

## Moore, Brentano, and Scanlon: A Defense of Indefinability

Miles Tucker

**Abstract:** Mooreans claim that intrinsic goodness is a conceptual primitive. Fitting-attitude theorists object: they say that goodness should be defined in terms of what it is fitting for us to value. The Moorean view is often considered a relic; the fitting-attitude view is increasingly popular. I think this unfortunate. Though the fitting-attitude analysis is powerful, the Moorean view is still attractive. I dedicate myself to the influential arguments marshaled against Moore's program, including those advanced by Scanlon, Stratton-Lake and Hooker, and Jacobson; I argue that they do not succeed.

**Keywords:** reasons, value, fitting-attitudes

G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was revolutionary. But it was not entirely without precedent. Moore writes:

When this book had been already completed, I found, in Brentano's 'Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong,' opinions far more closely resembling my own, than those of any other ethical writer with whom I am acquainted. (1993: 36)

Both Moore and Brentano were metaethical non-naturalists;<sup>1</sup> both believed that intrinsic value is the fundamental concept of axiology;<sup>2</sup> both said that the right may be defined in terms of the good.<sup>3</sup> But their systems differ ontologically. Moore claimed that intrinsic goodness is fundamental and cannot be analyzed. Brentano argued that correctness is primary: to be intrinsically good is to be correct to intrinsically love.

The *Principia* is still widely read and discussed; the *Origin* is mostly forgotten. Yet Brentano seems to have quietly defeated Moore: while few endorse Moore's claims about the indefinability of goodness, the analysis presented in the *Origin* inspired an army of allies,

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Moore (1993: 58-59), Brentano (2009: 17-18).

<sup>2</sup> Moore (1993: 78); Brentano (2009: 18).

<sup>3</sup> Moore (1993: 196-197); Brentano (2009: 13, 32).

including Broad (1930), Brandt (1946), Ewing (1948), Chisholm (1986), Scanlon (1998), Zimmerman (2001), Rønnow-Rasmussen (2011), and Parfit (2011), among others. All are now called fitting-attitude theorists, though not all claim that the good is that which it is fitting to favor; some say instead that a thing is valuable when we are required to respect it, or when we have reason to care about it. But all maintain that the deontic concept they employ—whether it is rightness, fittingness, requirement, or reason—is fundamental and that goodness is derivative. Thus, as Chisholm claimed, such views reduce axiology to deontology.<sup>4</sup>

In general, fitting-attitude theorists advance few arguments; they are content to present their reduction and rely upon its intuitive appeal.<sup>5</sup> But some of Brentano's successors hope for more: they wish to justify their position over the Moorean alternative. Thus Scanlon (1998) claims the Moorean view fails because it suggests that the goodness of a thing gives us additional reason to value it; Jacobson (2011) claims that it does not adequately explain what plural goods have in common; Stratton-Lake and Hooker (2006) say that it cannot account for the supervenience of the moral upon the non-moral.

I defend the Moorean view; I reject such claims. I first present and explicate what I take to be the most popular form of the fitting-attitude view. After, I examine the arguments of Scanlon et al.; I claim that, in each case, the objection to the Moorean program is either unsound or applies equally to the fitting-attitude theory. I conclude that, if there are good reasons to prefer Brentano's program, they have not yet been advanced.

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<sup>4</sup> See his (1986: 53).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Ewing (1948), Chisholm (1986), Zimmerman (2001), and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2011), among others.

## §1: Brentano and Scanlon

Brentano hoped to discover the foundation of our obligations. Like Moore, he claimed that the moral status of our actions is determined by facts about the intrinsic values of our ends. But Brentano was not content to take goodness as primitive; rather, he claimed that:

We call a thing *good* when the love relating to it is correct. In the broadest sense of the term, the good is that which is worthy of love, that which can be loved with a love that is correct.

But though Brentano's view is historically significant, I fear it is unattractive. If goodness is to be defined in terms of correctness, then correctness must be more fundamental than goodness. But this is difficult to maintain: the normative significance of correctness is unclear and Brentano's remarks about its nature are opaque.<sup>6</sup> The Moorean is rightly cautious; he claims that we should not trade a notion we understand, like goodness, for one that we do not.

Most of Brentano's followers encounter the same problem in a milder guise: they suggest that we analyze goodness in terms of fittingness or requirement. But outside of the very analyses they provide, the normative significance of these concepts is unclear.

