere make an individual intrinsically worse off, even in light of views on which such general normative truths aren't codifiable?<sup>5</sup> Do voluntarist views of obligations help explain the apparent permissibility of abortion but impermissibility of pre-natal harm?<sup>6</sup> Normative metaphysicians can contribute toward answering these and many other plainly urgent questions.

Unfortunately, many normative metaphysicians don't quite see it this way. It's not that they don't see such practical questions as urgent. Rather, in my experience at least, it's because they view normative metaphysics as having made very little progress.<sup>7</sup> Normative metaphysicians are hardly the only philosophers to lament their sub-field's lack of progress, of course. Indeed, pessimism about philosophy's progress across all sub-fields is ubiquitous.<sup>8</sup> But what's distinctive about normative metaphysicians' pessimism, at least to my ear, is a commonly heard reason for it – *that there are no new arguments*. That is, it's not uncommon to hear, if not at the Madison Metaethics Workshop itself then at least at the post-workshop bars, that there are few if any new and significant arguments among those Realists who, in pursuing the first of the normative metaphysicians' twin aims, agree that there are at least some items on the list of what exists in the normative domain. In particular, Reductive Naturalist Realists ("naturalists"), who claim that these items are continuous with the other "natural" items on the metaphysician's list, can often be heard

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<sup>3</sup> See Berker (2018) and Fogal (2020) for two recent papers in the spirit of what I have in mind.

<sup>4</sup> Schroeder (2007: 92-97) is primarily responsible for turning attention among contemporary metanormativists to the pragmatics of negative reason existential claims and the associated epistemological issues. See Benatar (1997) for a classic discussion of anti-natalist views against procreation's permissibility.

<sup>5</sup> See Barnes (2016) for a recent book-length treatment of the metaphysics of disability. The label 'particularism' is most closely associated with the alleged impossibility of codifying general normative truths and it is most prominently associated with Dancy (2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Horton (2017) for a general discussion of the relationship between voluntarism and obligation and Howard (forthcoming) for an application of it to procreative debates.

<sup>7</sup> Convergence among theorists is often cited as evidence of progress. If that's right, Parfit's (2011) existential angst about widespread disagreement among metanormativists seems fitting. See Finlay (2019) for a recent argument for the claim that Parfit's diagnosis is correct.

<sup>8</sup> See Stoljar (2017: Chapter 1).

complaining that Nonnaturalist Realists (“Nonnaturalists”) are still trotting out versions of G. E. Moore’s familiar 100+ year old arguments against them.

Yet the theme of this chapter, or as my students might say, the “vibe” of it, is optimism about the progress of normative metaphysics. That is, I hope to inspire a bit of such optimism by making explicit a new line of inquiry in the debate among naturalists and nonnaturalists from the few encountered typically.<sup>9</sup> And the way I’m going to do so is by taking very seriously some oft repeated misgivings about naturalism that nonnaturalists themselves express. You often hear from nonnaturalists variations of the claims that naturalist views “lose the normativity of the normative”<sup>10</sup>, that naturalism is “close to nihilism”<sup>11</sup>, or, perhaps most commonly, that the normative is “just too different”<sup>12</sup> to be natural. I’ll show that when such statements, especially statements about what is “just too different” from what, are taken literally, in the now antiquated sense of ‘literally’, an interesting and relatively neglected argument against naturalism can be made explicit – one that does more than merely echo Moore.

Previewing the argument to come, the motivating idea is that there is a tight relationship between existence and number, such that when you count all the things that naturalists tell us are on the list of things that exist in the normative domain, there won’t be enough of them for naturalism to be true. While I claim that this kind of idea underwrites nonnaturalists’ hang-up about naturalism, I will not be defending nonnaturalism ultimately. What I’ll argue in this chapter is that the argument to which it gives rise rests on a tempting but optional presupposition about the nature of existence, namely, that normative entities are countable *things* in the first place about which we can then wonder “How many are there?”. Rejecting the presupposition will point the way to developing a novel form of naturalism that is responsive to nonnaturalism’s concerns about naturalism, one based on an ontology of both countable things and what analytic metaphysicians call uncountable “stuff”.

In Section 2, I’ll chart a potted history of the debate between naturalists and nonnaturalists. In Section 3, I’ll detail how the deceptively simple question for naturalists described above lays the foundation for an argument against them. In Section 4, I’ll show how rejecting a presupposition of the argument allows naturalists to reject it and develop a more sophisticated form of their view. I’ll wrap it all up by describing some positive upshots for naturalists that are worth developing further in future work.

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<sup>9</sup> This has been one of my central aims over a series of papers, including Laskowski (2018, 2019, 2020) and Howard and Laskowski (2021).

<sup>10</sup> See Enoch (2011: 104-105)

<sup>11</sup> See Parfit (2011: 368)

<sup>12</sup> See Bedke (2020) for a wealth of quotes in this vein.

