

# METAETHICS AND THE NATURE OF PROPERTIES

I—JUSSI SUIKKANEN

## METAETHICS AND THE NATURE OF PROPERTIES

This paper explores the connection between two philosophical debates concerning the nature of properties. The first, metaethical debate is about whether normative properties are ordinary natural properties or some unique kind of non-natural properties. The second, metaphysical debate is about whether properties are sets of objects, transcendent or immanent universals, or sets of tropes. I argue that nominalism, transcendent realism and immanent realism are not neutral frameworks for the metaethical debate but instead lead to either metaethical naturalism or non-naturalism. We can therefore investigate the metaethical question on its own terms only within the framework of trope theory.

I am fascinated by two different philosophical debates about properties. In the more local debate, metaethicists disagree about whether normative properties (goodness, wrongness, and the like) are ordinary natural properties or properties of their own unique kind. In the general metaphysical debate, by contrast, philosophers argue about the nature of all properties. In this debate, the main positions are different versions of nominalism, transcendent and immanent realism about universals, and trope theory.

I will not solve these debates here. Rather, I will explore the thus far neglected question of how the two debates are connected. Are they orthogonal to one another, or does taking a stand on one of them force you to accept a specific view in the other? Are the debates independent of one another, or are they intertwined in a way that supports inferential connections between them?

I will argue that only one of the general metaphysical theories of properties is neutral with respect to the metaethical debate. Trope theory is the only framework in which the question of whether normative properties are natural or non-natural properties can be investigated on its own terms. All the other metaphysical theories about properties (versions of nominalism and transcendent and immanent realism), by contrast, are compatible with only naturalism or

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non-naturalism, but not both. This means that either (i) we ought to accept some version of trope theory in so far as we think that the naturalism versus non-naturalism debate is one worth pursuing, or (ii) the metaethical debate dissolves due to the general nature of properties.

This is how the paper will proceed. §I first makes explicit three assumptions: two about the metaethical debate and one about supervenience. §II explains how nominalist views of properties rule out non-naturalism in metaethics. §III argues that immanent realism similarly rules out non-naturalist views in metaethics due to the so-called supervenience challenge. §IV suggests that transcendent realism is incompatible with the basic ontological commitments of the naturalist views in metaethics. Finally, §V outlines how trope theory offers us the only neutral metaphysical framework in which the metaethical debate can be investigated by focusing on the normative properties themselves.

## I

*Three Assumptions.* My first assumption concerns the naturalism/non-naturalism debate in metaethics. In this debate, it is usually assumed that ordinary natural properties are (i) the subject matter of the natural sciences broadly construed, (ii) to be used in scientific explanations, (iii) known a posteriori, (iv) causally efficacious, and (v) figure in the laws of nature. Metaethical naturalists then claim that normative properties are either reducible to such natural properties or irreducible natural properties themselves (for surveys, see [Suikkanen 2016](#) and [Railton 2018](#)). Metaethical non-naturalists, in contrast, claim that normative properties lack the previous features, and thus they are distinct properties of their own unique kind (for surveys, see [Dancy 2005](#), [Enoch 2018](#), and [Ridge 2019](#)).<sup>1</sup> They are neither reducible to natural properties nor irreducible natural properties themselves, but rather *sui generis* non-natural properties of their own unique kind. My first assumption is this traditional understanding of the debate.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the uniqueness of the non-natural properties is given a more positive characterization in terms of, for example, unity ([McDowell 1998](#), pp. 202–3), resultance ([Dancy 1993](#), ch. 5) or normativity ([Dancy 2005](#), §5).

<sup>2</sup> Recently there have been attempts to draw the distinction in terms of grounding. For objections, see [McPherson and Plunkett \(2022\)](#).