However, the most recent versions of the fitting-attitude theory are, in this way, a significant advance. The analysis presented in Scanlon's influential (1998), and the nearly identical views defended by Stratton-Lake and Hooker (2006), Parfit (2011), and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2011), explain value not in terms of fittingness or correctness but in terms of

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<sup>6</sup> Some claim that Brentano's concept of correctness is identical with the concept of moral rightness (indeed he uses the German 'richtig' to express it). In this case, Brentano's view would hardly be mysterious; he proposes only to understand the good in terms of the right. However I worry that this interpretation is ultimately untenable. First, note that Brentano's account of moral rightness is defined in terms of correctness (see his (2009: 13, 32-34), Olson (2017)). But if correctness just *is* rightness, this account is, at best, uninformative. Second, Brentano defines *truth* in terms of correctness: what is true is what is correct to affirm (2009: 18). But what is true is not merely what it is morally right for us to believe. So I think correctness is not the familiar concept of moral rightness (although it may be identical with some more opaque, all-things-considered rightness).

*reasons*. The Moorean concern is thus undermined: talk of reasons is ubiquitous in moral philosophy, and the concept has clear normative significance. Further, reasons fundamentalism is currently the most popular and most discussed form of the fitting-attitude analysis. I think it an appropriate standard bearer. (I show in an appendix how our arguments may apply if we prefer some alternative.)

Scanlon's analysis begins with an account of what it is to value goods:

To value something is to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it... (1998: 95)<sup>7</sup>

However, to believe something is valuable is not merely to value it. Rather:

...To claim that something is *valuable* (or that it is "of value") is to claim that others also have reason to value it, as you do. (*Ibid.*)

Thus we may say that, according to Scanlon:

$x$  is good = df. we all have sufficient reason to hold a pro-attitude towards  $x$ .

The list of pro-attitudes is left open-ended. The appropriate response will be determined by the ontological category of the value bearer: states of affairs may call for desire, persons for love, historical artifacts for respect, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

Reasons fundamentalism is therefore attractive: it explains goodness in terms of reasons, a critical normative notion, and is neutral about what kinds of things may be good (and thus consistent with nearly all substantive views in axiology.) But it is incomplete.

Scanlon—and most of his allies—simply define 'good' without explaining what kind of goodness they target, or how it relates to the traditional objects of axiology. This will not

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<sup>7</sup> Scanlon also appeals to certain types of 'pro-actions,' such as maintenance and preservation. For ease of exposition, I will not mention pro-actions, but this omission is not intended to be philosophically significant.

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of variety, I will sometimes speak of 'favor' or 'care'. However, as I use these terms, to care about a thing, or favor it, is simply to hold some pro-attitude towards it.

suffice; if the reasons first view is to compete with the Moorean account, it must provide an analysis of *intrinsic* goodness.

So we should complete our explication of Scanlon's view by restricting it. Parfit suggests that, when analyzing intrinsic value, we should appeal only to reasons that are generated by the intrinsic properties of goods.<sup>9</sup> Thus:

*x* is intrinsically good =df. the intrinsic properties of *x* give everyone sufficient reason to value it.<sup>10</sup>

## §2: Fundamentality and Double Counting

If we accept reasons fundamentalism, we will say that reasons are fundamental and goodness is derivative: *things are valuable because we have reason to value them*. The Moorean reverses the order of explanation. He thinks goodness is fundamental and reasons derivative; he says that *we have reason to value things because they are valuable*.

These claims ground an important difference. Value generates no reasons for the fundamentalist: to say that we have reason to care about Linus because he is good is to say that we have reason to care about him because we have reason to care about him. And this cannot be: the *because of* or *in virtue of* relation is irreflexive. Rather, if the fundamentalist's view is true, then it is only the natural, good-making properties of things that can give us reason.

The Moorean rejects this picture; he claims that the values of things can give us reason to value them too. But this is objectionable, the fundamentalist claims. Scanlon writes:

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<sup>9</sup> See his (2011: 52).

<sup>10</sup> This restriction may also enable us to avoid the wrong kind of reason problem and its ilk. The argument usually appeals to an example; we imagine that if we do not favor a saucer of mud, a demon will punish us. Thus we have reason to favor the mud, but it is not good. (For further discussion see Jacobson (2011) and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2011: 33-42)). No such objection applies to our account; the fact that a demon will punish us is, of course, extrinsic to the mud.

[W]hen I consider particular cases it seems that these reasons [i.e. reasons to value goods] are provided by the natural properties that make a thing good or valuable. So, for example, the fact that a resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it or to recommend it to a friend, and the fact that a discovery casts light on the causes of cancer is a reason to applaud it and to support further research of that kind. These natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for reacting in these ways to things that are good or valuable. It is not clear what *further* work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value, and even less clear how these properties could provide reasons. (1998: 97).<sup>11</sup>

The Moorean view thus generates *too many reasons*.<sup>12</sup> To claim that the goodness of a thing gives us reason to value it commits us to double counting: we must say that when some resort is pleasant and therefore good, we have two independent reasons to value it. Similarly, if Linus is good because he cares for others, then we will have two reasons to value him: because he is good and because he is caring. But this is one reason too many.