## 2. A Potted History of Contemporary Normative Metaphysics

Naturalists and nonnaturalists agree that there are at least some items on the list of what exists in the normative domain but disagree over whether those items are like what science and experience teach us the rest of the items on the list are like. That is, naturalists think that what exists in the normative domain is natural while non-naturalists don't.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of a list is useful but not terribly informative. From a less metaphorical and more familiar perspective, naturalism can be understood as the view that there are normative entities, such as obligations, reasons, and so on, and they are identical to or fully constituted by natural entities, such as conventional patterns of behavior, psychological states, and the like. Nonnaturalism is the view that there are normative entities but they aren't identical to or fully constituted by natural entities – it is the view that normative entities are *sui generis* or of their own kind.<sup>14</sup>

The long and steady march of science seems to indicate that what exhaustively exists are entities like electrons, protons, and particles more generally, and perhaps whatever they compose; in other words, it's natural entities that exist.<sup>15</sup> But it doesn't seem to indicate that there are any moral or normative particles – there are no “morons”.<sup>16</sup> Science's progress enjoins us to accept as the default view that what exists is all of the same non-moronic kind. PhilPapers.org says that a plurality of metanormativists agree. Two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it's worth asking why a striking 26.56% metanormativists reject this default position in favor of accepting or leaning toward nonnaturalism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> There is no consensus among metanormativists on how best to understand what counts as 'natural'. Copp's (2007: Chapter 1) well-known, detailed discussion culminates in the view that natural properties are best understood epistemologically as those whose instantiation aren't, *very* roughly speaking, knowable a priori. Schroeder (2017: 225) finds the term unhelpful presumably because epistemological characterizations like Copp's, while prominent, are not, as Schroeder emphasizes in Schroeder (2007: 64), metaphysical. Sinhababu (2018: 32) suggests that the term doesn't sufficiently help us characterize different views in the vicinity. Streumer (2018: 66) characterizes natural properties linguistically as those ascribable with natural predicates, which Laskowski (2018: 768) also criticizes as not sufficiently metaphysical. See Dowell (2013) for another useful discussion. For myself, I'm partial to Armstrong's (1989: 76, 99) characterization of the natural world in terms of the “spatiotemporal manifold” or the conjunction of all states of affairs in space and time. Copp (2007: 38) worries that such a view rules out properties being natural, since properties aren't in spacetime. This seems right, but also, it seems, tells against certain views of properties rather than Armstrong's view of the natural world.

<sup>14</sup> This is a familiar characterization of the divide between naturalism and nonnaturalism – see, *inter alia*, Jackson (1998), Cuneo (2015), and Parfit (2011). Leary (forthcoming) powerfully argues for abandoning it in favor of understanding the divide in terms of the essence of normative entities, as she and others, like Bengson et al. (forthcoming) do. I myself am not yet sure. Interestingly, however, as we'll see, there is a way of reading the central argument of my chapter as lending support for Leary's critical claims.

<sup>15</sup> Papineau (2021: Section 1.2) usefully illustrates the march as it connects with philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> As Dworkin (1996) once jeered.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://survey2020.philpeople.org>.

Going a bit further back in history can help, since a similar question about the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is easy to answer. Every metanormativist learns at their advisor’s knee that, according to Moore (1903), because it is possible to coherently wonder whether something that an individual desires to desire is good, it can’t be that the normative concept GOOD<sup>18</sup> is analyzed fully in terms of, e.g., the naturalistic concepts WHAT AN INDIVIDUAL DESIRES TO DESIRE. Moreover, according to Moore, such evidence suggests that it is not possible for any naturalistic concept or combination thereof to fully analyze GOOD, and hence that it is not possible that the property of goodness itself is natural.<sup>19</sup> Moore’s “Open Question Argument” turned generations of metanormativists away from the various versions of naturalism that held sway previously.<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, however, metanormativists recognized that there is strong reason to reject every single premise of Moore’s argument.<sup>21</sup> It could be that WHAT AN INDIVIDUAL DESIRES TO DESIRE provides an unobvious analysis of GOOD such that it is possible for the analysis to succeed while at the same time possible for us to doubt it.<sup>22</sup> It could rather be that there is some other successful naturalistic analysis of GOOD out there that we haven’t discovered yet.<sup>23</sup> A great many objections have been levied. By far the most influential objection starts with the concession that the argument succeeds against *analytic reductive naturalism*, which packages the naturalist’s metaphysical claim that normative entities are identical to or constituted by natural properties with the semantic-epistemic claim that it is possible to know this because normative concepts are analyzable fully in terms of natural concepts. It is then said that while normative *concepts* are in this way non-natural, it doesn’t follow that normative *entities* themselves are non-natural – GOOD is non-natural but not goodness. *Non-analytic* or *synthetic reductive naturalism* was widely seen as an escape from Moore’s argument.<sup>24</sup>

Given that synthetic naturalism escapes Moore’s open question argument but a quarter of contemporary metaethicists still embrace nonnaturalism, it seems it would have to be that some other objection is responsible for the holdouts. A tempting place to look is Horgan and Timmons’s (1991) prominent “Moral Twin Earth” objection to synthetic naturalism.<sup>25</sup> According to Horgan

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<sup>18</sup> Small caps denote concepts

<sup>19</sup> See Smith (1994) for an explicitly abductive reading of Moore’s argument.

<sup>20</sup> Such as the views of, *inter alia*, Perry (1926) and Spencer (1879).

<sup>21</sup> See Laskowski and Finlay (2017) for discussion of how each premise has been criticized.

<sup>22</sup> See Lewis (1989).

<sup>23</sup> See Finlay (2014: 13-14).

<sup>24</sup> See Howard and Laskowski (2021) for discussion.

