BY WHICH WE MAY BE JUDGED: MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY, MIND-INDEPENDENT TRUTH CONDITIONS AND SOURCES OF NORMATIVITY

By
Maarten van Doorn

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Professor Simon I. Rippon

Department of Philosophy
Central European University
December 2021
Copyright Notice & Statement of Original Authorship

© 2021 – Maarten van Doorn
All rights reserved

I hereby declare that the dissertation contains neither materials accepted for the completion of any other degrees in any other institutions, nor materials previously published by others unless appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference and footnote.

Signature: ______________________

Date: 30-12-2021
Abstract

One of the most widely held philosophical views about the nature of ethics is non-naturalistic moral realism. According to this view, there exist *sui generis* and causally inefficacious properties, which are also inherently normative. Facts about the distribution of these ontologically fundamental properties constitute the *source* of morality. The answers to important normative questions – such as whether happiness matters, what we have reason to do, and so on – hinge, therefore, on the existence and patterns of instantiation of extra metaphysics beyond the natural ways of the world.

Such metaethical theories conceive of truth in ethics as correspondence to mind-independent and non-natural facts. In this dissertation, I critically investigate that conception of ethical truth. Metaphysically, I outline novel ways in which theories positing such a source of morality engenders a dilemma between explanatory power and traditional ‘queerness’ worries. Epistemologically, I develop an argument that the explanatory superfluosness of non-natural facts, defeats the justification of our beliefs in them. Normatively, I argue that non-naturalism has no good explanation of why truths about a non-natural realm should take priority in organizing our lives.

Many hope that our values, purged of messy human contingency, could aspire to correspond with mind-independent, rationally obligatory, and eternal ethical facts. But if the arguments of this thesis are on the right track, we should reject the search for non-natural and mind-independent moral truths. I end by exploring whether my research hints at a positive metaethical view.
# Table of Contents

Copyright Notice & Statement of Original Authorship ............................................................ i
Abstract ................................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................... iii
List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................ v

**Chapter 1:  Introduction** ........................................................................................................ 1
1.1 Overview of This Thesis ..................................................................................................... 1
1.2 A Word about Grounding ................................................................................................. 4

**Chapter 2:  The Metaphysics of Metaethical Non-Naturalism** ......................................... 7
2.1 Introducing Robust Realism .............................................................................................. 8
2.2 The Argument from Queerness ....................................................................................... 14
2.3 The Metaphysics of Normative Explanations .................................................................. 17
2.4 Assessing Non-Naturalism’s Metaphysical Framework .................................................. 38
2.5 Normative Implications of Robust Realism’s Metanormative Theory ............................ 63

**Chapter 3:  The Epistemological Argument against Metaethical Non-Naturalism** ........... 77
3.1 The Epistemological Challenge to Non-Naturalism ......................................................... 77
3.2 Third-Factor Replies ......................................................................................................... 83
3.3 An Explanatory Constraint on Justified Belief ............................................................... 99
3.4 Conclusion and Look Ahead ............................................................................................ 123

**Chapter 4:  The Shortcomings of Non-Realist Cognitivism** ........................................... 125
4.1 What Is Non-Realist Cognitivism? .................................................................................. 126
4.2 The Appeal of Non-Realist Cognitivism .......................................................................... 130
4.3 Scanlon and Skorupski ..................................................................................................... 142
4.4 Parfit .................................................................................................................................. 151
4.5 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 169

**Chapter 5:  Conclusion: Exploratory Reflections on the Source of Morality** .................... 171
5.1 Brief Summary of the Argument ...................................................................................... 171
5.2 Reflections on The Source of Morality .......................................................................... 172
5.3 Do These Arguments Hint at a Positive Metaethical View in Particular? ....................... 174

**Bibliography** ....................................................................................................................... 179
List of Figures

Figure 1. The Grounding Role of Laws ................................................................. 27
Figure 2. Principles as Partial Grounds ................................................................. 31
Figure 3. Principles as Partial Grounds, With Hyperintensional Moral Principles. Note the Redundant – ‘Double’ – Grounding ......................................................... 40
Figure 4. (No) Competing Explanatory Grounds .............................................. 46
Figure 5. Grounding Pluralism ........................................................................... 50
Figure 6. Principles as Partial Grounds Without Metaphysical Necessity .......... 59
Figure 7. Two Ways of Understanding the Evolutionary Debunking Argument ...... 79
Figure 8. Three Ways to Explain Belief-Fact Correlations ................................... 83
Figure 9. Enoch’s Third-Factor Explanation ....................................................... 85
Figure 10. Responding to the Evolutionary Debunking Argument ...................... 96
Figure 11. The Argument from an Explanatory Constraint on Justified Belief ...... 100
Figure 12. Justificatory Loss for Non-Natural Moral Beliefs .............................. 123
Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to Simon Rippon, who has been a wonderfully helpful supervisor, and has read multiple drafts of this thesis – an unenviable undertaking. Simon went way beyond the call of duty in supervising me during my PhD, especially during my first years in Budapest, when we had almost weekly (!) meetings to discuss some paper that confused me or a draft I’d written. So I am particularly grateful to him for helping me to sharpen my thinking during our philosophical discussions, and for his time, perceptive feedback, and general support.

I received three months of much-appreciated intellectual stimulation from David Enoch, when I was a (digital) visiting researcher at the Herbrew University of Jerusalem. Special thanks to David for his helpful feedback and discussion. Matthew Lutz, Pekka Väyrynen, Jonathan Way, Jeroen Hopster, David Weberman, Philip Goff, Ferenc Huoranszki, Kati Farkas, Tim Crane and Howard Robinson also helped me with useful comments or other help in discussion along the way.

Some parts of this dissertation or ideas in it were presented during seminars and conferences: I would like to thank the members of my audiences at Central European University’s Doctoral Work-In-Progress Seminars and Graduate Conferences, Kent University, Radboud University, Utrecht University and Antwerp University for their comments.

I would also like to thank the person for encouraging me to pursue a PhD in philosophy, which I probably wouldn’t have tried to without his support: my graduate supervisor Jan Bransen.

Thanks, as well, to my friends and colleagues at CEU for their warm company and lively philosophy discussions at seminars, colloquia and bars: Rob Hoverman, Zhiwei Gu, Ruben Noorloos, Forrest Schreik, Masahiro Suzuki, Zsolt Kapelner, Valentina Martinis, Kerem Eroglu, Huaming Xu.

There are many other friends who have, not at CEU, but at my hometown in the Netherlands, made my life rather enjoyable and without whom I might not have had the perseverance to pull through when my enthusiasm for academic philosophy was fading. In alphabetical order: Elroy Cocheret, Marieke and Willem van Doorn, Kaspar Elmans, Lennart van Gaalen, Timon van Honk, Rik Klein Gunnewiek, Myrthe Martinot, Masum Rahman, Bram Reintjes, Patrick Schoutens, Tijs Schnaar, Marijn aan de Stegge and Thierry van Wessel.

Looking at the names in the above list you might not have guessed it, but there is in fact a woman in my life (who I actually met and fell in love with during this PhD). I thank Josephine for
her love, support and patience in putting up with me during research hours that occasionally (probably more often than not) colonized evenings and weekend days.

I also want to thank my parents, Rini van Doorn and Monique Klaver, for planting and nurturing the seeds of my curiosity and giving me the freedom to follow that curiosity wherever it leads.
Chapter 1: Introduction

At least for the vast majority of human beings who are not philosophers, ethics mostly concerns itself with first-order ethical questions. Is it morally kosher to eat meat? To what extent is socio-economic inequality justifiable? What do I owe to my children, and my elders, and to strangers halfway around the globe who happened to be born in circumstances much less fortunate than mine? Or, more commonly, is it OK to push the fat man to save the five?

We constantly have to come up with answers to these kinds of practical questions about how we ought to act. But (1) what kind of facts and properties are we actually talking about when answering those questions? And (2) how could we have epistemic access to those facts, and distinguish justified from unjustified moral beliefs?

Those are topics in metaethics – more precisely in moral metaphysics (1) and moral epistemology (2) – that are central to this dissertation.

If you say, “Killing people is wrong,” that’s morality. If you say, “You shouldn’t kill people because God prohibited it,” or “You shouldn’t kill people because doing so generally does not maximize happiness”, that’s normative ethics on a more general level. And if you ask, “In virtue of what do those facts (about God’s commands or about happiness) ground morality; what makes it the case that those facts have normative force?”, that’s moral metaphysics. And if you ask, “How could we know that (e.g.) facts about what maximizes happiness ground facts about right and wrong and about what we have reason to do?”, that’s moral epistemology.

Here’s another way to get at the same point. If I claim there’s a laptop on my desk, we have a rather good idea of what makes this claim correct and how to justify it. The claim that there is a laptop on my desk is made correct by there actually being a laptop on my desk. I can know this by seeing that there is a laptop on my desk. The source of the validity of empirical claims is thus the existence of empirical facts. The normal way through which we come to know these facts, it seems, is by perception. But what is it that makes ethical claims correct? And how do we know?

1.1 OVERVIEW OF THIS THESIS

In this dissertation, I evaluate various answers to these questions. All of them fall under the label of metaethical non-naturalism.

What is metaethical non-naturalism? It is, to start, a subspecies of metaethical realism. Moral realists think that some moral claims are true, and that their truth is independent of people’s beliefs and attitudes. It’s a ‘judgement-independent’ or ‘attitude-independent’ fact. As Thomas Nagel
writes: “The reality of values is the view that claims about value and about what people have reason to do may be true or false independently of our beliefs and inclinations.”

To get some more grip on the meaning of ‘moral realism’, we may compare it with its antithesis, moral anti-realism. The main difference relevant for this thesis, deals with what makes moral claims correct – with the existence of ‘external’ correctness condition for morality. Given what is ethically true, what is it in the world that makes those truths true? Anti-realism typically holds that ethics is fundamentally mind-dependent. Ethical discovery could then be, for example, the discovery of solutions to the kinds of problems that humans find themselves to face. Metaethical realism, by contrast, says ethical truth is mind-independent.

If, say, we accept something like the Kantian principle of universalizability, and then ask why universalizability of the maxim should render an action permissible, non-naturalism answers: because an independent reality dictates that it does. And for non-naturalistic moral realism specifically, ethical discovery involves grasping ontologically basic moral facts. The normativity of our ethical concepts, whether they help us live together or not, is parasitic on whether they correctly represent this non-natural moral reality, which constitutes the standards by which we may be judged.

The question of this thesis is whether this idea of mind-independent correctness conditions for ethics in the form of ontologically basic moral facts can be made sense of metaphysically and epistemologically.

My specific plan is as follows. In chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the version of non-naturalism, supported by G.E. Moore, David Enoch and others, according to which “there are robust, worldly properties (including relations) whose nature is aptly characterized in terms of inherent, authoritative guidance…or force, or prescriptivity, or some such. These properties are sui generis, and particularly non-natural.” Because of this ontological commitment, it usually goes by the name of ‘Robust Realism’. In chapter 4, I analyse another non-naturalist theory – Non-Realist Cognitivism – defended by, most prominently, Derek Parfit. This theory says there are ontologically basic moral truths, and that we owe our allegiance to them, but that they have no metaphysical backing or status.

In the rest of this section, I offer a brief preview for each chapter.

**Chapter 2**, to begin, is about Robust Realism’s metaphysics. On this view, moral facts and properties are incompatible with a purely scientific worldview, because their very nature involves

---

1 Nagel 1986.
2 Bedke 2020, 127.
a kind of *sui generis* prescriptivity that is something ‘over and above’ any non-normative properties. Even if, as non-naturalism holds, these properties are isolated from the causally efficacious properties that shape the content of our beliefs about the empirical world. Normativity, on this view, still is its own, extra component of reality – as real and mind-independent as matter. The answers to important normative questions – such as what is intrinsically bad, what we have reason to do, and so on – hinge on the existence and patterns of instantiation of extra metaphysics beyond the natural ways of the world. If moral reality is to capture notions of right- and wrongness that is *genuinely objective* and has *categorical normative force* for rational agents, the thought goes, then we need to posit non-natural facts and properties at the bottom of all this. Because then non-naturalism can say that the ultimate grounds of wrongness are to be understood metaphysically as constituted by an independent, ontologically fundamental reality.

Be that as it may, Robust Realism typically has a hard time spelling out the connection between natural and moral properties. Is this connection one of supervenience? Constitution? Grounding? Brute co-variation? Secondly, they must dismantle the objection that moral properties are entities “of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” because of their apparently inherently prescriptive nature. Thirdly, since they call into play special non-natural moral ontology as a basis for the objective justification of ethical judgments, they must provide an explanation *why* non-natural, causally inefficacious facts should take priority in organizing our lives. In the chapter, I argue that Robust Realism suffers from explanatory shortcomings on all three fronts.

Moving on, chapter 3 is about epistemology. For Robust Realism must also explain how we could come to *know* that extra layer of reality which contains the moral truth. Especially since it’s, *ex hypothesi*, causally isolated. And it’s not clear why we should have any confidence in our moral beliefs when they’re not influenced by the facts that allegedly give them their truth value. Evolutionary and otherwise historical, not non-natural, facts that most adequately explain why we hold certain moral beliefs and not others. And, as Darwin himself argued, this suggests that an alternative evolutionary trajectory would have left us with different moral beliefs. So how can we know that the ones *we* happened to have ended up with coincide with these mind-independent, causally isolated, ontologically basic moral truths (if those exist)? I develop an argument which shows that if our beliefs in non-natural facts are not best explained by non-natural facts and there are no additional, non-abductive reasons for maintaining them, that defeats their justification.

---

3 FitzPatrick 2018, 554.
4 Mackie 1977, 38.
5 Darwin 1871 [2004], 70.
Chapter 4, finally, is about a different form of non-naturalism. According to this view, defended by Derek Parfit, T. M. Scanlon, Thomas Nagel, and others, ethical facts are non-natural but not robust. They are rather non-metaphysical, in the sense that positing them does not commit us to the existence of any ontologically weighty entities beyond the natural stuff ‘out there’. Like Robust Realism, Non-Realist Cognitivism still thinks there is, at the bottom of the grounding chain, an elite set of metaphysically necessary true moral laws that are the ungrounded normative facts upon which all the other normative facts rest. But its novel move is to claim that such normative facts take the form of non-ontological truths, that carry no ontological commitment, but are nevertheless true in the strongest sense. Attractive as this may sound, I argue in Chapter 4 that, if intelligible, this is not a coherent combination. It remains mysterious what a moral judgment could be about, and what the truth conditions of such a judgment could be.

In chapter 5, I take stock. After drawing together the above arguments, I diagnose the problems with claiming that there are mind-independent correctness conditions for morality (such as ontologically basic moral facts), which are intrinsically significant in that any rational agent will by necessity have a normative reason to respond accordingly. I take the epistemological and metaphysical issues with non-naturalism to indicate that we have reason to doubt whether there is such a universal ‘external anchor’ for moral systems. Many hope that our values, purged of messy human contingency, could aspire to correspond with mind-independent, rationally obligatory, universal and eternal ethical facts. But if I am right, there are significant problems with positing such a source of morality.

1.2 A WORD ABOUT GROUNDING

As the examples at the very beginning of this introduction reveal, metaethics has a lot to do with ‘because’ and ‘in virtue of’ claims. As it happens, metaphysics is currently undergoing a related shift, and possibly dragging metaethics in its wake.

Kit Fine, Gideon Rosen, and Jonathan Schaffer have, to begin, popularized the idea of a non-causal determination relation that underwrites metaphysical explanations – the grounding relation – and maintain this relation is crucial to understanding many first-order metaphysical debates. In particular, they take grounding to be central to the debate between physicalists and non-physicalists in the philosophy of mind and between naturalists and non-naturalists in metaethics. Selim Berker has further argued that the same metaphysical dependence relation is expressed by normative grounding claims (like ‘Abe should give the book to Sarah in virtue of the fact that he promised he would’), general ethical theories (like an explanatory form of

---

consequentialism according to which one ought to perform an action *in virtue of* its promoting optimal consequences) and by metaphysical grounding claims (like ‘A glass is fragile *in virtue of* the structure of the molecules that make it up’).\(^7\) And grounding, believe it or not, is no more and no less obscure than the word ‘because’.

To get an initial grasp on this relation, which will make many appearances in this thesis, let’s look at an example from Plato. During the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, Euthyphro suggests the following definition of piety:

(Eu) An act is pious if and only if all the gods love it,

to which Socrates famously responds, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”\(^8\) On the usual interpretation, this query raises the following pernicious dilemma for Euthyphro’s definition. If, on the first horn, we endorse

(1) An act is loved by all the gods because it is pious,

then the gods are only reacting to the piety, and so we haven’t found what ultimately makes the act pious. But if, on the other horn, we endorse

(2) An act is pious because it is loved by all the gods,

then either (a) the gods love that because it has certain properties which are the actual ultimate grounds of its piety, or if they don’t have such characteristics, (b) the gods’ love is (objectionably) arbitrary and hence not the proper thing to ground piety.

Rather than asking whether this argument succeeds, I want to focus on claim (2). The point about grounding becomes clear when we realize that the following are all equivalent ways of saying (2):

- An act is pious *in virtue of* its being loved by all the gods.
- The fact that an act is pious is grounded in the fact that it is loved by all the gods.
- An act’s being loved by all the gods makes it the case that the act is pious.

Writers on grounding maintain that these uses of ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, ‘grounds’, and ‘makes the case’ all seem to be picking out a distinctively metaphysical relation of dependence (or its converse). Following Kit Fine, it has become customary to refer to this relation as ‘the grounding relation’.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Berker 2018.  
\(^8\) Eutyphro 10a.  
In ordinary life, we offer grounding explanations of, for instance, why this chess player is victorious (because her opponent’s king is in checkmate), of why this coffee is hot (because its molecules have a high mean kinetic energy). And in philosophy, as Fine writes elsewhere, grounding has many applications: “What is it to explain the appearance of a world with minds in terms of a mindless world or the appearance of a world with value in terms of a purely naturalistic world? My own view is that what is required is that we somehow ground all of the facts which appear to presuppose the reality of the mental or of value in terms of facts which do not presuppose their reality.”

The grounding relationship has certain properties which I should like to already introduce here. Pictorially, the key fact about grounding is that meant to be a maximally intimate explanatory relation. More formally, like any explanatory relation – if q grounds p, then p obtains because q obtains – grounding is asymmetric, hence irreflexive. Unlike some explanatory relations (e.g., causal explanation), grounding is a form of synchronic necessitation. If q grounds p, then as a matter necessity, if q obtains then so does p. While these claims are standard, they are of course not uncontroversial. So it’s important to note that arguments involving grounding in this dissertation can be seen as conditional on this default reading of grounding holding up.

With that out of the way, let’s start by considering the most prominent defence of external correctness conditions for normativity.

---

10 Fine 2012, 41.
11 Rosen 2018.
12 Jenkins 2011.
13 Rosen 2018.
14 Leuenberger 2014.
Chapter 2: The Metaphysics of Metaethical Non-Naturalism

A noteworthy development in metaethics, and one central to this dissertation, is the revival of non-naturalistic realism about moral properties. Not too long ago, for instance, Alex Miller didn’t think it merited discussion in a competent and widely used introduction to metaethics.\(^{15}\) And, slightly further back, John Mackie was able to suggest that “no doubt it was an extravagance for Moore to say that ‘good’ is the name of a non-natural quality.”\(^{16}\) Such a dismissive attitude would be out of place today. A growing number of philosophers have come to the defense of what’s known as Robust Normative Non-Naturalism (Robust Realism from now on).\(^{17}\)

More relevant than this sociological observation about academics who spend their time thinking about metaethics, are the novel responses they have offered to key objections Robust Realism has traditionally been charged with. Grounding, we will see, has been central in developing these.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by introducing Robust Realism and explain why it is at a special advantage in accounting for moral objectivity. In section 2.2, I discuss Mackie’s argument from queerness and raise the problem of what justifies ontological commitments. Then, from section 2.3 onwards, I enter into a deeper discussion of the metaphysics of Robust Realism. In section 2.3.1, I introduce four desiderata for explaining the connection between the natural and the moral. This leads to the supervenience objection. I explain that a metaphysical grounding account on which moral principles have an explanatory role to play, gives Robust Realists a swift reply. Indeed, there’s a sense in which the tenability of Robust Realism depends on whether moral laws can stand in an explanatory relation to an action’s moral properties. However, this puts constraints on what moral laws can be (section 2.3.3 and 2.3.4). Once these are spelled out, it becomes clear that there are two ‘redundant explanation’ challenges that threaten this Principles as Partial Grounds claim. One arises from the content of moral laws (section 2.4.1 and 2.4.2) and merits a short discussion on grounding pluralism (2.4.3). The other one arises from the law’s modal status (2.4.4 and 2.4.5).

\(^{15}\) Miller 2003.
\(^{16}\) Mackie 1977, 32.
It will become clear that there is an interesting and (to my knowledge) unnoticed relationship between (a) the traditional queerness worries and (b) various explanatory challenges to Robust Realism. A pattern will emerge on which solving the latter opens the view up to more of the former; while the less ‘queerness’ non-naturalism takes on, the more it reveals itself to be wanting in explanatory power.

In the final part of the chapter (2.5), I look at the normative rather than the metaphysical implications of Robust Realism. While these are typically taken to be a plus for non-naturalism, I think the situation is more nuanced.

2.1 INTRODUCING ROBUST REALISM

What is Robust Realism? In this section I present three core characteristics of metaethical Robust Realism: realism, cognitivism, and non-naturalism.

A basic element of Robust Realism is that it endorses cognitivism rather than non-cognitivism in moral semantics. The non-naturalist explains what moral judgments are about, and explains their truth conditions, by postulating non-natural moral properties. According to Robust Realism, normative beliefs and assertoric normative language are in the business of ascribing these properties. The answers to important normative questions—such as what is intrinsically bad, what we have reason to do, etc.—hinge on the existence and patterns of instantiation of extra metaphysics beyond the merely natural ways of the world.

Indeed, rejecting all versions of noncognitivism or expressivism about the relevant discourse seems a necessary condition to qualify as a realist about it. Another such necessary condition for counting as a realist is to reject an error-theory about the discourse. We sometimes, Robust Realism thus maintains, accurately ascribe these sui generis properties. Our moral views are not systematically erroneous.

Robust Realism has often been classified as a metaphysical moral theory, since it purports to tell us about the ontological status of the facts that render our moral beliefs true. There are moral properties and facts that are objective (mind-independent) and metaphysically robust (the non-naturalist’s notion of moral properties and facts carries ontological commitment).18 The key driving intuition behind Robust Realism is that moral requirements have an ontological foundation due to the mind-independent normative facts to which they refer. There are robust, worldly properties (including relations) whose nature is aptly characterized in terms of inherent, authoritative

---

18 Hence the difference with so-called ‘quietist’ or ‘non-realist’ versions of moral cognitivism: these views (seek to) avoid this ontological commitment. I discuss these views in in chapter 4.
guidance. These properties are *sui generis*, non-natural and isolated from the causally efficacious properties that shape the content of our beliefs about the empirical world.

Robust realists are reluctant to accept the metaphorical charge that these *sui generis* properties float around in the ether. This is strongly suggested by their denial that these properties are supernatural properties, though the line between non-natural properties and supernatural properties is notoriously difficult to draw. Nevertheless, facts about these properties are the truthmakers of normative beliefs, like astronomical facts are the truthmakers of beliefs about celestial objects.

Zooming in, then, on the non-naturalism part, it’s hard to give a precise definition of ‘non-naturalism’ without entering (for our purposes) unnecessary controversies. So hard, that some philosophers have come to favor the hypothesis that it’s better understood as a “certain type of metaethical stance” rather than a metaethical “theory or position.”

Stephany Leary has, however, helpfully identified two claims that seem to constitute the core pre-theoretical commitments of any metaethical theory that should be labeled as non-naturalist. The first one is that normative properties are, as mentioned, *sui generis*: they are different *in kind* from any other kinds of properties there might be, not reducible to or fully constituted by some other type of property. Non-natural normative facts are typically not taken to be causally efficacious, or discoverable wholly empirically, or the sorts of facts the natural sciences investigate, or observable with the senses, or required to causally explain any non-normative events in the world. Normative claims, furthermore, cannot be re-stated in non-normative terminology or identified with non-normative truths. The second core commitment is that the non-natural properties are in a fundamentally different metaphysical category from the facts with which the empirical sciences are concerned (‘but they are not occult facts!’, the non-naturalist will be quick to add). As the metaphor has it, the gods weren’t done when they created the natural properties because they still had to put in place the normative ones. Normative facts and properties, on this view, are incompatible with a purely scientific worldview: normative properties are significantly different from scientific properties, so science provides an incomplete account of reality if Robust Realism is true.

---

19 Väyrynen 2017.
20 The same, of course, could be said of defining ‘naturalism’. However, for our purposes, not much hinges on the difficult matter of how to delineate the natural from the non-natural. This is because the spirit of Robust Realism is to distinguish the metaphysics of normativity from the metaphysics of *everything else*, not just the natural.
21 Cuneo 2007b, 852.
22 Leary 2016, 77-80.
A non-natural, *sui generis* property NN is not a physical, biological, psychological, mathematical, logical, supernatural, or ... property, and it cannot be constructed out of such properties. But what does that have to do with the normativity of NN? Non-naturalness and objective warrant are different concepts. If the properties our normative predicates ascribe are non-natural, they don’t make things matter just for that. But of course, the claim that normative properties are non-natural is not meant to explain why we should be concerned with them. It is instead just a theoretical claim about the metaethical status they must possess if our theories are to capture a robust sort of ethical objectivity and normativity. They will have to be non-natural facts and properties because they are *irreducibly evaluative*. This is what I meant when I said that moral claims, according to the non-naturalist, cannot be re-stated in non-normative terminology or identified with non-normative truths.