However a simple reply is available. Scanlon assumes the Moorean will agree with the fundamentalist that the good-making properties of a thing give us reason to value it. But the Moorean may simply deny this. He may insist instead that we have reason to favor some resort, admire some person, or prefer some outcome *only because* it is good. The good-making

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<sup>11</sup> Emphasis mine. Though I will make use of his examples in what follows, I am admittedly hesitant about the cases Scanlon gives; it is, I think, unclear whether resorts or research projects can have *intrinsic* value. Further, while Scanlon commits himself to the view that reasons are provided only by natural properties, this is not a necessary consequence of this 'reasons first' position; we could instead claim e.g. that we have a reason to perform some act because it would be kind to do so. However, as I understand Scanlon and his allies, they hope to *reduce* morality to the concept of reasons. This reduction would be made more complicated if our reasons are themselves generated by some of the moral facts they wish to analyze in terms of reasons. Further, as long as the moral supervenes upon the non-moral, I suspect that there will always be some natural property that can do the same work. (For example, suppose we say that we have reason to perform some action because it would be kind to do so, and that it would be kind to do so because it would make some person happy. Then Scanlon would, I believe, simply appeal to the fact that this act would make someone happy as a reason to do it.)

<sup>12</sup> I borrow this description of the problem from Schroeder (2007).

properties of a thing matter only in that they *make* things good—and therefore generate a property that itself provides reasons.<sup>13</sup>

Thus when we say that we should favor some resort because it is pleasant, we may speak truly by speaking elliptically: because being pleasant makes things good, and because the goodness of a thing gives us reason to value it, we can appeal to the pleasantness of a thing to justify claims about our reasons to favor it. But there is only one reason in such cases: the reason provided by that thing's goodness. The double counting problem is eliminated.

Of course, the reasons fundamentalist may stubbornly note that, according to the defense suggested, the claim that we have reason to value some resort because it is pleasant is still false, if understood literally. This is admittedly counterintuitive. But the fundamentalist must pay a similar price; as we have seen, he must deny that we have reason to value things because they are valuable. And this is unfortunate also: it is at best strange to deny that we may have reason to care about something because it is good.

Still, I worry this simple reply may open the Moorean view to a different objection. Let *S* be some good. The *because of* or *in virtue of* relation is transitive. Thus the following inference appears legitimate:

- (1) *S* is intrinsically good because it is pleasant.
- (2) We have reason to value *S* because it is intrinsically good.
- (3) So, we have reason to value *S* because it is pleasant.

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<sup>13</sup> We may think this view has unacceptable consequences; it entails that we have intrinsic reason to value only what is good. But this does not imply that an *individual* might not have sufficient reason to value something bad (such as e.g. their taking pleasure in the pains of others). As I understand things, the Moorean view is presumably the opposite of the reasons fundamentalist. If this is so, then the Moorean view is compatible with e.g. the claim that each person has sufficient reason to value their own pleasure, even if it is taken in the pain of others. What cannot be true is that we *all* have sufficient reason to value what is bad. And this claim is, I think, quite plausible.

The Moorean holds that claims like (1) and (2) may be true: he admits that things may be good because they are pleasant and that the values of things give us reason to value them. But he insists that claims like (3) must be false; the natural good-making properties of things cannot give us reason to value them. If this transitivity argument is legitimate, as it appears, then this position cannot be sustained.<sup>14</sup>

A new defense is therefore needed. And surprisingly, it is one we may take from the opposition.

Return to reasons fundamentalism. Scanlon says it entails that we cannot have reason to favor things because they are good. Parfit demurs:

Scanlon claims... [that a] thing's goodness could not give us reasons. Such goodness is the property of having *other* properties that might give us certain reasons, and the second-order fact that we had these reasons would not itself give us any reason[s]... This view needs, I think, one small revision. If some medicine or book is the best, these facts could be truly claimed to give us reason to take this medicine, or to read this book. But these would not be *further, independent* reasons. These reasons

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<sup>14</sup> The Moorean may claim this argument invalid because of equivocation. We say that (1) is a fact about metaphysical explanation: it specifies the good-making features of *S*—the properties that ground and explain its value. But (2) is a fact about reasons; it says that the fact that *S* is intrinsically good provides a reason to value it. Thus the argument is, in fact:

(1\*) The fact that *S* is pleasant grounds the fact that *S* is intrinsically good.