<sup>25</sup> While Horgan and Timmons introduce the argument in the early 1990s, they refine it over half-a-dozen subsequent articles through the 2010s.

and Timmons, it is possible to imagine that there is a planet much like ours except that instead of using GOOD to think and talk about the Utilitarian natural property of maximizing pleasure as they assume Earthlings do, Moral-Twin-Earthlings use GOOD to talk about the Deontological natural property of conforming to the categorical imperative. Intuitively, according to Horgan and Timmons, an Earthling thinking and talking about killing as GOOD would disagree with an M-T-Earthling who thought and talked about killing being NOT GOOD. But Horgan and Timmons claim that on any theory of normative concepts that is compatible with synthetic naturalism, the Earthling and M-T-Earthling are thinking and talking about different things in the natural world, and hence talking past each other. Consequently, the authors claim, we ought to reject all forms of synthetic naturalism.

Horgan and Timmons's Moral Twin Earth objection is an interesting and influential objection to synthetic naturalism. But it's hard to believe that it's responsible for nonnaturalism's grip on a quarter of contemporary metanormativists for several reasons. Among the most forceful, firstly, the objection presupposes the truth of at least half-a-dozen strongly contested claims about disagreement and content determination.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, the objection is widely seen as simply another version of Moore's ill-begotten open question argument.<sup>27</sup> Moore's argument teaches that normative concepts aren't fully analyzable. Horgan and Timmons's argument teaches us that normative concepts are in some sense practical. Yet again these are claims about the mind, about normative *concepts*. Neither argument seems to tell us anything at all about the world, about normative *entities*.<sup>28</sup>

Moore's open question argument and Horgan and Timmons's Moral Twin Earth objection are hardly the only objections to synthetic naturalism of which metanormativists are aware. But no other objections in isolation or in aggregate seem respected sufficiently widely to account for nonnaturalism's staying power. A more promising answer seems to be that there is no explicit argument or group of arguments against naturalism or in favor nonnaturalism that accounts for nonnaturalists' numbers. So, what's left to say?

Well, if you pick up just about any nonnaturalist text written during the last 50 years, you'll notice that nearly all of them talk about normative entities in the same peculiar way. In particular, you can read them describing normative entities as uniquely distinct from everything else in the world – as “just too different” from natural entities to be identical with or constituted by them. Don't

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<sup>26</sup> See Schroeder (forthcoming). Of course, it's also worth mentioning that the argument is thought by many to support expressivism if it supports anything at all.

<sup>27</sup> Horgan and Timmons (1992) note the similarity themselves. See also Lutz and Lenman (2021).

<sup>28</sup> The argument has been criticized by too many to mention given volume space constraints, but see, *inter alia*, Merli (2002), van Roojen (2006), and Dowell (2016).

take my word for it. Take what one of metanormativity’s most outspoken defenders of nonnaturalism has said:

“In arguing—to the extent possible—against naturalist reductions of the normative, I end up relying on what I call “the just too different” intuition—normative properties and facts, I claim, seem too different from natural ones to be identical to some of them.”<sup>29</sup>

Given that there are few if any explicit arguments for nonnaturalism that haven’t been panned over the last few decades, and given what nonnaturalists themselves actually say, I claim that the most charitable reconstruction of nonnaturalism’s place in metanormative inquiry has its roots in the “just too different” intuition. I’m far from the first to recognize the “just too different” intuition’s significance.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it’s recognition as such has led a number of metanormativists with reservations about nonnaturalism to offer debunking explanations of it, on which it is alleged that the intuition tells us more about what’s special about – you guessed it – normative *concepts* rather than normative *reality*.<sup>31</sup> But I think that there might be more to the intuition the tacit recognition of which explains nonnaturalists’ refusal to get with the naturalist program.

### 3. Why Nonnaturalists Reject Naturalism

We’ve seen that the quarter of metanormativists who accept nonnaturalism don’t do so because of the success of prominent and explicit arguments for nonnaturalism like Moore’s Open Question Argument or against naturalism like Horgan and Timmons’s Moral Twin Earth Objection. Instead, as we’ve also seen, they accept it because it seems very strongly that obligations, reasons, and other normative entities are “just too different” to be identical to or constituted by natural entities. This section contains a discussion of several arguments related to just-too-different style claims and a defense of the claim that one of them best accounts for nonnaturalism’s staying power among normative metaphysicians.

At least two obvious approaches to explaining why normative entities *seem* too different from natural entities are available. The first begins with the claim that they seem different because they *are* in fact too different and the second makes no such reference to any actual or possible difference. A plausible pursuit of the second approach would involve offering a debunking or error theoretic

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<sup>29</sup> Enoch (2019: 18). As mentioned previously, claims like this are very easy to find. In addition to the previously cited Bedke (2020) article, Schroeder (2005) and Laskowski (2019, 2020) also catalogue a wide number of instances.

<sup>30</sup> See Copp (2020).

<sup>31</sup> See Laskowski (2019, 2020) Finlay (2019), Bedke (2020), and Copp (2020).

explanation for the appearance of difference, as alluded to above. And that's just what naturalists have been busy doing, by constructing naturalistic-friendly views of the nature of normative language, thought, and concepts that explain why normative entities seem but in fact aren't different from natural entities.<sup>32</sup> The first approach is more friendly to nonnaturalism. What's there to be said for it?