These non-natural properties are irreducibly normative because their very nature involves a kind of *sui generis* prescriptivity that is something ‘over and above’ any non-normative properties. Leary, for instance, writes that “[Non-naturalism] takes the very nature of these properties to involve something like *to be promoted-ness* or *to be considered-ness* (or *to be doneness*, as Mackie\(^23\) says), so that they objectively ‘call out’ for certain responses in us.”\(^24\) And certain properties’ having that particular primitive feature does seem to explain why *those* properties are normatively privileged so that they are the ones that we really should care about and consider during practical deliberation, and so on: they objectively call out for those responses. Some acts and states of affairs have a primitive feature of normativity; and it is this primitive feature that privileges them from the point of view of reality. Normativity is its own, extra component of reality – as real and mind-independent as matter.\(^25\)

The Robust Realist’s claim is that there are correct answers to ethical questions insofar as there are ways of living that are objectively favored by the patterning of these non-natural properties. A discourse that, for example, attempted to express widely held sentiments or to identify solutions to shared practical problems would lack a special kind of *normative authority*. It is only if some morality tracks the mind-independent truths that it counts as genuinely normative, since the distribution of the inherently normative properties determines which natural features are truly good- or right-making.

---

\(^23\) Mackie 1977.
\(^24\) Leary 2016, 8.
\(^25\) We may ask a further question: what is it for a non-natural property to be normative? What is this *sui generis* prescriptivity that certain non-natural properties possess? This is a complicated issue, to which I return in section 2.5.2.
Even so, the question arises why having this primitive feature matters. If there were facts of primitive normativity, what reason do we have to care about them? When deciding what to do, why should facts about some sui generis property be relevant? If some normative concepts ascribe properties in the above sense but others do not, why should we take that to in any way speak in favor of thinking that we should let the former guide our actions? For that matter, do we even have a clear grasp on what it is for a property to be normative according to the non-naturalist? Don’t the glosses on ‘prescriptivity’ and ‘to be promoted-ness’ present the same sort of problems as we’re considering?26 If we knew what ‘prescriptivity’ was, what are we so hard at work at when trying to figure out what normativity is?

Whether these are coherent questions, and to what extent they can be answered, will concern us from section 2.4 onwards. In the first half of this chapter, we will consider the metaphysical prospects of non-naturalism. I start by considering the best argument in favor of it.

### 2.1.1 Vindicating Moral Objectivity

When contemplating the fundamental structure of reality, meta-ethical naturalists and anti-realists prioritize ‘external accommodation’. They seek to fit normativity in our empirically informed understanding of the mind and world (‘it is impossible for anything to have irreducibly normative properties’). Meta-ethical non-naturalists, by contrast, prioritize ‘internal accommodation’. They strive to do justice to objectivist moral appearances (‘it’s necessarily, mind-independently morally wrong to inflict pain on random victims’).27 Moral facts, they believe, are just as ontologically respectable as other facts. Making sense of this pre-theoretical commitment leads them to end up with ‘downstream’ commitments according to which non-natural intrinsically normative properties and facts exist as discoverable features of the objective, mind-independent universe. The non-naturalist ends up committed to her sui generis normative ontology because it’s an indispensable element of her explanation of how she conceives of the reality of wrongness and value.

Notice the direction of explanation at work here. The non-naturalist starts with: “I know there are mind-independent moral truths,” and reasons from there, exploring what ontological and metaphysical commitments are required to make sense of this starting point. Here, for example, is Jonathan Dancy: “Our intuitions in favor of objective duties are so strong that we should be willing to accept a fair degree of artificiality in attempts to defend them.”28 The non-naturalist says: ‘It’s

---

27 This observation about internal versus external accommodation was first made by Timmons (1999).
28 Dancy 2000, 59.
not easy to decide what are or are not acceptable starting points for enquiry, but everyone has that
difficulty. It’s not like the methodological naturalist avoids the difficulty, but the non-naturalist
doesn’t. My starting point is that the data must be accounted for, and I don’t see why we can’t do
philosophy adopting that same methodological attitude to the robust reality of morals and values.’

Granting the existence of intrinsically normative entities is, for the non-naturalist, the only
way to bring the endless reiteration of the question ‘why must I do that?’ to an end, and still save
obligation.29 If we don’t posit intrinsically normative entities, we can neither make sense of the
reality of value and obligation nor of objective truth conditions for moral claims. Hence realism is
seen by many as the only hope in ethics. From that methodological starting point, she claims,
Robust Realism is the default position.30 Which perhaps explains why most defenses of realism
don’t primarily provide positive arguments for it, but rather defend it against various objections.31
Indeed, non-naturalist themselves have noted that “there is very little by way of positive argument
for Robust Realism (or related views) in the current literature. The implicit – and sometimes explicit
– assumption of many realists seems to be that something like Robust Realism is the default view,32
that the burden of argument lies on the shoulders of those putting forward competing views.”33

Still, it’s commonly agreed that the main positive argument for this view is that it seems to
be at a special advantage in accounting for moral objectivity. After all, what could be more objective
than reality itself dictating certain ways of acting and valuing? Realism aims to provide a rationale
for the distinction between merited and unmerited evaluations in terms of the way the world is.
Non-naturalism says there are ontologically basic, non-natural, irreducibly objective normative truths
that when successful in our normative inquiries we discover rather than create or construct.34 This
way, the non-naturalist procures the thought that moral judgments are judgments about mind-
independent facts, and so the gut-feeling that some acts are “really” wrong. Because if there are no
mind-independent moral facts, the fear goes, there is no such thing as getting it right (except,
perhaps, by our own lights) in making normative claims. And if moral anti-realism is true, then it
seems the only ground for criticizing someone else’s values could be a lack of internal coherence or
some such. Many people would not be satisfied with that – they want to defend the idea that one’s
values can also be criticized on the grounds of lacking external correspondence to the ontologically
fundamental evaluative truths. As Ronald Dworkin famously suggests: “It is startlingly

29 Korsgaard 1996, 34. This type of regress argument will return in section 2.3.2 and 5.2.
30 I owe this way of putting the point to Philip Goff. Thanks to David Enoch for helpful conversations as well.
31 For example, Wielenberg (2014, e.g. 39).
33 Enoch 2011, 10.
34 Enoch 2007, 21, emphasis mine.
counterintuitive to think there is nothing wrong with genocide or slavery or torturing a baby for fun. I would need very powerful, indeed unanswerable, reasons for accepting this…“

Certainly most of us will heartily approve of such conviction, and I don’t want Dworkin to abandon realism in spite of it. What I think he and non-naturalists ought to do, however – as will become clear in this chapter and the next – is be concerned about finding a metaphysics and an epistemology adequate to support his conviction, if only because their lack persuades so many other people of antirealism.

2.1.2 The Non-Neutrality Intuition

For now, there’s one more consideration that non-naturalists typically take to count in favor of their view. This is their vindication of the ‘non-neutrality intuition’ in moral disagreement. This is the idea that the right way to proceed in cases of interpersonal conflict due to moral disagreement is analogous to the right way to proceed in cases of interpersonal conflict due to realist-factual disagreement (and not to the right way to proceed in cases of interpersonal conflicts due to mere preferences).

Consider Moral Twin Earth cases. These scenarios involve a hypothetical linguistic community – the Others – that has terms such ‘good’, ‘ought’, and so forth, which play the same normative role as our normative terms (they have the same connections with motivation, deliberation, and reactive attitudes). The Others do what they do based on considerations about what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ in their sense (good* and right*); we do what we do based on considerations about what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ in our sense. However, this hypothetical linguistic community regularly applies these terms to fairly different substantive views in their practices. The Others, for example, applaud setting bugs on fire and condemn pacifism. In such scenarios, metaethicists agree, there seems to be some sort of live issue as to whether we or the alternative community get things right. Intuitively, we want to say that all is not well: it is bad that the Others are sensitive to other considerations that are right* rather than right. This, however, looks like an objection that can be raised perfectly symmetrically from within each of the two lifeforms. For the Others can point out that it is ‘bad*’ that we are sensitive to right rather than right* considerations.

Non-naturalists now suggest that their metaphysically committed realism is the only way to capture what we intuitively want to say, for only the non-naturalist can say that we and not The

---

35 Ibid.
36 Horgan and Timmons 1991. Such thought experiments will return in chapters 4 and 5.
Others track the normative structure of reality. If there are no mind-independent moral facts, it’s not possible to be wrong about these facts either. And then there might be nothing we could tell The Others about why her ideas about what reasons she has are mistaken. We could not appeal to objective moral facts. This means that the disagreement between us and The Others has a worrying symmetry, and we should proceed as if it was a preference-based conflict. This, however, violates the way we normally think about moral disagreement as being asymmetrical. When two people make conflicting normative judgements, at most one of these judgements is correct.

For example, whether you ought not to humiliate people is, we usually think, independent of your own set of normative attitudes (or whatever). It is already so. What accounts for the asymmetry in moral disagreement, on non-naturalism, is that conflicting normative judgments aim to represent the mind-independent moral reality in incompatible ways. Accordingly, in cases of disagreement, this attitude-independent truth should make a difference. We could settle the dispute by appealing to it.

Consequently, on this view, moral error is possible because agents’ beliefs about reasons can be out of line with the normative structure of the cosmos. Any other explanation of moral error, the non-naturalist thinks, has unacceptable implications for cases of moral disagreement, for it does not allow us to appeal to mind-independent facts to settle them: “Had morality not been objective in a fairly strong sense … the moral constraints applying to the resolution of some conflicts would have been different than they actually are. In particular, under non-objectivist metaethical assumptions, conjoined with some fairly plausible moral premises, it would be morally impermissible to stand one’s moral ground in any number of conflicts or disagreements where it does seem permissible (perhaps even required) to stand one’s moral ground.”

In sum: Robust Realism is attractive because it can account for the objectivity commonly associated with normativity. And it is also attractive because, against the fear that the rejection of realism about normative propositions somehow relegates them to a second-class status, Robust Realism insists that normative facts are as ontologically respectable as any other type of facts.

2.2 THE ARGUMENT FROM QUEERNESS

We now move to an influential objection against the non-naturalist framework: the argument from queerness. Many philosophers argue that a commitment to sui generis, non-natural properties

---

37 Enoch 2011, 9.
counts against a view, since this commitment lacks the right kind of explanatory backing. This is an important consideration, because (we’ll see later in the chapter) it applies to other elements of the Robust Realist’s metaphysical theory as well – not just the non-natural properties.

‘One man’s modus ponens is another man’s modus tollens.’ This very ontological substantiality of moral properties non-naturalism takes to be a plus – it helps to ‘take morality seriously’ –, other philosophers find incredible. Why, for instance, did Mackie think that it was an “obvious extravagance” for Moore to assert that normative properties are non-natural? Probably because he had trouble imagining that reality could contain extra-scientific properties. Something like that seems to be the underlying thought in Mackie’s argument from queerness.\(^\text{38}\) Irreducibly normative properties, Mackie writes, would involve “curious metaphysical objects”, “entities of a very strange sort”, which are “too queer” to be part of the “fabric of the world.”\(^\text{39}\) Moral values would have to be part of the universe and be independent of and prior to all human activity, as non-naturalism claims. They would also have to be prescriptive in the sense of supplying both normative and motivational force. Now, according to Mackie our world contains subjective prescriptivity, such as the rules of etiquette. Our world also contains objective non-prescriptive things, such as stars and oceans. But our world doesn’t contain objective prescriptivity. That would be too ‘queer’ to exist.

More recently, Evans and Shah, somewhat uncharitably, expressed their opinion that “the problem with primitivism [non-natural normative realism], is that it is committed to there being at least some normative facts at the bedrock level of explanation. This commitment is widely held to be naïve at best, and childish at worst: a holdover from some earlier, less enlightened vision of the universe.”\(^\text{40}\) This is because, in their view, it is only in earlier visions of the universe that one thought morality did not have a non-moral source, not all of morality can be explained and so there are ontologically basic (brute) moral facts.

According to philosophers who are global naturalists, Robust Realism is committed to a metaphysics that one should try to avoid. It is, after all, explicitly non-naturalist. Irreducible normative properties aren’t the kind of stuff likely to appear on the list of what our best science says or is likely to say exists.\(^\text{41}\) This at least shifts the burden of proof: Given this incompatibility,

\(^{38}\) Mackie 1977, 38-42.
\(^{39}\) Mackie 1977, ch.1, §9.
\(^{40}\) Evans and Shah 2012, 88. As we’ll see in section 2.3.1, however, this is the exact explanatory structure present-day non-naturalists defend.
\(^{41}\) Enoch 2011, 135. I say more about this in section 3.1.
without good arguments or evidence for believing in the things non-naturalism says we should believe in, we should not believe in them.

This argument leaves the non-naturalist two strategies to reply. One is to massage away the incompatibility with the scientific worldview – to say everything a Robust Realist wants to say without being robust, without ontological commitment. That’s the gambit of Non-Realist Cognitivism. One motivation for Parfit, Scanlon, and others to go metaphysically lightweight is thus to prevent the argument from queerness from getting off the ground. I’ll save discussion of that view for Chapter 4.

The other possibility is to wear this discordance with metaphysical naturalism on one’s sleeve. For Robust Realists, biting the bullet has by and large been the most dominant strategy of response. Yes, irreducible normativity is ‘queer’. No, that’s not a (major) downside of the framework.

Robust Realists argue that a ‘weird’ ontological commitment just because it is weird doesn’t cost many plausibility points. Building up a case against irreducible normativity, they say, requires more than vague intuitions. Especially since the strong intuitions we have in favor of moral objectivity. Robust Realists are under no obligation to refute incredulous stares. The locus classicus of this confident response is Mark Platts:

The queerest thing about this as it stands is the claim that it is an argument…. The world is a queer place. I find neutrinos, aardvarks, infinite sequences of objects, and (most pertinently) impressionist paintings peculiar kinds of entities; but I do not expect nuclear physics, zoology, formal semantics or art history to pay much regard to that. 42

This is why, after going through other possible readings as well, David Enoch, for example, labels the argument from queerness the “Sheer Queerness worry.” 43 As it stands, it does not seem to be a particularly forceful objection. Nevertheless, the most important metaphysical worry surrounding Robust Realism, I believe, still springs from the principle that you can’t posit the existence of any queer entity whatsoever, without having the right kind of evidence for its existence. Doing so sharply drives down a theory’s probability. Which is why we should not believe in ontologically basic moral facts.

I develop this epistemological tack in the next chapter. This chapter focuses on the metaphysical and explanatory standing of the non-naturalist’s framework. I’ll argue that the

---

42 Platts 1980, 72.
43 Enoch 2011, ch.6.
problematic metaphysical commitments of the non-naturalist don’t stop at the ‘mere’ queerness of non-natural properties. To arrive at that conclusion, we need to take a closer look at the metaphysics of Robust Realism.

2.3 THE METAPHYSICS OF NORMATIVE EXPLANATIONS

In section 2.3, I’ll enter into deeper discussion of the metaphysics of Robust Realism. I first present the straightforward Robust Realist picture (section 2.3.1). On this view, both natural facts and moral principles play a role in grounding specific moral facts. At least some substantive normative principles are not fully metaphysically grounded in non-normative facts. And all particular substantive normative facts are partially metaphysically grounded in normative principles that link the particular normative facts to their non-normative grounds. I explain why the fate of non-naturalism is tied with this picture being feasible, and explicate what moral laws must be like in order to have this explanatory role (section 2.3.2). After unpacking the ontological commitments of this account of the connection between the natural and the normative (section 2.3.3), I develop two objections to it in section 2.4. After considering possible replies, I conclude that Robust Realism either runs into severe queerness worries or lacks explanatory power.

2.3.1 The Natural Robust Realist Picture

In this section, I first introduce some concepts we’ll need to think more deeply about metaethical non-naturalism and metaphysics. Then I integrate them into a coherent theory about non-naturalistic moral metaphysics that I will spend some time assessing.

We saw that a central tenet of non-naturalism is the idea that the normative is \textit{sui generis} and irreducible. In other words, normative properties are \textit{discontinuous or autonomous} from natural properties. One finds this autonomy thesis formulated in various ways in the literature.\footnote{See, for example, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 401-3), Elliott & Faraci (MS, 12), Enoch (2019, 4), Maguire (2015, 194), Rosen (2017b, §1).} Ethical autonomy theses sometimes maintain that certain logical relations do not obtain between ethical and non-ethical sentences, for instance that no non-ethical sentences logically entail an ethical sentence. But the autonomy crucial for our purposes is \textit{metaphysical}.

\textbf{Autonomy:} The non-normative plays no role in the explanation of the fundamental normative facts, and non-fundamental normative facts are partially grounded in more fundamental normative facts: no normative fact is fully grounded in natural facts.
For example, if act utilitarianism turns out to be the most fundamental moral fact, this would have been so no matter what the natural facts would have been like. No natural fact figures in the complete story of why this fact obtains. Note that unless Robust Realists accept that some substantive normative facts or principles are not fully metaphysically grounded in non-normative facts, they cannot distinguish themselves from naturalists.

Relatedly, many philosophers have noted that the natural and the normative appear to be ‘separate magisteria’: they are so different in kind that a reduction would have strongly counterintuitive implications. It’s not obvious how this metaphysical discontinuity can be captured in precise terms, but David Enoch’s “just too different” intuition expresses the main idea:

**Just-Too-Different:** Normative truths and facts are just too different from natural ones to be a subset thereof. Normative facts are in a separate, distinctive category. Value properties are radically different from natural properties.

This is why according to the non-naturalist, there will always be an explanatory gap between natural facts and the obtaining of particular normative facts. That John’s act was an act of helping is one thing, but that it was also good is another thing – a sui generis further fact. Recent interest in ground stems largely from the idea that this explanatory gap can be narrowed.

A third item on the list of things a meta-ethical view must make sense of pulls in the opposite direction. It’s a common presupposition, namely, that particular normative facts are never completely inexplicable. If a particular act has a normative property, there must be some non-normative properties of the act that make this the case. Actions and other things have their normative properties in virtue of their non-normative properties. Things are good or bad, right or wrong, because of some non-normative properties. There is, in other words, a strong intuition that particular normative facts are dependent on and explained by other facts. Call this, following Pekka Väyrynen, “the dependence intuition”.

**Dependence:** Token normative properties are ‘consequential’ or ‘resultant’ attributes: they are properties that something can have only in virtue of having other properties.

No token action is brutely wrong: whenever I do something wrong, there are certain properties of that action (and, perhaps, of other things in the world as well) that make what I do wrong. Suppose, for instance, that non-naturalism is true in metaethics, and act utilitarianism is

45 Enoch (2011, 4); Huemer (2005, 94); Parfit (2011, 326).
46 See, for example, Enoch (2019, 5); Rosen (2017b, 288); Shafer-Landau (2003, 76-7); Zangwill (2008, 111).
47 Väyrynen 2015.
true in normative ethics. Then, ultimately, acts have their moral properties in virtue of being utility-optimizing or not. This structure generalizes: the fact that moral properties are resultant is independent of whichever first-order moral theory turns out to be true.

It would seem like there is, for the non-naturalist, a tension between Dependence, on the one hand, and Autonomy and Just-Too-Different, on the other. But only in the absence of a plausible non-naturalist story about the exact (dependence) connection between natural and normative facts, non-naturalism loses plausibility points. But we haven’t yet established this absence. We have only noted non-naturalism must find a way to make sense of the fact that particular normative facts (a) always stand in some explanatory relation to non-normative facts in the vicinity (b) from which they are wholly different. The challenge is thus to characterize this explanatory connection between the particular normative facts and the non-normative facts that ‘underlie’ them. This challenge will concern us for the biggest chunk of this chapter.

Dependence is one desideratum the non-naturalist has to accommodate in her account of this connection – Autonomy and Just-Too-Different are two others. There’s one more constraint: supervenience. The non-naturalist, that is, also needs to accommodate the fact that normative facts supervene on non-normative facts.48

**Strong Supervenience:** If two possible entities are alike in every non-normative respect, they are alike in every normative respect.

Gideon Rosen recently labeled the strong supervenience thesis “the least controversial thesis in metaethics.”49 This doctrine implies that for every moral property, if something has the property, then that thing has some (possibly quite complex!) natural property such that by metaphysical necessity, everything that has this natural property also has this moral property.50 If there cannot be a normative difference between two entities without there being some natural difference between them, then for any x that has some normative property F, there is some natural property G that x has such that any y in any metaphysically possible world that is G is also F. Strong Supervenience states that, for example, if Jan is a good person, then there is some natural property

---

48 See, among others, Blackburn (1971; 1985); McPherson (2012, 211); Roberts (2018); Rosen (2020); Väyrynen (2017, 170).
50 This doctrine of strong supervenience has long been treated as a fixed point, though it has recently been called into question. See, for example Rosen (2017b), Fine (2002), Roberts (2018). Many deniers of strong supervenience remain committed to a form of supervenience, though. But it involves ‘normative necessity’ rather than metaphysical necessity. I take this up in section 2.3.6.
G that Jan has such that it’s metaphysically necessary that, if someone has property G, he or she is (also) good.

How wide is Strong Supervenience? If entities cannot differ morally without differing in some other qualitative respect, this doesn’t seem to be merely a claim about how things must be in a given world. To use a classic example from R. M. Hare, if St. Francis was a good person, then anyone exactly like him in all other respects couldn’t but have been good as well. What difference would it make whether a duplicate of St. Francis was actual or merely possible? None, it seems. Accordingly, the supervenience desideratum to non-naturalism is best understood in terms of strong supervenience, which constrains variations among any possible entities. (The distinction is with weak supervenience which only constrains entities in the same possible world.)

One traditional objection to normative non-naturalism holds that it cannot explain why moral properties supervene on properties from which they are distinct without making commitments that count significantly against the view as it also seeks to hold onto Autonomy and Just-Too-Different. The basic idea of this explanatory objection, made famous by Simon Blackburn, is that the non-naturalist cannot, within her framework, adequately explain the impossibility of normative differences without non-normative base differences. The objection exploits the tension between Autonomy and Just-Too-Different on the one hand, and Dependence and Strong Supervenience on the other. Let me explain.

According to Strong Supervenience, there is a necessary connection between normative and non-normative properties. According to Robust Realism, normative and non-normative properties are distinct existences. So understood, non-naturalism and the supervenience of the normative jointly entail that normative properties supervene on properties from which they are wholly distinct. Because supervenience is a necessary connection between distinct entities, it requires explanation.

Explaining a necessary connection between distinct existences, or why a particular normative and a particular non-normative property (which are very different properties, according to the non-naturalist) should be destined to be a couple in modal space, is a problem for normative non-naturalism. Because of the radical discontinuity of moral properties with non-moral properties, non-naturalism seems unable to account for the necessitation connections that hold between non-moral and moral properties. The non-naturalist claims that moral properties are sui generis. So she

---

51 Hare 1952, 145.
52 See Kim 1984.
cannot explain the necessary connection by the usual suspects of analysis, reduction, or identity. Such explanations would make moral properties have a tight metaphysical connection to natural properties that is inconsistent with their discontinuity. But if moral and base properties are discontinuous, why should it be impossible for things to differ morally without differing in base respects? Whence a bar on such variations?

After having raised these questions, the objector claims that no answers are forthcoming because the non-naturalist’s core commitments force her to accept the metaphysical bruteness of the normative supervenience connection. She simply cannot, within her framework, adequately explain the impossibility of normative differences without non-normative base differences. As we read in the original argument by Simon Blackburn, the non-naturalist is committed to admitting the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative as “an opaque, isolated, logical fact, for which no explanation can be proffered”. And a commitment to an inexplicable necessary connection counts against a possible metaphysical view: leaving such a connection unexplained is a theoretical cost.

It is worth making explicit that this inference – the one from the logical property of entailing a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties to the epistemic property of being prima facie epistemically unjustified – assumes the “Modest Humean” methodological principle that a commitment to brute necessary connections between distinct properties counts against a view. So understood, the core idea behind the argument is that, while everyone should accept the supervenience of the ethical and this modest Humean thesis, the non-naturalist’s core commitments force her to accept the bruteness of the supervenience connection. Together these premises entail that non-naturalism has a problem with explaining the connection between the natural and the moral. Putting it this way is helpful because it makes plain the logical space of responses open to the non-naturalist: deny the methodological premise (argue that Modest Humean is false) or deny strong supervenience. By and large, non-naturalists have taken the former route.

To sum up: the necessary metaphysical connections between the natural and the moral together with distinctiveness of moral and natural properties put pressure on the non-naturalist to

---

[55] In section 2.3.6, we will come across a few thinkers (Fine 2002, 253-81; Rosen 2017b; 2017c; 2020) who have denied strong supervenience.
give a metaphysical explanation for these metaphysically necessary connections. Let me briefly explain why a *metaphysical* explanation is required.

Strong supervenience seems to be a *platITUDE* surrounding our moral concepts. It – asserting that entities can differ in their moral properties without differing in their base properties – manifests a conceptual deficiency, or so we normally think. We would, for instance, be deeply puzzled by folks who, for example, regard St. Francis as a good person but at the same time think that there might have been another person with exactly the same character and behavior and placed in exactly the same circumstances – but differed from St. Francis only in not being a good person.

Some philosophers have accordingly sought to explain strong supervenience as a *conceptual* truth that does not saddle non-naturalism with additional ontological baggage. On this account, normative properties must vary with non-normative properties because the alternative is conceptually impossible – nothing could count as a moral property unless it covaried this way. The necessary connection between the natural and the moral is explained by the way a property would have to be, in order to be what we talk about when we talk about ethical properties. And since this is a basic feature of our understanding of normative words and terms, it cannot be explained further.

However, this fails to provide a right kind of metaphysical basis for the conceptual connection. Moral supervenience is presumably a connection between families of properties, so it holds irrespective of whether some community’s concepts have picked it up. Thus it is hard to see how, at least given the terms and conditions of Robust Realism, the conceptual status of strong supervenience is supposed to account for the necessary metaphysical connection it states between moral and base properties.