(2\*) The fact that *S* is intrinsically good gives us reason to value *S*.

(3\*) So, the fact that *S* is pleasant gives us reason to value *S*.

And this inference, we say, is invalid. However I worry that the argument might be repaired relatively easily. If some fact *F* gives us a reason, then *F* grounds the fact that we have this reason. So, e.g. if the fact that the resort is pleasant *gives us* reason to visit, then the fact that the resort is pleasant also *grounds* the fact that we have a reason to visit. Thus (2\*) entails:

(2\*\*) The fact that *S* is intrinsically good grounds the fact that we have reason to value *S*.

But the grounding relation is transitive. Thus (2\*\*) and (1\*) entail that:

(3\*\*) The fact that *S* is pleasant grounds the fact that we have reason to value *S*.

However, if some fact grounds our reason to have some attitude, then this fact gives us reason to have that attitude. E.g. if the fact that the resort is pleasant grounds the further fact that we have reason to visit, then I believe the pleasantness of the resort gives us a reason to visit. So I think (3\*\*) entails (3\*). However I would be happy to be mistaken about this—if I am, then it would only be easier to defend the Moorean position.



would be *derivative*, since their normative force would derive entirely from the fact that made this medicine or book the best. That is why it would be odd to claim that we had three reasons to take some medicine: reasons that are given by the facts that this medicine is the safest, the most effective, *and* the best. (2011: 38)

Parfit maintains (i) that the values of things may give us derivative reasons to favor them but (ii) only the natural properties of things generate non-derivative reasons. This approach preserves our intuitions: we may claim, as we do pretheoretically, that both the values of things and their natural properties give us reason to favor them. But we do not need to worry about double counting, Parfit claims: when we consider the strength of our reasons in favor of holding some attitude, we consider only the non-derivative reasons. This is because derivative reasons are not independent, and do not provide additional support.

The position Parfit suggests is therefore attractive. But—though this has not been recognized—Parfit’s position is not available to him or to Scanlon. We cannot have reason to value things because we have reason to value them: as I have stressed, the *because of* relation is irreflexive. And thus, on the accounts they advance, we cannot have reason to value things because they are good—regardless of whether this reason is derivative or non-derivative.

However the position Parfit suggests *is* available to the Moorean; the reflexivity argument does not apply to his program. Further Parfit’s suggestion may, I believe, help us escape the objection posed. Let us say that some fact gives us *derivative* reason to have some attitude just in case it grounds some further fact and this further fact gives us reason, on its own, to have that attitude. And let us say, similarly, that some fact provides *non-derivative* reason just in case it gives us reason to have some attitude, regardless of what other facts it grounds, or makes true.

When combined with the Moorean account, it then follows that (i) the natural good-making properties of things generate derivative reasons but (ii) only the values of things generate non-derivative reasons. Thus for example, the pleasantness of some state gives us derivative reason to value it: its pleasantness makes it good, and this goodness gives us reason to value it. Further, we avoid double counting: derivative reasons only count inasmuch as they make it true that some non-derivative reason obtains. Thus in counting the non-derivative reasons, we have already accounted for the force of the derivative reasons; these non-derivative reasons *contain* the force of the derivative reasons. The objection dissolves.

### §3: Non-derivation and Competition

Still, there are worries for this defense. In an important essay, Stratton-Lake objects: If, then, we are to make sense of the idea of distinct, non-additive derivative reasons, we must think of them as having a weight or strength of their own, but one that does not add to the weight of the basic reason. How are we to make sense of this?...If Parfit is to hold onto his account of a reason as something that counts in favor of an act or attitude, then he owes us an account of how a derivative [reason] can count in favor of something without adding weight. (2017: 89)

We should be clear on the charge. We might think that if reasons *count in favor* of some attitude, and derivative reasons do not *count in favor* of that attitude, then they are not reasons at all. But this argument relies upon a kind of equivocation. Reasons can count in favor of some attitude by being reasons for that attitude (rather than, say reasons against it), or by adding to our *overall* reason to hold that attitude. I take it that something is a reason for some attitude only if it counts in favor of that attitude *in the first sense*. This does not imply that every reason must contribute its total weight to our overall reason to have that attitude—nothing

about the concept *reason* entails that our overall reason to hold some attitude must be equal to the sum of the weights of our individual reasons. Thus derivative reasons *are reasons*—it is just that their contributory force is not equal to their weight.

But, Stratton-Lake asks, how could this be? We need some account of derivative reasons that explains why they do not contribute their weight. The standard is entailment: our account cannot merely suggest how this is possible with metaphors and imaginative language; it must entail that derivative reasons do not provide additional support.