There has been one explicit and detailed development of the first approach.<sup>33</sup> It comes in the form of the following reconstructed argument:

1. If the normative fact that X is M were identical to the natural fact that X is N, then the normative fact that X is M would lack feature F.
2. The normative fact that X is M has feature F.
3. So, the normative fact that X is M is not identical to the natural fact that X is N.
4. So, M is not identical to N.

This argument's success would establish that normative entities are different from natural entities, the implicit recognition of which might result in it seeming to theorists that normative entities are different from natural entities. Consequently, it's worth a close look.

While the inference from 3 to 4 is perhaps questionable, the inference from 1 and 2 to 3 is straightforwardly valid. Of course, if the argument were obviously unsound, then it would be a lousy candidate for explaining why so many normative metaphysicians find nonnaturalism attractive. Is it so? On this reconstruction, the sense in which normative entities are too different to be identical to natural identities is that normative entities have features that natural entities lack. It's an argument that rests on the familiar Leibniz Law style idea that, roughly speaking, if two entities are numerically identical then they share all the same features. It's a pedigreed style of argument.<sup>34</sup>

However, consider the first premise. Suppose that the relevant values under consideration for X, M, N, and F were 'stealing', 'wrong', 'desired by all to be avoided', and 'motivating for anyone who reflects on normative facts', such that it reads:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> It comes from Pakkunen (2017: 4). Huemer (2005: 94) also discusses it. Schroeder (2009: 201-202) criticizes Huemer's discussion forcefully.

<sup>34</sup> See Magidor (2011) for examples of the argument used in metaphysics.



If the normative fact that stealing is wrong were identical to the natural fact that stealing is desired by all to be avoided, then the normative fact that stealing is wrong would lack [the] feature [of being] motivating for anyone who reflects on the normative facts.

But in fact if the normative fact that stealing is wrong is identical to the natural fact that stealing is desired by all to be avoided, then the normative fact that stealing is wrong *would* have the feature of being motivating for anyone who reflects on normative facts.<sup>35</sup> This is just to say that the first premise is false – the fact that stealing is wrong would have F: the property of being motivating for anyone who reflects on normative facts since stealing is desired by all to be avoided. This illustrates that to make this Leibniz Law style argument work against naturalism, and hence license the *general* kind of pessimism about naturalism that is found among nonnaturalists, nonnaturalists have to specify some value for F that would be missing on *all* versions of naturalism. None of us has evaluated all such views. And since none of us can, no such value will ever be identified.<sup>36</sup>

Fortunately, there is another more charitable way to pursue the first approach on behalf of nonnaturalists – a way that will serve as the focus of the rest of this chapter. It starts with a simple question – a question so simple that, while normative metaphysicians no doubt think it, they likely don't often express it out of fear of embarrassment. Since I'm not easily embarrassed, I'll ask it:

How many things are there when naturalists say that a normative entity *n* is identical to a natural entity *d*?

Given that there is an extremely tight connection between identity and number, such that for any *p* and *q*, *p* is identical to *q* just in case *p* and *q* are *one* thing and *p* is not identical to *q* (or *p* is distinct from *q*) just in case *p* and *q* are *two* things, it seems like the answer has to be only *one*.<sup>37</sup> But if there is only one thing then naturalism appears to be in trouble. This can perhaps be more easily brought out with an application of the thought in standard form:

#### *The Number-of-Things Objection*

P1: The author of this chapter has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author's normative reason to listen to

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<sup>35</sup> At least on some plausible assumptions about the relationship between desire and motivation.

<sup>36</sup> Finlay's (2014: 14) discussion of the open question argument is instructive here. See also Laskowski (2018a: Sec. 3.2).

<sup>37</sup> This is a modified claim that comes from Olson (2012: 66), which he presents as a schema rather than universally quantified claim.

ZZ Top is identical to the author's desire to listen to ZZ Top. [naturalism, assumed for reductio]

- P2: for any p and q, p is identical to q just in case p and q are one thing. [assumed]
- P3: So, the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and their desire to listen to them is one thing. [from P1, P2]
- P4: If the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and their desire to listen to them is one thing, then either the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ top or the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P5: So, either the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ top or the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top. [from P3, P4]
- P6: If the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ Top, then it's not the case that the author has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top is identical to the author's desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P7: If the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top, then it's not the case that the author has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top is identical to the author's desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P8: So, either way, P1 is false. [from P1, P5, P6, P7]<sup>38</sup>

I claim that the pervasive sense that normative entities are just too different to be natural identities is well captured by the Number-of-Things Objection (the "NOTO"). Normative entities can't be

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<sup>38</sup> I was tempted to name this objection the "Eliminator Objection" as an homage to ZZ Top's "Eliminator". Though it would have been philosophically fitting, I did not want the objection to become too closely associated with discussions of eliminativism in philosophy of mind and elsewhere.

natural entities, the thought goes, because the relationship between existence and number is such that normative entities are simply numerically distinct from natural entities.<sup>39</sup>

While I announced at the start of this chapter that I would be making explicit a new line of argument, I confess that traces of the NOTO can be found in Frankena's (1939) seminal discussion of our old friend Moore.<sup>40</sup> Over the course of interpreting what Moore could mean precisely when Moore infamously claims that naturalists commit the "naturalistic fallacy" in analyzing goodness, Frankena says that naturalists could be committing what Frankena calls the "definist fallacy", which is the "process of confusing or identifying two properties, of defining one property by another, or of substituting one property for another".<sup>41</sup> Frankena goes on to say:

This formulation of the definist fallacy explains or reflects the motto of *Principia Ethica*, borrowed from Bishop Butler: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing". It follows from this motto that goodness is what it is and not another thing. It follows that views which try to identify it with something else are making a mistake of an elementary sort. For it is a mistake to confuse or identify two properties. If the properties really are two, then they simply are not identical."