My second assumption is a stronger assumption about the previous debate. Many metaethicists have dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to investigating whether normative properties are ordinary natural properties or *sui generis* non-natural properties. The second assumption is that, even if we still might have no conclusive answer to that question, the previous efforts have not been wasted. I thus assume that it is worthwhile to investigate whether normative properties are natural or non-natural properties. Furthermore, I assume that which side in this debate is right ought to turn only on what is distinctive of the normative properties in particular. What the correct view is should thus be decided by whether the normative properties themselves are a posteriori or a priori knowable, causally efficacious or not, to be used in scientific explanations or not, unified or shapeless, resultant or not, and so on. This assumption thus also entails that the metaethical debate should not be decided based on considerations external to the debate, for example, concerning the nature of properties generally. I call this idea the *autonomy assumption*.

Finally, I also assume that normative properties supervene on the natural properties (for surveys, see Väyrynen 2018 and McPherson 2022). I thus assume the following:

*Supervenience.* It is *conceptually necessary* that when something has a normative property *N*, it also has some base property *P* such that it is *metaphysically necessary* that anything else that is *P* is also *N*.

This thesis needs explaining. The base properties here must be neither irreducible normative properties themselves nor properties the correct analysis of which ineliminably refers to such properties. In most cases, these properties are, roughly speaking, ordinary factual, natural and descriptive properties, or more complex conjunctive properties of having several of such simpler properties. *Supervenience*, then, is the claim that in virtue of the meaning of normative concepts, it must be true that whenever something has some normative property it also has a base property, the having of which metaphysically necessitates having that normative property. This is the *supervenience assumption*.

The second and third assumptions provide the key desiderata for the general metaphysical theories of properties for the purposes of the naturalism versus non-naturalism debate in metaethics. We want those theories to be neutral frameworks that could

support the autonomy assumption whilst simultaneously offering both the naturalists and the non-naturalists a way of vindicating the supervenience assumption. The rest of this paper investigates whether the traditional theories of properties can meet these two desiderata.

## II

*Nominalism.* As theories of the nature of properties, all versions of nominalism are metaphysically parsimonious (for surveys, see [Edwards 2014](#), ch. 5, and [Tallant 2020](#), pp. 120–5). They are committed to the idea that only concrete particular objects exist (and perhaps also abstract objects such as classes, sets and functions). This excludes properties as a distinct ontological category. There are, however, different versions of nominalism.

A typical version of class nominalism claims that a property *P* consists of the class or set of concrete objects that are *P* (that is, of which it can truthfully be said that ‘the object in question is *P*’). The more plausible modal versions of this view include both actual objects and possible objects that are *P* in the relevant class or set that constitutes *P*-ness ([Tallant 2020](#), p. 123). This is to guarantee that the existence of a property does not depend on whether anything in the actual world happens to be *P*, and to distinguish contingently actually coextensive properties. Another typical version of nominalism claims that the property *P* is not a set or a class, but rather a function from possible worlds to the extensions of objects that are *P* in those worlds ([Egan 2004](#)).

We can apply these views to normative properties. This may sound artificial, because we usually think that normative properties are instantiated by actions, outcomes, events, characters, mental states, and the like, rather than by objects. Because of this, it sounds odd to say that *an object* can, for example, have the property of being right or wrong. In this context, we can, however, use the term ‘object’ more loosely to refer to whatever the bearers of the normative properties are, even when these are not objects in the strict metaphysical sense. This allows us to say that the property of wrongness, for example, is a set of objects or a function from possible worlds to extensions, where what we really mean is that wrongness is a certain set of actual and possible actions or a function from worlds to extensions that contain actions.

The problem with nominalism as a framework for the metaethical debate is, however, that it enables us to use Frank Jackson's (1998, pp. 118–25) argument to show that any purported non-natural properties collapse into natural properties.<sup>3</sup> For this argument, we first need to assume that there is, for example, a set of all possible wrong actions. In principle, it is then possible to give a maximal description of all the base properties of every action in that set. Such a description states, for every possible base property, whether a given action in that set has that property or not.