I must admit that my proposal does not do this. And while Stratton-Lake canvases a number of alternative accounts; he (correctly, I believe) claims that none succeed.<sup>15</sup>

Parfit concluded that we should abandon the idea of a derivative reason.<sup>16</sup> I disagree; I think a kind of solution is possible. I argue by analogy.<sup>17</sup> Consider a puzzle in the metaphysics of causation. Suppose a bird has been trained to peck at red patches. Suppose it sees a crimson patch; it pecks. We have then two possible causes: that the patch is red, and that the patch is crimson.<sup>18</sup>

We could say both are causes. But this seems to be double counting. These two events seem instead to *compete* to be the cause of the pecking. To resolve the competition, Yablo (1992) instructs us to reason counterfactually: if the patch had not been red, the bird would not have pecked. But if the patch had not been crimson, the same need not follow. Thus it is the patch being red that is the cause. This is the test of *proportionality*: when causes compete, we

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<sup>15</sup> Schroeder (2007) proposes an interesting and novel account that may explain why reasons are not additive. However his approach has costs; it requires that it is not particular reasons but sets of reasons that have strengths or weights. I find this difficult to accept. But those untroubled by this consequence will have another attractive way of solving this puzzle. See Stratton-Lake (2017) for discussion.

<sup>16</sup> See his (2017).

<sup>17</sup> I am thankful to Bradford Skow for suggesting this kind of defense.

<sup>18</sup> This example is due to Yablo (1992).

should choose the cause that appeals to the property that makes the difference. And the property that makes a difference is *being red* not *being crimson*.<sup>19</sup>

I think much the same applies here. As I see it, we have two reasons that are *competing*. Unlike in the causal case, we must insist both are reasons; the transitivity argument assures us of that.<sup>20</sup> But the transitivity argument does not assure us that both add their weight. So the competition shifts: which reason contributes? Not both: to accept this would be to double the strength of our overall reason. We thus need a rule to decide on a victor.

I have claimed that we should prefer the non-derivative reasons. I think this intuitive. But it might be further justified by appeal to a version of Yablo's proportionality test. Consider our possible reasons to value the resort: (i) because it is pleasant and (ii) because it is good. The Moorean should claim that (i) fails the test: we might have reason to value the resort, even if it is not pleasant. But (ii) passes: we would not have reason to value the resort if it were not good. It is goodness that does the work. Of course, the results generalize: derivative reasons will fail proportionality; non-derivative reasons will pass.

We may protest: I have not done what Stratton-Lake asked. I have not given an account of derivative reasons that entails that derivative reasons for  $\mathcal{A}$  do not add their weight to our overall reason for  $\mathcal{A}$ . But if the causation model is acceptable, then this is not necessary; it need not follow from the *nature* of derivative reasons that they do not add weight. Rather we need to show only that reasons provided by goodness and reasons provided by good-making properties are in competition to add their weight, and then provide a rule to resolve such competitions. The existence of the competition is intuitively justified by appeal to

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<sup>19</sup> The test of proportionality is in fact much more complex—and there is debate about how it should be understood; see Woodward (2010) for discussion. However I believe this very crude form of the test will be clear enough for our purposes.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, if we think the transitivity argument is unsound instead, then this would be just fine for the Moorean; it would make any defense unnecessary.

double counting concerns: we look and see that to add both reasons would be too much (much as we do in the causal case).<sup>21</sup> Nothing further is needed or desirable. Indeed, our account of derivative reasons should not be invoked to justify the *existence* of the competition: after all, the fact that goodness and goodness-making reasons compete has nothing to do with which reasons are derivative and which are non-derivative. Rather, our account of derivative reasons should be invoked only in grounding our rule to resolve such competitions. If we believe derivative reasons should always lose, our account of derivative reasons needs to explain why. And—in conjunction with a version of the proportionality test—I contend our account does just that.

#### §4: The Pluralism Argument

I believe the objections considered do not succeed. Those who prefer the fundamentalist program must provide further argument.

