

# NATURALISM AND TRIVIALITY

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## Abstract

The paper examines Derek Parfit's claim that naturalism trivializes the agent's practical argument and therefore abolishes the normativity of its conclusion. In the first section, I present Parfit's charge in detail. After this I discuss three possible responses to the objection. I show that the first two responses either fail or are inconclusive. Trying to avoid Parfit's charge by endorsing irreductionist naturalism is not a solution because this form of naturalism is metaphysically untenable. Non-descriptive naturalism, on the other hand, does not answer the pressing concern behind Parfit's charge. I conclude that we had better turn to the third response: Peter Railton's vindicatory reductionism. However, I also argue that naturalism can only avoid triviality in this way if it is able to respond to further challenges concerning the vindication of the reduction it proposes. Hence, though not a knockdown argument as it is intended to be, Parfit's charge can still pose a threat to naturalist accounts of normativity.

## **I. Naturalism and Parfit's objection**

Ethical naturalists hold that normative judgments owe their normativity to the facts they refer to in the natural world. Not everyone is happy with this claim, however. Derek Parfit has recently attacked naturalism through its 'substance'; he has claimed that the problem with naturalism is its insistence on reducing ethical properties to natural properties. This is a problem, he thinks, because reduction trivializes the agent's practical reasoning and thus abolishes the normativity of its conclusion. My aim in this paper is to investigate this objection. To this end, we first need a suitable account of what ethical naturalism (from now on: naturalism) is and in this context we then have to locate Parfit's charge. This will be the topic of the present section. After this, in the second section I consider three responses to Parfit's objection. Detailed analysis of these attempts leads me to the claim that naturalism can only avoid Parfit's charge if it is able to respond to the challenge of vindication. I thus conclude that while Parfit's charge does not qualify as a

knock-down argument against naturalism, it may nevertheless cause trouble for it.

We do best in understanding contemporary naturalism by introducing a distinction between methodological and substantive naturalism. (Railton 1990, p. 155; 1993b, p. 315) On the former view, naturalism adopts an *a posteriori* explanatory approach to an area of human practice or discourse such as epistemology, semantics or ethics; on the latter view, naturalism proposes an interpretation of the concepts in some area of practice or discourse in terms of *natural* properties or relations. Since it is notoriously difficult to define what a natural property is, I will not attempt to give a precise definition.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I will act on the supposition that such an account can be given. This assumption is not only needed to get the argument going but is also legitimate given the similar definitional problems other realist theories, particularly non-naturalist accounts have to face. Finally, since my aim in this paper is to attack naturalism and not to defend it, making the assumption also makes my argument more charitable from the naturalist point of view.

Let me first turn to *methodological naturalism*. There are two things to note here. First, someone can be a methodological naturalist without being a substantive naturalist - think of Allan Gibbard's evolutionary grounding of norm-expressivism or Richard Hare's defence of prescriptivism on the basis of linguistic intuitions. Second, a substantive naturalist need not be naturalist in the methodological sense. In particular, certain naturalists use *a priori* conceptual analysis as their method. Three attempts deserve particular attention. David Lewis gives a direct naturalistic definition of value, while both Michael Smith and Frank Jackson employ a two-stage analysis.<sup>2</sup> (Lewis 1989; Jackson 1998, Chapters 5-6; Smith 1994, Chapter 2) The idea is to see whether ethical concepts

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<sup>1</sup> There are many attempts in the offing. A popular choice is to say that natural properties are those with which it is the business of the natural sciences, or of psychology to deal, or which can be completely defined in the terms of these. See Moore (1903), p. 25; Wiggins (1993), p. 303; Smith (1994), p. 17; Copp (2003). But there are other attempts in the literature. For a good overview of different definitions and the difficulties they face see Ridge (2003).

<sup>2</sup> We should note that there is an important difference between their accounts of the process, which concerns the reductiveness of the conceptual phase. Jackson's 'network-analysis' is given in reductive, natural terms, whereas Smith's 'summary-style' analysis does not refrain from using normative, unreduced terms. See Jackson (1998), Chapter 5; Smith (1994) Chapter 2 for details.