We can then call all the maximal descriptions of every wrong action  $D_1, D_2, \dots$ , and  $D_n$ , and so every possible wrong action is  $D_1, D_2, \dots$ , or  $D_n$ . Furthermore, given the supervenience assumption, an action that is not wrong cannot be  $D_1, D_2, \dots$ , or  $D_n$ , or otherwise there could be two otherwise identical actions, one of which would be wrong and the other not. Finally, we can use the previous maximal disjunctive description of all wrong actions to form a new predicate 'is  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$ ', which ascribes the property of being  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$  to actions. This property is *necessarily coextensive* with wrongness.

Let's then assume, with the nominalists, that properties are either sets of actual and possible objects or functions from worlds to extensions. The problem is that sets are identified by their members and functions by their extensions (Miller 2007, p. 16). Two seemingly different sets with the same members are one and the same set, and two seemingly different functions that take the same arguments (worlds) to the same values (extensions) are likewise the same function. In the present nominalist context, that sets and functions are identified extensionally would entail that the property of wrongness would just be the base property of being  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$ . In this framework, there is thus no logical space for the idea that wrongness would be a non-natural property of its own unique kind.<sup>4</sup>

This means that if some version of nominalism were true, we would have to give up the autonomy assumption. In this case, the

<sup>3</sup> For objections to this argument see, for example, FitzPatrick (2008), Majors (2005) and Suikkanen (2010), but generally these responses are not available within the nominalist framework.

<sup>4</sup> In response, it could be argued that necessarily coextensive properties can be distinct if we identify them with distinct structured sets (Lewis 1986). This response would, however, violate the autonomy assumption. The metaethical debate would now not be decided based on anything specific to do with normative properties, but rather on whether we accept the relevant kinds of structured properties.

naturalism versus non-naturalism debate could not be decided by investigating what the normative properties are like themselves, but rather it would dissolve to the naturalists' advantage due to our general view of the nature of properties.

### III

*Immanent Realism.* Let us then consider immanent realism (for surveys, see [Edwards 2014](#), §2.3, and [Loux 2006](#), ch. 1). In addition to concrete particulars, all realists posit an additional ontological category of universals. Properties of objects are then understood in terms of these entities—properties just are universals. There are two main versions of realism. This section focuses on the immanent version defended by [David Armstrong \(1978\)](#).

According to immanent realism, universals are a certain kind of *repeatable* entity. At any one time, numerically the same universal can be wholly exemplified by and literally completely present in different particulars that are in different locations in space and time. Immanent universals are thus multiply located where a given property is instantiated by different objects. Furthermore, according to Armstrong, when a universal is exemplified by an object (that is, when an object has a property), the universal really exists *in* the object which has the property as one of its parts. Immanent universals also cannot exist without at least some objects in which they exist, nor objects without at least some immanent universals that exist in them. Objects and universals are thus co-dependent, and neither is more basic than the other. When an object has a property—when a universal exists in the object—this unity constitutes a state of affairs.

When applied to normative properties, this view would mean that a normative property, say wrongness, would consist of a universal that can be multiply located in different objects (that is, in different actions) at the same time. That an action is wrong would then consist of the state of affairs in which the wrongness universal is wholly present in the particular action in question.

One advantage of this view is that it appears to support the autonomy assumption. The disagreement between the metaethical naturalists and non-naturalists could now be understood as a disagreement about the higher-order properties of the normative property universals. It would be over whether the multiply located normative property universals are empirically observable, causally efficacious, the

subject matter of natural science, and so on. Immanent realism thus seems to offer a coherent framework in which these questions could be explored.

The problem, however, is the supervenience assumption. The concern is that if immanent realism were true, the non-naturalists would struggle to explain how the normative properties could supervene on the base properties. This is the familiar supervenience challenge for the non-naturalists (for surveys, see Väyrynen 2018 and Dreier 2019; and for a version I draw on, McPherson 2012).

§I above outlined the traditional understanding of the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, according to which the non-naturalists are committed to the idea that normative properties are a *discontinuous*, unique kind of properties, and hence very different from the ordinary natural properties. The challenge is that this feature of these purported non-natural properties seems to conflict with the supervenience assumption. According to that assumption, in virtue of the meaning of our normative vocabulary there must be metaphysically necessary connections between the base properties and the discontinuous non-natural normative properties. If there are two objects that are otherwise identical and one of them has a given normative property, then the other one too *must* have that normative property, where that necessary connection is claimed to hold between wholly different kinds of discontinuous properties.