Frankena goes on to claim that if Moore is accusing naturalists of committing the mistake of the definist fallacy – of claiming that two entities are somehow one – then it's really Moore who is the one making a mistake. This is because, according to Frankena, naturalists are most plausibly interpreted as making the *semantic* claim that normative and natural concepts co-refer, not the *metaphysical* claim that two distinct things in the world are somehow really one. Moore is "misled by the material mode of speech", Frankena tells us – naturalists are *synthetic* naturalists making linguistic and not metaphysical claims.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Both referees for this paper expressed doubt about whether the just-too-different intuition is well captured by the NOTO. Several colleagues have expressed a similar sentiment, including Lutz (personal correspondence), who remarked that while the NOTO might capture an "important concern", it seems like it captures a "separate" one. Having tried to make sense of the just-too-different intuition now for several years across several publications (see citations throughout this chapter), I understand the worry. My view is that whatever the interpretation might lack in exegetical faithfulness is made up for in philosophical charity.

<sup>40</sup> Though this is perhaps evidence that my diagnosis really is on the right track.

<sup>41</sup> Frankena (1939: 472)

<sup>42</sup> "But do those who define ethical notions in non-ethical terms make this mistake? They will reply to Mr. Moore that they are not identifying two properties; what they are saying is that two words or sets of words stand for or mean one and the same property. Mr. Moore was being, in part, misled by the material mode of speech, as Mr. Carnap calls it, in such sentences as "Goodness is pleasantness", "Knowledge is true belief", etc. When one says instead, "The word 'good' and the word 'pleasant' mean the same thing", etc., it is clear that one is not identifying two things." Ibid.

Set aside whether Frankena is reading Moore correctly.<sup>43</sup> Even if he isn't, Frankena might still be right that on the best understanding of naturalism, naturalists don't commit the definist fallacy of claiming that two properties are one. And given the definist fallacy's obvious similarity to the NOTO, we might then suspect that the NOTO has an obvious answer to it and hence, like the reconstructed Leibniz Law style argument above, fails to account charitably for nonnaturalists' resistance to naturalism.

Transposing Frankena's reply on behalf of naturalists, naturalists might say that the NOTO simply targets a view that they don't or at least shouldn't hold. On this response, the NOTO can be ignored, because naturalism is not best understood as the metaphysical view that there are normative entities and that they are identical to natural entities. Rather, naturalism is better understood as the semantic view that normative concepts refer and to what they refer is natural, which is a view that, on this line of response, isn't touched by the NOTO.

However, it has become increasingly clear in recent years among metanormativists that the most interesting and theoretically worthwhile interpretation of naturalism is metaphysical, not semantic.<sup>44</sup> One overarching reason is the flatfooted one that when we're asking questions about what there is and what those things are like, we're simply not asking anything about words or concepts.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar spirit, it has been argued that we have to understand naturalist claims about normative entities as metaphysical ones to underwrite familiar kinds of explanation in the normative domain.<sup>46</sup> Suppose, for example, that you did the right thing. A perfectly natural explanation for why you did the right thing is that you did it *by* choosing the option that maximized pleasure or *in virtue of* choosing the option that maximizes pleasure or *because* of it. Just as we make sense of the fact that a shaded triangle is a shaded triangle by appealing to its shadedness and triangularity, we make sense of the fact that you did the right thing by appealing to your action's features, such as the fact that it maximizes pleasure.

Moreover, on this line of thought, naturalists have to understand their view as a particular kind of metaphysical claim to make sense of explanations in the normative domain. Suppose, for example,

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<sup>43</sup> Frankena continues: "But Mr. Moore kept himself from seeing this by his disclaimer that he was [sic – 'not' seems to have been omitted by Frankena] interested in any statement about the use of words". It's not that Moore wasn't interested in words. Rather, in my view at least, it's because he had a view about how they relate to the world.

<sup>44</sup> See Schroeder (2007), Laskowski (2019), and Leary (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> Some evidence for the flatfooted responses comes from Rosen (2015), who points out that even fully competent users of concepts like JUSTICE might still wonder about its nature.

<sup>46</sup> Schroeder (2007: Chapter 4)

that we understand naturalism as the metaphysical claim that rightness is identical to maximizing pleasure. This claim allows us to make sense of what we want to make sense of – the claim that your action is right because it maximizes pleasure. However, identity’s symmetry also allows us to say something seemingly false – that your action maximizes pleasure because it’s right. Consequently, naturalists not only ought to reject a semantic understanding of their view in favor of a metaphysical one, they also ought to accept that the relation between normative and natural entities is an asymmetric one. In particular, naturalists should embrace the relation of constitution – normative entities are *fully constituted* by natural entities. By claiming, for example, that *what it is* to perform a right action is to perform an action that maximizes pleasure, we can then say that you did the right thing because you maximized pleasure (but not that you maximized pleasure because you performed the right action).