(conceptual stage) do indeed instantiate in the world (substantive stage). To use Smith's example, if we want to know whether there are witches in the world, we first clarify our concept of a witch: we set up conditions a person has to fulfil in order to qualify as a witch. Then, armed with these conditions, we check if there is anyone in our world who fulfils these conditions, that is, if there are witches in our world. (Smith 1994, p. 64)

Next is *substantive naturalism*. The two main approaches here are analytical naturalism and non-analytical naturalism. The former has four characteristics. (Jackson 1998, p. 144-6) First, it rejects any form of methodological naturalism and opts for conceptual analysis with all the variations mentioned above. Second, it can be neutral on whether the analysis in the conceptual phase gives the meaning of the ethical term in the descriptive sense, i.e. the meaning of a term is given by the property that a competent speaker associates with it, or it only causally fixes its reference in Kripke's sense. Third, it allows that the discovery of the identity between ethical and non-ethical properties in the substantive phase might take place *a posteriori*, i.e. empirically. Fourth, it can but need not hold that the identities thus discovered are themselves analytic and thus *a priori*. Finally, in all cases, whenever meaning in the descriptive sense is concerned, two options are open. (Brink 1989, p. 152-3) Either the ethical term is synonymous with the non-ethical term in which case ethical properties are identical with non-ethical properties; or the non-ethical term implies the meaning of the ethical term in which case ethical properties form a subset of non-ethical properties.

Non-analytical naturalism comprises of two positions. One is the idea of reforming definitions. It is similar to analytical naturalism in that it appeals to an *a priori* analysis of ethical terms but is different from it in that it doesn't intend its account to be an analysis of our *actual* use of the term but rather as a substitute for it. (Brandt 1979, Chapter 1; Rawls 1971, 60-63§) The other position is non-analytical naturalism proper: it makes no claim about meaning, only about properties. It comes in two distinct forms. Either it is the view that ethical properties are reducible to natural properties and we can give synthetic identity statements about them. (Railton 1997, 2003a) Or it is the claim that ethical properties are not reducible to natural properties, though they are nothing over and above natural properties. (Sturgeon 1985a, 1985b, 1986a, 1986b; Boyd 1988, Miller 1979, 1985; Brink 1989, Chapter 6) Non-analytical

naturalism achieves this by denying two theses. One is the descriptive theory of meaning mentioned above; the other is the claim that all necessary truths are analytical. It instead settles for Kripke's causal theory of reference and holds that there are *a posteriori* necessities. As the comparison shows, it is this last claim that really distinguishes it from analytical naturalism.<sup>3</sup>

We now have a proper understanding of naturalism at hand. It is time to turn to Parfit's objection.<sup>4</sup> (Parfit 1997, pp. 123-4) Applied to the analytical version of what we may call the Desire-Based Reasons Model (or, for short, the Model), the objection takes the following form.<sup>5</sup> The normative claim:

(1) *P* is a reason for *A* to *f*

means

(2) There is some *e* such that *A* actually desires *e*, and, given that *p*, *f-ing* subserves the prospect of *e*'s being realized (or continuing to be realized).

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<sup>3</sup> We can compare this with the terminology of others. Michael Smith's 'definitional naturalism' is what I call analytical naturalism where analysis is wholly reductive, while his 'metaphysical naturalism' corresponds to my non-analytical naturalism. See Smith (1994), pp. 26-7. Frank Jackson's 'analytical descriptivism' covers those analytical naturalist views where analysis is given in purely reductive terms, his 'metaphysical naturalism' is my substantive naturalism that includes both analytical and non-analytical versions and his 'ontological naturalism' corresponds to my non-analytical naturalism. See Jackson (1998), p. 146. Finally, what Darwall, Gibbard and Railton (1997), pp. 24-30 calls post-positivist non-reductionism includes analytical views that allow for meaning implication as well non-analytical theories that opt for constitution; and what they call reductionism includes analytical views that restrict discussion to synonymy as well as non-analytical accounts that favour identity.