There are necessary connections between seemingly discontinuous properties elsewhere too. Anything that is hot, for example, must have the property of having a high average kinetic energy of particles. Yet, in these contexts we tend to explain the necessary connection between seemingly discontinuous properties by showing that one of the properties can be analysed in terms of, reduced to, or identified with the other property. The non-naturalists cannot, however, make these moves, because for them the normative properties are genuinely discontinuous in a way that blocks analyses, reductions and property identities.

The non-naturalists hence seem forced to accept that the necessary connection between the discontinuous normative and base properties is *brute*, one that cannot be explained further. Yet, as Tristram McPherson (2012, p. 217) puts it, ‘Commitment to brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties counts significantly against a view’. The supervenience challenge is thus that the non-naturalists need to explain the necessary connection between the

base properties and the discontinuous normative properties; otherwise we have good reasons to prefer other metaethical views.

Immanent realism seems to make it much harder for the non-naturalists to respond to this challenge. In fact, immanent realism enables us to pose that challenge in an especially forceful way. Let's assume that a particular action has the normative property of being wrong, which here means that the wrongness universal would be wholly present in this particular action when it is done. The supervenience assumption states that if there were another action exactly like the previous action in its base properties, the very same normative property universal would necessarily have to be present in this other action too. But why would this have to be the case? What would make the normative property universal 'pop up' always exactly at the right time and place in every possible world to make the supervenience assumption true? This just seems inexplicable.

The non-naturalists have, of course, attempted to respond to this challenge, and perhaps responses could be formulated in the framework of immanent realism (for surveys, see Väyrynen 2018 and Dreier 2019). For example, it could be suggested that a part of the essence of the so-called hybrid normative properties is that their essences specify both the naturalistic sufficient conditions for their instantiation and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of the related *sui generis* normative properties (Leary 2017, p. 98). Thus it could be argued both that the essence of being a reason specifies the conditions when some consideration is a reason and that reasons play a justifying role. The essences of such hybrid properties would then be the glue that binds the other, 'thin' normative property universals (such as being justified) to certain base properties in a way that would support the supervenience assumption. Yet serious concerns have been outlined with regards to all such proposals. For example, here it could be argued that the previous proposal just moves the brute necessary connections from one place to another, namely, from the relationship between the base and normative properties to the relation between the conjunctive properties which the essences of the previous hybrid properties are taken to consist of (McPherson 2012, pp. 222–4; for a response, see Leary 2017, pp. 100–3, and for further objections, Toppinen 2017).

Overall, the number of different non-naturalist responses to the supervenience challenge, the number of objections these responses



have received, and the fact that no proposal has gained widespread approval suggests that the framework of immanent realism makes it difficult for the non-naturalists to explain supervenience. This furthermore suggests that immanent realism cannot vindicate the autonomy assumption either. This is because, as a general metaphysical view about the nature of all properties, it seems to lead to the conclusion that naturalism must be the correct view of normative properties because non-naturalism fails to vindicate the supervenience assumption. Thus, in so far as we want to hold on to the autonomy assumption, we had better see if we can find a more neutral metaphysical framework.

#### IV

*Transcendent Realism.* According to transcendent realism too, properties consist of universals. On this view, however, universals are not entities multiply located in space and time, but abstract entities that exist in a distinct Platonic realm (for a survey and references, see [Edwards 2014](#), §2.2; for recent defences, see [van Inwagen 2011](#) and [Tugby 2015](#)). These abstract entities are immutable, mind-independent and indestructible real things in their own right that ‘subsist’ outside space and time.