In Section 1, I followed many others in assuming the familiar characterization of naturalism as the view that normative entities are identical to *or* fully constituted by natural entities. This focus on constitution can be read as emphasizing the significance of the second disjunct. Constitutive Naturalism, as it were, is important for our purposes because it appears, at least on a quick glance, to make salient another potentially obvious way of responding to the NOTO. For if the NOTO only targets Identity Naturalism, as it were, then the NOTO fails to cast doubt on naturalism *per se*.

Nevertheless, it seems that if you’re worried that normative entities are just too different to be numerically identical to natural entities, similar worries about normative entities being *fully constituted* by natural entities loom. For if one claims that *what it is* for a normative entity to be *n* is for it to be a natural entity *d* – that *n* is *nothing more than d* or *all there is to n is d* or that *n* is *nothing over and above d* – it’s tempting to then wonder just how many things are there.<sup>47</sup> That’s enough to launch a suitably modified version of the objection:

*The Number-of-Fully-Constituted-Things Objection*

- P1: The author of this chapter has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author’s normative reason to listen to ZZ Top is fully constituted by the author’s desire to listen to ZZ Top.  
[constitutive naturalism, assumed for reductio]

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Goff (2017) on the “free lunch constraint” in debates about phenomenal consciousness. See also Rosen (2017: 136, emphasis mine), who comes close to expressing the NOTO’s conclusion when he writes that “...for the naturalist: the particular facts about right and wrong, good and bad, reasons and requirements, and the rest are all *almost-but-not-quite-literally* nothing over and above the non-normative facts that underlie them”.

- P2: for any p and q, p is fully constituted by q just in case p and q are one thing. [assumed]
- P3: So, the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and their desire to listen to them is one thing. [from P1, P2]
- P4: If the author has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and their desire to listen to them is one thing, then either the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ top or the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P5: Either the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ top or the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top. [from P3, P4]
- P6: If the author has no normative reason to listen to ZZ Top, then it's not the case that the author has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top is fully constituted by the author's desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P7: If the author has no desire to listen to ZZ Top, then it's not the case that the author has a normative reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen to ZZ Top and the author's normative reason to listen to ZZ Top is fully constituted by the author's desire to listen to ZZ Top. [assumed]
- P8: So, either way, P1 is false. [from P1, P5, P6, P7]

Since judgements about the relationship between existence and number also appear to cast doubt on constitutive naturalism, such judgements cast doubt on naturalism whole hog – they are the judgements that explain nonnaturalists' resistance to naturalism.<sup>48</sup>

#### 4. Why They Shouldn't

In the previous sections, I observed that over a quarter of metanormativists still lean toward or accept nonnaturalism despite the preponderance of considerations favoring naturalism. I then explained why prominent arguments for nonnaturalism and against naturalism don't account for this observation, before going on to float an alternative proposal. Nonnaturalism's place in contemporary metanormative inquiry is, I argued, well explained by the pervasive sense that

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<sup>48</sup> These considerations can be read as rejecting an inherited piece of Lewisian (1991: 81) dogma, according to which mereology is "ontologically innocent".

normative entities are just too different from natural entities to be identical to or fully constituted by them in the sense that they are just too *numerically* different. I then argued that a relatively neglected objection to naturalism, the Number-of-Things Objection (the “NOTO”), can be constructed from the sense that normative and natural entities are numerically different. In this section, I’ll argue that naturalists can interestingly reply to the NOTO by rejecting a subtle presupposition of it.

But before developing the reply, it’s worth heading off another more immediate one – one so immediate, in fact, that we might once again worry about whether we’ve identified a charitable source of nonnaturalists’ resistance to naturalism. Take any uncontroversial identity claim from outside of normative inquiry, e.g., H, H, O is H<sub>2</sub>O. Now apply a modified form of the NOTO. If H, H, O and H<sub>2</sub>O are identical, then they’re one thing. And if they’re one thing, then once again either there is no H, H, O or...and so on. It’s going to turn out, then, that H, H, O isn’t identical to H<sub>2</sub>O. Shouldn’t we worry that the NOTO overgeneralizes?

Maybe. But it might also be that worries about overgeneralization are overblown. Such worries get going by leveraging judgements about uncontroversial cases. Yet even the claim that H, H, O is H<sub>2</sub>O is a substantive one about the mereology of chemical fusions for which there is plenty of disagreement.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, identity’s generality is itself a contested issue, so even if an uncontroversial case from outside the domain normative inquiry were forthcoming, it’s not clear how much it would teach about the normative case.<sup>50</sup> Naturalists should look beyond simple worries about overgeneralization to raise trouble for the NOTO.

The response to NOTO that I am now in a position to develop begins with the simple question from above that I wasn’t too embarrassed to ask:

How many things are there when naturalists say that, e.g., that there is a reason for me to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen and that my reason is identical to my desire?

This question, from which the NOTO springs, like all questions, makes sense only given the truth of several presuppositions. To appreciate an important one, I invite you to consider the possibility of a world consisting exhaustively of qualitatively uniform or homogenous *space*. In virtue of its exhaustiveness and homogeneity, such space seems like it cannot be non-arbitrarily divided into discrete portions. And interestingly, while it seems apt to say that there is space in, as it were, space-world, it also seems apt to say that space-world doesn’t contain that which we can *count*.