The impossibility of moral differences without base differences is a necessary connection between discontinuous entities. We should be suspicious of such connections if they cannot be explained. So the connection requires explanation. The conceptual response doesn’t provide this. It merely reaffirms the necessary connection between normative and non-normative properties by claiming that, normative properties being what they are, they are necessarily connected with non-normative properties. Yet it doesn’t follow from it being a basic feature of our use of normative words, that normative properties must vary with non-normative properties. So it seems that Robust

---

56 See also Smith 1994, 22-4.
58 See also Väyrynen 2017, 175.
Realism is committed to explaining the ascriptive supervenience of the moral in terms of *ontological* supervenience.

Supervenience, it has further been noted, is not an explanatory relation but a surface relation reporting a pattern of covariation, suggesting the presence of a ‘deeper’ metaphysical relation that might explain it. In metaethics, as of late, grounding is being recruited to do this explaining.

Moral facts, according to this more promising response to the supervenience challenge, supervene on non-moral facts because moral facts are *made the case* by non-moral facts. Strong Supervenience is explained by an ‘underlying’ asymmetrical dependence in which the natural properties non-causally make some entity have some normative property.

To understand how grounding explains supervenience it might be helpful to rehearse a technological point from chapter 1. Grounding, we assume, involves metaphysical necessitation:

If x grounds y, then in any metaphysically possible world where x obtains, y obtains. So understood, grounding is supposed to deliver exactly the deeper metaphysical explanation that the supervenience challenge asked for. The supervenience of the moral properties on the base properties is explained by the fact that the base properties ground the moral properties:

[Positing a grounding relation ensures] that there is dependent-variation of the grounded properties on their grounds. A grounding relation explains why that which is dependent, namely the normative, varies with that on which it depends, namely the non-normative. The grounding of normative in non-normative properties implies the supervenience of the former on the latter, thereby allowing us to discharge the explanatory burden that is incurred when positing the supervenience of the normative positing a grounding relation ensures that there is dependent-variation of the grounded properties on their grounds.

The non-naturalist offers theoretical justification for this reply. Grounding relations are, she says, exactly the kinds of explanatory relations that supervenience relations are *meant* to model. The motivations and intuitions cited in the context of supervenience typically take the form of resultance intuitions, whereby instantiations of normative properties are taken to be explained by instantiations of non-normative properties. Positing a grounding relation connecting these properties properly captures these intuitions.

---

59 Though see Skiles (2015).


61 Bader 2017, 116.
Has the non-naturalist now discharged the explanatory burden incurred by Strong Supervenience? It might seem that she has. We’ve been concerned with how she can explain the connection between the natural and the moral, and the grounding reply seems to offer an account. But this appearance, I believe, is misleading.

The grounding reply is just a promissory note. It labels the relationship between the natural and the moral, but doesn’t explain it (in the right way). Grounding accounts for Dependence and Strong Supervenience, but that is just an austere, logical point – not an answer to explanatory worries. It is usually in virtue of the truth of a certain in-virtue-of claim, that a given supervenience claim is true. Establishing a dependency relation suffices to explain a pattern of covariation. But, of course, if this dependence itself is brute, we haven’t made any progress (at least when the grounding facts and the grounded facts are claimed to be Just Too Different). Why does the natural ground the moral? And how does that work exactly? These questions seem very much alive at this point, which indicates that invoking grounding doesn’t solve the explanatory issue underlying the supervenience objection. It (merely) relocates it. In the words of Tristan McPherson, prima facie, a “bruteness revenge” reply seems open to the objector: any attempt of this sort to answer the supervenience argument is “in grave danger of simply moving the objectionable explanatory bump in the carpet.”

The point thus stands: if a theory cannot provide a good explanation for a necessary connection – whether grounding or supervenience – this makes it in one respect worse than its rivals. Grounding as an explanation for supervenience is all well and good, but can’t (or rather: shouldn’t) be the end of the story. The grounding relation explains the supervenience connection, but whence the grounding relations? The general worry that motivates the supervenience objection is that the non-naturalist owes an explanation for why there are metaphysically necessary connections between natural and normative properties and the grounding gambit doesn’t seem to respond to this concern. As it stands, the grounding reply just says that there are some such connections, and that they take the form of non-causal dependence philosophers have come to call ‘grounding’.

This doesn’t mean grounding can’t be of help to the non-naturalist. It just means that invoking the metaphysicians’ notion of ‘grounding’, or the expression ‘ground’, by itself, isn’t enough to discharge explanatory burdens concerning the distribution of natural and moral properties. Ample questions remain.

---

2.3.2 How Can Grounding Resolve Explanatory Worries?

I have just claimed that grounding hardly *explains* any metaphysically necessary connections between the natural and the moral in a way that harmonizes Just-Too-Different and Autonomy with Strong Supervenience and Dependence. I will now elaborate on this claim and consider ways in which grounding *can* resolve explanatory worries.

Consider an example of questions that remain after we’ve invoked grounding. Assume we ought to give more to combat drought. Why is this so? Well, because of (the natural facts about) the suffering of all those starving to death and their loved ones, and the (natural) fact that giving more will alleviate it, presumably by increasing reliable access to food. Are these natural facts enough for grounding the duty? Well, if natural facts are moral facts’ *full* ground, then it seems inconsistent to also say that these moral facts are, at the same time, very different from natural facts. How can they both be fully grounded in natural facts and also be discontinuous with them? This seems inconsistent with Autonomy, Just-Too-Different and with their very non-naturalism.

Robust Realism thus seems committed to the claim that at least one moral fact is not fully grounded in non-normative, natural facts: ethical facts are such that every full ground for it contains a normative ingredient.\(^63\) Where a full ground is enough on its own to ground what it grounds, and a mere partial ground isn’t enough on its own to ground what it grounds. Non-naturalists of course agree that token normative facts are always somehow grounded in the natural facts, but insist that this connection does not amount to a full metaphysical ground. The challenge for the non-naturalist is to give some positive account of this connection.

A natural idea is that *general laws* play a role in metaphysically grounding particular moral facts. On this view, particular normative facts are metaphysically grounded in the relevant natural facts together with general normative principles connecting the two. What makes it the case that we ought to give humanitarian aid, it is very natural to say, is suffering, and that we ought to alleviate suffering when we can.

After all, the constraint of Autonomy doesn’t block non-naturalists from holding that particular things’ non-normative properties partially explain their normative properties. But for the non-naturalist, such cases must involve some further moral law that is part of the ultimate explanation in these cases. For example, if Donald is bad because he’s a liar, it seems Donald’s being a liar explains (in the immediate sense) his being bad. But this is true, for the non-naturalist,

\(^63\) As Enoch (2019, 2-3) recognizes.
only because (say) it is an independent normative fact that being a liar makes one bad. Ultimately, Donald’s badness depends not just on his being a liar, but also on that normative fact.

Gideon Rosen calls the resulting view *Bridge-Law Non-Naturalism*: “Whenever a particular action A possesses a normative property F, this fact is grounded in the fact that A satisfies some non-normative condition φ, together with a general law to the effect that whatever φs is F.”

Particular ethical facts obtain in virtue of more general ethical facts together with pertinent non-ethical facts. For example, the full explanation of why an action was wrong involves two kinds of facts: (i) a particular natural fact – you lied – and (ii) a general connecting grounding fact – for all act acts, if it was a lie, it was wrong in virtue of being a lie.

In this way, grounding explanations have been said to resemble covering-law explanations. This gives us a tripartite, law-based view of grounding explanations as model for moral explanations:

**Grounds:** particular natural fact(s).

**Law:** general explanatory grounding law about what grounds what.

**Explanandum:** particular normative fact.

G.A. Cohen provides a helpful illustration of how moral laws account for the moral relevance of certain natural facts. Suppose that Jane affirms the principle P: we should keep our promises. Cohen constructs P as an impure moral law, since he imagines this person would cite a natural fact (F) in support of it: only when promises are kept can promisees successfully their projects. Why does F support P? Because of P1: we should help people to pursue their projects. P1, Cohen points out, makes F matter, which makes it support P. But a principle that makes a natural fact matter is insensitive to whether or not that natural fact obtains: if Jane came to think that facing broken promises builds character, and thereby helps to turn people into more effective project pursuers, and that F is therefore false, she would have reason to abandon or modify her affirmation of P but no reason to abandon P1. She would still believe we should help people pursue their projects, just not that we ought to keep our promises because of it.

Nevertheless, P1 may still be sensitive to other natural facts. So what supports it? F1 does: people can achieve happiness only if they are able to pursue their projects. But then F1 supports P1 only in light of a more ultimate principle, P2, according to which people happiness should be promoted (absent other considerations). Why is that? Because promoting people’s happiness

---

64 Rosen 2017c, 138. See also Maguire (2015, 194).
expresses our respect for them (F2). In virtue of what does F2 support P2? In virtue of P3: we ought to express our respect for people, which is based on the fact that people possess what we are thought to be respect-meriting characteristics. The relevant ultimate, basic, fundamental principle P4 may then be: one ought to respect beings who have the relevant characteristics.

How does the grounding chain continue? In particular, what grounds moral principles? That depends. So-called *impure* moral laws are partly grounded in non-normative facts. For example, a moral law specifying that kicking dogs for fun is wrong, would be grounded in part in contingent facts of canine physiology, and in part in a more fundamental law to the effect that it’s wrong to hurt sentient beings for fun. In a sense, then, the moral law against kicking dogs for fun depends on contingent natural facts (about canine physiology). *Pure* moral laws, in contrast to their impure counterparts, are moral laws that are independent of natural facts (recall Autonomy). The non-naturalist may, for example, suggest that whatever the natural facts would have been, for example, it would have been wrong to hurt sentient beings for fun.

Okay, and what grounds such general laws? *Pure* normative principles need not be *fundamental* or inexplicable. They can be non-basic in the explanatory order if, even though they don’t depend on contingent non-normative facts for their explanation, they depend on more fundamental pure normative truths. Cohen provided an example: the rule against hurting sentient beings for fun (which is a kind of disrespect) might be grounded in the rule that one ought to respect beings who have the relevant characteristics.
What account for such grounding relationships? Typically, grounding explanations are mediated by essences. That is, in the paradigm cases, whenever \( A \) grounds \( B \), there exists an item (or items) whose nature ensures that every \( A \)-like fact grounds a corresponding \( B \)-like fact.\(^{67}\) However, the non-naturalist’s key thought is that the essences of the normative properties do not in general fix the true general principles on which they figure, some of which are thus genuine synthetic laws about which metaphysicians who know the essences of moral properties can disagree.\(^{68}\) In other words, non-naturalism holds that the essences of normative properties do not in general fix non-normative necessary and sufficient conditions for their instantiation. (If they did, they would be natural properties.\(^{69}\)) Therefore, whatever grounds the moral law, it’s not the nature of any of the properties it links up.

That would entail that the natures of the normative properties and relations, collectively or taken one at a time determine naturalistic necessary and sufficient conditions for their application. But that would make them natural properties, so that would be a variant of moral naturalism. Ethical non-naturalism, by contrast, is the view that in at least one case, the essences of the normative properties fail to determine naturalistic necessary and sufficient conditions for their application. Indeed:

The naturalist’s key thought, it seems to me, is not that each normative property is separately definable in non-normative terms. It is rather that the normative facts are fixed by the wholly non-normative facts (e.g., facts of physics and psychology) together with the natures of the normative properties and relations. On this sort of view, anyone who knows the non-normative facts is in a position to derive the ethical facts provided she also knows what it is for an act to be right, good, rational, etc. The non-naturalist’s distinctive commitment is that someone who knew the natural facts and the essences might still be in the dark about the synthetic principles that connect the normative facts to their non-normative grounds.\(^{70}\)

So, the idea is that particular ethical facts obtain in virtue of more general ethical facts together with pertinent non-ethical facts. And as we ask what grounds those “synthetic principles”, general normative laws will figure at every step. The regress could conceivably be infinite. But more likely is that it will terminate in fundamental laws: the supreme principles of normativity. On the non-naturalist picture, there is thus an elite set of metaphysically necessary true moral laws that are

---

\(^{67}\) Cf. Litland 2015. Whether this is usually the essence of A or B is debated among grounding theorists (see Bennett 2017, 192-213 for an overview).

\(^{68}\) Rosen 2017c, 146.

\(^{69}\) Rosen 2017b, 291.

\(^{70}\) Rosen 2020, 12, my emphasis.
the ungrounded normative facts upon which all the other normative facts rest. The unmoved mover of the moral realm.

Suppose that indeed there are a few pure moral laws that explain the rest. A natural follow-up question would then be: Why is this the set of supreme principle of morality when the grand moral theory might just as well have been… Rule Utilitarianism? *It is a feature of the framework we have assumed that this question can have no answer.* The fundamental laws can’t be explained by reference to deeper principles (since there are none). Neither are they grounded in any non-normative facts (since they are pure and would have been just how they are no matter how the natural facts had been) or in any particular normative facts they subsume (since they ground their instances and are not grounded in them). This commitment to inexplicable moral laws seems a feature of any non-naturalist view.71 For instance, Shafer-Landau, himself a non-naturalist, acknowledges that “realists don’t have any general answer to [the question what makes moral judgments true]. … The realist must say of the moral standards she favors that they are … simply correct.”72 Any non-naturalist will quickly add that this is a consequence of the picture of moral reality we’ve been discussing, not an objection to it. But still, “if pushed to explain why these basic principles include p but not q, she will fall silent.”73

What should we make of this? An underappreciated point about this view of moral reality is that it’s not at all historically unique to non-naturalists. It actually springs from the widely shared thought that moral philosophy constructs moral theories in order to explain moral phenomena, in much the same way that scientists construct scientific theories to explain natural phenomena. In contemporary physics, for example, the search is on for a so-called theory of everything uniting all four fundamental forces (strong nuclear, weak nuclear, electromagnetic, and gravitational). There’s a time-hallowed tradition in ethics with similar aspirations. This approach sees moral theory as the search for a grand unified theory of the ethical realm, whose aim it is to identify “one first principle, or common ground of obligation” that would be “the source of obligation.”74 This universal law could then be used to deduce which behaviors are right and which are wrong. And to justify why, exactly, the right actions are right, and the wrong ones are wrong:

The thought was that in order to explain the rightness of any particular action we must identify a feature that this action exemplifies that guarantees its rightness. For example, utilitarians believe that any action that exemplifies the property of utility maximization is morally right. In

---

71 See, for example Enoch (2011, 146), Rosen (2017b, 288), and Wielenberg (2014, 24).
72 Shafer-Landau 2003, 45-6. I return to this, albeit in a different context, in section 5.2.
73 Rosen 2020, 21.
74 Mill 1871, chap. 1, §3-4.
order to explain the rightness of a particular action, A, we have to show that A exemplifies the property of utility maximization. And since any action that exemplifies this property is morally right, then so is A.\textsuperscript{75}

Over the past century, ethics has moved away from the monist idea that there must be a single fundamental principle of morality. But the idea that “morality is composed of principles”\textsuperscript{76} and the corresponding commitment to a deductive model of moral explanation, remains intact.\textsuperscript{77} The most natural way to do moral explanation, it still seems to many, is to order moral phenomena under general moral laws. Picturing a moral reality containing fundamental, brute moral principles which have a special role in grounding non-fundamental moral facts is not, it seems, a distinctively non-naturalist commitment. It simply follows from how, in the words of naturalist David Brink, “particular moral truths are asymmetrically metaphysically dependent upon the more general moral truths stated in first principles.”\textsuperscript{78} For instance, according to such a picture, if utilitarianism is true, then the fact that you ought to maximize utility is an ungrounded moral fact – and all other moral facts are partly grounded in it (and partly in the natural facts, facts about which line of action will have which consequences, and the like).\textsuperscript{79} This ‘source-model of moral explanation’ strikes many as a plausible picture independent of Robust Realism. I return to this issue in section 5.2.

2.3.3 Principles as Partial Grounds

As we saw, almost all contemporary non-naturalist views hold that all contingent particular normative facts of the form $Fa$ are grounded in a non-normative fact are grounded in some non-normative fact $G$ together with a (fundamental) normative principle connecting $F$ and $G$. All in all, then, we can extract the following commitment from the previous discussion:

**Principles as Partial Grounds:** “Whenever a particular moral fact of the form [A has M] obtains, it is fully grounded in the combination of (i) a general moral principle specifying a connection between M and some set of non-moral properties or relations and (ii) various particular facts about the instantiation of those non-moral properties or relations.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{75} Leibowitz 2010, 474.
\textsuperscript{76} Hooker & Little 2000, 2.
\textsuperscript{77} Particularists, of course, dissent.
\textsuperscript{78} Brink 1994, 197.
\textsuperscript{79} Cf. Enoch 2019, 3.
\textsuperscript{80} Berker 2019, 6. He lists many examples showing that something like Principles as Partial Grounds “is assumed, almost always without argument, by a wide variety of different authors in a wide variety of different contexts” (7, 31fn.18).
For example, if A is an action that is morally required, utilitarian non-naturalists would claim that [A maximizes happiness] and the Principle of Utility together fully ground [A is required]. Like so:

Principles as Partial Grounds

![Figure 2. Principles as Partial Grounds](image)

Principles as Partial Grounds connects seamlessly with the grounding response to the supervenience challenge. Suppose the non-naturalist argues that certain ethical laws obtain with metaphysical necessity. Principles as Partial Grounds clarifies that these are precisely in the business of grounding impure ethical facts when combined with pertinent non-ethical facts. These theses entail the supervenience of the mixed facts on the non-ethical facts. Since grounds necessitate what they ground, together they explain why particular normative facts do not ‘vary on their own’. Supervenience now seems a simple consequence of the premise that mixed facts are explained by non-normative facts plus pure principles, together with the observation that the pure principles are metaphysically necessary. Consequently, on this picture, there is no puzzle about how to explain supervenience.

In sum, according to non-naturalism, the full grounds of particular moral facts include more than just the relevant natural facts, to explain the distribution of moral properties we need to invoke

---

81 Figures 1 and 2 are adapted from Berker 2019.
82 Maguire 2015, 199.
more than the distribution of natural properties. In particular, we need moral laws in order to explain the distribution of moral properties. Appealing to grounding in order to explain the distribution of moral properties, then, is incomplete without an account of the “synthetic principles” that conspire with the underlying natural facts to ground the particular moral facts.

Specifically, the non-naturalist needs to show that laws are able to play the metaphysical grounding role given to them. On her account, moral principles are themselves part of what explains why individual actions have the moral properties that they do. But, as I will explain shortly, not everything that they could be like would be able to do this. This means that the viability of the grounding response to explanatory worries surrounding non-naturalism depends on an account in which moral laws can and do play a determining role vis-à-vis the distribution of moral properties. Indeed, David Enoch acknowledges there are “theoretical reasons to think that Robust, non-naturalist, Realism needs moral principles to do serious grounding work.”\(^83\) And Selim Berker even contends that “the very tenability of [the non-naturalist’s] metanormative view depends on something like [Principles as Partial Grounds] being true.”

How can the success odds of a particular response – the grounding one – to a relatively common but also somewhat arcane objection – the Supervenience Challenge – have the far-reaching consequences Berker talks about? The answer, of course, is that if moral laws have no explanatory role the non-naturalist is not just in trouble with supervenience. This is because a central commitment of non-naturalism is that there are “synthetic principles” connecting the natural to the moral: there are true normative principles as ungrounded normative facts, upon which all other normative facts rest. Such (fundamental) normative principles are metaphysically prior to particular normative facts, which they help to ground.

A picture on which these (non-natural) laws don’t play a role in making moral facts the case, but on which moral facts are fully grounded in natural facts instead, seems at odds with non-naturalism. This is because if the full ground of moral facts includes only natural facts, moral facts no longer seem to have their own radically different, sui generis, non-natural metaphysical category. So if moral laws are not partial grounds, there seems to be no reason to believe that moral facts are non-natural facts. Principles as Partial Grounds seems the only way for non-naturalism to reconcile Dependence and Strong Supervenience with Autonomy and Just-Too-Different.\(^84\)

\(^83\) Enoch 2019, 1.
\(^84\) Asya Passinsky comments there might be an alternative way for non-naturalists to reconcile Dependence and Strong Supervenience with Autonomy and Just-Too-Different. This alternative approach casts principles as meta-gounds, rather than partial grounds. Such that whenever a particular moral fact of the form [A has M] obtains, it is fully grounded in various particular natural facts. But the fact that a particular moral fact is so grounded is itself fully
What exactly moral laws are on the non-naturalist view is an intricate question that will occupy us in the next section.

2.3.4 What Is a Moral Law?

In this section, I unpack the ontological commitments of said explanatory role for moral laws. To support my claim that not everything they can be like allows them to play this role, I start by giving two examples to show why not everything that moral laws could be like would allow them to play the role the non-naturalist needs them to play.

Since this required role is explanatory, the principles cannot, firstly, be mere regularities. The mere fact that all As are Bs cannot explain the fact that a given A is B. Rather, they have to be proper laws: general facts that account for their instances and are not explained by them. For a general connecting principle – between (e.g.) suffering-facts and duty-facts – to figure in the grounds is for it to govern its instances. And for a principle to govern its instances is to be part of what makes any instance obtain. And the only ones that can on pain of circularity govern their instances are ones that are not plausibly grounded in their instances.

To see the point about circularity, suppose the general fact that if something A-like obtains, so too does something B-like is made true, at least in part, by its instances—by that A-like thing and B-like thing, and that one, and so forth. But then if the general principle is included in the grounds of ordinary grounded facts, each instance is also partly grounded in the generalization. Each instance is partly grounded in the generalization, and the generalization is partly grounded in each instance. This violates the asymmetry of grounding.

So: moral laws cannot be mere regularities because they have to be prior to their instances in the metaphysical grounding order. A second thing they cannot be is mere, as it were, epistemic scaffoldings. On this view, it is not moral truth itself, but our epistemic capacities and limitations that necessitate postulating moral laws. Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, for example, can be understood as having a view along these lines. They defend moral generalism as a prescriptive thesis. Arguing that principles are guides in moral thought and discourse, and that the prominent role these guides play in our practices is what necessitates our commitment to them. This point about the epistemic or practical need for general principles, however, is not enough for the non-grounded in a general moral principle. Rather than partial grounds, why can’t general moral principles be such meta-groundings of grounding facts involving particular moral facts and particular natural facts? This is an interesting suggestion, which I’ll consider under the banner of ‘grounding pluralism’ in section 2.4.3. That is where such proposals most frequently make their occurrence. A discussion of principles as meta-grounds in a framework that does not assume grounding pluralism was removed for reasons of space.

88 McKeever & Ridge 2006, 177-8.
naturalist purposes. She must also show that the principles *actually determine* the moral facts. What is required is an account of how laws manage to *have* this explanatory power. Arguing that moral laws are required for an *epistemically satisfying* story about why, for example, suffering-facts ground duty-facts, does not suffice for defending their role in a *metaphysically complete* story about this grounding relationship.\(^\text{86}\)

Why not? The problem is that, for Principles as Partial Grounds to be true, moral laws can’t be mere *descriptions* of metaphysical dependence relations. On such a view, true moral principles *track* the natural-moral metaphysical dependence relations obtaining ‘out there’. For example, the statement “I promised to F” explains the statement “I am obligated to F” in virtue of a metaphysical dependence relation that exist between obligations and promises. This view of moral laws, however, would have laws be describers of metaphysical explanation, rather than themselves explanatory (in the right kind of way, see below). This is to play an epistemic role only. Namely: to direct towards the underlying metaphysics, without being *part* of the metaphysics. Without helping to *make* the connection between promises and obligations obtain.\(^\text{87}\) Each instance of (e.g.) wrongness is fully explained by a particular natural fact. This amounts to saying that the full ground of moral facts are natural facts. The non-naturalist can’t say that. On her view, the law needs to be an *additional, more fundamental entity* in the explanation that explains – is responsible for – any emergent regularity between (e.g.) promises and obligations. This corresponds to the non-naturalist thought that there exists a metaphysically robust moral realm, conformity to which is the ultimate standard for right and wrong.\(^\text{88}\)

There’s a more general issue in the background here that requires a brief comment. This issue is an ambiguity in the term ‘explanation’. It pays to recognize a *metaphysical* and an *epistemic* sense of ‘explanation’.\(^\text{89}\) As Karen Bennett writes:

> To say that something \(x\) *metaphysically* explains \(y\) is to say that \(x\) makes \(y\) exist or obtain, that it fully accounts for \(y\). Metaphysical explanation is *production* or *generation* or *making happen* or *obtain* or *being responsible for* (in a nonmoral sense). Epistemic explanation, in

\(^{86}\) A possible reply is that, maybe particular ethical facts can be fundamental in the metaphysical grounding order. For example, “the pain and suffering of *this* genocide makes it wrong” would be an example of a fundamental non-natural fact that constitutes moral reality. An argument against that view is that it’s at odds with a central feature of ethical practice: we normally think that moral explanation presupposes general principles. We can refute a moral explanation of the form ‘it’s wrong to push the fat man because doing so is \(\varphi\),’ by citing a merely possible counterexample to the implied general law: whatever \(\varphi\)s is wrong. This shows that the moral law implicit in the explanation is not a mere regularity, but rather a modalized generalization of some sort.


\(^{88}\) Cf. Erdur 2016, 598.