When a particular object, then, has a given property (when, for example, a shirt is white), the object must be in a distinct instantiation relation to the given abstract universal (the shirt to the whiteness universal). Historically, there have been attempts to understand this relation in terms of participation (the object in a sense ‘taking part in’ the universal) or resemblance (the object being similar to the universal) ([Russell 1912](#); [Plato 2000](#), *The Republic*). These attempts are, however, problematic, and so it is more common to take the relation to be a primitive, one that cannot be explained in substantive terms ([Cook Wilson 1926](#)).

On this view, then, when an action is wrong, it stands in the instantiation relation to the transcendent universal of wrongness. Initially, this view may seem promising for the purposes of the metaethical debate. It could be suggested that there are different kinds of universals in the Platonic realm. Some universals will have the qualities of the natural properties, whereas perhaps others can be a different kind of universals, including the *sui generis* normative ones.

Yet, *prima facie*, this view seems unable to explain how the supervenience assumption could obtain. There does not seem to be any reason why, when the primitive instantiation relation obtains between a particular action and a certain normative property universal, another similar instantiation relation would also have to obtain between another action with the same base properties and the given normative property universal. If the instantiation relations are primitive, what again would guarantee that they necessarily be found between the relevant particular actions located in the different possible worlds and the transcendent normative universals in the Platonic realm?

Knut Olav Skarsaune (2015) has provided an insightful response to this challenge. He suggests that we should first take the primary bearers of normative properties to be kinds (action-kinds, outcome-kinds, character-kinds, and so on).<sup>5</sup> This allows us to analyse ordinary normative claims as ‘mixed claims’. For example, to say that Annie did something wrong when she lied to Beth is, on this view, to claim (i) that Annie’s action belongs to a certain action-kind (the empirical part) such that (ii) it instantiates the property of wrongness (the normative part).

This idea is not enough to respond to the supervenience challenge, because it supports only weak supervenience. Two actions that share the same base properties (for example, two identical cases of lying) will non-problematically belong to the same action-kind. Thus, if that action-kind bears the relevant normative property, then both of those action-tokens will derivatively have the same normative property. The problem, however, is that it seems possible that the action-kind in question would bear the normative property in one possible world but not in another. If this were possible, we would still not get sufficiently strong supervenience.

Here transcendent realism can provide the missing part of the explanation (Skarsaune 2015, §10.7). On this view, when a particular action belongs to an action-kind, this too should be understood in terms of transcendent universals. For an action-token to belong to an action-kind would thus be for it to stand in the instantiation relation to the abstract universal of being a certain kind of an action.

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<sup>5</sup> One reason to do so is that typically we justify particular actions by explaining how they belong, for example, to good action-kinds. For further arguments to this conclusion, see Schroeder (2014), Skarsaune (2015) and Dancy (2018, pp. 30–3).

We can then understand an action-kind bearing a normative property in terms of the action-kind having a higher-order normative property. More specifically, for an action-kind to have a certain normative property would be for the action-kind universal to be in the instantiation relation to the normative property universal within the Platonic realm.

With this addition, transcendent realism can also provide an explanation of the stronger supervenience assumption. If an action belongs to an action-kind that has a certain normative property, then that action-kind universal stands in the instantiation relation to the normative property universal in the Platonic realm. This entails that the action-kind will have the normative property *necessarily*, as there are no different *possibilia* in which sometimes the action-kind instantiates the normative property and sometimes it does not. There are thus no different cases to provide variation between whether the action-kind instantiates the universal or not.

The thesis, then, is that how things are in the transcendent realm, what kind of instantiation relations hold between the universals there, determines how properties are related to one another within all possible worlds. If a given action-kind universal instantiates a normative property universal in the Platonic realm, then this entails that all possible actions of that kind in every possible world also have that normative property. And so we have an outline of how the supervenience assumption can be vindicated.

Have we thus found a neutral metaphysical framework for the metaethical debate? The problem is that even if transcendent realism can vindicate the supervenience assumption, it fails to vindicate the autonomy assumption. This is because, ultimately, transcendent realism is not compatible with the kind of naturalism to which metaethical naturalists are committed more generally.