<sup>4</sup> The objection first appears in a footnote in Sidgwick (1907), p. 26n. Gibbard (1990), p. 33 also makes use of it in his rejection of naturalism. A detailed presentation of the argument, one to which my discussion owes a lot, could be found in the earlier version of Parfit (ms), Chapter 2; it is, however, no longer included in the pre-ultimate draft of the manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> Parfit, among other views, also uses the Model as his example, but he gives two competing formulations, both different from the one I use above and which I borrow from Dancy (2000), p. 28. Hence my move above amounts to a simplification of Parfit's discussion. But since Parfit's problem concerns the reductionism of the Model, details of formulation don't matter from his perspective. About these details see Dancy (2000), pp. 15-19, 26-29; Hubin (1996), (1999), (2003); Noggle (1999).

If we accept (2), Parfit claims, we can no longer believe that we have a reason to do what satisfies our desires. We can only believe that to satisfy our desires is to satisfy them and this is a tautology that makes practical reason claims trivial and thus non-normative. We can call this, following Parfit, the *triviality objection*.

This might be obscure, so let me put this point in a different way. Take the example of Joe who wants to climb Mount Everest. According to the model, his reasoning would have the following form:

- (3) Climbing Mount Everest satisfies a desire of mine that I now have

given that

- (4) When applied to acts, the term ‘I have a reason to *f*’ means, “I actually desire *e*, and *f*-ing subserves the prospect of *e*’s being realized (or continuing to be realized)”

I conclude

- (5) I have a reason to climb Mount Everest.

The triviality objection says the following. Joe’s conclusion in (5), though through a further premise (4), only restates his premise in (3). Can the truth of (4) help the naturalist out? It cannot. Since (4) is a definitional truth, it uses the very same concepts and designates the same properties, as does (3). Therefore it makes the concept of reason redundant, a mere abbreviation for ‘satisfies my desire that I now have’. But it just cannot matter to show how a certain term, in this case the term ‘reason’, is used. It simply does not make a difference if we show that we can refer to some longer term in a shorter, more convenient way: that we can use the word ‘reason’ for it. But unless these concerns receive an answer, Joe cannot properly believe that he has a reason to act if and only if acting satisfies a desire of his; he can only believe that to satisfy his desires is to satisfy those desires, full stop. And this, as it stands, abolishes the normativity of his belief: he cannot believe that he *should* do what his desires command him to do. So he cannot believe, as a particular instance of it, that he *should* climb Mount Everest.

So far we have only considered the analytical version of the Model. Is it not possible that *non-analytical* naturalism can somehow avoid triviality? After all, it is ‘easy’ (technically, not philosophically) to formulate the Model as stating a synthetic truth, so it is important to see whether such a shift in substance can help. Parfit thinks it cannot. His point is this. (Ibid.) Take our previous example and give it a non-analytical turn. Instead of (4), the non-analytical premise would then be:

- (6) As another way of reporting the natural fact or ascribe the property (3) refers to, I can say that there is a reason for me to climb, or that I should climb.

But again: (6) only says that (3) could be expressed in another way; otherwise it reports the same fact. That is, to say that climbing fulfils Joe’s desire and to say that he should climb is to report the same fact. And, though now the terms (3) and (5) uses are different, they are not different in the relevant respect: they are both descriptive, expressing beliefs of the agent, which, by property identity, are about the same part of the natural world. Consequently, (5) adds nothing to Joe’s original reasoning: from the perspective of the triviality objection it makes no difference whether triviality arises because (3) and (5) mean the same or because the two report the same fact. Hence the non-analytical form of the Model is just as much unable to account for the normativity of reason-claims as does the analytical version.