\(^{89}\) See, among others, Bennett (2017, §3.5, §7.4.2); Dasgupta (2014, 572); Leibowitz (2010, §6).
contrast, is an epistemic notion. To say that $x$ epistemically explains $y$ is to say that $x$ renders $y$ intelligible, or sheds some light on how or why it happened.\footnote{Bennett 2017, 202.}

To say that moral laws epistemically explain moral facts is to say that they make them intelligible. To say that they metaphysically explain moral facts is to say that they make them exist or happen. The goal of epistemic explanation is to render something intelligible to someone, or to make someone understand something. So conceivably, what counts as a satisfying epistemic explanation might very from audience to audience and context to context. Metaphysical explanation, by contrast, is typically to be taken objective, roughly in the sense of being mind-independent. Its success does not depend on the extent to which it induces understanding in its audience, but on the extent to which it is successfully captures the explanatory relations obtaining ‘out there’ in the world. Adopting a more objective notion of explanation fits better with the explanatory ambitions of normative theories.\footnote{As Väyrynen (2020, 5) argues.}

Theories like act-utilitarianism – here understood as an explanatory theory according to which any action is right if and only if, and because, it maximizes general happiness – don’t constrain their explanatory claims about what makes acts right by epistemic or pragmatic factors such as an audience’s background beliefs or interests.

Since normative explanations are metaphysical rather than epistemic, and Robust Realism is committed to moral principles being part of complete normative explanations, Robust Realism is committed to the claim that moral principles metaphysically explain moral properties. They play a role in making moral facts the case, over and above any role they might play in making sense of why a moral fact obtains.

Alright, let’s take stock. Since the non-naturalist needs moral principles to do grounding work, she needs to explain how exactly they conspire with the underlying facts to ground particular normative facts. This account needs to vindicate the law’s metaphysically explanatory role. As I’ve tried to show with my examples in this section so far, not everything they can be like allows them to play this role. To recapitulate, moral laws can’t be grounded in the particular moral facts they subsume, since to the contrary, those particular facts are party grounded in the laws. Moreover, we aren’t after epistemic justification for a belief that a particular moral fact obtains given that a particular natural fact obtains. On that role, moral generalizations only license certain natural-moral inferences, but their explanatory power is derivative from the metaphysical dependence relations they depict rather than make the case.
Instead, we want to know what underwrites such inferences licensed by the generalizations. For this, we need the sort of explanation that gives an account for why things are the way they are. What must moral principles be like for them to do this work? What must moral laws be like such that the grounding role it assigns to moral principles as an additional entity in the explanation of particular moral facts can be vindicated? In what follows, I will unpack the ontological commitments of the grounding reply to the supervenience objection.

First desideratum: in order for these laws to play a role that’s metaphysically explanatory, they must play a (non-causal) determining role regarding the distribution of moral properties. (The analogy would be non-Humeanism about the laws of nature where they play a determining role in making events come about.) If moral laws are to do grounding work, they need to be partly responsible for the moral facts they help to ground. That’s just what it is to have a metaphysically explanatory role.

So: one thing the non-naturalist’s account of moral laws must accommodate is that they must be responsible for particular moral facts. They must make the facts obtain. Before unpacking other desiderata of the non-naturalist account of moral laws, I want to point out an interesting implication of this.

As a rule, that which is grounded is ontologically dependent on its grounds. On the view we’re considering, moral laws are needed to ground particular moral facts. It follows these facts are ontologically dependent on moral laws, and would not obtain without the law obtaining. For example, without a general fact according to which suffering is bad, the relation between particular facts about suffering and particular facts about badness would not obtain. The facts about suffering and the moral law are both required to fully account for the facts about badness. (On the laws of nature analogy, two objects attract each other with the force they do in part because of the masses they have and the distance between them, and in part because of the law of universal gravitation.)

There being wrongness at all, thus depends (in part) on there being moral laws. Without any moral law, no moral fact would obtain. For all its apparent boldness, it’s hard to see how there could be an account on which moral laws do metaphysical grounding work that does not have this implication.

---

93 Indeed, non-naturalism and Principles as Partial Grounds together imply that our moral commitments should be counterfactually conditionalized on information about the existence and patterns of non-natural moral properties (for the distribution of which moral laws are responsible). I return to this issue in the final section of this chapter.
Is this a counterintuitive claim? For those with particularist leanings, it might be. But for the bridge-law non-naturalist, with her commitment to Just-Too-Different, it strikes me as a natural thing to say that moral principles are ontologically prior to moral properties. Consider an analogy with legality. Let’s say Don builds a six-story building on Main Street where the building code specifies a maximum of five stories. The building is thus illegal. What grounds the illegality fact? Neither the building itself nor the fact that it is six stories tall has the power, as it were, to generate the fact that the building is illegal. To use a phrase of Karen Bennett’s, the illegality fact can’t just “unfold upwards” from the building’s height because it is factors extrinsic to the building that do the work. The grounds of legal facts—such as the fact that a certain building is illegal—must thus include general facts:

While it would be fine to say that the building is illegal because it’s a six-story building on Main Street, this is shorthand. A full grounding explanation must cite this pre-legal fact together with a general legal fact, e.g., the fact that according to provision 20.3(c) of the building code, for all x, if x is a six-story building on Main Street, x is illegal.\(^95\)

The general principle needs to — as it were — ‘hook onto’ the building’s height and ‘pull up’ the fact that the building is illegal.\(^96\) As this shows, there are other cases of grounded facts that plausibly have something general in their grounds, and where we also see the ontological dependence: without law, there wouldn’t be illegality. The non-naturalist says the situation is similar in the moral case: without the laws, there wouldn’t be wrongness.\(^97\) The law needs to ‘hook onto’ the utility-suboptimality of an action (if utilitarianism is true) and pull up the fact that it was wrong. If utility-suboptimality non-causally determines wrongness, this is because there is a true non-natural moral fact with the content ‘utility-suboptimality is wrong’.

That said, let’s resume our line of questioning. What other positive desiderata does the non-naturalist account of moral laws need to meet? Well, since they enter into grounding relations, they must be facts. And since they have moral content, they are moral facts. Now, according to the non-naturalist, moral facts are mind-independent. That is, they are facts about the world. Thus, the claim that giving to charity is good represents the world as being a certain way, and if that claim is true, that is in virtue of a certain kind of worldly fact: that giving to charity is good. Similarly, if it is true that giving to charity alleviates suffering, this is so in virtue of some other worldly fact. Now consider a moral principle: Giving to charity is good because it alleviates suffering. This seems to be

---

\(^94\) Bennett 2011, 33; 2017, 196.
\(^95\) Rosen 2017b, 286.
\(^96\) Cf. Bennett 2019, 515.
\(^97\) Though see section 2.4.3 of this dissertation for limitations on this analogy.
true as well. But if we accept that giving to charity alleviates suffering and giving to charity is good are both worldly facts, to say that giving to charity is good because it alleviates suffering is to say that one worldly fact obtains because another worldly fact obtains. Because this ‘because’ relation holds between two worldly facts, this ‘because’ relation seems like it must, itself, be worldly (yet non-natural). And the same for other moral laws. For the non-naturalist, moral laws are mind-independent aspects of the world, the truthmakers of claims where a moral property is supposed to obtain because some natural property obtains.

The final desideratum is that moral laws need to supply a necessary connection between distinct existences. To meet this, the grounding reply to the supervenience, well, asserts there can be necessary relations between distinct existences, at least when the distinct existences are normative on one side, and natural on the other. The moral laws, to be understood as extra, sui generis facts about the world, ‘hook them up’. The moral laws concern what grounds what, and partly makes this grounding fact the case. The non-naturalist does not have an answer to how this could be, but denies she has to give one. The non-naturalist is indeed committed to something brute, but the bruteness, she claims, is exactly where it’s supposed to be. So it’s not (really) costly.

This ends our search for an answer to the question what moral laws must be like for Principles as Partial Grounds to be vindicated. They must be sui generis worldly facts about what grounds what, the most fundamental of which are ontologically basic. Next to being facts about what grounds what, they must be responsible for the particular moral fact they help to ground.

2.4 ASSESSING NON-NATURALISM’S METAPHYSICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, we’ll investigate whether this combination is coherent. We’ll also consider the plausibility of a commitment to ontologically basic, sui generis moral laws as items occurring in one’s ontology and the suggestion that this commitment is uncostly because explanatory questions about them do not properly arise. We’ll also ask whether natural-moral connections can be such that Principles as Partial Grounds is true of them while also being metaphysically necessary. In both cases, non-naturalism does not escape unscathed.

---

98 Enoch 2011, 147.
99 Recall the discussion at the end of section 2.3.2.
2.4.1 Redundant Explanations I: The Content of Moral Principles

How plausible is it that general moral laws are part of what makes particular moral facts obtain? In this section, we'll see that their standard formulation is, in fact, incompatible with this picture.

Contra Principles as Partial Grounds, Selim Berker has recently argued that the best understanding of moral principles does not allow them—on pain of inconsistency with their very content—to play a role in grounding particular moral facts.\textsuperscript{100} If moral principles are themselves about what grounds what, there is no room for them do such grounding work themselves.

Berker begins his argument by asking what the logical form of moral principles is. Often, he says, such claims are formulated in a purely intensional ("correlational") manner, so that they concern the extension of the relevant moral properties across all possible worlds – indifferent to the Euthyphronic contrast between the claim that an action is wrong because it fails to maximize utility, and the claim that it fails to maximize utility because it is wrong. Thus we get:

**Principle of Utility\((a)\):** Necessarily, an action is required if and only if it maximizes happiness.

Other times, though, authors formulate these principles hyperintensionally ("explanatory"), so that they track distinctions that can be made between necessarily co-extensive properties. \textit{Not} indifferent to the Euthyphronic dilemma, but stating roughly that action is wrong if and only if, and \textit{because}, it fails to maximize utility. The most straightforward way of doing so, Berker tells us, is to include an appeal to grounding in the content of the moral principles. That gives us:

**Principle of Utility\((b)\):** Necessarily, an action is required if and only if, and because, it maximizes happiness.\textsuperscript{101}

As Berker further notes, it seems clear that the hyperintensional formulation of moral principles is to be preferred over the purely intensional formulation.\textsuperscript{102} First-order ethical theories like utilitarianism aim to provide us with accounts of what \textit{makes} acts right and wrong. We understand it as claiming: ‘All acts that are not utility-maximizing are wrong \textit{in virtue of that very fact}.’ Not as arguing just for the necessary coincidence of (e.g.) wrongness and failure to maximize utility. Moral theories, then, do not state a mere extensional equivalence, but are best seen as grounding claims. So understood, utilitarianism, for example, is the view that an action is wrong if, and

\textsuperscript{100} Berker 2019.
\textsuperscript{101} Berker 2019, 5.
\textsuperscript{102} Berker (2019, 5): “Indeed, one might think that even when an author explicitly writes down an intensional formulation of [a moral principle], really it is the hyperintensional formulation that is intended.”
because, it fails to maximize utility. Its distinctive claim is that utility-suboptimality grounds wrongness.

Furthermore, this seems to be a statement of wrongness’ full ground. Nothing more is needed to make it the case that an act was wrong. There is nothing else in virtue of which, in this example, a non-utility-optimizing act was wrong. The utilitarian doesn’t think that besides utility-suboptimality a second fact is needed to ground wrongness.

But if one thing fully grounds another, then no other thing is needed in order to ground it. In particular, if whenever an action is wrong, utility-suboptimality fully grounds its wrongness, then the principle of utility plays no role—at the very least, no non-redundant role—in grounding its wrongness. As Enoch summarizes the argument: “So the best [hyperintensional] understanding of the principle of utility has it saying of itself, as it were, that it does not play a non-redundant role in grounding the wrongness of wrong actions.”  

![Diagram: Principles as Partial Grounds with Hyperintensional Laws](image)

Figure 3: Principles as Partial Grounds, With Hyperintensional Moral Principles. Note the Redundant – ‘Double’ – Grounding

Unfortunately, there is a presumption against redundant explanations, which – it is commonly thought – can only be overcome if there is something that is exclusively explained by

---

103 Enoch 2019, 5.
each member of a set of redundant explanations. In other words, we should posit additional explainers of moral facts beyond natural facts only if there is something that is exclusively explained by these additional explainers—something that natural facts (for example, those about utility-optimality) don’t already explain.\footnote{Of course, there are commonplace examples of redundant grounding explanations. True disjunctions, for instance, are widely held to be fully grounded in each of their true disjuncts. [There is an apple or there is a fire hydrant] is fully grounded in [there is an apple] \textit{and} fully grounded in [there is a fire hydrant]. Doesn’t this show that redundant grounding is not problematic at all? It does not. The different (full) grounds of facts like disjunctions and existential generalizations are not competing explanations. Whereas in the moral case, they are (see section 2.4.2). That’s the disanalogy. Thanks to Asya Passinsky for discussion here.}

Berker’s argument, though, aims to show that there is no such thing. If the principle of utility is a grounding claim, Berker argues, the claim that it partially grounds a particular act A’s being right involves redundant, circular grounding. The principle itself, after all, states that maximizing utility is by itself sufficient to ground A’s being right. If differences in which moral facts obtain are fully explained by differences in which natural facts obtain, as the hyperintensional formulation of moral principles has it, it seems they are \textit{exclusively} explained by these differences.

Berker concludes that moral laws are metaphysically idle. Rather than standing in a grounding relation themselves, they merely describe or summarize such relations. They are, in Berker’s terms, merely “explanation-serving”: they specify which particular natural facts explain which particular moral facts, and that’s it. They are not “explanation-involving” – do not themselves figure in the explanation of particular moral facts. As Fogal and Risberg put it, they are explanatory “in content”, not “in role”.\footnote{Fogal and Risberg 2020.} Or in our terminology, they might figure in an \textit{epistemological} explanation of moral properties, making sense of why they obtain. But they do not actually figure in their metaphysical explanation, the full account of what \textit{makes them the case}. On this result, the truth of the principle that (say) lying is wrong, is not, for example, partly responsible for particular moral facts involving lying.

Why is this a bad result for the non-naturalist? Why is it not open to her to happily accept the (alleged) upshot that moral principles are explanatory in content, but not in role? That would entail that “moral principles can be viewed as mere summaries … of the individual explanation relations that obtain between specific instantiations of moral and non-moral properties.”\footnote{Berker 2019, 2.} Particular facts about the explanatory relationships between particular moral and non-moral facts explain the general explanatory principles, rather than the other way around. This threatens the Robust Realist’ picture because it leaves the laws \textit{irrelevant} for metaphysical explanation –
metaphysically idle – whereas the non-naturalist needs them to be (on the contrary) responsible for the distribution of moral properties.

How can the non-naturalist respond? A lot of work in this argument is done by the claim that moral laws are typically meant as hyperintensional principles. They specify features that not just, as a matter of fact, covary with the moral property at issue. Those features, moreover, ground and explain that moral property. This, by itself, seems enough to rule out a special explanatory role for moral principles and get the challenge going. Isn’t that suspect? Perhaps especially so because, as saw above, there’s a rich historical tradition that sees morality as the search for the “first principle(s)” of morality. Isn’t that at odds with the Berker’s deflationary result vis-à-vis such moral principles?

It need not be. It’s not clear that understanding this tradition as the search for a principle specifying which natural facts ground the moral facts is less accurate than understanding it as the search for a principle making it the case that certain natural facts are morally relevant. If anything, I think the former interpretation is more likely. It strikes me as improbable that those seeking to systematize morality in a system of principles see those principles as items occurring in one’s ontology, as the non-naturalist has it. The metaphysical search for a source of morality is a distinctive non-naturalist endeavor. So the apparent mismatch between Berker’s argument and the source-of-normativity tradition is not the beginning of a reductio on behalf of the non-naturalist.

Another thing the non-naturalist might say is that any account that rejects a metaphysically explanatory role for moral principles has trouble making sense of moral supervenience, which renders it implausible.\textsuperscript{107} Strong Supervenience allows us to infer, for instance, that if Jan is good, every other possible entity with his natural properties is also good. Berker takes the natural-normative grounding relations to hold between wholly particular natural and wholly particular moral facts. Some of Jan’s natural properties fully explain why he’s good. As a result, nothing entitles us to generalize from facts about the natural and moral properties of one particular entity to facts about the natural and moral properties of another. Such generalizations, however, are exactly what the platitude of moral supervenience captures. However, given an underlying Humean metaphysics, there’s no reason to expect there to be true principles of a general form that can legitimize such generalizations. If moral laws are explanatorily idle, then it seems we shouldn’t expect Strong Supervenience to be true on any meta-ethical view. This is a counterintuitive result: many agree it’s an \textit{a priori} truth that when we come to know that “This object with natural features

\textsuperscript{107} Fogal and Risberg (2020, §3–4) argue along these lines.
N has moral feature $M'$, we somehow also come to know that any object with exactly the same natural properties as this object – any entity that is N – will have M as well.\(^\text{108}\) Doesn’t Berker’s Humean conclusion contradict this, and doesn’t that count against the force of the argument?

Since it doesn’t, this reply, too, has little force. Supervenience points us to a pattern: N-like things ground M-like things. Do we really need principles to explain this? The Humean might suggest that, having perceived the grounding of M by N in this case, we generalize. If M is grounded by N in this case, then we conclude that N will be co-instantiated with M in other cases as well. What licenses this inference if not principles? Well, it seems open for the Humean say that the fact that N-like things ground M-like things is grounded in N-like likeness, the nature of N-like things, what it is like to be N-like. For example, she could say that the essence of pain explains the pattern of pain-facts grounding badness-facts. I do not see that the Humean has any special difficulty explaining generalizations about natural-moral grounding. So moral supervenience, it seems to me, cannot be turned into a reductio against Berker’s argument either. (Of course, this explanation by an appeal to the essence of natural properties is not available to the non-naturalist. As mentioned, to claim that it is in the nature of the normative that some non-normative facts ground some normative facts is a distinctly naturalistic claim.)

The final thing the non-naturalist could say is that the preference for hyperintensionally formulated moral principles is the result of our moral explanatory practice – it does not point to a metaphysically ‘deep’ insight. Almost all explanations we actually provide are partial rather than full. Why haven’t you bothered to visit your grandparents for so long? Because of the coronavirus. While sensible as a reply, the explanatory potential of your explanation for your behavior depends on a host of background facts that are taken for granted. This illustrates a general feature of our explanatory practice: rather than citing everything required to explain something, we’re typically content to highlight one or two particularly notable factors, trusting our interlocutors to fill in the rest. Recall also, as a second example, the explanation of why the six-story building on Mainstreet was illegal. While it would be fine to cite just the fact that it’s a six-story building on Mainstreet to explain its illegality, a full grounding explanation must cite this pre-legal fact together with a general legal fact (“According to the building code…”). Something similar, the non-naturalist might suggest, is going on in the moral case. While we’re typically content to say that an act was wrong because it was a lie, this explanation is actually shorthand. Actually, the non-natural fact that lying is wrong – perhaps ultimately grounded in the principle of utility – itself also partly explains particular moral facts involving lying. Moral principles select among the vast array of non-normative features those

\(^{108}\) Smith 1994, 22.
with normative significance. They specify the ontological grounds by *making it the case* that these features ground normative properties. So maybe the apparent preference for hyperintensional moral principles, with natural facts being the only ground of moral facts, is a misleading appearance due to our explanatory practices.

The reply sounds sensible as far as it goes, but I doubt it gets the non-naturalist off the hook. Recall that, according to non-naturalism, moral laws are facts about the patterns of instantiation of *sui generis* ontology. Citing a fact about the patterns of a non-natural realm to complete an explanation of why some act was wrong does not seem on a par with citing a fact about the building code to complete an explanation of why some building is illegal. The claim that a fact about something like *sui generis*, non-natural ontology is required to ground instantiations of any everyday moral states of affairs strikes me as counterintuitive. The observation that our pragmatic explanations are generally incomplete does nothing to establish that the omitted element is information about a non-natural realm. The non-naturalist needs to supplement this remark with the substantive claim that the information our pragmatic moral explanations leave out is information about the patterns of instantiation of *sui generis* non-natural properties. However, when the non-naturalist insists that an act was wrong because it caused suffering, *and* that *not only* because of that, but *also* because there is a non-natural, *sui generis*, extra fact about the world which makes it true that suffering is bad, it’s not clear what *that* is supposed to add.109 In short, there seems to be a tension between how we normally think of moral principles and an ontological dependence of moral properties on moral laws as the non-naturalist understands them. Except, perhaps, by embracing grounding pluralism, which I discuss shortly, I do not see how the non-naturalist can avoid this revisionist theory of normative discourse if she wants to make sense of a metaphysically explanatory role for moral laws the way she understands them.

Summing up: non-naturalism needs particular normative facts to be partially grounded in (fundamental) normative principles. But if such principles are themselves grounding claims – as seems the most natural way to understand them – the view that normative principles play a role in grounding particular normative facts seems to involve redundant grounding. One way to resist this conclusion is to argue that the apparent superiority of hyperintensionally formulated moral

---

109 This is reminiscent of a complaint leveled against realism by Simon Blackburn (1988, 166): “A scientist can say that there was a certain result because a neutrino or electron did this and that, but a philosopher has nothing to add to this. If she tries to say, ‘Not only did the result occur because of the neutrino; but also because neutrino theory depicts (corresponds with, matches, carves at the joints) the world,’ she adds nothing but voices only a vein, and vainglorious attempt to underwrite the science. This attempt may have made sense in a Cartesian tradition, when the mind’s contact with the world seemed so problematical, but its time has passed. … Characteristically, if realism fails [it fails] because it is vacuous.”
principles thus should not be taken at face value. This, however, seems to give an implausible result with regard to the role of sui generis ontology in (everyday) moral explanation. So either non-natural moral laws explain redundantly, or they explain implausibly.

In the next section, I discuss an account that seeks to avoid this result.

2.4.2 Non-Naturalism and the Ultimate Explanation of Moral Truths

Non-naturalists have long argued that truth in ethics is independent of whatever anyone happens to think about it. The mere fact that we (dis)approve of some ethical belief or converge on a particular moral code has no bearing on its truth or falsity. Of course, this means we ourselves may be wrong about the mind-independent, causally inefficacious moral facts. Even if we can come to know what is ‘good’ and what is ‘right’, by our moral vocabulary, there would remain the question of whether it is our terms and concepts that limn the normative structure of reality. For the non-naturalist, the answer to this question hinges on representational matters: do the special non-natural properties pattern in a way that coincides with our normative concepts? Indeed, many non-naturalists have recently adopted metaphysicians’ talk of being joint-carving, or elite, and interpret the question of which normative concepts are the right ones to use as one of which normative concepts are joint-carving. Call this “Competing Grounds”.

With this in place, we’re in a position to get clear on what I think is a rhetorical sleight of hand in the way the non-naturalist typically presents her view. When she presents herself as holding that ‘reality itself dictates certain ways of acting and valuing,’ it sounds like what she’s saying is: “The suffering, the pain, the joy, the happiness, the agony, and all those other things we commonly treat as relevant for classifying states of affairs as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, settle the right pattern for moral goodness and badness. What else in reality than pain, happiness, and the like, could do that?” But what she’s actually saying is: “There’s another type of property in reality, unobservable and very different in kind from pain, suffering, happiness, and the like. Yet, this property-in-reality is inherently authoritative, and whatever acts have it, are the ones that should be done.”

Yet many non-naturalists argue we should not see non-natural properties as doing any morally justificatory work. They do not believe that non-natural properties are the entities that make acts wrong, nor that the ultimate explanation of (e.g.) the wrongness of genocide is not some

---

10 As Eklund (2019, 3), among others, notes. See also the discussion in section 2.1.
111 See, e.g., Chappell 2019.
material in the non-natural part of the universe. Rather, the view is that facts like ‘pain and suffering make genocide wrong’ constitute the moral reality realists accept: “If there are facts about which actions are right and wrong, and facts about what makes those actions right or wrong, and these facts do not constitutively depend on the endorsement of any actual or hypothetical agent, it is plausibly these facts themselves which (at least partially) constitute moral reality.” Non-naturalism then insists that if that reality is to capture a notion of wrongness that is genuinely objective and has categorical normative force for rational agents, then we also need to posit that these facts about normative significance of natural facts are the appropriate standards for rational beings, having genuine authority. Skepticism about capturing this without relying on some irreducibly normative, facts about good- or right-makingness leads the view to posit non-natural facts and properties at the bottom of all this. Because then it can say that the ultimate grounds of the wrongness of genocide are to be understood metaphysically as constituted by an independent, ontologically fundamental reality. But non-natural properties and laws are not competing moral grounds (call this “No Competing Grounds”). So there’s no dilemma of redundant grounding.

I think it’s questionable whether No Competing Grounds can coherently be read as claiming that the non-natural realm does not to any morally justificatory work. A natural reading of non-naturalism, even when constructed like that, is that non-natural facts and properties are higher-level reasons why and as such do figure in moral justification.

---

112 Even though, as Horn (2020, 349) admits while defending non-naturalism, “In fairness … [non-naturalists] have sometimes characterized their own views in ways that sound like they are making substantive commitments about what makes actions wrong.” See, for example, Erdur’s (2016, 600) discussion of Shafer-Landau and Enoch.

113 Horn 2020, 347.

114 FitzPatrick 2018, 554.

Along these lines, Melis Erdur has argued that metaethical views terminate chains of substantive moral why-questions, and as such must be substantively moral themselves.\textsuperscript{116} Once a question is asked about an abstract normative theory, the appropriate next step, according to Erdur, is to ascend to the level of metaethics. Metaethical theories, therefore, may naturally be heard as very general substantive moral claims about why (in the end) right things are right and wrong things are wrong. Like her, many have interpreted the way non-naturalism locates the source of normativity in a realm of non-natural facts as a commitment to the thought that what ultimately accounts for the wrongness of, say, genocide is some non-natural part of the universe. Because, according to that line of thinking, conformity to the facts about a distribution of certain inherently normative non-natural properties is the moral bottom line. So the wrongness of anything is conditional on the distribution of these properties.\textsuperscript{117}

Let me give a few textual examples in support, in order to show that interpreting No Competing Grounds such that the distribution of non-natural properties has no normative role, is not a live option for the non-naturalist.\textsuperscript{118}

Richard Chappell, to begin, clarifies that (according to him), “the role of non-natural properties is not to be responded to, but to “mark” which natural properties it is correct for us to respond to in certain ways.”\textsuperscript{119} This is consistent with the mentioned appeals to eliteness – the thought that differences in alignment with non-natural properties can settle moral disagreements between communities. But if non-natural properties make it morally correct or incorrect to care about certain things and not others, it’s very hard not to see them as higher-level reasons why – as a reason why we should care about things like happiness and love (they share a non-natural property) and not about hand-clapping and blade-counting (they do not). Robust Realism, generally, is understood as positing a metaphysically robust moral realm, conformity to which is the ultimate standard for right and wrong. This might not commit the non-naturalist to denying that natural facts have significance in their own right. But it does commit them to the claim that non-natural properties should be taken as relevant to the normative statuses of things. Which sets up the dilemma of redundant grounding or implausible moral explanations.