Some appeal to pluralism about intrinsic value. If there are, as the pluralist claims, many fundamentally distinct kinds of intrinsic goods, then there is a further challenge: what unifies these goods? What do e.g. pleasure and beauty have in common that makes them both intrinsically valuable? The Moorean seems to have no explanation: intrinsic goodness is a primitive. But those who follow Scanlon may explain that these goods are all alike in that we have reason to value them. Jacobson (2011) writes:

The motivation for adopting an FA [fitting-attitude] theory becomes clearer when one moves from a single case, especially the paradigmatic good of pleasure, to other good things. Consider a plausible list of intrinsic values: pleasure, beauty, friendship, and knowledge...Someone might wonder what these things have in common, in virtue of

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<sup>21</sup> Or as we do when we look at some organic unity and see that the value of the whole is not equal to the sum of the values of its parts.

which they are good. Of course there may be no answer, if it is just a brute fact that there are four intrinsic goods, which resemble each other simply in having the property of goodness...[But] perhaps what unifies these goods is something about human attitudes. Maybe pleasure, knowledge, beauty, and friendship are all desirable or admirable things, where this means not that we can desire or admire them but that we should (ought, have reason to) do so.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the reasons fundamentalist can say that pleasure and beauty are alike in that we have reason to value them. But the Moorean has no account of what plural goods have in common; because intrinsic goodness is indefinable, we have no recourse for further explanation.<sup>23</sup> Thus we should reject the Moorean view and accept Scanlon's alternative.

I believe this argument is inconclusive. Remember that, according to the reasons fundamentalist:

$x$  is intrinsically good =df. the intrinsic properties of  $x$  give everyone sufficient reason to value it.

Thus to claim that pleasure and beauty are alike in that we have reason to value them is simply to say that they are alike in that they are good. It is thus unclear that the reasons fundamentalist has any explanation of the feature that all and only intrinsic goods share (besides, of course, goodness).

Further, even if we accept that the reasons fundamentalist *can* explain what plural goods have in common, this would not be decisive. This is because the fundamentalist cannot explain what plural goods have in common that makes them reasonable to value. But this

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<sup>22</sup> See also Scanlon (1998: 97-98)—though Scanlon's argument also contains elements of the concern I raise in fn. 24. For further discussion see Stratton-Lake and Hooker (2006).

<sup>23</sup> In fact, I think this argument is somewhat poorly stated. As Tucker (2016) argues, value pluralism cannot be understood as the view that there are many different kinds of intrinsic goods. But for the sake of argument, I will not object here.

need not be a brute fact on the Moorean account: if we connect reasons and value in the way I have suggested, then we may say that we have reason to value these things because they are good.

Thus we are faced not with an argument but with a choice: we may explain why things are good or explain why we have reason to value them. We cannot do both.<sup>24</sup>

### §5: The Supervenience Argument

Moore, Brentano and Scanlon all embrace non-naturalism: their systems declare that goodness is unanalyzable in terms of natural properties. Given this, they must explain the relation between the moral and the non-moral. Of course, the moral facts supervene upon non-moral (or natural) facts—but why?<sup>25</sup>

The explanation is immediate for the naturalist: he thinks moral facts *are* natural facts. And it is unnecessary for the anti-realist: he denies there are such facts. It is thus a special problem for non-naturalists. And since the publication of Blackburn's (1971), critics claim it is a challenge they cannot meet.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> There is another argument about pluralism lurking—but this concerns not value pluralism but pluralism about reasons. It seems on the Moorean view we are committed to a kind of monism about intrinsic reasons; we must claim that we have intrinsic reason to value things only because they are valuable. But it seems that e.g. our reasons to favor a resort are very different from our reasons to favor some line of research. (I am thankful to Peter Graham for making this objection clear to me.) However, this concern can, I believe, be ameliorated in three ways. *First*, it is not clear that either of these things are in fact examples of *intrinsic* goods, and our reasons to value clear examples of intrinsic goods (like different instances of pleasure) appear more homogenous. *Second*, the Moorean view is committed only to monism about non-derivative reasons. Thus our derivative reasons to favor a resort *may* be very different from our reasons to value some line of research. *Third*, though fundamentally we have reason to value things only because they are good, things may be good for very different reasons. Thus there is still a kind of pluralism here—it is simply a little bit deeper in our explanatory chain.

<sup>25</sup> The fundamental concept of moral supervenience is simple enough: we claim that there cannot be a difference in the moral facts without a difference in the non-moral (i.e. natural) facts. This slogan is perhaps best understood as a claim of *strong* supervenience, i.e.:

Necessarily, if a thing  $x$  has some moral property  $F$ , then there is some non-moral property  $G$  (which may be disjunctive, conjunctive, negative, etc.) such that, necessarily, anything that has  $G$  has  $F$ .

For an exhaustive survey of the various interpretations of moral supervenience, see McPherson (2015).