Most naturalists in metaethics are not only naturalists about normative properties but ontological naturalists across the board. They believe that everything that exists does so in the reality around us that consists ‘of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system’ (Armstrong 1995, p. 35). They also hold that for something to exist in that system, that thing must be causally efficacious, be a part of the subject matter of natural sciences, play a role in scientific explanations, and so on. Most metaethical naturalists thus take the very same qualities that make properties natural properties to be conditions of existence, full stop.

We can then see that the alleged immutable, indestructible, abstract transcendent universals of the distinct Platonic realm do not exist in the same spatio-temporal system as we do (or, in fact, in any such system), and they also lack the other qualities of natural entities such as causal powers (Armstrong 1995, pp. 36–7). This means that the metaethical naturalists, in so far as they are committed to the core tenets of ontological naturalism, cannot accept transcendent realism as a framework for the naturalism versus non-naturalism debate. To accept that framework, the naturalists in metaethics would have to give up their most fundamental ontological commitments.

There is, admittedly, logical space for a weaker naturalist view in metaethics, according to which (i) the Platonic realm of transcendent universals exists, and (ii) when it comes to the normative property universals within this realm, they are similar to all other universals in that realm, and so not unique in kind. It is, however, difficult to see on what grounds such a view could be motivated. This is because the arguments the metaethical naturalists traditionally give against positing distinct non-natural normative properties seem to apply equally against the distinct Platonic realm of transcendent universals. These arguments are usually based on the value of metaphysical parsimony in philosophical theorizing and questioning how we could ever come to know about the existence of such properties or realms.

## V

*Trope Theory.* There is, then, one final metaphysical framework left to consider, namely trope theory. This section suggests that this framework can vindicate both the autonomy and the supervenience assumptions, and thus it can offer a neutral metaphysical framework for the naturalism versus non-naturalism debate in metaethics.

Let me begin from the basic tenets of trope theory (for surveys, see Edwards 2014, ch. 3, and Maurin 2018). Tropes are property instances. The whiteness of my shirt, for example, is an instance of the property of being white. Such instances of properties, the tropes, are then taken to be concrete (existing in time and space) basic particulars (inhering in just one object each). They are simple, fundamental and independent primitive entities.

Trope theorists tend to use these property instances, the tropes, to give an account of both individuals and properties. Individuals, such as my shirt, are to be understood as bundles of ‘compresent’ tropes

(that is, tropes that occupy the same point in space and time). This means that an individual instantiates a property when an instance of that property in part constitutes the individual. Tropes and individuals are thus in part/whole relations.

There are, of course, different instantiations of the same property: whiteness<sub>1</sub> of my shirt, whiteness<sub>2</sub> of the White House, and so on. As instantiations of the same property, these property instances are *exactly resembling* basic particulars, where exact resemblance is an equivalence relation that is symmetrical, reflexive and transitive. Properties can then be understood to consist of sets of exactly resembling tropes. These sets have as their members all the actual and possible exactly resembling tropes, so that we can also accommodate uninstantiated properties. The relationship between tropes and the corresponding properties or ‘universals’ can thus be understood in terms of standard set membership.

Let us then apply this framework to the normative properties. Take, for example, the action-tokens that belong to the action-kind of being a certain kind of deliberate hurtful lie. If these action-tokens are understood as bundles of tropes, then each action of this kind is constituted at least in part by an exactly resembling trope of being this kind of a lie. The set of these tropes, both actual and possible, then constitutes the first-order property of being a certain kind of deliberate hurtful lie ( $S_1 = \{T_1, T_2, \dots, T_n\}$ ).