FitzPatrick, to continue, explains his motivations for adopting non-naturalism like this: “We are skeptical about capturing everything we want without relying on some irreducibly evaluative or

\textsuperscript{116} Erdur 2016.
\textsuperscript{117} Erdur 2016, 597.
\textsuperscript{118} An exception might be non-naturalists who explicitly endorse some form of grounding pluralism – to be discussed in the next section.
\textsuperscript{119} Chappell 2019, 125.
normative facts about standards or good- or right-makingness; so we posit such apparently ‘non-natural’ facts and properties at the bottom of all this.”\textsuperscript{120} What could ‘at the bottom of all this’ mean, if not the bottom of a \textit{chain of justifications}? Non-natural properties are the truthmakers for the normative truths about which natural properties are normatively significant in which ways.\textsuperscript{121} So when two natural properties differ in normative valence, this is ultimately reflected in them having different non-natural properties. But if non-natural properties are where moral justifications hit bottom, it seems misplaced to say non-naturalism doesn’t implore us to “govern our lives … for the sake of the promotion or maximization of things possessing a non-natural property about the character of which we are able to say very little.”\textsuperscript{122}

And, of course, Parfit famously believed that nothing is right and wrong if there are no non-natural properties. Enoch recently too has endorsed conditionals of the form “if human pain and dog pain have no non-natural property in common, then … dog pain is not intrinsically bad.”\textsuperscript{123} Again, the implication that accepting non-naturalism means you should take certain information about non-natural properties into account seems hard to avoid. Even though their non-natural properties might not be the only reason why things are wrong, they wouldn’t have the normative status they have if they didn’t have the non-natural properties they have. Which means that either we have the problem of redundant grounding or \textit{sui generis} “whatnots” – to borrow Dasgupta’s\textsuperscript{124} term – have moral justificatory force. Both of which seem implausible.

In conclusion: non-naturalism claims one needs non-natural moral properties, for whose distribution moral laws are responsible, to account for the normative significance of the familiar natural facts we cite in ordinary ethical justifications.\textsuperscript{125} This either leads to a redundant explanation of particular moral facts or commits the view to a revisionary and implausible account of our practice of moral explanation. As both options are bad, this dilemma costs plausibility points for non-naturalism. But without it, the view seems unable to accommodate at the same time Strong Supervenience, Dependence, Just-Too-Different, and Autonomy. It thus has to ‘buy’ explanatory power by taking on board implausible and counterintuitive, perhaps even slightly ad-hoc or even ‘queer’, commitments. (As we’ll see, this is a recurring pattern.)

\begin{footnotes}
\item[120] FitzPatrick 2018, 555.
\item[121] Chappell 2019, 131.
\item[122] Korsgaard 1981, 10.
\item[123] Enoch 2020, 2.
\item[124] E.g. Dasgupta 2017, 301.
\item[125] See, for example, FitzPatrick 2018, 556.
\end{footnotes}
2.4.3 Grounding Pluralism to the Rescue?

This does not yet end my discussion of Berker’s argument. For I may have been too eager to pin the non-naturalist down on a bad-looking dilemma. Perhaps the non-naturalist need not rescue the non-redundant explanatory role of the moral law by telling the implausible story outlined above. She may instead insist that the moral law has a grounding role to play because there are different kinds of grounding involved in moral explanations. She may say that the full metaphysical ground of a particular moral fact includes reference to a moral principle, whereas the full moral ground of (e.g.) the wrongness of wrong actions are their relevant natural characteristics.\(^\text{126}\) That would reconcile the hyperintensional formulation of moral principles (moral laws specify the full moral grounds) with Principles as Partial Grounds (they have a metaphysically explanatory role).

How does this work, exactly? An analogy with legality may, yet again, be insightful here. We’ve seen that moral laws are like legal laws in the sense that legality facts and moral facts both seem ‘just too different’ from the natural facts that underlie them. Accordingly, a general principle needs to ‘hook onto’ (e.g.) the building’s height or the act’s utility-suboptimality to ‘pull up’ the fact that the building is illegal or the act is wrong. However, it seems that the full legal ground of the building’s illegality is its height (and perhaps other, non-legal but legally relevant facts). That is, ‘within the legal story’, as it were, the fact that the building exceeds a certain length suffices for its illegality. Within the framework created by the specific legal norms, all that’s needed for the building to be illegal is for it to have a certain height. But that does not mean that the framework itself is grounding-irrelevant. It’s relevant because it’s part of the ‘more external’ story of the grounding of legal facts. Neither the building itself nor the fact that it’s so-and-so tall has the power, as it were, to generate the fact that’s illegal. This implies the legal norm is part of what creates the relevant legal facts, so it seems relevant for grounding particular legal facts. As such, it seems that the full metaphysical explanation of what makes it the case that the building is illegal has to refer to the building code – to the general framework. The full metaphysical explanation of what makes it the case that the building is illegal has to refer to the legal norm. But the internally legal story does not. Within that story, the height suffices. The relevant law does some kind of grounding work, but ‘internally’ it does not.

Once we distinguish between those two, it is claimed, the non-naturalist can escape Berker’s challenge. Like legal laws, moral laws figure in the external, metaphysical grounding story. So they do grounding work. But the moral law is not needed in moral explanation: we can hold onto its

\(^{126}\) Enoch 2019, 10.
hyperintensional appearance. On the pluralist story, the law only comes in when we’re giving *metaphysical* explanations. And so it might seem that grounding pluralism allows the non-naturalist to escape Berkner’s challenge unscathed. We can interpret the claim made by Principles as Partial Grounds in terms of the metaphysical grounding relation, but formulate the content of our moral principles hyperintensionally in terms of the normative grounding relation. The relevant moral law becomes ‘Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and fully *normatively* because, it maximizes happiness.’ This principle can play its role as a partial metaphysical ground of [A is right] in a non-redundant manner: it does not need to team up with another fact that on its own suffices to fully metaphysically ground [A is right].  

![Figure 5. Grounding Pluralism](image)

Let’s return for a moment to the point discussed in the last section. As we saw, prima facie, it’s not immediately clear how to square the claim that non-natural properties don’t do work in moral justification with Principles as Partial Grounds. The former claim very much *does* seem to imply that moral laws are partial wrong-makers. Except, perhaps, when we take on board grounding pluralism. In the language of grounding pluralism, a non-naturalist could say that if you think that non-naturalism is committed to non-natural stuff constituting the ‘deepest’ morally relevant reasons, you have equivocated moral grounding and metaphysical grounding. In

---

127 David Enoch (2019) is one prominent non-naturalist who has marshalled the grounding-pluralism defense of the non-redundant explanatory role of moral laws. Thanks to David for helpful discussion on how to frame grounding pluralism. See also Fine (2002, 2012), Bader (2017; MS) and Salinger (2022).

explaining what grounds the wrongness of genocide, the pain and suffering do the moral grounding work. These facts morally fully ground the wrongness. The ultimate morally relevant reasons are the reasons that morally ground, and the non-naturalist is not committed to the thought that the non-natural stuff is morally relevant in that way. This leaves the question of metaphysical grounds open. The non-naturalist may thus say that the full metaphysical ground of a particular moral fact includes reference to a non-natural moral fact, whereas the full moral ground of (e.g.) the wrongness of wrong actions are their relevant natural characteristics. The full metaphysical ground of any particular moral fact—such as that the fact that genocide is wrong in virtue of the pain and suffering it causes—includes reference to a non-natural moral fact or law. The non-natural laws are only relevant for the more external (metaphysical) grounding that includes the internal (moral) one as a part of it. They are not competing justifiers of wrongness. This, it is claimed, avoids the conclusion that, on a non-naturalistic meta-ethic, things are only right and wrong because they possess some non-natural property.

Since the viability of this response depends on the plausibility of grounding pluralism, let’s go back to Berker’s argument about redundant explanations, because Berker anticipates the grounding pluralism response—and rejects it.129 So: “The grounding-pluralism gambit involves (a) distinguishing between two fundamentally distinct grounding relations, call them ‘metaphysical grounding’ and ‘normative grounding’; (b) insisting that Principles as Partial Grounds is a claim about metaphysical grounding; and (c) insisting that moral principles should be formulated hyperintensionally in terms of normative grounding.”130 Berker rejects this move for reasons having to do with the relation between any two posited grounding relations—metaphysical and moral grounding, in this case. The grounding pluralist insists on distinguishing between intra-moral grounding relations and the extra-moral ones. But there are reasons to think she should not say that the in-virtue-of claims made in first-order moral inquiry are only about moral grounding, which is entirely distinct from metaphysical grounding, and thus do not involve any metaphysical grounding claims. For instance, Berker points out, in most cases both metaphysical and normative grounding are transitive and asymmetric: if p grounds q and q grounds r, p also grounds r (transitivity), and if p grounds q, then q does not ground p (asymmetry). Berker then observes that “mixed” transitivity and asymmetry principles also usually hold: if p metaphysically (or normatively) grounds q, and q normatively (or metaphysically) grounds r, then p grounds “in some non-rigged-up sense” r. And if p metaphysically (or normatively) grounds q, then q does not normatively (or metaphysically)

129 Berker 2018, §5-§7; 2019, §5.
130 Berker 2019, 13.
If normative and metaphysical grounding were entirely distinct relations, it would be mysterious why these two grounding relations are typically linked up in certain ways.

So what is the relation between the two? Berker offers a dilemma: moral and metaphysical grounding are either interdefinable, or they are not. But their relation can’t be interdefinability, because if normative grounding can be restated in terms of metaphysical grounding (and vice versa), they are not in fundamentally distinct ‘explanatory businesses’, and the problem of redundant grounding creeps back up. On the other hand, if they don’t, claims Berker, the grounding pluralist relies on an unexplained connection between two metaphysically different grounding relations. And that means we have no reasons to believe claims such as ‘[A maximizes happiness] and [Necessarily, if an action maximizes happiness, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is right] together fully metaphysically ground [A is right]’. Why would two utterly different grounding relations interact with one another in the way such claims claim they do?

But does interdefinability really exhaust all the options? As Enoch has pointed out, there does not seem to be some deep explanatory mystery about the relation between moral or legal and metaphysical grounding. It doesn’t seem like the only way the issues Berker brings up can be avoided by interdefinability or irreducibility, on pain of leaving a costly explanatory gap about how the grounding relations relate:

Perhaps an explanation in terms of essence can do the work: For it’s a very natural thought that it lies in the nature of the legal that particular legal facts are grounded in the conjunction of legal norms and non-legal facts. Furthermore, it seems to lie in the nature of the legal grounding relation that it is related to the metaphysical grounding relation in something like the following way: When a legal fact is metaphysically grounded in a legal norm together with legally relevant non-legal facts, it is fully legally grounded in the legally relevant non-legal facts alone. …

Similarly for the moral, I would say. It lies in the nature of the moral that (particular) moral facts are metaphysically grounded in the conjunction of moral principles and morally relevant natural facts. And it lies in the nature of the moral grounding relation that when a moral fact is metaphysically grounded in the conjunction of a moral principle and a set of

---

131 Berker 2018, 760. Though see Väyrynen (2020) for a somewhat different perspective.
morally relevant natural facts, it is fully morally grounded in the relevant set of natural facts alone.\textsuperscript{133}

This isn’t interdefinability, because it doesn’t allow a replacement of the reference to moral grounding in the content of moral principles with something about metaphysical grounding. So we do not have moral principles that are supposed to do serious metaphysical grounding work, the content of which refers to moral grounding, itself defined in terms of metaphysical grounding. Hence, we do not land on the first horn of Berker’s dilemma. And we do not land on the second either, the reply continues, because it’s hard to see why there’s a deep metaphysical mystery about the relation between legal and metaphysical grounding that can only be avoided by defining them in terms of each other.

This means that normative grounding is distinct from metaphysical grounding in the sense that these two grounding relations cannot be defined in terms of one another or in terms of a more generic grounding relation. The grounding pluralist thus claims that claims that the grounding relation that the ethicist’s “making”, “because”, and “in virtue of” talk concerns is not the same grounding relation that pervades first-order metaphysics.

How convincing is this? This appeal to an unreduced notion of normative grounding strikes me as inelegant. It adds a further primitive notion to Robust Realism’s other ‘queer’ commitments. The more such assumptions your model of reality makes, the more it loses on prior probability grounds. After all, you must multiply together the prior of all these postulates to get a prior on a complete metaphysical theory. So all this sharply drives drown the probability of Robust Realism – which is a metaphysical theory – being true.\textsuperscript{134}

One further wonders whether a theory that relies on so many \textit{sui generis} and brute notions really explains all that much. Go back, for instance, to the non-naturalist’s claim that the fact that moral laws are \textit{fundamental} means that further explanatory questions about them are illegitimate. They are, we are told, where reality starts out, by definition having no full explanation. Now we’re further being told that these grounding facts incorporate a new asymmetric relation of normative grounding, which \textit{also} resists elucidation. But now you get the feeling that perfectly legitimate explanatory issues are being swept under the carpet. Normative principles are just not the right sort of thing to be fundamental facts. Consider the candidate fundamental normative principle ‘An

\textsuperscript{133} Enoch 2019, 14-5.
\textsuperscript{134} Even if, as Enoch suggests, there might be other theoretical reasons for accepting grounding pluralism.
act is wrong iff it doesn’t maximize utility.’ If something like this is a fundamental, ungrounded fact, utility (or some such) will turn out to be a fundamental object. But that seems unlikely.

On the notion of fundamentality, we saw that some non-naturalists claim it’s a category mistake to ask for an explanation of the most fundamental moral law. But this appeal to Shamik Dasgupta’s notion of autonomous facts seems unfounded.135 An autonomous fact, in Dasgupta’s mouth, is one that is not apt for grounding. It’s not in the game of being grounded at all – simply not the sorts of thing that can, in principle, have a metaphysical explanation. For example, that it is essential to water that it is composed of H2O is an ungrounded fact, but it also seems like it would be out of place to ask for its grounds. But sensible normative principles just aren’t good candidates for autonomous facts. It seems to make sense, for instance, to ask why it is that an act is wrong iff it doesn’t maximize happiness. True, there may be no answer. But I’m not sure whether we would say that the why-question – in the sense of ‘what grounds them, what makes them the case’ – doesn’t properly arise for moral laws, as in the case of autonomous facts. While this demand for explanation might perhaps not be uncontroversial, it seems to me that this is nevertheless an explanatory shortcoming of the view.

Thirdly, grounding pluralism threatens to overgenerate. In order to make plausible the existence of a plurality of grounding relations, one needs to give an account of what grounding principles there are that avoids a proliferation of different grounding relations. As Rosen notes: “No one will be tempted to posit sui generis relations of legal grounding, musical grounding, orthographic grounding, and so on.”136 Even the most committed non-naturalist will probably have limits as to how liberal to be in multiplying grounding kinds. Here’s Enoch:

I don’t want it to be the case, say, that that grass is green is the grassy-ground of the conjunctive fact that grass is green and snow is white, and that that snow is white is its snowy-ground. And what I have to concede is that I don’t have a good answer for the question how liberal is too liberal. Still, intuitive ideas about domains or some such can help. There’s no grassy domain in a sense analogous to that in which there is a moral or a legal domain.137

This remark about overgeneration strikes me as a forceful argument. Enoch’s earlier remarks about “essences” don’t seem to have explanatory import for this consideration, and I don’t think his ideas about “domains or some such” seem to help very much either. This is especially so

---

135 Dasgupta 2014.
136 Rosen 2017b, 286.
137 Enoch 2019, 9fn.20.
because of what Robust Realism allows different (primitive) kind of laws ‘to do’, as it were. According to non-naturalism, true moral laws ‘latch onto’ a natural fact and ‘pull up’ the mind-independent, *sui generis* and ontologically robust fact that it’s wrong. Clearly, we wouldn’t want to bestow this power on any general fact we may cite in grounding a grounded fact, and end up as robust non-naturalists about legality, spelling, social facts and all other cases of grounded facts that plausibly have something general in their grounds. But then what marks the relevant difference?

The imminent danger is that grounding pluralism only *seems* plausible in certain cases because the grounding role of the general facts in *those* cases is *shallow*. The principle itself, that is, is metaphysically grounded in prior particular facts about the actions and dispositions of individuals. The law is not a ‘robust’ element of the explanation, not an element that occurs in one’s ontology. So we can reduce a grounding explanation that includes the general fact into a more fundamental explanation that does without it.

Indeed, this seems to point to a pertinent disanalogy between the legal and the moral domain. The grounds of both legal facts and moral facts (on the non-naturalist picture we’re exploring) must, it seems, include general facts in perhaps a pluralistic way. The fact that morality-as-the-non-naturalist-sees-it is not the only domain where grounded facts have something general in their grounds in this pluralistic-seeming way helps to guard against the accusation that invoking this grounding structure is objectionably ad-hoc. But the metaethical non-naturalist should not get too much comfort out of this presumed alliance with legal facts. This is because the moral and legal generalizations *themselves* have very different grounds.\(^\text{138}\) This being so, they invoke said explanatory structure with very different ontological implications, questioning the strength of this analogy.

Consider: what grounds legal generalizations? It seems to me that legal facts are ultimately grounded in pre-legal facts. Consider again Rosen’s general legal fact: for all \(x\), if \(x\) is a six-story building on Main Street, \(x\) is illegal. This is not grounded in its instances. It is grounded in some to-be-specified complex social activities and agreements. It is so in virtue of some sprawling complex of facts about the saying and doing of legal officials, pre-legal moral facts, and so on. So even if general facts play a role in the grounding of particular facts of the form [\(A\) is illegal], the ultimate ground for such facts involves no legal facts. If we press further and ask what grounds generalizations like [\(A\) is illegal], the general fact will disappear to be replaced, eventually, by some collection of facts about individuals. In legality, spelling and other domains of merely ‘formal’

---

\(^{138}\) Enoch (2019, 4) uses the legal-moral analogy and challenges those who think this analogy doesn’t help the non-naturalist to point to a relevant disanalogy between the legal and the moral case. I have tried to meet this challenge. I return to the morality- legality (dis)analogy in the next section.
normativity, Rosen writes, “the law itself is metaphysically grounded without remainder in prior particular facts about the actions and dispositions of individuals. And if that’s right we can convert a grounding explanation that includes the law into a more fundamental explanation that does without it.”¹³⁹ Whereas for Robust Realism, in the moral case, we can’t.

This difference in how moral and legal principles are grounded makes them very different kind of facts, with implications for how they can ground. A successful grounding explanation ‘in the legal framework’ doesn’t mean you’ve discovered a mind-independent, in-an-interesting-sense-ontological legal fact. In the moral case, according to the non-naturalist, it does. So when we cite legal principles in our explanation, we haven’t just now posited a basic explanatory relation alongside metaphysical grounding as we do when we invoke normative grounding.

If Rosen is right here (and I think he is), then in many domains, while laws do play a role in the grounding of particular normative facts, their role is shallow. There is a tension between how the Robust Realist sees moral laws as relevantly similar to legal principles (which are ultimately grounded from below in complex social facts) and as relevantly similar to laws of nature on a non-Humean conception of them (which are ultimately not grounded from below). A worry is that the Robust Realist piggybacks on the apparent plausibility of the former type of grounding explanation, while actually being a variant of the latter. At the very least, then, she owes us a systematic theory of these different kinds of grounding principles that explains how they work and how they are to be individuated, and avoids a proliferation of different grounding relations.¹⁴⁰

All in all, then, it’s not quite true that intra-legal explanations function the same way – ‘do the same thing’ – as intra-moral explanations. In morality, for the non-naturalist, laws figure in grounding explanations in a more robust way. After all, for the bridge-law non-naturalist, the general moral facts that figure in the explanation of particular moral facts are not ultimately grounded in the non-normative array (she is a non-naturalist, after all). Rather, as we have seen, moral laws are either ungrounded or grounded in deeper moral laws. Accordingly, moral laws ultimately, bottom out in brute, ontologically basic moral facts. Legal laws, by contrast, are ultimately grounded in non-legal facts. So while the Principles as Partial Grounds grounding structure might have companions in guilt, grounding principles as sui generis and ontologically basic might not.

¹³⁹ Rosen 2017b, 298.
2.4.4 Redundant Explanations II: The Modal Status of Moral Principles

Principles as Partial Grounds seems the only way for non-naturalism to reconcile Dependence and Strong Supervenience with Autonomy and Just-Too-Different. Nevertheless, it runs into a dilemma: either non-natural moral laws explain \textit{redundantly}, or they explain \textit{implausibly}. In this section I develop a third concern: assuming a plausible conception of what ‘metaphysical necessity’ is, Principles as Partial Grounds is, in fact, inconsistent with Strong Supervenience.

As set out earlier in this chapter, according to the widely accepted data point of Strong Supervenience, the relations between the natural and the normative are metaphysically necessary. And according to Robust Realism, these relations are made the case by the moral laws. So only if the fundamental moral truths hold with \textit{metaphysical} necessity, can they play that role.

Now, what does it \textit{mean} to say that something is \textit{metaphysically} impossible or (on the contrary) necessary? One sharpening of this notion is the \textit{essentialist} account of metaphysical modality:¹⁴¹

\textbf{Essentialism about metaphysical modality:} For a proposition \( p \) to be metaphysically necessary is for there to be some collection of items \( X \) such that \( p \) obtains in virtue of \( X \)’s nature or essence.

This view identifies metaphysical necessity as “that form of necessity that derives from the nature of things.”¹⁴² Given any item \( x \) — object, property, relation, etc. — we have the truths that obtain in virtue of \( x \)’s nature or essence or identity. If there exist one or more items \( X \) such that it lies in the nature of the \( X \)s that \( p \), we say that \( p \) is an essential truth. It lies in the nature of the number 1, for instance, to be a number, to follow 0, and so on. For a proposition to be metaphysically necessary \textit{just is} for it to be an essential truth.¹⁴³ The metaphysically necessary truths, then, are those truths that follow from the essences of things. For example, the fact that it’s essential of \textit{being a bachelor} that if \( x \) is a bachelor, then \( x \) is unmarried, explains why it’s metaphysically necessary that all bachelors are unmarried. In sum, essences determine the metaphysical possibilities, and thereby explain metaphysical necessities. On the proposal we’re now considering, that means moral truths are essential truths. It is the nature of the respective properties that require that a grounding connection between, for example, pain and badness holds.

¹⁴¹ Asya Passinsky objects that plugging in different accounts of metaphysical necessity might yield different, perhaps more favorable, results for the non-naturalist. I’ve chosen to focus the discussion on the essentialist account of metaphysical modality since many authors in the present debate, such as Gideon Rosen and Kit Fine, do so too. I concede the possibility that different options here could yield different results.

¹⁴² Fine 2002, 270.

¹⁴³ Rosen 2020, 5-6.
It follows that – as noted by Gideon Rosen\textsuperscript{144} – Strong Supervenience, the essentialist account of metaphysical modality and Bridge-Law Non-Naturalism form an incompatible triad. Because it follows that for each moral property $M$, there is a non-normatively specified naturalistic condition $\Phi$ such that for some item $x$, the equivalence between $M$ and $\Phi$ is necessary in virtue of $x$’s nature. But as Pekka Väyrynen wonders: “Isn’t this a form of moral naturalism?”\textsuperscript{145} After all, as non-naturalists such as Rosen avow in a passage quoted earlier, “the non-naturalist’s distinctive commitment is that someone who knew the natural facts and the essences might still be in the dark about the synthetic principles that connect the normative facts to their non-normative grounds.”\textsuperscript{146} Which is no surprise. After all, according to the non-naturalist, normative properties are radically discontinuous in relation to the natural. But the claim that the nature of moral properties specifies these synthetic principles is inconsistent with this, yet seems to follow from essentialism and strong supervenience.

Given the wide acceptance of both Strong Supervenience and the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity, this incompatible triad is a problem for the non-naturalist view we’ve been discussing. It seems that the program needs to, but can’t, incorporate both of these doctrines.

Like Berker’s challenge, this objection too argues that there’s no non-redundant grounding role for moral principles. The former threat took its cue from the fact that moral laws are hyperintensional principles that themselves are about what grounds what, leaving no room for them to do grounding work. The current issue arises from the fact that, while for the non-naturalist the connection between moral properties and the natural properties that underlie them hold in all possible worlds, such metaphysically necessary connections are typically explained by essences alone, again leaving no room for the principles to contribute anything.

In the previous section, it became clear that, to save the idea that the moral laws really are needed in metaphysically explaining moral properties, the non-naturalist had to commit herself to an implausible account of moral explanation and an objectionable variant of grounding pluralism. In the current section, I argue that the only way out of the metaphysical necessity conundrum is another costly commitment. The only escape from this problem, I argue, is to embrace a sui generis account of metaphysical modality. This is, however, an inelegant solution that also leaves pressing explanatory concerns unanswered.