The triviality objection as presented here is different from well-known objections against naturalism. To begin with, it makes no claim about the impossibility of deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. This claim, traditionally known as the ‘is/ought’ thesis, has two interpretations, one logical (no normative statements can be derived from statements that involve no normative terms), the other motivational (normative judgments necessarily motivate, hence cannot be derived from statements of facts). (Brink 1989, pp. 145-9; Smith 1994, pp. 190-3; Jackson 1998, pp. 139-142) The triviality objection, however, requires no mention of either logical or motivational mistakes. Although in a sense it is also about how to bridge the gap between the normative and the non-normative, it need not postulate either of these failures to make its point. Furthermore, it is perhaps less obvious but is still clear enough that the triviality

objection is different from Moore's open question argument. Very schematically, in Moore's view no naturalist definition of normative terms is adequate since such definitions always leave questions about what is right, rational etc. open and this would be impossible if they were to function as definitions. (Moore 1903, pp. 10-21; Ayer 1936, pp. 103-106; Brink 1989, pp. 152-3, 162-3) The triviality objection, however, is not dependent upon claims about meaning. It has troubles with the reductionist element in naturalism and as such it is indifferent to whether that reduction takes an analytic or non-analytic form.

Also, the triviality objection poses a real challenge to the naturalist. I emphasize this because one might wonder whether the naturalist really needs to look for a response to the triviality objection. More precisely, the naturalist might give a response, but a debunking one. He can admit that his understanding of normativity is trivial, but add that he has no problem with this view of normativity and, if it comes to that, he is willing to bite the bullet. The alternative, non-trivial view of normativity, he can point out, might be a valid one but to appeal to is question-begging. At the moment we just have two competing readings of normativity and an independent argument is needed to prove the truth (or falsity) of either.<sup>6</sup> I don't think this is so. The issue here, rather, is where the onus of proof lies and I believe it lies on the naturalist side. This is because our ordinary understanding of normativity goes beyond the account the naturalist so happily embraces. I don't know how to prove this, but it seems to me that accepting the naturalist proposal would leave normative inquiry impoverished. (cf. Gibbard 1990, p. 33-4) We think – again, this is my impression - that when one reasons about what to do, one takes oneself to arrive at a genuine normative conclusion, not just a repetition of what was already involved in one's premises. It is this phenomenon the triviality objection articulates and that naturalists must account for.

## **II. Three responses to Parfit's objection**

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<sup>6</sup> Many have put this response to me on behalf of the naturalist (regardless whether they are naturalist themselves). I remember Tony Booth and Kaj Strandberg, in particular.

I see three ways naturalists can accomplish this task. I first deal with the two that are unsuccessful leaving the third, more promising one to the end. The response that immediately comes to mind is that naturalists need not be reductionist, but can also endorse some form of *irreductionism*. That is, they need not hold that the relation between properties is that of identity; instead, they can say that ethical properties are irreducible properties, though they are nothing over and above natural properties. In this case the triviality objection does not work. To take Joe's argument above, his conclusion reports an ethical fact that is not identical with the natural fact that his premise designates, but is still not itself an additional property. Consequently, Joe's reasoning is not trivial; hence its conclusion preserves normativity.

Let me set aside the issue whether the irreductionist move could avoid collapsing into reductionism.<sup>7</sup> There is another, equally serious problem lying here. To see it, we should turn to metaphysics. Here we first find that the irreductionist approach is anything but self-evident. Irreductionists normally appeal to supervenience in picturing the relation between ethical and natural properties. However, this is an idea that forms part of many positions other than irreductionist naturalism and these positions view it differently. (Darwall, Gibbard and Railton 1997, p. 27) Reductionist naturalists think that the ethical supervenes on the non-ethical because the two are identical; non-naturalists claim that the ethical supervenes on the non-ethical because the ethical is non-natural; finally, non-cognitivists deny that supervenience would occur on the level of properties at all and instead claim that it holds between concepts. So the irreductionist reading of supervenience certainly needs further explanation.