<sup>26</sup> In fact, it is unclear just what Blackburn's concern was—and there is still significant debate. But I am interested only in the supervenience argument as Stratton-Lake and Hooker present it; I believe this is the only version of the supervenience argument that has been advanced in the debate between the Moorean and the fitting-attitude

Hooker and Stratton-Lake argue that, in this way, the two programs are not alike. The reasons fundamentalist can easily explain the supervenience of the moral upon the non-moral; Mooreans cannot. They write:

[O]n Scanlon's view, goodness is not a simple indefinable property, but is the property of having other properties that give us reason to care....[G]iven this account of goodness, there is no mystery why it must supervene upon other properties. It must supervene on other properties, because it is the property those properties have of providing reasons. For Scanlon, reasons just are such properties of things as that they produce pleasure or might lead to an improvement in our understanding of cancer. The reasons to care about things are properties that can be described without use of the concept of 'practical reasons.' Goodness, in turn, is the non-natural property those properties have of providing reasons. (2006: 163-164).

Thus, if we accept Scanlon's view, then the supervenience of the reason facts upon the non-moral facts is analytic; it is a "conceptual truth that if you have a reason to care about A, then there must be something that provides that reason. This something is what the reason supervenes on." And given that the facts about goodness *just are* facts about reasons, this explanation holds for the axiological facts as well.

I believe this argument may succeed only if the Moorean cannot find an equally satisfying explanation of supervenience. However, I think a general explanation of supervenience is available to the non-naturalist, regardless of whether we accept the Moorean position or Scanlon's alternative. Given this, I believe that the special explanation postulated is unnecessary and the claimed advantage of Scanlon's position is illusory.

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theorist. Thus if I can undermine their concern, then I will have defended the Moorean view adequately for my purposes. But I do not pretend that this is the only version of the supervenience argument, nor do I insist that Hooker and Stratton-Lake's argument is related to Blackburn's concern in the way they claim.



We should separate our tasks. Moral facts divide into two categories: moral principles and derived truths.<sup>27</sup> I first show that the supervenience of moral principles is trivial, and therefore does not require explanation. Next, I argue that the supervenience of the derived truths is entailed by the truth of moral principles.

Moral principles differ in subject matter but are alike in form. Begin with right action. It is now standard to say that all such theories assert that:

An act is right if and only if (and because) it is *A*.

Such principles thus (i) specify necessary and sufficient conditions for right action and (ii) tell us what makes right actions right. Thus, for example, the utilitarian theory claims:

An act is right if and only if (and because) it maximizes utility.

And the Kantian theory, the Rossian theory, and so on, may be formulated in the same way.

Something similar is true in axiology. Though the form of such theories has been neglected, any program in axiology must at least specify necessary and sufficient conditions for intrinsic value. Further, if they are to explain the sources of this value, they must specify the properties that make things good. Thus a complete axiological theory will claim that:

A thing is intrinsically good if and only if (and because) it is *B*.

Similarly, I think the correct theory of virtue will claim that:

A state of character is a virtue if and only if (and because) it is *C*.

And so on.

It is widely accepted that if any moral principle is true, it is true necessarily. Moral principles make no appeal to contingencies; they do not depend on any matters that are

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<sup>27</sup> In fact, my strategy echoes Scanlon (2014). Though Scanlon identifies only certain facts about reasons as being necessary, we both agree that (i) we should divide moral facts into a pure or privileged class and an impure class and that (ii) the pure claims may, in some sense, explain the supervenience of the impure moral facts.

accidental. In addition, as Shafer-Landau has stressed, they are *philosophical* theories.<sup>28</sup> And like other philosophical theories, they appear to be both necessary and *a priori*.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the question *why do moral principles supervene upon non-moral facts?* is answered immediately: supervenience is vacuous over necessary facts and thus moral principles supervene on everything. There is nothing to explain.

What of other moral claims?<sup>30</sup> The reason they supervene upon the non-moral facts is, again, immediate: they are connected in exactly the way these principles specify and the connection holds *because* these principles are true. Thus, for example, let *T* be the true theory of right action and let  $F_1 \dots F_n$  be the right making features according to *T*. Then the deontic facts must supervene upon the  $F_1 \dots F_n$  facts. Why? Because *T* is true, and *T* specifies that these are the features that the rightness of acts depends upon. Thus both the supervenience of moral principles and derived truths is explained.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, we may ask: what makes the true moral theory true? I expect that for the non-naturalist there is no answer. But this is a burden that Scanlon and Moore must share. For the reasons fundamentalist, there will be many conditional truths that assert that, when certain facts obtain, we have reason to have certain attitudes. And because Scanlon's program

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<sup>28</sup> See his (2005).

<sup>29</sup> Of course, I do not expect the naturalist or anti-realist to be moved by such concerns. But this should be enough, I think, for the non-naturalist—regardless of whether he subscribes to the Moorean view or Scanlon's alternative. I should note also that the claim that moral principles are *a priori* is not necessary for the suggested defense; it is merely, I think, a reasonable posit for the non-naturalist, regardless of the structure they assign to moral philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, there is a kind of gap in this argument, for there may be moral claims that are not principles but are not contingent (for example, the disjunction of the true theory of right action and the claim that some particular action is wrong). But if such claims hold necessarily then, again, it is not clear that there is anything to explain, since their supervenience on the natural facts is also vacuous. Thus the gap is, I hope, easily bridged.