\textsuperscript{144} Rosen 2020, §4.
\textsuperscript{145} Väyrynen 2017, 181.
\textsuperscript{146} Rosen 2020, 12.
How might the non-naturalist escape the incompatible triad? Let’s start by considering whether it is open to the non-naturalist to reject Strong Supervenience. The most developed proposal of this sort is due to Gideon Rosen.\textsuperscript{147} He and Kit Fine\textsuperscript{148} argue that non-naturalists should deny that the normative metaphysically supervenes on the natural in the first place. Following Väyrynen (once more), I’ll refer to this program as the Contingency Strategy.\textsuperscript{149}

In effect, the gambit is to save an explanatory role for the laws by arguing that the connection between the properties involved is less ‘strong’ than metaphysical necessity. It does not derive from essences – does not hold in every possible world – so we need the laws to tell us how the natural and moral properties ‘hook up’ in any particular world. Since the connection between natural and moral properties is thus not fully explained by the essences involved, the moral law is needed. This saves Principles as Partial Grounds.

![Figure 6. Principles as Partial Grounds Without Metaphysical Necessity](image)

The metaphysical contingency of basic moral principles doesn’t mean that just anything could (metaphysically) have been good or right. Just as saying that the causal laws could have been different does not imply that anything could have caused anything.\textsuperscript{150} But it does mean that what’s good or right might (metaphysically) not have been so. Still, the Contingency Strategy – despite its name – agrees that moral laws possess some form of necessity: they hold by a weaker type of

\textsuperscript{147} Rosen 2017b, 2017c, 2020.
\textsuperscript{148} Fine 2002.
\textsuperscript{149} Väyrynen 2017.
\textsuperscript{150} Bader 2017, 109.
necessity called *normative necessity*. The truth of moral claims is *metaphysically contingent* but *normatively necessary*. The most fundamental moral law is thus a “brute, inexplicable metaphysical contingency”.¹⁵¹

What is normative necessity? Moral laws that hold by normative necessity are “fact-independent”, meaning they hold and would’ve held no matter what the world would’ve been like in wholly non-normative respects. Normative necessities that obtain in a given world, obtain independently of any non-normative facts that obtain in that world.¹⁵² Per the rejection of metaphysical necessity, these laws can vary per possible world. Nevertheless, facts that are normatively necessary are necessary because they are explanatorily independent from other facts that obtain *in a given world*. Although no moral truths are absolutely necessary, some are such that they are the case and would have been the case no matter how things had been in wholly non-normative respects *in this possible world*.

On this view, for example, act utilitarianism might be true in some worlds even if it is false in the actual world and would have been false no matter how the non-normative facts had been. The metaphysical contingency view entails that we should do what’s right in the actual world, even if that would not be right if we were in a world where some alternative principle is true. This is because, if the Contingency Strategy is correct, different facts about what’s right (with no difference in non-normative facts) hold depending on whether any such given metaphysical contingency obtains.

So: The Contingency Strategy suggests that normative necessity is weaker than, and thus different from, metaphysical necessity. As opposed to metaphysical necessity, it thus does *not* take a stance on how things are in remote possible worlds. By extension, rather than constraining all metaphysically possible individuals, the true supervenience claim says only that no *normatively possible* world that is identical to a second world in all base respects, can be different from the second world in its normative respects. When the non-naturalist only needs to account for normative supervenience, she no longer needs to explain why some particular set of non-normative facts necessarily instantiates another particular set of normative facts across *all* possible worlds. This is because we are no longer assuming that the non-normative facts ‘fix’ the normative facts as a matter of absolute necessity across possible worlds.

According to the Contingency Strategy, then, the true supervenience claim is not the traditional doctrine of Strong Supervenience, but this one:

**Normative Supervenience**: “For each fully determinate constellation of non-normative facts D, there is a constellation of normative facts N, such that as a matter of normative necessity, if D obtains then N obtains.”\(^{153}\)

This says that no normatively possible world that is identical to a second world in all base respects can be different from the second world in its normative respects. To explain the truth of Normative Supervenience, an explanation of why the general pattern of covariation obtains – of why these two sets of facts covary across possible worlds – suffices. In every world, then, says the Contingency Strategist there exist moral laws that help make it the case that certain natural facts ground certain moral facts. The existence of these relations explains the cross-world covariation of natural and normative facts.

How attractive is this view? I now outline three issues with the core idea that fundamental normative truths are (metaphysically) contingent.

For one, the thought that there could be two naturally indistinguishable things where one of them is good and the other isn’t, strikes many meta-ethicists as highly implausible. In fact, this is probably the main motivation for most non-naturalists to go all the way in endorsing Strong Supervenience. Many philosophers have even thought that the metaphysical supervenience of the normative is part of our normative concepts, and that honoring such a supervenience constraint for moral terms on natural terms is a requirement for linguistic competence in moral discourse. So we have reason to doubt whether, as Rosen claims,\(^{154}\) nothing important is lost if we instead adopt the weaker supervenience thesis that moral properties supervene on base properties as a matter of normative necessity.

The contingency of even the most fundamental moral laws is a suspect result for another reason too. As Väyrynen points out, it might leave something morally important unexplained.\(^{155}\) If, say, deontology is the basic principle of morality in some possible worlds but not ours, why is that? If handclapping, baby-eating or cursing are moral obligations in some metaphysically possible worlds, how come ours isn’t one of them? The seemingly brute but contingent authority of moral laws seems problematic. If it just so happens to be that we live in a world where you should maximize happiness, the traditional objection against non-naturalism that sui generis facts and

\(^{153}\) Rosen 2020, 5.
\(^{154}\) Rosen 2020, 7-9.
\(^{155}\) Väyrynen 2017, 176-7.
properties have no normative authority over us looms larger than ever.\textsuperscript{156} Any plausibility points the Contingency Strategy might win for the way she deals with the supervenience objection against non-naturalism seem to be offset by how the objection from normative authority becomes more pressing.

There is a third reason why the most plausible forms of non-naturalism do not allow for variation in normative principles. If normative laws were to be metaphysically contingent, non-naturalism would have to pay a hefty epistemological price. Unlike, for instance, the case of causation, where we experience the things standing in causal relations and thereby can identify patterns of interaction, we cannot identify normative laws a posteriori (as they’re causally isolated). So how could we discern the ones that happen to hold in our actual world? Since these facts don’t influence the causal order, an a priori epistemology for them seems the only option. But their metaphysical necessity is required to make an a priori epistemology acceptable and possible! The contingency of the laws, by contrast, ensures that it is a brute fact as to which laws happen to obtain in the actual world that cannot be discerned a priori. That means that our beliefs in pure moral principles would have been just as they are even if the pure moral facts had been quite different. Hence foregoing metaphysical necessity entails too much moral luck. The Contingency Strategy, in short, leaves us no way to explain the non-accidental truth of our normative beliefs.\textsuperscript{157}

I conclude that the Contingency Strategy faces some problems, and that the non-naturalist has good reasons to hold onto Strong Supervenience. This entails, for the non-naturalist, that there can be metaphysically necessary connections between properties that are not mediated by the essences of those properties: metaphysically synthetic and yet absolutely necessary connections. Moral laws and the natural-moral connections they help make the case both hold with metaphysical necessity. After all, it is hard to see how a metaphysically necessary relation between A and B might be explained without appealing to another metaphysically necessary relation between A and B.

\subsection*{2.4.5 Brute Non-Essentialist Metaphysical Necessity}

Given those concerns, let’s assume moral laws do not derive entirely from essences (as the Contingency Strategy argues), but they nevertheless possess necessity of exactly the same strength as certain (or even all) of the truths that \textit{do} derive entirely from essences (unlike the Contingency Strategy argues). This raises a difficult question for the non-naturalist: if fundamental normative

\textsuperscript{156} See the next section for discussion and references.

\textsuperscript{157} Cf. Bader 2017, 110-1. One might think, and I agree, that \textit{any} version of non-naturalism faces similar epistemic problems regardless of the modal status of non-natural moral laws. I return to this in the next chapter.
laws do not arise from essences, then why do they possess exactly the same grade of necessity – metaphysical necessity – that truths deriving from the natures of things possess?

And here no account seems to be forthcoming. Having rejected the essentialist account of modality, non-naturalism offers no explanation for why the fundamental normative laws are metaphysically necessary. As we’ve seen, these laws can’t be (a) contingent nor (b) hold in virtue of essences. But still, the non-naturalist maintains, there is a single grade of necessity, which both the truths that derive entirely from essences and the fundamental moral law possess. But how can this be? The claim that all normative facts are grounded in natural facts does not explain why there are metaphysically necessary connections between natural and normative properties. It simply states that there are some – namely, grounding connections. It seems implausible for the fundamental moral law to behave coincidentally like the truths arising from essences. This view thus leaves us with a mystery, because it just relocates the mystery to the normative laws themselves. Without some explanation for why the normative laws are metaphysically necessary (and not just normatively necessary), the view fails to explain Strong Supervenience. The Robust Realist’s non-essentialist but also non-explained sui generis form of metaphysical necessity seems like an auxiliary assumption devised ad hoc to account for the data point of Strong Supervenience.

In sum, Robust Realism holds that some substantive normative principles are not fully metaphysically grounded in non-normative facts. All particular normative facts, in turn, are partially metaphysically grounded in normative principles that links the particular normative fact to its non-normative grounds. This straightforward response to the supervenience challenge, as it turns out, requires the non-naturalist to take on a host of other dubious ontological commitments besides the already-suspect ontological addition of non-Humean moral laws and primitively normative non-natural properties. These are the two main occurrences of what I had in mind when I mentioned the tension between queerness worries and explanatory power inherent in metaethical non-naturalism. This theory furthermore requires a sui generis notion of metaphysical necessity, leaving us with an explanatory mystery. As metaphysical theories go, that are a lot of considerations counting against accepting it.

2.5 NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF ROBUST REALISM’S METANORMATIVE THEORY

In the first part of this chapter, we investigated the metaphysical implications of the non-naturalist idea that normativity resides in a non-natural part of the universe. An attempt to satisfy four desiderata of metaethical theories – Dependence, Supervenience, Autonomy and Just-Too-Different – has led many non-naturalists to defend Principles as Partial Grounds as an explanation
of the connection between the natural and the normative. The tenability of the view even seems to depend on something like that explanatory thesis being true. Defending it, however, turned out to be no easy task. If it can be done it all, the non-naturalist needs to take on board unacceptable commitments about moral laws, moral explanations and metaphysical necessity. The *metaphysical* implications of the non-naturalist’s framework do not look good. In the final part of this chapter, I want to investigate the *normative* implications of the idea that normativity has its source in *sui generis* non-natural properties. Generally, non-naturalists believe that their view scores plausibility points here because it can do justice to a particular strong – ‘robust’ – form of moral objectivity. While that may be true, for reasons I present below, I doubt that the first-order moral implications of non-naturalism’s claims about the source of normative authority are that positive *overall*.

I proceed as follows. In section 2.5.1, I explain why Robust Realism’s claims about the source of normativity have specific epistemic implications for what information is morally relevant – for what counts as a reason to change your mind in moral matters – and normative implications for which properties matter for our acting. In section 2.5.2, I request a defense these implications, and spend some time defending this request. In section 2.5.3, I argue the non-naturalist can’t meet it. This is because (a) there’s no good explanation for why this particular information is normatively relevant, which contributes to (b) the sense that the information it singles out as epistemically relevant actually should not be relevant for making up your mind about moral matters.

### 2.5.1 The Epistemic and Normative Implications of Meta-Theory

As we’ve seen, the history of ethics is rampant with thinkers searching for the true principles of morality. Robust Realism has a particular *way* of understanding, first, what such moral principles would embody. They would represent our best theory of the patterns of instantiation of *sui generis*, non-natural properties whose nature is aptly characterized in terms of inherent authority. *Ethical* truths are thus also *descriptive* truths about these patterns. This, for example, is what Christine Korsgaard was getting at when she noted that “moral realism is distinguished not by its view about what kind of truths there are, but by its view about what kind of subject ethics is. It conceives ethics as a branch of knowledge, knowledge of the normative part of the world.” Adding: “There is a way in which this conception of ethics as an epistemological enterprise is the essential characteristic of [robust] realism.” Second, non-naturalism has a particular *way* of understanding the source of a moral law’s *normative authority*. Normativity has its source in non-natural matters of

---

159 Korsgaard 1996, 41fn.68.
fact, in extra metaphysics beyond the natural ways of the world. A moral system is privileged if, and because it aligns with these brutally normative non-natural properties.

To better explain what I have in mind, I need to introduce a distinction between two levels of normative explanation. Let’s say humankind converges on a system of deemed-true moral generalizations: a moral code. In this deductive system, the one ungrounded moral principle, the one axiom, it turns out, is (lo and behold) some form of utilitarianism. We can then say that utility is, according to humankind, the ultimate bearer of normativity: utility is the consideration that ultimately provides practical reasons. Still, a deeper explanatory question remains. In virtue of what does the fact that an act optimizes utility have the normativity of a reason? Where does its normativity come from, what is its source? The source question asks in virtue of what the considerations that ultimately bear normativity do so. The non-naturalist answers: in virtue of correctly representing certain sui generis non-natural properties and facts. Accordingly, the only way a moral code can be vindicated is by tracking these facts. For example, natural facts about happiness and suffering only count as reasons if, and because, they stand in the non-natural reason-giving relation.

The source question asks in virtue of what any bearer of normativity is normatively relevant, and different answers to that question have different implications for which non-normative facts are epistemically relevant as one makes up one’s mind about normative matters. This interplay between source and bearers of normativity indicates that if you have a certain view on what non-natural properties and facts are, this metaethical view renders relevant certain bits of information that would otherwise not be morally relevant. Because this relation is symmetrical, it follows from Robust Realism that discoveries about the existence and patterns of non-natural facts are reasons to change your mind about morality. A few parallel examples will help to see the point.

On certain views of morality, to put it in a slogan, the norms were made for man, not man for the norms. Moral laws, on some such views, have a legitimate claim to govern us only insofar as they are practically useful to us, and remain always open to revision. For example, David Baybrooke has argued that Acquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Rousseau share the idea that “moral judgments [are founded] on what, given the nature of human beings and ever-present circumstances, enables people to live together in thriving communities.” Similarly, the main motivation behind David Copp’s version of naturalistic moral realism is that the point of morality

---

161 Cf. Hayward 2019, 909.
162 Baybrooke 2003, 125.
is to make it possible for groups of people living together in society to work together cooperatively in a way that enables them to meet their needs and live flourishing lives. Thus, by virtue of accepting this kind of view, one must take information about what norms enable human flourishing into account as one forms beliefs about the normative statuses of things. For instance, if the moral code that best serves these goals prohibits hand-clapping, then it is true that hand-clapping is wrong.

On these views, the metaphysical determinant of something’s being a reason has to do with something about \( u \). What makes something metaphysically have the action-guidingness of a reason, is something about our natures, needs, use of moral vocabulary, or some such. Hence such information becomes relevant for making up your mind about moral matters.

That is not the only possible alternative to Robust Realism, however. For example, if someone thinks that moral obligations just are the commands given by God, this person is rationally obligated to take into account information about the existence of God and what She has commanded, when making up their mind about what is and what is not morally obligatory. Important for our purposes is this: it is because of her metaethics that the divine command theorist is rationally obligated to treat information about God’s commands as relevant to their normative opinions.

Notice that information about God and what She has commanded is not normative information. Just like information about human happiness or humankind’s use of moral concepts isn’t. Your metaethics thus makes certain non-normative information epistemically relevant for making up your mind about normative matters. Your view of the source of normativity tells you ‘where to look’ – it tells you what information settles whether something is or is not a bearer of normativity. That’s what I’ve tried to say with my examples.

Paralleling the above cases, by virtue of their metaethics, non-naturalists are rationally obligated to take into account information about the existence and distribution of non-natural properties when making up their minds about normative matters, where ‘information about the non-natural’ means information that is not couched in explicitly normative terms. The metaphysical determinant of something’s being a reason are the patterns of instantiation of the allegedly normative non-natural properties. Now:

---

164 Variances of this rough thought have recently been put forward by Erdur (2016), Bedke (2020), and Hayward (2019).
Because non-naturalists think that what it is for something to have some normative status, like being intrinsically bad, is for it to instantiate a certain non-natural property (like the one picked out by ‘intrinsic badness’) they think that normative beliefs and assertoric normative language aim to correctly represent and describe certain non-natural properties and facts … [And] if you think you are aiming to represent non-natural properties correctly, you should (rationally) be interested to know which actions share a non-natural property and which do not, and you should (rationally) be prepared to change your mind accordingly.\textsuperscript{165}

We have here a normative implication – about which non-normative information makes a normative difference – of the metanormative core claim of Robust Realism.\textsuperscript{166} The metanormative claim that the source of normativity resides in a non-natural realm renders information about how its properties and facts pattern – information that need not trade in normative facts and language – normatively relevant. The standards of evaluation that have genuine authority, are the appropriate ones for human beings to build our lives around are given by the distribution of non-natural properties NN1, NN2, and so forth.

Those of us who are not non-naturalists would, by contrast, take discoveries about non-natural properties NN1, NN2, and so on, to be not immediately relevant as to how to lead our lives. Again, this is a straightforward implication of their metaethical view. For Copp and the thinkers Baybrooke cites, once morality has converged on a theory that serves our interests, there is no further standard against which to evaluate it. For other naturalists it may be that once morality has converged on a theory that perfectly accounts for what we mean by ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, similarly, there would be no further standard against which to evaluate it. If our ethics doesn’t converge on the sui generis non-natural properties the Robust Realist think we owe allegiance to, the naturalist doesn’t see that as a failure because these properties aren’t the appropriate standard (\textit{even if} they did exist, and we could reliably come to know about their patterns of instantiation). Thus, while the non-naturalist could in principle use ‘MORAL’ to denote something further – such as the pattern of instantiation of non-natural properties NN1, NN2, etc. – that makes little sense, for them, \textit{insofar as ‘MORAL’ is supposed to denote a standard against which to evaluate moral systems}. This is because what they, by their metaethics, take to be relevant for ethical evaluation does not include information about any non-natural realm.

\textsuperscript{165} Bedke 2020, 1028-29.
\textsuperscript{166} Cf. Väyrynen 2019.
The non-naturalist, by contrast, does claim that there is a further standard against which to evaluate any moral code: does it track patterns of instantiation of NN1, NN2, and so on? The normative status of the fundamental moral principles (for example, humankind’s claim that utility is the ultimate bearer of normativity) does not hinge on conceptual considerations about ‘rightness’ or on what serves our interests – it hinges on whether the belief tracks the patterns of instantiation of certain sui generis non-natural properties. For the non-naturalist, facts about which actions share various sui generis, non-natural moral properties determine what really counts as right and wrong independent of anyone’s interest, natures, needs and what have you.

This will seem incoherent to non-naturalists. “The non-naturalist’s view is that non-natural property NN1 is the property goodness, and that information about non-natural properties NN1…NNn is information about morality. It’s obvious that we should promote goodness and be moral, hence it’s obvious that we should promote NN1 and act according to NN1…NNn.” Indeed, the non-naturalist will object I’m begging the question – it’s only by treating non-naturalist claim as false that the outlined objection is coherent. NN1, NN2, and so forth, are ex hypothesi normative properties and facts. So information about their patterning cannot be non-normative information. Rather, NN1 is, for example, information about an act’s to-be-doneness. And it’s incoherent to claim that having the non-natural property of, e.g., to-be-doneness settles nothing about an act’s to-be-doneness. The non-naturalist’s view is that one can’t disentangle reasons and non-natural properties like that. When we get information about the latter, we get information about reasons and requirements – not about some kind of stuff.

I won’t disagree that it’s obvious that we should promote goodness. But as Shamik Dasgupta has pointed out, this puts a constraint on what goodness is. Whatever it is, it had better be something we should promote. Consider, by way of analogy, the following toy theory of oxygen: that oxygen is a colorless, odorless, and tasteless gas of which an adult human at rest inhales about 2 grams per minute. This then puts a constraint on a chemical theory of oxygen: whatever chemical substructure constitutes oxygen, it had better behave as the thingy that living organisms breathe. If someone claimed that oxygen is the element zinc (Zn), we can object that bodies of zinc are, most pressingly, not the thingy that organisms breathe (nor are they colorless gasses). Posit any chemical substructure you like, but don’t call any of them ‘oxygen’ unless you’ve already shown it’s the thing that living organisms breathe. That would not, Dasgupta claims, be playing fair.

---

167 Dasgupta 2017, 301.
Similarly, to play fair, the non-naturalist must first establish that we should promote any sui generis non-natural property before it’s fair to call this property ‘goodness’. She should not call any alleged feature of reality ‘goodness’ until she has already shown that she has something you should promote or upon which we should conditionize moral commitment. She should not simply assume that the non-natural properties she claims exist are the ones that we are talking about when we ask the relevant normative questions. It must first be shown that certain non-natural properties are obedience-worthy before they themselves are worthy of the name ‘morality’. It must first be shown that any non-natural properties bear on what we have reason to do before proposing that truths about the patterning of these properties deserve the title ‘normative truths’. So my question is not why we ought to do whatever has the property of to-be-doneness. My question is why we ought to do whatever has certain non-natural properties. Understood fairly, this question is no more incoherent than the question of whether Zn is the thingy living organisms breathe.

Moreover, if non-natural ontology doesn’t play that role, a dilemma seems to be lurking. Without that justificatory structure, it seems that non-natural properties don’t do any real work at all. Except, perhaps acting as an unjustified conversation stopper for terminating ascending requests for justifications. But then, if non-naturalism doesn’t make this higher-level reasons-why claim involving mind-independent non-natural properties, what is meta-ethical about the view? On this horn, it starts to look rather like a Dworkinian refusal to accept the existence of further metaethical questions. And if those ontologically fundamental properties don’t do any work, non-naturalism’s signature claim to maximally strong objectivity can no longer be upheld. Which is why I’ll focus on the other horn of the dilemma. On this horn, non-naturalists do point to the patterning of ontologically basic, mind-independent and non-natural properties as source of normativity. But then, I’ll argue in the upcoming section, they need to explain why these properties should guide our behavior, why they are normatively special.

2.5.2 Is There A Non-Naturalist-Friendly Explanation for Why Any Property Is Normative?

In this section, I’ll ask why we should care about sui generis non-natural properties. Even if we could settle which moral system best overlaps with the sui generis non-natural properties, why would that settle the matter? Why would having a certain sui generis non-natural property make those things be the things we should really care about? If some concepts ascribe certain non-natural properties and others do not, why should we take that in any way to speak in favor of thinking that we should let the former guide our actions? What makes it the case that we should act according to the NNs, rather than according to (say) what maximizes happiness? What makes the non-naturalist’s sui generis property apt for playing whatever role she believes it to play in normative
theory? Without an answer to these questions, it’s natural to think that while some acts may truly have some non-natural property, this says nothing about their to-be-doneness.

We can extract from this an

**Explanatory Requirement (ER):** If a property P should guide acting, then there must be an explanation for why this is so.

Let me present three considerations in defense of ER.

First, while we may have piecemeal knowledge as to which properties should guide theorizing and acting, many realists (just like most epistemologists who want to provide a systematic theory of knowledge) would rather have a general explanation for why any property should guide theorizing and acting rather than not.

Furthermore, as Wedgwood writes, “explanatory characterizations” of normative reasons “associate reasons with a justificatory story—that is, with a story that explains the truth about which action or attitude one has, all things considered, most reason to do.”\(^{168}\) Elstein similarly suggests that normative explanation “coincides” with justification.\(^{169}\) Normative explanations are (perhaps among other things) justifications: at least some explanatory reasons why a normative fact holds must provide normative reasons for certain responses, or be features in the light of which those responses are apt or fitting or the like.\(^{170}\) Normative explanations are explanations of why things have the normative features they do: they aim to explain why things have properties such as rightness and wrongness. Most of us are inclined to think that such facts in a way involve reasons: considerations that justify actions. If so, then we would want normative explanations, too, to cite such considerations, and to be incomplete otherwise.\(^{171}\) They have a *justificatory* function. The non-naturalist, in other words, owes us an explanation of why the fact that certain acts have a *sui generis* non-natural property means it’s normatively better to do those things and not others is left hanging in the air. So when non-naturalism says certain properties matter for our acting, the request to defend this claim seems legitimate.

Thirdly, consider that, if any non-natural property is to deserve a normative title like ‘goodness’ or ‘reason’, it must play whatever normative role the title plays in normative theory. In applying such normative concepts, we rely on criteria that are such that satisfying the criteria ipso

---

\(^{168}\) Wedgwood 2007, 91.  
\(^{169}\) Elstein MS.  
\(^{171}\) Väyrynen 2015, 173.
facto establishes that someone or other has reason to act or react in a certain way.\(^{172}\) However, satisfying the criteria that the non-naturalist relies on – normative significance is settled, on her view, by the patterning of certain non-natural properties – does not ipso facto establish reasons: no explanation of why non-natural properties should guide acting seems to be forthcoming. That is, as things stand, the non-naturalist claim that it’s normatively better to act in accordance with these properties is left hanging in the air. What stops us from concluding there’s nothing about a *sui generis* non-natural property in virtue of which it could play the role sources of normativity play in normative theories?

(Again, it’s crucial not to be misled by labels here: *calling* a non-natural property “goodness” doesn’t *make* it obedience-worthy. One must first show it is, before one may fairly propose to refer to it by the word “goodness”. It is not by naming your preferred source of moral authority a certain way that the Explanatory Requirement is discharged.)

Relying on something like ER, then, the current objection asks what makes the non-naturalist’s *sui generis* property fit to play whatever role she believes it to play in normative theory. Dasgupta himself uses an analogy to Divine Command Theory (DCT) – which holds that an act is morally obligatory iff, and because, God commands it – in order to make the point. Even if DCT is true, he says, it owes us an answer to the question of what it is that makes the commands of this being fit to play the normative role of generating obligations. Does God have knowledge of morality, so that we should follow Its orders as good advice? But then what is this morality, outside God, of which God has knowledge? Do God's commands determine morality? But then why, *morally*, should one follow God’s orders?