We can then return to the idea from §IV that it is plausible to think that the primary bearers of normative properties are kinds. If we take deliberate hurtful lies to be wrongful actions, then we should take the previous first-order property,  $S_1$ , to be the primary bearer of the property of being wrong (rather than any particular action of that kind). We can, after all, take wrongness claims about particular actions to be mixed claims about (i) a particular action belonging to a kind, and (ii) the kind being a bearer of the wrongness property. Translated to the trope theory, what it is for deliberate hurtful lies to be wrong is that the set that has all the being-a-deliberate-hurtful-lie tropes as its members is itself a primary bearer of the property of wrongness. More precisely, here the trope  $W_1$  of being wrong would be a trope compresent with the set  $S_1$ , the set that is the first-order property of being a deliberate hurtful lie.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This means that this trope-theoretic framework is also committed to trope theory concerning higher-order properties. Many traditional trope theorists would understand the

Similarly, in this framework, an exactly resembling trope to the previous wrongness trope,  $W_2$ , might be compresent with the set  $S_m$  (the first-order property of belonging to the kind of being a murder) that has as its members all the actual and possible tropes of being an instance of a murder. This means that, ultimately, we can then understand the higher-order normative property of wrongness itself as the set of all the wrongness tropes, each one of which is compresent with a different set of action-kind tropes ( $S_w = \{W_1, W_2, \dots, W_n\}$ ).

Let us then consider how this framework allows us to vindicate the supervenience assumption. This explanation begins from the idea that each one of the first-order properties of being a certain kind of an action is in fact a transworld entity spread across all possible worlds. Such a set has as its members all the actual and possible tropes of being a certain kind of action that can be found from all the different possible worlds in which that kind of action is performed (and similarly for outcome-kinds, character-kinds, and so on). As the members of these sets are spread across all possible worlds, these sets, which constitute the first-order kind properties of belonging to a certain kind, are similarly spread across all worlds.

At this point, either a given kind-trope set (action-kind, outcome-kind, character-kind, and so on) instantiates a given normative property or it does not. Either way, there is only one case to consider, the one set spread across all possible worlds. It thus cannot be that a given action-kind of, say, being a deliberate hurtful lie instantiates the property of being wrong in some possible worlds but not in others. The fact that if this action-kind instantiates the property of being wrong, for example, it does so necessarily, therefore follows from taking normative properties to be second-order properties of the kind properties and from the previous trope-theoretic account of the nature of the kind-properties (they, as first-order properties, consist of sets that are spread across all worlds).<sup>7</sup> We also already

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higher-order property of wrongness here as the set of the different first-order sets of the kind tropes (McKittrick 2018, §1.1.1). Such a view would again lead to metaethical naturalism and thus fail to support the autonomy assumption for the reasons explained above in §1. I am assuming that sets are spatio-temporally located when and where their members are. Thus, in so far as those members are scattered across space, time and worlds, the resulting set and the compresent higher-order tropes are likewise located across space, time and worlds.

<sup>7</sup>This feature of all set-theoretic accounts of properties is well known. David Lewis put it in the following way: ‘A universal can safely be part of many worlds because it hasn’t any

saw that it is non-problematic to think that all action-tokens (or outcome-tokens or characters-tokens or ...) that share all and only the same base properties belong to the same kinds. With the help of these ideas, the outlined trope-theoretic framework can thus vindicate the supervenience assumption, according to which it is conceptually necessary that when something has a normative property, it is metaphysically necessary that anything that has the same base properties as that thing must also have that same normative property.

The trope-theoretic framework can also vindicate the autonomy assumption as it is itself neutral between the naturalist and non-naturalist views in metaethics, and so the defenders of those views can in this framework focus on arguing about what kind of intrinsic features the normative properties have. There are three main reasons for this.

Firstly, in this framework, the property of wrongness, for example, consists of the set,  $S_w$ , that has as its members all the wrongness property instances,  $W_1, W_2, \dots, W_n$ . If we then transpose the metaethical debate to this framework, the naturalists are claiming that we can know whether an action-kind bears one of these wrongness property instances a posteriori, the wrongness property instances have causal powers, they play a part in causal explanations and laws of nature, they are a part of the subject matter of the natural sciences, and so on. This is because these tropes are either reducible to other natural property tropes or they are distinct natural property tropes themselves. The non-naturalists are, in contrast, claiming that we can only know a priori whether a given action-kind bears a wrongness trope, and such a trope does not have causal powers, it does not play a part in causal explanations or laws of nature or belong to the subject matter of the natural sciences. As normative property instantiations, such tropes are *sui generis*. In principle, we can then have more substantial and focused debates about which of these views is right. Our metaphysical framework concerning the nature of properties does not now settle that debate.