The only attempt I know of to explain this strong relation between properties in irreductionist terms is David Brink's notion of constitutional supervenience. (Brink 1989, pp. 157-8) He gives two

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<sup>7</sup> The dilemma hidden here is this. Irreductionism insists that it is still a form of naturalism. But if it is, then one can start to wonder whether it is really different from reductionism. After all, if inseparability is enough to save naturalism, what difference remains between the two approaches? Along general lines, both Parfit (ms: earlier draft), Chapter 2 and Darwall, Gibbard and Railton (1997), pp. 27 poses this question. In my discussion I set aside this reaction because it doesn't answer the crucial ontological challenge: that even if entities do not exist independently, they are still separate ontologically – and this is enough for the irreductionist strategy to get off the ground. I thank János Kis for pressing me on this point.

reasons to support the proposal. Both are versions of the multiple realization argument and appeal to an analogy with other fields. The first is introduced like this:

“For example, a table is constituted by, but not identical with, a particular arrangement of microphysical particles, since the table could survive certain changes in its particles or their arrangement. Similarly, moral properties are constituted by, but not identical with, natural properties if, though actually realized by natural properties, moral properties can be or could have been realized by properties not studied by the natural or social sciences.” (Brink 1989, p. 158)

The question is whether this example does the work Brink wants it to do. I think it does not. The reason is the following.

Brink’s example employs an understanding of property that appears to be metaphysically flawed. (McNaughton and Rawling 2003, pp. 39-40) He mentions a physical object and compares it to a property. It is, moreover, important for Brink that the analogy is between these two entities and not between two properties, i.e. the property of being a table and the property of being right.<sup>8</sup> For it is hard to see how he can get the kind of relation he is postulating between microphysical particles and properties: these are just two different kinds of things. If, however, he employs the analogy in its original form, he puts himself in trouble. This is because, metaphysically speaking, objects ‘behave’ differently than properties. Let me explain. Take the three rival metaphysical theories. On nominalism, there are *no* such things as properties: only concrete particulars exist that can only be in one place at any given time, and only one of them can be in the same place at the same time. Hence this ‘understanding’ of property would not help Brink to establish his analogy. On realism, properties do have an independent existence but they are taken to be abstract universals: they can be at many places at the same time, and many of them can be in the same place at the same time. This means that one can move from world to world and identify *instances* of properties just as one can identify tables. But one cannot identify an *entire* property throughout the possible worlds: properties are trans-world entities and thus are unsuitable for Brink’s purposes.

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<sup>8</sup> Both Gianfranco Pellegrino and Anders Strand asked me why the alternative reading is not possible.

Can we find refuge in the third of the theories, trope theory? I doubt it. On this view there are such things as properties (*qua* realism), but they are particulars and not universals (*qua* nominalism). More precisely, a property is taken to be a class or set of exactly similar or resembling tropes where individual tropes are understood as *instances* of the given property. For a substance to have or to instantiate a property is for one of its tropes to exactly resemble all of the tropes that comprise that property (or for the set of tropes that is the substance to overlap the set of tropes that is the property). (McDonald 1998, pp. 35-40) And this shows that trope theory cannot provide hope for Brink either. For on this view properties are again trans-world entities. One can identify *instances* of properties from world to world just as one can identify tables, but one cannot identify a property *per se* (an entire property, as I called it above). Hence Brink's analogy with the table remains unfounded.

Nor does the second analogy help his case; in fact, it makes things worse. It appeals to the one/many relationship that, according to some functionalists in the philosophy of mind, exists between mental states and physical systems. Brink's claim is that we find the same situation in morality. He says: "For example, both the property of injustice and particular instances of injustice, in whatever social and economic conditions they are actually realized, could have been realized by a variety of somewhat different configurations of social and economic properties and property instances. Moral properties could have been realized by indefinite and perhaps infinite sets of natural properties." (Ibid.) Jackson makes a similar proposal. (Jackson 1998, p. 141) Recall his (and Smith's) account of the two-stage process. Revising his original idea that we have identity relations throughout the stages, Jackson at one point says that his conceptual analysis tells nothing about the metaphysics of rightness. Drawing on the analogy with the distinction between role and resultant property in the functionalist theory of mind, he points out that the property of rightness need not be identical with the property that we find in the world in the substantive phase of the analysis. For it might be that the property of rightness is the *second-order* property of having that property.