Note that the defender of DCT will be happy to acknowledge the explanatory need and give an answer to these Euthyphronic questions: God is special in the relevant ways, and so are Her prescriptions. So DCT explains why it is that those supernatural properties (and not others, for instance) are the ones fit to play the relevant role in normative theory. By comparison, Dasgupta submits, the Robust Realist has much less to offer. Why is it, Dasgupta asks, that the NNs – rather than other properties, or no properties at all – are *the* things in the world we should care about? What is this what-you-claim-we-should-call-morality that the non-natural properties constitute and why, morally, should we obey it? Here the Robust Realist seems to have little to say by way of explanation.

---

\(^{172}\) Sayre-McCord MS, 16.
Historically, non-naturalists have often responded that the form of this complaint is confused (there is no explanatory need), or that the answer is obvious (the explanatory need is easy to meet). I'll take these in turn.

On the first horn, it is sometimes claimed that the normative questions I'm asking in this section can't even sensibly be raised, because we can only refer to her sui generis properties under their normative guise. As such, it’s a mistake to think we cannot denote these properties with letters like ‘NN’ and then ask whether NN should be promoted. As Chappell puts it, “it makes no sense at all to question the normativity of a purely normative property”, because “the only way to directly pick out the property in question is via the corresponding normative concept.” As a consequence, a picture on which the properties they claim we owe allegiance to are in some sense non-natural before they are normative, is mistaken. They are properties that are purely normative, rather than made normative in virtue of normativity being conferred onto them (as in the case of DCT). And it makes no sense to question the normative significance of a purely normative property. My reply is that even if some non-natural properties can only be denoted by a normative term, and even if it’s somehow obvious that this property should be promoted (more on this below), what explains why this is so is still a fair question. Moreover, the position that it’s not, Dasgupta diagnoses, doesn’t seem very attractive once we remove the smoke and mirrors: it’s the claim that a sui generis bit of the world with a suspicious-sounding metaphysical nature should be promoted even if there’s nothing that makes it special. Moreover, even if you start with the property goodness and then discover that it’s sui generis rather than the other way around, the question of what makes this-thing-that-you’ve-now-discovered-to-be-sui-generis something we should promote is intelligible, even if we never identified a sui generis property prior to calling it ‘goodness’.

On the second horn, here, for example, is Parfit: “If [normative non-naturalists] were asked why it’s rational to respond to reasons, they could answer: “That is what being rational is.” But Dasgupta emphasizes that such dismissive responses will not work. The question isn’t why it’s rational to respond to reasons; the question is why it’s rational to respond to NN. If a non-naturalist thinks something like Parfit’s line discharges ER, she must have conflated these two questions. And the questions are indeed the same if one assumes that NN is the property of being a reason. But assuming that not playing fair. As Enoc now admits: “Robust realists can’t respond

173 Chappell MS.
174 Dasgupta 2018, 309.
175 Parfit 2006, 359. See Scanlon (2003, 14) and Enoch (2011, 239) for similar replies.
176 Dasgupta 2018, 303.
“Why, these are the normative properties, so of course they are fit to play the role those play in normative theory”, any more than the DCT-ist can respond with “Why, these are the supernatural facts that constitute rightness, so of course they are fit to play the rightness-role.”177 There is something to explain here.

2.5.3 Brutely Normative Properties

This concession, however, doesn’t mean that non-naturalists (also) agree about how bad it is – if at all – to accept that there’s nothing that explains why it is that some non-natural properties are fit to play the relevant roles in normative theory. For they might respond, as Enoch does,178 by insisting that there need not always be an explanation of why some property P is fit to serve an action-guiding role. More specifically, Enoch claims that the fact that NN is fit to play an action-guiding role can be a brute fact about NN if NN is a fundamental normative property. For example, if the non-naturalist argues that her favorite non-natural property NN just is goodness, says Enoch, then there’s simply no explanation in deeper normative terms of why we should care about NN. This NN just is where explanations come to an end. So despite familiar complaints to the extent that, as Gibbard puts it, no mere property can settle what to do,179 Enoch claims that if some NN is a basic normative property, this is where non-naturalist explanations of normative relevance come to an end. “Insisting that there must be more [by way of explanation] really amounts to a refusal to take seriously robust realism as a view about the metaphysics of morals.”180

Enoch offers a rationale for why the Robust Realist is entitled to claim bruteness here. Consider again a Divine Command Theory. Suppose someone offers a theory according to which the expressions of some creature are obedience worthy. Suppose she further says there’s no explanation for why this creature and those utterances of her have that normative role. We would say her account is crucially incomplete, and insist on an explanation, perhaps mentioning a principled criterion along the lines of ER in doing so. Enoch submits that the air of incompleteness that surrounds this toy DCT derives from how it makes facts about action-guidingness not metaphysically fundamental, but grounds them in non-normative facts about some creature’s will. If that’s the structure of your normative theory, you owe people an explanation of why they ought to listen to that particular creature. Robust Realism, by contrast, has a different structure because it conceives of facts about action-guidingness as metaphysically fundamental, not grounded in anything. Hence there’s no explanatory gap to be filled. Since there’s nothing what makes these non-

177 Enoch MS, 18.
178 Enoch MS, §4.
179 Gibbard 2003, 10.
180 Enoch MS, 19.
natural properties normative – their normativity is primitive, they have it all by themselves – there’s nothing to explain about how they are so.

For this reason, Chappell\textsuperscript{181} – a non-naturalist – and Dasgupta\textsuperscript{182} – not a non-naturalist – recently suggested Robust Realism might better be called metaethical “primitivism.”

So, Enoch denies ER and says there mustn’t always be an explanation of why a property should guide acting, because when a property is a basic normative property, an explanation in more fundamental normative properties cannot be available. Hence there mustn’t be an explanation of why we ought to care about this property. This line of thought assumes that justifications of a property’s action-guidingness can only be given in “more fundamental normative terms” (as Enoch puts it). The argument thus seems to rely on the assumption that if a fact has no deeper (normative) grounds, it’s relevance can’t have a normative explanation (so the fact that it doesn’t have one, doesn’t count against its normative relevance, or make it objectionably arbitrary). It’s only by pointing out that, on the non-naturalist’s view, there cannot be such an explanation (a ‘deeper’ one), that Enoch’s rejection of ER – at least when it comes to fundamental normative properties – gains its appearance of legitimacy. On Enoch’s way of putting things, it’s because we’ve reached the metaphysical bedrock with certain non-natural properties that we can (uncostly) reject the call to explain how it is that they play the relevant normative role.

But why think that normative explanations can only be given in deeper terms? The intuitive idea that particular non-natural properties have an ultimate ontological basis in some fairly low-level non-natural properties, is orthogonal to the question of whether those low-level non-natural properties are the things that ultimately explain why certain acts (such as murder) have a normative status (try to avoid it if at all possible) while other acts (such as donating to charity) have another normative status (go for it). Why should we think that, for any A and B, if A normatively explains B, A has to be the metaphysical ground of B, so that, if B has no metaphysical ground because it’s fundamental, it can’t have a normative explanation either? Why should we expect that normative explanation must transmit downward via such a grounding relation?\textsuperscript{183}

If we don’t make this assumption, there doesn’t seem to be any good reason for letting non-naturalists off the hook by virtue of having reached bedrock.

\textsuperscript{181} Chappell 2019, 20.
\textsuperscript{182} Dasgupta MS, 24. In a footnote on the same page, Dasgupta further remarks that “‘Non-naturalism’ is not ideal since, as is often observed, the view in question distinguishes normative facts not only from natural facts but also from non-natural facts about God and spirits. And “robust realism” is too loaded—who wouldn’t like a view that’s robust?”
\textsuperscript{183} Väyrynen (2020) also considers this question, though his argument is different from mine.
Of course, once we’ve granted that we should behave as some non-natural properties tell us, of course, the question turns to where those non-natural properties get their normative significance, and then it seems harmless to imagine that this regress will terminate with the most basic non-natural properties. The question is why we should follow the non-naturalist in assigning an action-guiding role to any non-natural properties in the first place (and before we’ve started naming them).

After all, the lack of explanation of why some non-natural properties should guide acting invites the question why they in fact should. What if some oracle informs us that our morality doesn’t align with the non-natural properties? Well, all we’ve been told is that our morality lacks some extra primitive property. But so what? As Dasgupta argues: “This kind of “error” shouldn’t bother us in the slightest.” If normativity is a primitive feature of properties, not capable of being further elucidated in independent terms, then questions arise about why having this primitive feature matters. Even if there were facts of primitive normativity, there seems to be no reason to care about them. Non-causal, sui generis facts are not among the things we should let our moral commitments depend upon.

Compare this benchmark of assessment – does it correctly track sui generis non-natural properties – with other criteria for assessing moral systems. Are people happy? Are individuals in control of their own lives? Et cetera. If our moral theory does everything we want of it, but we were told it lacks some extra primitive property, well, so what? Balaguer presents a helpful analogy: “If it turned out that non-standard models of arithmetic (and not standard models) were “glowing”, it wouldn’t follow that they were the natural numbers; instead, it would follow that the “glow” was arithmetically irrelevant. And the same seems true in the moral case; if the “glow” didn’t line up with our concept of wrongness, then it would be morally irrelevant.”

I still suppose you might think that there are moral joints in reality that somehow sit on top of the natural facts and have the power to make moralities metaphysically special. But I just don’t see what these non-natural joints could consist in, how we could know anything about them and why they would be morally relevant.

Rather, it seems to me that the fall back on primitive normativity is another instance of the trade-off between queerness and explanatory resources (of whatever quality) mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Claiming that some non-natural properties have normative significance all on their own, without explanation and not in virtue of anything else, makes them special the

---

184 Dasgupta MS, 26.
185 Hayward 2019, 905.
186 Balaguer 2020, 306.
way the non-naturalist needs. But it also makes their metaphysical nature all the more mysterious-seeming.

Looking ahead, it should be clear that the preceding discussion warrants a look at the epistemology of Robust Realism. For suppose some properties really are normative in the non-naturalist sense even if we can’t explain why this is so. This should be cold comfort for the non-naturalist. As a realist, her account of deliberation presupposes that we can figure out what the normative properties are. Yet if properties are normative without explanation, it’s unclear how we can come to pick them out. Even if properties could be brutally normative, it would be unclear how we could come to know what these properties are. Justin Clarke-Doane even argues that primitivism rules out the possibility of knowing what properties are normative, which makes practical and theoretical deliberation (as conceived by the non-naturalist realist) impossible.187 Whether the epistemological predicament of non-naturalism is in fact so dire will concern us in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Epistemological Argument against Metaethical Non-Naturalism

One of the most formidable challenges faced by moral non-naturalism – which holds there are mind-independent, causally inefficacious moral properties – is the epistemological challenge of explaining how it is that we can know there exist any such properties at all, or discover truths about them. In this chapter, I first give a short introduction of the epistemological challenge to Robust Realism, specifically the Evolutionary Debunking Argument (EDA) (section 3.1). I then consider how, on the Reliability-Challenge interpretation of the EDA, Third-Factor Accounts might solve the worries raised by the argument (section 3.2). In light of this, I defend a different evolutionary debunking argument – inspired by the epistemic principle that, for our beliefs to be justified, they must be best explained by the facts they are about – in section 3.3.

3.1 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO NON-NATURALISM

What procedure do we commonly use to settle questions about external reality? The Robust Realist claims moral facts exist in the same sense as chemical facts, physical facts, and all the rest. And, in these domains – if I’m allowed a crude generalization – the usual way we inquire into what exists is by doing experiments. True beliefs are more likely than false beliefs to make correct experimental predictions, so if we increase our credence in hypotheses that make correct experimental predictions, our model of reality should become truer over time. Of course, objective values (of the kind the robust realist says exist) are not the kind of stuff likely to appear on the list of what our best science says exists or is likely to say exists. So the standard procedure isn’t available. But then what gives?

Robust Realists are generally not skeptics: they believe we have justified beliefs about some of these moral facts. But if our moral beliefs take their truth value from sui generis non-natural facts, then how could we be justified in believing they align with these causally inefficacious facts? Non-naturalists face a fundamental epistemological challenge to provide “an account of how it is that we can have epistemic access to the normative truths about which they are realists.”

What is the connection between our moral beliefs and non-natural moral facts, such that our beliefs about those facts are justified? (How) can a theory that postulates mind-independent moral

---

189 Enoch 2011, 151.
facts be plausible without defending some kind of (causal) interaction between those moral truths and moral judgments?

*Ex hypothesi*, the non-naturalist cannot avail herself of either of the two straightforward explanations for elucidating the connection between our normative beliefs and the normative facts. One: she can’t hold that our moral beliefs cause or constitute the moral laws (belief-to-truth), as she believes moral truth is independent of whatever anyone happens to think they are. Neither can she say moral facts cause our moral beliefs or explain our beliefs in them or our dispositions to infer in accordance with them (truth-to-belief), because she doesn’t believe moral facts ever explain any mental state.\(^{190}\) If there is no way in which robust realists can explain how our moral beliefs have the right sort of connection to non-natural moral properties, then moral knowledge would be a startling fact. And it seems that non-natural realists lack the resources to explain this crucial explanandum.

This seeming inability to show that our moral judgments track judgment-independent moral forms the basis of the Evolutionary Debunking Argument (EDA), to which I now turn.\(^{191}\)

### 3.1.1 The Evolutionary Debunking Argument (EDA)

The EDA starts with the following hypothesis: evolutionary forces have had a significant impact on the content of the moral judgments we endorse. And, crucially, none of the available empirical hypotheses concerning the evolution of the human faculty for moral judgment mention that this faculty served reproductive fitness via the production of true judgments. There seems no ground, that is, for optimism that the evolutionary process that produced the moral faculty will turn out to be the sort that happens to track truths (even if it lacks this as its adaptive function). Rather, we have many of these beliefs because having them was reproductively advantageous, by making early human beings more likely to survive and spread their genes. If the evolutionary story is true, then the best explanation for why we hold the evaluative judgments we do is that they are adaptive.

This needn’t be a problem by itself. It seems problematic, however, that these beliefs would have been expedient *whether or not* they were true. So, it may be that the evaluative beliefs we should hold are such-and-such, but that the ones we do hold are this-and-that, because the latter are adaptive, and the former aren’t. This way, evolution works as an *irrelevant influence*: even though it at least partially explains why we hold our moral beliefs, it does not bear on their truth. The origins

---

\(^{190}\) This is because they are stipulated to be causally inert. See section 2.1.

\(^{191}\) The *locus classicus* is Street (2006). Joyce (2006, 2013) is another prominent evolutionary debunker of morality.
of our moral beliefs thus seem to lack an appropriate explanatory relation to their truth. If an adequate account of this explanatory relation proves to be in principle impossible, the challenge goes, then any prima facie justification that our non-naturalistic moral beliefs might have is undercut. That is to say, we ought to give up our belief in non-natural facts because we have learned that these beliefs do not qualify as knowledge. \(^{192}\)

This way of putting the EDA maintains that since the causes of our normative beliefs were unrelated to their truth, their epistemic justification is in jeopardy. Another way of thinking about the epistemic significance of causes of belief emphasizes *contingency* or *luckiness*. If morality is this causally inefficacious light shining from beyond, as it were, that, in principle, we might not be able to perceive at all, then what are the odds that a series of genetic mutations will result in creature with mostly true moral beliefs? On that assumption: not very high. Especially because there are many possible arrangements of non-natural normative facts, including the absence of any, that are consistent with the evolutionary facts and their influence on normative beliefs. \(^{193}\) And, *ex hypothesi*, in relatively few of these possibilities do our normative beliefs represent the non-natural normative facts (if such there be). Hence it would be a *coincidence* if the normative judgments that have been shaped by evolution are aligned with the stance-independent normative facts. For there’s *no* reason to think that natural selection, or any other causal process, would shape us in such a way that we would be able to track facts that exist outside the causal order. This implies that our moral judgements are probably off track in regard to the moral truth and this raises a problem about the justification of our moral judgments.

---

\(^{192}\) This presentation is most in line with Joyce’s interpretation of the EDA. In defending his error theory, Joyce claims we ought to give up our moral beliefs because their origins can be shown to lack an appropriate explanatory relation to their truth. As will become clear in this chapter, I believe this is the right way to go in pressing the epistemological argument against non-naturalism.

\(^{193}\) This way of framing the EDA is more like Street’s. In defending her anti-realist constructivism, she claims we ought to give up our objectivist moral beliefs because they are shown to be in all likelihood false or only coincidentally true. As I explain in §3.2, I believe that, on this interpretation, the EDA threatens to be self-defeating.
Let’s sum up this brief intro. The EDA maintains that a non-normative genealogy of our normative judgments can be given, and that because of the non-naturalist’s metaphysical commitments,194 she will be unable to account for alignment between those judgments and the non-natural normative facts she posits. Without an argument for the claim that at least some of our beliefs are likely to track non-natural moral properties – that they are reliable – the justification of our moral beliefs is in trouble (if we understood those beliefs as being about non-natural properties).195

3.1.2 The Reliability Challenge (RC) interpretation

This is not a new challenge. Non-naturalists have developed answers. In my view, the most popular – and according to some, only available196 – reply given by the non-naturalist is based on an incomplete interpretation of the challenge. But we’ll get there later.197 First, in this section, I outline said interpretation of the challenge and, in the section thereafter, the way realists deal with it, followed by a discussion of the alleged question-beggingness of this response.

As we’ve seen, depending on the exact interpretation, the EDA aims to show one of two things. Either that if moral realism is true, it would be only a coincidence if our moral beliefs are true. Or that there’s an explanatory gap when it comes to vindicating the epistemic status of our moral beliefs, since they lack the right sort of connection to non-natural facts. Both claim as upshot that if evolutionary theory explains how we form moral beliefs, we cannot justifiably believe or know robust moral facts. Focusing on the former, we can ask: what is a “coincidence”, in the relevant sense, and why exactly should such a coincidence be epistemically troublesome?

David Enoch provided an influential answer.198 A coincidence, in this context, is a reliable correlation that can’t be explained:

[V]ery often, when we accept a normative judgment j, it is indeed true that j; and very often when we do not accept a normative judgment j (or at least when we reject it), it is indeed false that j. So there is a correlation between (what the realist takes to be) normative truths

194 That is, to clarify: given the realist commitments according to which a causally inefficacious, non-natural part of reality dictates certain ways of acting and valuing.
195 At the end of this rough introduction of the EDA it should be noted that, as will become clear, the structure and conclusion of both Street’s and Joyce’s argument is subject to much debate. Cf. Berker (2014); Bogardus (2016); Das (2016).
196 “Different versions of realism give different responses to [the epistemological] challenge. But the general consensus seems to be that for non-naturalists, there is only one option: so-called third-factor explanations. Indeed, the current dialectic over the non-naturalist’s (in)ability to meet this challenge has more or less reduced to the question of whether or when third-factor explanations can answer it” (Elliott and Faraci MS, 1).
197 If you can’t wait, see section 3.3.
198 Enoch 2011, ch.7.
and our normative judgments. What explains this correlation? On a robustly realist view of normativity, it can’t be that our normative judgments are causally or constitutively responsible for the normative truths... And given that (at least basic) normative truths are causally inert, they are not causally responsible for our normative beliefs... And so the realist is committed to an unexplained striking correlation, and this may just be too much to believe.199

It is often assumed that ‘explaining the reliability’ of some set of target beliefs at least requires one to explain why those beliefs are true more often than chance would predict.200 This unexplained correlation, Enoch further tells us, is the “strongest version of the epistemological challenge [to non-naturalist normative realism].”201 Many theorists have followed him in this assessment. What the epistemological challenge really comes down to, this interpretation has it, is that it highlights how the non-naturalist seems committed to an unexplainable correlation between our normative beliefs and normative facts, which is too bad for the non-naturalist because such a commitment costs plausibility points.

Some philosophers have explicitly framed this interpretation of the EDA as the “Reliability Challenge” to non-naturalism.202 This challenge means to establish that, if non-naturalism is true, we have no good reason to think our moral judgments are generally reliable. This is because the non-naturalist holds there’s no relation between the evolutionary forces that have influenced the contents of our moral judgments and the stance-independent moral facts. And if moral facts aren’t causally connected to anything else, we shouldn’t expect they would be correlated with anything else either. According to the reliability challenge, then, it is a striking fact that we are reliable about morality. For it’s in principle impossible to explain belief-fact correlations if we are non-causal realists. These commentators thus interpret Street’s argument as the moral analogue of the Benacerraf-Field challenge for mathematical Platonism.203

It is important to note that on this way of fleshing out the EDA, the evolutionary part merely makes salient a problem the non-natural realist already had from the get-go. It only highlights a built-in tension of the overall Robust Realist package. The fact that it’s in principle impossible to explain belief-fact correlations if we are non-causal realists holds independent of whatever

199 Enoch 2011, 158.
200 Cf. Schechter 2018; Street 2016, 305.
201 Enoch 2011, 163, italics in original. See, e.g., Shafer-Landau (2012) and Wielenberg (2014) for similar claims.
202 Lutz (MS); Hopster 2018; Schechter 2018, 453-7.
203 Roughly, in its generalized form, this is the challenge of explaining how we can reliably track truths about some specified domain, if we assume these facts are mind-independent and causally inert. Reframed in the context of moral non-naturalism, the challenge is to explain how we have managed to arrive at moral beliefs that are mostly true (hence reliable), given the truthmakers of these beliefs are mind-independent and causally inert facts.
evolutionary theory tells us about the origin of our moral beliefs. On this way of seeing things, the EDA is hardly anything over and above this challenge. Its main dialectical purpose would be to draw our attention to the striking correlation that has been there all the time. Perhaps what the EDA allows us to say is that the coincidence isn’t just there, but big. Along those lines, many have suggested that the debunking argument rests on probabilistic considerations. In the words of Shafer-Landau, the odds of adopting a true moral belief are low because “our actual moral beliefs represent only a small portion of all possible moral beliefs.”

Read like this, the EDA makes the striking correlation a bit more striking, but that’s it. The EDA only allows us to put some meat on our correlational bones: realists are committed to a rather strong correlation between the independent normative truths and the normative judgments you can expect evolutionarily successful creatures to make. But that’s it, the explanatory challenge it raises is just old wine in new bottles. Although this may not be true if the challenge applies to other versions of moral realism as well, such as naturalistic realism, as Street intends it to. There, the evolutionary details may be doing crucial work after all. But when it comes to non-naturalism, Enoch submits that “Street’s Darwinian Dilemma can be seen as a particular instance of the most general epistemological challenge to Robust Realism.”

In my mind, Enoch is right that, in reliability challenge interpretation, the mind-independence and causal inertness of non-natural moral properties are doing all the work. Our inability to tell whether our current moral belief system is the one that matches the facts depends on (the conceptual possibility of) our beliefs being mismatched with the moral properties. That, in turn, depends on the moral properties being mind-independent and causally inert. The crucial observation is that the nature of moral properties puts the non-naturalists claim that at least some of our moral beliefs are likely to track non-natural moral properties in jeopardy.

Seen like this, the evolutionary hypothesis merely raises a concern about the epistemic status of our moral beliefs, in the form of a striking correlation. This concern, some philosophers argue, can be met. The most favored response to the reliability challenge is a so-called third-factor explanation. It aims to show how moral beliefs are reliable, despite their non-moral origins, and despite the fact that moral facts not directly explain them. To this response I now turn.

---

206 Thanks to David Enoch for this point.
207 Enoch 2010, 164.
3.2 THIRD-FACTOR REPLIES

In general, how does a correlation get explained? For any correlated factors A and B, either (1) A is (part of) the ultimate explanation for B; (2) B is (part of) the ultimate explanation for A; or (3) some third factor C is (part of) the ultimate explanation for both A and B. Thus, the non-naturalist must accept that:

1. Moral beliefs explain moral facts; or
2. Moral facts explain moral beliefs; or
3. Some third factor explains both.

Non-naturalism takes normative facts to be mind-independent and ontologically prior to our beliefs about them. This straightforwardly rules out belief-to-fact explanations of (1). And since non-natural normative properties are said to be causally inefficacious, fact-to-belief explanations of (2) are also ruled out. So some additional factor (3) needs to establish the correlation. Accordingly, non-naturalists argue that there is indeed such a factor. They thus advance ‘third-factor explanations’ of the alignment between the content of our moral judgments and the moral facts.

Figure 8. Three Ways to Explain Belief-Fact Correlations
According to such responses, there is a common explanation through which our moral beliefs are linked to the moral facts. Since the same natural facts which partly (non-causally) determine – partly ground – the moral facts are also part of what (causally) determines our moral beliefs, an indirect connection exists between our moral beliefs and the moral facts. This indirect connection explains the correlation between moral belief and moral fact.

An example will help. Enoch suggests that survival might serve as a third factor that can explain both our normative beliefs (via evolutionary forces) and the normative facts (via moral laws). He speculates that survival or reproductive success is morally good, and that Darwinian forces have shaped our moral beliefs such that they often concern actions that promote survival and reproductive success.\textsuperscript{209} Selective forces have shaped our normative judgments and beliefs with the “aim” of survival or reproductive success in mind (so to speak). But given that these are by and large good aims – aims that normative truths recommend – our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with the normative truths.\textsuperscript{210} Given that survival is good, we can explain why beliefs that it is good would non-coincidentally correlate with the non-natural facts. Moreover, it looks like evolutionary forces would have pushed us in the direction of having such beliefs. The correlation between our normative beliefs and the normative truths is thus explained by the fact that the goodness of survival is responsible for our beliefs and these truths. That is, there is a ‘bridge’ between the evolutionary explanation of why humans endorse certain moral norms and the truth of these norms as conceived by non-naturalists. And so, it’s neither an accident that survival is good, nor that we believe it is.

Note that, in this argument, certain facts about the moral laws help to explain why beliefs about those facts are not merely coincidentally correct. Given that they are thus and such, it is no coincidence that some of our beliefs represent them. Third-factor accounts thus assume the truth of some particular, substantive “Morality Claim M”\textsuperscript{211} and then use M to demonstrate that our moral beliefs are by and large reliable.