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<sup>49</sup> See Schaffer (2017) and the citations therein.

<sup>50</sup> See Geach (1967) for a classic discussion of relative identity. See Shumener (2022) for contemporary discussion.

Instead, it seems more apt to say that space-world contains that which we cannot even begin to count. Counting seems inapplicable to space in space-world not for familiar reasons owing to space-world containing too many or much to assign the counting numbers (think of the fact that we cannot assign the counting numbers to all of the real numbers). The sense in which number doesn't seem to apply to space-world seems stronger – it seems to make little sense to apply any number at all. Space-world highlights a distinction, sometimes drawn by metaphysicians, between that which is countable – *things* – and that which is strongly uncountable – *stuff*.<sup>51</sup>

Now you might worry about space-world's coherence and hence possibility. Space could be best thought of in terms of absence in which case you might think the sense in which space-world "contains" space is stretched beyond recognition. So, the thought goes, it's not a scenario where there's things or stuff or whatever and where numbers don't apply. Or you might think number straightforwardly does apply to space-world, namely, zero. Consequently, you might conclude, there is no distinction to be drawn between things and stuff.

Instead, then, imagine a world containing an exhaustively space-filling and homogenous substance. Suppose that it is a Thalesian world containing exhaustively space-filling and homogenous liquid. Once again, in virtue of its exhaustiveness and homogeneity, such liquid also seems like it cannot be non-arbitrarily divided into discrete portions. But if such liquid cannot be non-arbitrarily divided into discrete portions, it also seems to be uncountable. Why, we might ask, is it one? Why many? Such liquid isn't actual, of course. Indeed, familiar liquids to us, like water, are composed of molecules, which are composed of atoms, which are composed of protons and neutrons, and so on, which seem to have the requisite discreteness to make them countable. But I claim that a Thalesian world of stuff rather than things is coherent and hence possible. Consequently, again, I conclude that there is an intelligible distinction, albeit not yet fully understood perhaps, between things and stuff.

Suppose, then, that at least some normative entities aren't things at all, and so aren't entities that we can count. Of course, it's a supposition around which it can be hard to wrap one's head, since our very use of quantifiers and plural terms like 'entities' seems to imply that our topic concerns the countable. Grammar notwithstanding, on the supposition that at least some normative entities aren't things, the simple question of how many things there are when naturalists say that, e.g., that there is a reason for me to ZZ Top and a desire to listen and that my reason is identical to my desire, would seem to beg the question against the view on which it makes no sense to ask. Thus, the NOTO rests on the presupposition that normative entities can't be stuff and hence begs the question against naturalist views on which they can be.

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<sup>51</sup> See, *inter alia*, Lewis (1991), Lowe (1998), Olson (2012), and Goldwater (2017, 2020).



Of course, it's one thing to acknowledge the coherence of the stuff category and the possibility that it includes space and liquid and quite another to acknowledge the possibility that it includes normative entities like reasons, obligations, and so on. Ontologies that include stuff are uncommon. Normative ontologies that do are unheard of. Consider, however, the use of 'reason' in a sentence like "I have several reasons to listen to ZZ Top" and its use in "He has a lot of reason to listen to ZZ Top". Both uses of 'reason' seem similar in that they are both normative (as opposed to motivating or explanatory). But they also seem importantly different. The former seems to be about that which we can count while the latter doesn't. That is, the former seems to be about reasons as things whereas the latter seems to be about reason as stuff. Just how that which is talked about in our use of 'reasons' relates to that which is talked about in our use of 'reason' is an interesting question to which metanormativists have turned their attention recently.<sup>52</sup> On one way of semantically descending, however, we can consider the new and intriguing view that for *r* to be *a reason* for *s* to *phi* is for *r* to provide *reason* for *s* to *phi*.<sup>53</sup> Such a view can be motivated by a variety of considerations.<sup>54</sup> But for our purposes, what's important is that on this view, reasons are analyzed in terms of *reason*, which is to say that *things* are analyzed in terms of *stuff*.<sup>55</sup> Reasons, on such a view, are things in the sense that they are the sources of stuff, namely, reason.

An analysis of reasons as things in terms of reason as stuff illuminates the possibility of normative stuff, by illuminating the possibility of a mixed normative metaphysics of things and stuff.<sup>56</sup> It hence advances the case, on behalf of naturalists, that the NOTO rests on the contestable metaphysical presupposition that normative entities concern only things. More should be done to advance the case, however. And one obvious way to advance it is to motivate the possibility that the stuff of reason provided by reasons is natural. What could that natural stuff be, then? Continuing with the example that I've used throughout this chapter, I have a reason to listen to ZZ Top and a desire to listen. Now consider again the view that for *r* to be *a reason* for *s* to *phi* is for *r* to provide *reason* for *s* to *phi*, but add to it the twist that to be a reason is to be a desire and to be reason is to be motivation. This view tells us that the reason I have to listen to ZZ Top is my desire to listen, which is a source of my reason or motivation to listen. Given that desires and motivation are natural, we can say that reasons and reason are natural. This is a simplistic package of claims, no doubt. But it is coherent. And my primary goal in this chapter is to show that the

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<sup>52</sup> Fogal (2016) is responsible for drawing metanormativists' attention to these issues. See also Howard and Schroeder (forthcoming)

<sup>53</sup> See Fogal and Risberg (forthcoming). Note, however, that the authors do not descend in this way.