However, once one takes over the multiple realization argument from the philosophy of mind, one should not be silent about what comes with it. In particular, one standard objection against irreductionist functionalism seems to have an analogue in

ethics as well: Jaegwon Kim's causal exclusion argument. With significant simplification, Kim's claim is that if the first-order physical property ('realizer property') can be a sufficient cause of a physical event (what is called the 'physical closure' principle), and we suppose that the mental supervenes on the physical in the irreductionist way, then there appears to be no causal work left for the second-order mental property ('role property') to do. (Kim 1999, p. 37, 53) It seems that the role causality plays in the mental causation debate is taken over by truth in the corresponding ethical discussion.<sup>9</sup> For Jackson clearly supposes that both first-order properties as well as second-order properties can play the role of truth-maker in the conceptual phase. (Jackson *ibid.*) But if this is so, then we seem to have no need to complicate the picture by introducing the second-order property: there is just no truth-making work left for it to do. Its role as a truth-maker is entirely pre-empted by the first-order property. The analogy with philosophy of mind is thus a dangerous consideration to appeal to.<sup>10</sup>

I conclude that irreductionist naturalism must give way to reductionist naturalism and then the triviality objection is allowed to do its job: we are back where we started. But an advocate of naturalism might still find my treatment unfair. He might claim that I am forgetting something crucial about the position: that it is a claim about concepts, not just about properties. And this is a striking omission for naturalists need not hold - what I took them to be holding - that ethical concepts are exclusively descriptive. Perhaps some form of *non-descriptive naturalism* is true, and then the concepts that appear in the agent's reasoning will be different in kind thereby avoiding the trap of triviality.

There are three problems with this proposal but they are all aspects of the same basic issue. Let us take a closer view at the structure of non-descriptivist naturalism. It must navigate between two equally unacceptable positions: non-cognitivism on the one

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Anders Strand for calling my attention, even if indirectly and perhaps not deliberately, to the possible analogy between the two fields.

<sup>10</sup> To be fair, we must note that Jackson himself favours the reductionist reading. Here is what he says about rightness (referring to Smith 1994, pp. 74-6): "We want rightness to be what makes an action right, not in the causal sense but in the sense of being what ought to be aimed at... [W]hat ought to motivate us, and what we should value and pursue, is not the moral status of our actions per se, but the goods that confer the moral status." See Jackson (1998), p. 141. Hence, he concludes, we'd better opt for first-order properties instead of the second-order properties that possess them.

hand and descriptivist naturalism on the other. The way it does this is by combining the non-descriptivism of the former with the realism of the latter. The result is a hybrid view according to which the semantic role of ethical predicates is both to refer to robust ethical properties *and* to express some non-cognitive state of mind. There are well-known difficulties with constructing a defensible non-descriptivist side (basically all the relevant objections to non-cognitivism belong here, plus some specific claims concerning certain naturalist proposals), but there is another problem characteristic of this position only: how to combine the different aspects so that they fit properly together? Keeping them separate without establishing any connection between them seems a rather implausible solution. After all, we are talking about *one* mental state, so it is an obvious requirement to say something about how the sides involved in that state exist together.

However, I do not regard this as a daunting obstacle. There are proposed solutions in the literature both on the naturalist and the non-naturalist side (for a recent naturalist attempt see Copp 2001). My concern is driven more by two corresponding problems. First, the position as described here seems unstable. For it is just difficult to see what explanatory advantage non-descriptivist naturalism has over non-cognitivism and descriptivist naturalism. Accounting for motivational judgment internalism – the thesis that normative judgments necessarily motivate – is a good candidate, but non-cognitivism takes this hurdle by construction, whereas descriptivist naturalism has its own solutions (e.g. Smith 1994, pp. 177-181; Jackson 1998, pp. 157-160). At the same time, both rival accounts are simpler. Non-cognitivism can do without any metaphysical commitment, while not denying that ethical claims may refer to plain natural facts; and descriptivist naturalism can do without any non-descriptivist commitment, while not denying that ethical claims may have motivational aspects. The question therefore is what explanatory work is left for the additional features of non-descriptive naturalism to do, and the answer seems to be that none.