<sup>31</sup> We might object: what if the facts that the true theory of right action mentions are moral facts, namely about goodness or virtue? Then we have an explanation only of the moral in terms of the moral. However, this dependence cannot continue indefinitely. The right may be explained in terms of the virtues or the good, but unless our total moral theory is to be circular, eventually a non-moral property must be invoked.

takes reasons to be fundamental, these conditional truths will not hold in virtue of other truths.<sup>32</sup>

Further, these conditional truths must be necessary in the same way that other moral principle are. According to Stratton-Lake and Hooker, if some fact *F* provides us with a reason, then this fact is what that reason supervenes on. Thus if we have reason to value Linus because he cares about others, then the fact that we have reason to value Linus supervenes upon the fact that Linus cares about others. However for supervenience to hold, it must then be *necessarily* true that, if Linus is caring, we have reason to value him. Otherwise, supervenience will fail: there will be worlds that are alike with respect to whether Linus is caring but differ over whether this generates reason to value him.<sup>33</sup>

It thus appears to me that the general explanation of supervenience given above is at least as strong as the special explanation postulated by Stratton-Lake and Hooker. I conclude that their objection is unsound.

## §6: Conclusion

I believe that the arguments given to prefer Scanlon's view do not succeed. In each case, the competitors are on roughly equal ground. Ultimately, I find this unsurprising: the view Scanlon has advanced is, in many ways, like the Moorean account: both construct moral philosophy out of a single normative notion; both deny that this notion may be explicated in

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<sup>32</sup> See Scanlon (2014: 2).

<sup>33</sup> We may think the explanation of supervenience given by Hooker and Stratton-Lake simpler than the alternative I suggest. But I think they are on roughly equal ground. This becomes evident when we think not of non-naturalism in general, but instead adopt some particular view of the structure of moral philosophy. E.g. suppose we accept the Moorean position; we reduce all moral notions to the concept of intrinsic goodness. Then to explain moral supervenience we need only appeal to a theory about what things are intrinsically good and why. Such a theory will both explain *why* supervenience holds and (if it is necessarily true) guarantee that it does. To explain the supervenience of the moral upon the non-moral, Hooker and Stratton-Lake need the same thing—namely a reduction of all other moral notions to the concept of *reason* and a necessarily true principle that specifies our reasons.

natural terms. The choice between the two will thus be determined by an overall evaluation of the resulting programs: we must decide whether we wish to build moral philosophy upon goodness or upon reason.

#### Appendix: Alternatives to Scanlon's View

There are many fitting-attitude views. I have attended to Scanlon's: it is the most popular, and, I think, the most attractive. But some may prefer views like Brentano's, which appeal to correctness, or views like Ewing's, which appeal to fittingness.

Begin with the former. According to Brentano:

$x$  is intrinsically good =df. it is correct to intrinsically love  $x$ .

The double counting argument may thus be recast as follows: according to Brentano, the natural properties of things make them correct to love; this makes such things good.

According to the Moorean, the natural properties of things make them good and this makes them correct to love.

But again, this short description belies the options available to the Moorean: in fact, he may accept that both the natural and evaluative properties of things make them correct to love. He may do so by claiming that the goodness of things makes them non-derivatively correct to love, and that the natural properties of things make them derivatively correct to love. Thus our verdict of this argument should, I think, mirror our verdict of Scanlon's argument. (This response runs similarly for the accounts advanced by philosophers like Ewing: we simply replace "correct to love" with "fitting to favor.")

Our reply to the concern about pluralism is also familiar: Brentano can claim that plural goods are alike in that they are all correct to love. It is unclear that this is a true explanation, however. If it is an explanation, then we must admit that the Moorean cannot

give such an answer—but he can explain what plural goods have in common that makes them correct to love. The result is, at worst, a draw. (And *mutatis mutandis* for other fitting-attitude views.)

Finally, supervenience. It is perhaps analytic that, if we have a reason to do something, then there is something that provides that reason; reasons are, in this way, relational. But fittingness and correctness are not relational. Thus, the claim that,

- (i) if something is correct to intrinsically love, then there must be something that makes this so

is no stronger than the claim that

- (ii) if something is intrinsically good, there must be something that makes this so.

I conclude the supervenience argument cannot be advanced if we do not accept Scanlon's program. It is, in this way, different from the other concerns examined.

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