The second advantage of this metaphysical framework is that, unlike transcendent realism, it is itself acceptable for both naturalists

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accidental intrinsics' (Lewis 1986, p. 206 n. 6). Lewis is right to point out that this is only true for the intrinsic higher-order properties—the properties a first-order property has due to its intrinsic nature. This means that, for the trope-theoretic response to the supervenience challenge to work, normative properties must be intrinsic properties of action-kinds.

and non-naturalists. Many of the most prominent trope theorists have, after all, been explicitly metaphysical naturalists (Campbell 1990; Schaffer 2001). They have thought that the tropes exist in time and space and are a part of the causal nexus of the reality we belong to that is studied by the natural sciences. As naturalists, these trope theorists have furthermore explicitly relied on tropes to explain, for example, the causal powers of objects. Adopting the framework does not therefore require any new metaphysical commitments that naturalists (or non-naturalists) would reject.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, unlike nominalism, trope theory also leaves logical room for the non-natural properties because in this framework the non-naturalists can block Jackson's argument against them (Suikkanen 2010). We can return to the natural property  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$  which all and only wrong actions have (§II). According to trope theory, metaphysically speaking, this property is the set of its instantiations—the set of being  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$  tropes, where these tropes are constituents of the action-tokens that are wrongful actions. The property of wrongness, however, is according to the outlined view the set of wrongness tropes ( $S_w = \{W_1, W_2, \dots, W_n\}$ ), where each one of these tropes is compresent with a different set of first-order tropes that constitute the different action-kind properties, which are the primary bearers of wrongness.

We can then notice that these two sets ( $S_w$  and the set of being  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$  tropes) have different members. One of these sets has the wrongness tropes as its members and the other the disjunctive property tropes. Furthermore, the tropes that belong to these sets are also instantiated by very different kinds of things. The wrongness tropes are instantiated by action-kinds, whereas the  $D_1$ -or- $D_2$ -...-or- $D_n$  tropes are instantiated by action-tokens. As a result, these sets just cannot be the same set, and so Jackson's argument to the conclusion that normative properties must be identical with the underlying necessarily coextensive natural properties fails. For all these reasons, then, we can conclude that trope theory seems to offer us a neutral framework in which metaethicists are able to investigate the question of whether normative properties are natural or non-natural properties by focusing on the features of the normative properties themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Here I assume that there are both realist and anti-realist ways of understanding *possibilia* in ways that are acceptable for both naturalists and non-naturalists.



## VI

*Conclusion.* This paper has suggested that, as more general frameworks of how to understand the nature of properties, nominalism and immanent realism about universals support metaethical naturalism, transcendent realism conflicts with the core ontological commitments of metaethical naturalists, and trope theory is the only framework that offers us a neutral space in which the naturalism versus non-naturalism question can be investigated on its own terms.

What should we then conclude from these observations? There are really three ways to go. If you believe that the trope theory is plausible, then nothing should stop you from taking part in the metaethical debate as it has been traditionally understood. If you are a metaethicist who is convinced that the metaethical debate is worth having but have no prior views about the nature of properties, then you should become a defender of the trope theory. Finally, if you find nominalism, immanent realism or transcendent realism to be the most plausible view of properties, then the metaethical debate is dissolved from your perspective. As a nominalist or an immanent realist you are led to naturalism in metaethics, and as a transcendent realist you are likely to be drawn to some form of non-naturalism.

There is also, however, a more general conclusion to be drawn. This is that the two debates discussed in this paper certainly seem much more intertwined than previously assumed, and so metaethicists should pay much more attention to the work done in the metaphysical debate, and vice versa. These debates just cannot be explored separately, or so I have suggested.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Birmingham*  
*Edgbaston*  
*Birmingham B15 2TT*  
*UK*  
[j.v.suikkanen@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.v.suikkanen@bham.ac.uk)

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