The third problem takes us back to the context of the triviality objection. Recall the way non-descriptive naturalism aims to overcome the objection. It says that while the agent's reasoning begins with purely descriptive premises, his conclusion will be an ethical claim that has a non-descriptive aspect as well. But it is unclear whether this response delivers, by the theory's own light, the

result it is intended to. For the objection's driving thought is that naturalism cannot bridge the gap between the agent's non-normative premise and his normative conclusion because the latter simply repeats the former. Now it is true that the theory under discussion adds something to the agent's reasoning, namely that its conclusion is not purely descriptive. Yet, it is unclear whether thereby it also bridges the gap between the normative and the non-normative. After all, non-descriptive naturalism is still a realist theory, hence it must explain normativity with reference to a fact of the world, in this case the natural world. But if ethical judgments become ethical and thus normative by virtue of representing certain natural facts (this is their *primary* semantic role), the non-descriptive element of naturalism will not add anything *normatively significant* to the agent's reasoning. Therefore it is at least unclear whether non-descriptive naturalism faces up to the triviality objection in the first place.

I don't see how naturalists can deny this.<sup>11</sup> They just cannot take the alternative way because that would be endorsing something like Allan Gibbard's revised account of his non-cognitivism. (Gibbard 2003, Chapters 1, 2, 9) He too accepts non-analytic naturalism but gives it a non-cognitivist turn, holding that normativity is best captured by a non-cognitivist analysis (as he earlier put it, our normative terms carry an element of endorsement that only non-cognitivism can capture). This would be a way of bridging the gap the triviality objection uncovers; but this would also be a non-cognitivist and not a naturalist way to do this. Alternatively, the non-descriptivist naturalist might try to give us a hybrid account of normativity. But I just don't see how this would go: how can one claim that normativity is descriptive and non-descriptive at the same time? How can he marry the two without giving up one of them? Finally, there is the possibility of claiming that the presence of the given natural property only signals the presence of normativity: normativity itself still follows a non-descriptivist analysis. However, this is nothing else but a sophisticated (or, in any case, a more complicated) version of a Gibbardian position and as such it invites the same assessment: it is not available to a 'real' naturalist.

There is, however, a third response that is still open to the naturalist, even if he advocates reduction and descriptivism. He has to hold that ethical properties, though reduced to the natural, are

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<sup>11</sup> This short discussion has profited from conversations with Daniel Elstein.

nevertheless genuine properties with an independent role to play in human practice and discourse.<sup>12</sup> Peter Railton calls this project *vindicatory reductionism*. He puts the idea in the following way: “[...] the naturalist who would vindicate the cognitive status of value judgments is not required to deny the possibility of reduction, for some reductions are vindications – they provide us with reason to think the reduced phenomena are genuine.” (Railton 1990, 161) And, at another place, he says: “Some reductions explain away the reduced phenomenon, but others simply explain it – and thereby show it to be well-founded.” (Railton 1993b, p. 317)

To support his case Railton brings examples. The reduction of water to H<sub>2</sub>O or the reduction of salt to NaCl, he says, reinforces rather than impugns our sense that there really is water or salt. In short, it is vindicatory not eliminative. Similarly, to take an example from navigation, the reduction of seaworthiness to a set of physically realized dispositional properties of vessels, does not eliminate talk of seaworthiness; instead, it vindicates our use of the term. (Railton 1990, p. 166) We can find counterexamples too, cases when the reduction did (or would, if proposed) eliminate the reduced term: phlogiston, caloric fluid, vital force, polywater, the non-divine reduction of the sacred are all like that. Hence, Railton points out, whether a reduction is vindicative or eliminative will depend on the specific character of what is being reduced and what the reduction basis looks like.” (Ibid. p. 161)

This is still vague. What makes a reduction in one case eliminative and vindicative in the other? The key term is ‘vindicative information’. The idea is that vindicative reductions provide us with crucial information about the notion reduced by placing it in the world in an unproblematic way. (Railton 1993b, p. 318) Take the reduction of water to H<sub>2</sub>O. In knowing that water is water, what we knew was that water is the colourless liquid that flows in rivers, falls from clouds as rain, etc. But in coming to know that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, we were told that water is a substance whose molecules consist of two hydrogen atoms bonded to one oxygen atom. This is an important piece of information that explains why water exists and takes the form as it does. Hence, though the facts reported are the same, it is important that they can be reported in some other way: for such possibility conveys vindicative information. As opposed to this,

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<sup>12</sup> It was Krister Bykvist whose remarks prompted me to consider this response.

eliminative reductions either do not produce any information or, if they do, it is such that it proves the reduced notion to be redundant or non-existent.