<sup>54</sup> See Fogal (2016) for linguistic motivations and Fogal and Risberg (forthcoming) for metaphysical ones.

<sup>55</sup> Pace Markosian (2015).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

NOTO rests on contestable presuppositions the contention of which points towards the possibility of a novel form of naturalism. That much has been accomplished. This version of naturalism's full development is for another day.

Nevertheless, there are nearby views that advance this case against the NOTO even further, perhaps even more plausibly so. I've been suggesting that a recent view of the relationship between reasons and reason can be used to help illustrate that a *pure* normative ontology of only things isn't the only possible normative ontology. Instead, normative ontology can be understood to include both things and stuff – it can be mixed. But consider another pure normative ontology that consists entirely of stuff. While the surface grammar of the language of 'reasons', 'obligations' and so on suggests at least a mixed normative ontology, it could be that such language is misleading.<sup>57</sup> Despite appearances, it could be that the normative world consists entirely of stuff like reason. Is there something naturalistic that reason might be? Desires would be out, since those would be things. How about *desire*? Consider the claim that you have 163 desires. It sounds bizarre, right? It could be that it sounds bizarre because "desires" cannot be divided or separated non-arbitrarily.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps, then, the mind is such that there is only the stuff of desire and no desires. A naturalist could then claim that a person's reason to phi is their desire to phi. Such a picture might suggest that there is less reason around than we might have otherwise thought. But in any event, we still end up with a coherent and hence possible naturalism based on a normative ontology not of things but rather of stuff – an ontology that raises no worries about the number of normative things included in it, since there's only normative stuff that we can't even begin to count.

While my primary goal in this chapter is to show that a stuff-based metanormative naturalism answers the NOTO, it's also worth noting some of the virtues of a stuff-based metanormative naturalism. Consider, then, the widely but no longer universally held claim that necessarily, normative entities supervene on non-normative entities.<sup>59</sup> Now call to mind the familiar idea that there are no necessary connections between distinct existences, or Hume's Dictum, which we can think of as a particular application of the general idea that necessities require explanation. Identity naturalists claim that two things are one thing or that normative entities aren't distinct from non-normative entities. Consequently, it is standardly said, identity naturalists explain normative supervenience trivially.

But now consider our novel stuff-based naturalism on which the normative stuff that exists is natural stuff. Consider, too, a corollary claim that for any p and q, p and q are identical iff p and q

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Finlay (2014). But see Fogal (2016).

<sup>58</sup> See Goldwater (2020).

<sup>59</sup> See, *inter alia*, Hare (1952: 145), Ridge (2007: 335), Shafer-Landau (2003: 78), and Väyrynen (2021) for expressions of the orthodox view. See Hattiangadi (2018), Roberts (2018), and Rosen (2021) for expressions of heresy.

are one, on which for any p and q, p and q are distinct iff p and q are two. This corollary claim ties distinctness and number in a way that a stuff-based naturalism rejects as not even applicable. There are necessary connections between existences, on a stuff-based naturalism, but there is no question at all of whether they apply to distinct existences. Consequently, naturalists who accept stuff explain normative supervenience even more trivially by claiming that there's nothing to be explained.

There's another virtuous thing (wink) worth highlighting about a stuff-based naturalism. While naturalists can often dig deep into their philosophical toolkit to find clever responses to objections from nonnaturalists, this chapter perhaps being case in point, it's rare to find naturalists doing the hard work of developing views of what in the natural world *specifically* reasons, reason, obligations, and so on might be. That is, it's not often that naturalists explain what most metanormativists want explained. Indeed, it's even been said that:

“...the *best* objection to reductive naturalism is that no one has offered a proposed reduction that seems like it could possibly be true. High-level arguments that some reductive view *must* be true simply do not address the source of skepticism that no such view *could* be. The only antidote to this—the only dialectically fruitful way forward—is to defend better views, and to show that they are not obviously false.”<sup>60</sup>

It's a big natural world out there, so naturalists shouldn't be blamed for failing to tell us where exactly normative entities can be found. One of the positive upshots of this chapter, of having defended the coherence and possibility of stuff naturalism, as it were, is that this task is now much more manageable since naturalists can ignore all the natural *things* in the world, to the extent that there are any, in their search for the *stuff* that matters.

## 5. Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, I observed that Moorean arguments from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still, after a century of intermittent but intense discussions, loom large in normative metaphysics. Why they do is an interesting question. My sense is that the issues dividing naturalists and nonnaturalists track bedrock intuitive and methodological differences between them, where it's extremely hard to find common ground of any sort, let alone arguments with shared premises. Consequently, normative metaphysicians keep returning to the few incidentally Moorean arguments that they have at their disposal. This chapter supports this diagnosis, since, by the end of it, it became clear that progress among naturalists and nonnaturalists might very well depend

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<sup>60</sup> Schroeder (2017: 682, original emphasis)

on the foundational metaphysical question of what there can be. And if the central argument of this chapter is right, there can be stuff in the normative domain, which undercuts the common nonnaturalist concern that the normative is just too different from the natural for naturalism to be true.

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