An important element is still missing. Railton himself is a non-analytical naturalist and this may suggest that vindicatory reductionism is open only to non-analytical views. It might be claimed that what matters is reality, not how reality can be described. It is unimportant whether we can say the same thing, or express the same concept, by using different words. But it may have great importance whether, when we say two different things, or use two different concepts, we are referring to the same property, or reporting the same fact. Truths about properties are truths about reality.<sup>13</sup> I don't think this is so. Let me put the idea of vindicatory reductionism in a different way. Recall our claim that Joe's practical reasoning is trivial because his conclusion adds nothing to his premise. Now we see that, on the non-analytical reading at least, this may not be so. For on this reading Joe's premise and his conclusion employ different concepts and this means that their content is given by different propositions (for this view of the identity of propositions see Schick 1991, pp. 72-8). What we have here then is a case of co-reportive propositions, which, we just saw, can be significant if the information it produces is vindicative not eliminative.

However, and this seems to be behind the point above, no such thing happens in the analytical case since here we have the same concepts, thus no co-reporting propositions are present. This is certainly so, but this need not rule out the possibility of producing vindicative information. What contemporary analytical naturalists claim is that by using conceptual analysis we can get a clearer view on concepts we are otherwise familiar with. This is because many facts about these concepts are hidden in the unobvious, opaque conceptual relations of what Jackson calls 'mature folk morality': the morality that we end up with after debate and critical reflection. (Jackson 1998, p. 151) As a result, though analytical views lack the sort of metaphysical background – in the form of separate but co-reporting propositions – that non-analytical accounts share, they may still be vindicative. This happens when they come up with an analysis of a normative concept, which is such that it brings extra

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<sup>13</sup> Originally this claim appeared in Chapter 2 of the earlier draft of Parfit (ms). But, as has been noted previously, this chapter is no longer included in Parfit's manuscript.

information in the way mentioned above. The failure of vindication does not follow from the mere fact of analyticity.

### III. Conclusion

The possibility of informative reduction provides metaphysical grounds for vindication. It shows that it can matter whether some fact can be reported in a different way or that the term some fact refers to has a synonym or implies another in meaning. This brings with it an important reduction in the scope of Parfit's charge. While the triviality objection was presented as a knockdown objection against naturalism *per se*, the possibility of vindicative reduction makes the success of the objection depend on a meticulous case by case analysis. For what we have to do now is to fill up with content the clause 'informative in a vindicatory way'. Conditions are needed that can serve as constraints on the possibility of vindication, and then we have to show that the particular reduction naturalists propose does not meet these conditions.<sup>14</sup> This task, however, should wait for another occasion; until then, Parfit's charge remains a serious but not yet fulfilled promise to refute naturalism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Railton himself suggests two conditions. The first is called tolerable revisionism; the second might be labelled as practical justification. See Railton (1990), pp. 159, 173; (1993a), pp. 282; (1993b), pp. 316, 324. The former claims that the reduction proposed must retain all the central pre-reductive functions of the given term, whereas the latter holds that the naturalist must show why we should deliberate and act in accordance with the property reduction uncovers. Both serve as grounds for further fruitful discussion. Rosati (1995) and (1996) have used the former against the dispositional account of value, while the latter may be connected to Christine Korsgaard's regress argument as it appears in Korsgaard (1996), pp. 38-9, (1997), pp. 240-3; (2003), pp. 110-112; (ms), Lecture 2, pp. 13-15. However, Rosati's objection only concerns one particular type of reduction, whereas Korsgaard's argument is attacked by many. See FitzPatrick (2005), Railton (2003b) and (2004) for influential attempts.

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