\textsuperscript{210} Enoch 2011, 168.
\textsuperscript{211} Moon 2017, 215.
One facet that makes his proposal attractive, Enoch explains, is that it works in large number of fairly close possible worlds: “Perhaps more by way of counterfactual robustness can be hoped for. But some significant counterfactual robustness is satisfied by the suggested explanation of the correlation between the normative truths and our normative beliefs.”212 The normative beliefs that evolution has shaped us to have and happen to coincide with the truth are, in other words, relatively safe. Since evolutionary explanations of morality imply that at least some moral beliefs are safe, non-naturalist often claim, their epistemic status cannot be undercut by those explanations.213 Which is why, on this view, evolutionary explanations of morality fail to imply a justificatory loss for our moral judgements.

But why, precisely, can Robust Realists claim that their beliefs in non-natural facts are relatively safe, despite (or thanks to) evolutionary theory? Well, S’s belief that p is safe if and only if p is true in all nearby worlds where S holds the belief that p. In other words, S’s true belief that p is safe if S could not have easily been wrong. Now, the straightforward thought here is that evolutionary explanations of morality suggest that we are led to believe the fundamental moral truths in all nearby possible worlds. As Enoch points out: “Had the selective forces worked only somewhat differently, or had the evolutionary “aim” been different but still of value, still the starting points of our normative beliefs would have been close enough to the truth for our

---

212 Enoch 2011, 174.
normative beliefs to be (somewhat)correlated with the normative truths. The possible worlds in which – on the suggested story – there is no correlation between our normative beliefs and the normative truths are quite far: these are worlds in which, for instance, evolution “aims” (only or mostly) at suffering or humiliation, or worlds in which survival (or whatever) has absolutely no value.” Which is why we could not easily have falsely believed that survival is good, and so forth. This way, evolutionary explanations of morality imply that at least some moral beliefs are safe.

So: third-factor accounts seek to demonstrate that at least one of our moral beliefs bears an epistemically significant modal relation to the moral facts. Putative examples of such epistemically significant modal connections include safety and sensitivity. And such modal security, it is consequentially claimed, means moral beliefs’ epistemic justification is not in jeopardy despite them not being explained by moral facts nor explain them. Justin Clarke-Doane, for one, has argued that even if there is some relevant sense in which our reliability calls for explanation and seems unexplainable, so long as we are not given reason to believe that they lack an epistemically significant modal connection, those beliefs remain justified. He maintains that for one to give up one’s belief B in light of new information E, E has to reveal there to be a problem with the epistemic sensitivity or the epistemic safety of B. However, since we’ve now established that our normative beliefs are relatively safe, this lack of connection doesn’t obtain. Hence the lack of an explanatory connection doesn’t have much epistemic import. Since there is the modal connection, coincide-worries don’t even arise, and worries about belief-truth disconnectedness are alleviated.

There’s an assumption about epistemic priority here: this defense presupposes that a lack of explanatory connections between a set of beliefs and the set of facts these beliefs are about is only troubling if (and because) that lack of connection shows the beliefs lack an epistemically significant modal connection to these facts. Later in the chapter, I will argue that lack of explanatory connections has non-derivative epistemic import instead.

But for now, the non-naturalist adds one more thing. While the response has a conditional form – given that the normative facts are such-and-such, we can explain why our normative beliefs are safely correlated with them – this does not, she insists, count against the reply. The fact that the response hinges on a substantive normative assumption such as that survival is good, is moot. Since the epistemological challenge does not presuppose that realism is false, the realist claims it’s

---

215 Very roughly, a belief is sensitive if it would not be held if it were false, and a belief is safe if it mostly true when it is held.
216 Clarke-Doane (2016, §4; 2017c, §5).
217 Clarke-Doane, 2017c.
legitimate to assume there are evaluative truths. We are, in general, entitled to make assumptions
about the way the world is when answering the skeptic. (The extent to which this generalizes to
the case of moral non-naturalism is subject to heated debate and the topic of the next section.)
And if that’s allowed, then it seems we are prima facie justified in believing that survival is good, as
it’s “very hard to deny that the survival (or some such) of creatures … is good [in the sense needed] for
my explanation of the correlation between the normative truths and our normative beliefs to
go through … My normative assumption, then, is quite plausible.”218 Thus: by relying on their
antecedent moral beliefs realists are able to assure themselves that the lack of explanator
cal connection did not prevent them from forming moral beliefs with some epistemically significant
modal connection to the moral facts.

Given the assumption about epistemic priority, this defuses the EDA. Using a third-factor
response, the realist can now resist the argument without having to affirm that moral facts explain
or are explained by moral beliefs. Like so: There are certain evaluative claims that, plausibly,
evolutionary forces would have disposed us to believe yet that would be implausible to deny. These
assumed beliefs are true, yet (contrary to what the EDA aims to show) it’s not a coincidence that
we believe them because adaptive belief-forming tendencies would track these truths. Therefore,
causal explanation of our normative beliefs can vindicate the thought that they are in line with the
normative truths. For it’s now much less of a surprise that many of our moral beliefs are true: when
some act promotes survival, then (a) it is good (by our assumption), and (b) we are likely to believe
that it is good. That our beliefs about goodness coincide with the facts about goodness is no longer
a mystery. Why, our normative beliefs even turn out to be relatively safe.

3.2.1 Begging the Question?

It has seemed to many, however, that third-factor accounts – especially the idea that the non-
naturalist may rely on a moral assumption – trivially beg the question against the debunker.219 After
all, the epistemic status of realistically-understood moral premises are the very thing called into
question by the debunking argument. For instance, Enoch is supposing that survival is good, which
is a substantive first-order moral belief. But evolutionary debunking arguments challenge our
substantive first-order moral beliefs. So to appeal to those very beliefs seems like cheating. Clearly,
we’re not entitled to rely on beliefs about what the normative facts are to help ourselves to the
relevant explanations for non-coincidentality, are we? If the challenge is to explain the reliability of
moral beliefs, it seems illegitimate to rely on moral beliefs. Many take this to be a reason to dismiss

218 Enoch 2011, 171.
219 See, for example, Bedke (2014, 111-2) and Street (2008, 215; 2016, 319).
third-factor replies. To really answer the debunking argument, they claim, non-naturalists must show that the evolutionary forces have led us to form justified normative beliefs, and they must defend this claim without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true.

Realists object this sets the bar unfairly high. As Parfit writes: “We couldn’t possibly show that natural selection had led us to form some true normative beliefs without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true.” Agreeing with Parfit, many have argued it’s acceptable to assume the truth of our moral beliefs in meeting the epistemological challenge. Generally, they say, in explaining a correlation between factors A and B, one is entitled to assume that they both obtain because otherwise it would be impossible to explain a correlation between them. Furthermore, circularity seems, to a certain extent, inherent in explanations of the reliability of any class of beliefs. Arguably, we can explain the reliability of any particular class of beliefs only if we assume the truth of some of the beliefs in question. If we are unable to do so, it will be impossible to answer any skeptical challenge. To explain the reliability of beliefs of any type, one has to invoke in one’s explanation at least some substantive beliefs of that type. Since this is just what third-factor explanations do, they are legitimate, or so the argument goes.

By way of example, consider an explanation of the reliability of our perceptual beliefs. We can explain the reliability of perceptual beliefs by appealing to the theory of evolution, biological and psychological facts about perception, and how perceptual beliefs influence behavior. It seems very plausible, after all, that our perceptual beliefs must be reliable since creatures that are mostly wrong in such domains won’t survive to reproduce. But in appealing to evolution, we are appealing to the truth of empirical claims whose justification ultimately depends on the reliability of our perceptual beliefs – hence, such an appeal is circular as well. In construing, testing, and defending the theory of evolution, in describing the biological and psychological facts, and in observing how our perceptual beliefs influence behavior, we rely on those very beliefs. We cannot defend their reliability without relying on those very beliefs in doing so. Thus we find Enoch making this partners-in-guilt defense: “The remaining miracle on my account is not significantly more miraculous than the one involved in the “miracle” of (for instance) our perception being largely reliable.”

---

220 Fraser 2014, 471; Street 2008; Vavova 2015, 111.
222 This point has been pressed by, among others, Berker (2014), Vavova (2014), Foley (2001) and Clarke-Doane (2016).
According to non-naturalists, we can’t simply take certain perceptual beliefs to be true, as way to evaluate the epistemic standing of other perceptual beliefs, without allowing the moral realist to do likewise. Whether they are, in fact, entitled to assume they have reliable knowledge about some non-natural fact is at the “heart of the debate between realists and the debunker”. As we’ve seen, the non-naturalist’ argument in favor of the legitimacy of third-factor accounts relies heavily on the idea that it is impossible to explain the reliability of any faculty in a non-circular way. It is always impossible, they say, to explain how any faculty is reliable without making some assumptions about the truth of beliefs delivered by that faculty. If we announce it illegitimate to rely on the deliverances of some source of information without independent evidence of the source’s reliability, we’re heading for a regress. If we cannot assume that any of our beliefs about the external world are true, then we have no grounds for thinking our sense perceptions are reliable and can’t answer the external world skeptic. When challenged to do so, a prohibition to treat as evidence the very claims that one’s interlocutor is calling into question will lead to a sweeping skepticism. This threat of global skepticism, in turn, may be real, but it is not a threat particular to moral non-naturalism.

There are reasons, however, for thinking the perception case and the moral case to be unalike. Any assumption we make in the perception case will be based on independent evidence that can help explain how a faculty is reliable. I know that my sight is a fairly reliable means of detecting bodies of water, partly based on the corroboration provided by my sense of touch, knowledge of ecology, and so on. So I can appeal to the supported assumption that the sea lies beyond the beach, when asking whether my sight reliably enables me to see the sea. In contrast, we cannot ‘get outside’ our moral beliefs to test their epistemic status, and that’s importantly different. We can only ever appeal to unsupported assumptions, only based on deliverances of the faculty in question or on the fact that we already believe it. There’s no independent corroboration for anything we assume about a non-natural realm. It seems uncontroversial that the debunker can still salvage from the etiology of morality the conclusion that it’s likely that the starting point for rational reflection contains a mixture of truth and error. This is simply because we would expect natural selection to have also favored certain dispositions that we take to be immoral. Many things that we take to be morally wrong would have been evolutionarily advantageous to believe, and indeed our ancestors had many wrong beliefs. And if our starting points are ‘likely to be false,’ then

---


225 Thanks to Simon Rippon for the distinction between supported and unsupported assumptions.
rational reflection is no more than “a process of assessing evaluative judgements that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark.” So without independent corroboration, what reasons do we have for thinking that any methodology of moral epistemology is bringing us closer to the mind-independent truth?

This may not yet undermine the realist’s response, but add to this a second difference: it is comparably easy to explain why our perceptual beliefs are reliably formed: they are caused by perceptual facts. As Street points out, in the perception case, we need not assume anything about the objects in our manifest surroundings in order to answer the skeptical challenge. Since they are things with causal powers, they can affect one’s survival and reproduction, and we can see why selective pressures might have led us to form accurate beliefs about them. Creatures must locate food, avoid predators, and so forth, using their perceptual faculties. The simplest way to do this is with reliable perception. The explanatory role played by reliable perception derails the claim that EDAs overreach to perception. For in the moral case, we can say no such thing. The difference being: the former is supported by a convincing epistemology, which provides good internal reason to think our perceptual beliefs are generally reliable, and the latter isn’t. That is, non-naturalism lacks a positive account that specifies how we can track the contents of moral truths. Which is why, according to Street, the non-naturalist’s reliance on moral truths in presenting a third-factor account is ‘trivially question-begging’, whereas the reliance on the reliability of our sense data in the manifest surroundings case is only ‘ultimately question-begging’ and therefore more acceptable. As Street puts it: “The best explanation of why we tend to value our survival is not that it’s independently true that our survival is valuable ... but rather, much more simply, that creatures who valued their survival tended to do what promoted it, and therefore left more descendants.”

In that respect, the evolutionary explanation of moral belief differs significantly from that of our perceptual beliefs about, say, mid-sized objects. It is overwhelmingly plausible that evolution has selected for their truth. After all, having true perceptual beliefs would have enhanced the fitness of our ancestors, helping them locate food and detect environmental threats.

More generally, if we adopt the non-naturalist conception of moral properties there is no reason to think that any causal process would shape us in such a way that we would be able to track truths about them. Moreover, causal pressures that, unlike non-natural facts and properties, undeniably have had an influence in shaping our moral views and dispositions—those of biological

---

226 Street 2006, 124.
227 Street 2016, 321.
228 Street 2008, 209.
and of cultural evolution—seem to have nothing at all to do with non-natural moral truth. And actions purportedly guided by moral beliefs, such as speaking the truth or taking care of one’s offspring, appear to be adaptive irrespective of whether their related moral beliefs correctly represent any non-natural realm.

Our “basic evaluative tendencies”, Street points out, have been shaped by a process of natural selection, and these tendencies, in turn, constitute our intuitive inclinations to perceive certain behaviors as ‘called for’ or ‘demanded by’ the circumstances. We have, for example, a natural urge to protect one’s offspring, or a tendency to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. While the contents of our evaluative tendencies do not strictly determine the contents of our “full-fledged evaluative judgments”, it stands to reason they’re (counterfactually) related nonetheless: “Had the general content of our basic evaluative tendencies been very different, then the general content of our full-fledged evaluative judgments would also have been very different, and in loosely corresponding ways.”

Take incest taboos, for example. These are often said to be explained—in full—by the reproductive advantage of inbreeding avoidance mechanisms, either in the form of hard-wired disgust (for individuals) or cultural norms (for populations). Citing such a posteriori information about our moral beliefs, proponents of the debunking argument are keen to distinguish their challenge from radical skepticism, as the skeptical hypothesis in the moral case is claimed to be empirically inspired:

It is not just that [with the evolutionary challenge] we can make up a consistent hypothesis according to which a bunch of our ordinary beliefs are false; rather it is that we might have empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that explains how [our moral beliefs] came about but does not require that they be true.

This shows that the prospects of the evolutionary challenge are independent of the prospects of radical skepticism. Even if radical skepticism could be rejected, the evolutionary challenge might yet succeed.

As we’ve seen, the non-naturalist claims that not allowing her the substantive moral assumption needed for third-factor accounts, makes the debunker’s challenge into an uninteresting

---

229 Ibid., 119.
230 Ibid., 120.
232 A second line of comparison with this kind of skepticism that is suggested by Street (2006, 155), and emphasized by several commentators (Shafer-Landau 2012; Vavova 2015), is that the evolutionary challenge is a targeted skeptical challenge that is supposed to apply only to the moral domain, as opposed to a general skeptical challenge that applies across many different domains.
global skepticism. But there are pertinent disanalogies between the bootstrapping in the justification of our perceptual beliefs (the global skepticism case), and the bootstrapping involved in third-factor accounts. This means it’s questionable whether an appeal to the justificatory structure of perceptual beliefs can do the work the non-naturalist needs it to do. And this, in turn, means that there might be something to the debunker’s charge that third-factor accounts are non-starters.

3.2.2 Why Is Genealogical Information Relevant for the Justification of a Belief if It’s Not Evidence of Error?

Nevertheless, the dialectic continues. For the non-naturalist offers another defense of her assumption, one that does not rely on a partners-in-guilt claim invoking perceptual beliefs.

Third-factor accounts are meant to secure that even if the truth of our ancestors’ beliefs does not figure in the account of why they were adaptive and we have them, nevertheless they were (sometimes and non-accidentally) true. The debunker objects that such replies seem only to make our beliefs true by coincidence. Third-factor replies only show the mere possibility of a relation between the normative facts and the evolutionary process. They inform us that if the moral facts were thus-and-so, then our ancestors’ normative beliefs would have reliably tracked those facts. This is all well and good, but the debunker was never under the impression that such a connection was impossible. One might easily stipulate that moral goodness is whatever conduces to genetic replication, and then any evolutionary explanation would implicitly involve moral facts. However, the demand isn’t to demonstrate the possibility of reliability, but rather to explain how reliability is probable given realism, on the grounds that inexplicable reliability is highly improbable.

But, the realist responds, even if my assumption need not be granted on pain of global skepticism, what of it? There are other ways to support it. Coincidences happen, and we are entitled to believe that they have happened when we have evidence that their results are instantiated. And we do seem to have such evidence. As Enoch claims, it seems “very hard to deny that the survival (or some such) of creatures like us is good.”

As things stand, the realist might still wonder why – exactly – the cited evolutionary influence constitutes a problem. Why should learning about the influence of evolutionary forces on our evaluative beliefs undermine those beliefs? Even if evolution caused us to believe that “pain and injury are bad, and that we have strong reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves

---

235 Enoch 2011, 171.
and our children,” Parfit for example writes, “these beliefs are not badly mistaken, but correspond to some of the independent normative truths. Pain is bad, and we do have strong reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves and our children.” So whence all the fuss about probability? Isn’t the burden on the anti-realist to show that we have good reason to think that we are, courtesy of evolution, mistaken about morality? That the set of the selected-for beliefs and the set of the true beliefs come apart? That there’s a gap?  

This point has been powerfully pressed by Katja Vavova. Vavova avows that evidence of error would be a reason to revise our beliefs, but denies the evolutionary challenge can provide that. The reason for this, is that a substantial assumption about the moral truth would be required of proponents of the evolutionary challenge to show we’re mistaken. To believe that moral truths do not coincide with the adaptive judgments, we must assume something about what those moral truths are, or what they are like. We need to hold something fixed about morality – presuppose some knowledge about it – in order to infer the error-judgment from the origins of our moral beliefs. After all, we cannot get evidence of our own error about some domain in the absence of substantive assumptions about the truths in that domain. But this an assumption the debunker cannot make. If she may rely on moral assumptions, so may the non-naturalist, and so was born a third-factor reply. By contrast, if we can make no assumptions about what morality is about, we cannot hold that the true and the adaptive moral beliefs come apart. So without moral assumptions, we cannot rationally get any reason to think we’re mistaken, since we can’t tell whether evolution would have led us toward or away from the moral truths. And with a moral assumption, on the other hand, we can explain why we’re reliable about these truths. Either way, it seems, we cannot conclude that we are likely to be mistaken about morality.

Consequentially, the dilemma for the debunker seems to be this: either we are allowed to rely on moral assumptions in responding to the debunker’s challenge, and we can tell a story of about why evolutionary influences have not made us completely hopeless at recognizing and reasoning our way to the normative truths. Or, instead, we aren’t allowed to rely on any moral assumptions, and we cannot tell such a story. But then nor can we tell anything about whether

---

238 Vavova 2014; 2018; 2021. Thanks to Simon Rippon for pressing me on this.
239 Several other philosophers have endorsed a thesis similar to Vavova’s, suggesting that the evolutionary hypothesis cannot show us that our moral beliefs are probably false (Clarke-Doane 2017a; 2017b; Lutz 2018; Sinclair 2018; Warren 2017).
evolution would have led us toward or away from the truths and conclude that we are likely to be mistaken about morality.\textsuperscript{240}

Vavova is right, I believe, that the jig is up, so to speak, if the debunker allows her critic to appeal to some positive moral claims in her response. If she does so, she has placed herself outside a dialectical context in which the air of bootstrapping that surrounds third-factor accounts can be pressed as an objection. As mentioned, using a third-factor response, the realist can now resist the argument without having to affirm that moral facts explain or are explained by moral beliefs.

But this is not the dialectical situation. The mistake in this line of reasoning, we will see later, is with the assumption that the debunker aims to provide the realist with evidence of error. \textit{If} the EDA was about establishing that our moral beliefs were mostly false, it would require some ‘benchmark’ of moral truth to make a comparison and reach that conclusion. But this is not what the EDA aims to establish. Its upshot is supposed to be that we lack epistemic justification for believing in non-natural moral facts. Not that our moral beliefs are erroneous by our own lights. Which is why, and this is the second point I wish to make, the EDA may be better interpreted as suggesting that we have no reason to think that any non-natural moral belief (regardless of its first-order moral content) is justified, in light of a Darwinist view of morality.

These two claims, at any rate, are what I will argue for in the rest of this chapter.

\subsection*{3.2.3 Getting Our Bearings}

But first, let’s recap the trajectory of this chapter so far. According to third-factor replies, the connection between evolutionary forces and value – the fact that survival is good in Enoch’s proposal – is what explains the correlation between the response-independent normative truths and our selected-for normative beliefs.\textsuperscript{241} In Enoch’s example, facts about survival explain our beliefs about what is good, by evolutionary mechanisms. And those same facts about survival also explain the moral facts about what actually is good, because \textit{survival is good}. This is an assumption that is both (a) prima facie justified and (b) allowed given that it seems the debunker also needs to assume something about moral truth in order to be able to press her objection about how our moral beliefs are likely ‘off-track’

If the realist uses this free pass to smuggle the right assumption in – one whose truth would establish that our normative judgments are generally reliable – she has established an initial alignment between our judgments and the facts, and the game is over. Here, though, I should note

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{240} Vavova 2021, 725-6.
\item \textsuperscript{241} Enoch 2011, 175.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
that it is not immediately obvious whether Enoch’s account succeeds in establishing this. After all, the reference class of survival-promoting judgments is still huge; presumably there is only a small set of normative judgments within this large reference class that aligns with the normative truths. Enoch’s reference class allows for survival-promoting strategies such as killing the offspring of rivals, abusing others for one’s own benefit and cheating to the detriment of the group.\textsuperscript{242} Other morally dubious survival-enhancing behavior includes stealing, free-riding and making self-serving moral judgment. The moral assumption Enoch has picked thus allows for the evolution of various moral judgments, many of which realists will take to be untrue. However, Enoch’s third-factor account allows for them. It thus faces another iteration of the reliability challenge. Of all the moral judgments we could have made in the light of the proposed third-factor explanation, what guarantees that our actual judgments coincide with the mind-independent truths?

I bracket this issue in what’s to come, because I want to focus on the general viability of third-factor accounts. So, regardless of whether Enoch’s proposal succeeds, the idea is that given a starting point of normative beliefs that are not too far-off, presumably some reasoning mechanisms (and perhaps some other mechanisms as well) can get us increasingly closer to the truth by eliminating inconsistencies, increasing overall coherence, eliminating arbitrary distinctions, drawing analogies, ruling out initially justified beliefs whose justificatory status has been defeated later on, etc.\textsuperscript{243} So as long as the realist picks the right free assumption – one whose truth would indeed establish that our normative beliefs are generally reliable – she takes herself to be off the hook. It is this contention that I’ll attack, so even if non-naturalists come up with the ‘right’ free assumption – it would make no difference. For, as I’ll argue, they cannot help themselves to that assumption in the first place.

This is an important knot in the argument. All the pieces are in place; the non-naturalist takes herself to have shouldered all explanatory burdens, like so:

- **Epistemic Priority**: lack of explanatory connections between a set of beliefs and the set of facts these beliefs are about is only troubling if (and because) that lack of connection shows the beliefs lack an epistemically significant modal connection to these facts.

\textsuperscript{242} Cf. Hopster 2019, §6.2.
\textsuperscript{243} This is a common thread in realists replies. See, for example, Behrends (2013, 491), Enoch (2011, 166), Huemer (2005, 216), FitzPatrick (2015, 886-8), Parfit (2011, 523), Schafer (2010, 477), Shafer-Landau (2012), and Vavova (2020, 7).
• **Third Factor:** by relying on a normative assumption, the non-naturalist can explain the once-striking correlation between her normative beliefs and the normative facts and secure the relevant modal connection.

• **Vavova’s Dilemma, or No Evidence of Error:** The non-naturalist is defeasibly entitled to this assumption. If moral assumptions are illegitimate, then we have no reason to think we’re mistaken. We cannot rationally get any. And if they are legitimate, we have no reason to think we’re massively mistaken either because we can self-correct from a starting point.

There was an awkward silence as the debate reached a stalemate. I like Matthew Lutz’s summary of the dialectical situation:

Skeptics often object at this point that the moral realist has given us no reason to think that there are moral laws like this. The non-naturalist may reply that the skeptic has not yet given any reason to think that there are not … If the skeptic is asking how our moral beliefs can be justified, the non-naturalist may talk about reflective equilibrium or intuitions or deliberative indispensability or anything else244 … And the non-naturalist may point out, it’s simply not true that the reliability of our moral beliefs can’t be explained: by appealing to [moral laws], I just explained the reliability of our moral beliefs. Thus, that reliability can be explained. QED.245

---

244 I discuss these in section 3.3.3.
245 Lutz (MS, 12).
As you can imagine, debunkers are left unsatisfied. There seems to be something fishy about this response. The impression that this way of dealing with the epistemological challenge relies on a kind of trick is hard to shake: ‘Surely this isn’t the right kind of way to explain the reliability of our moral beliefs?’ Realists are under no obligation to refute incredulous stares, however. So, the debunker needs to specify what the right kind of way would be, and why, and argue the non-naturalist can’t supply that kind of explanation. In the rest of the chapter, I’ll make an attempt.

3.2.4 Brute Correlations Aren’t (By Themselves) Epistemological Challenges

One (preliminary) piece of the puzzle is that the correlation-construal (implicit in RC) of the epistemological challenge is misguided. This matters, because what one is allowed to assume in the explanatory project of accounting for a correlation diverges from what’s dialectically legitimate to assume in, say, the context of responding to an undercutting defeater. So different ways of pushing the epistemological challenge might give different results when it comes to what can and cannot be replied without begging the question.

This is not to say, however, that my main reason for arguing that the epistemological challenge to non-naturalism is about an unexplained correlation is because another interpretation would be more congenial to my purposes. Rather, my basic thought here is that it’s a mistake not to relate the EDA back to some epistemological notion, such as epistemic justification. Doing so will help us see why third-factor replies rely on an illegitimate assumption after all. Not seeing the EDA as primarily about an unexplained correlation can, moreover, be independently motivated.

First, notice that without such an epistemological connection, it is hard to see how this is an epistemological challenge at all. As it stands, the challenge holds “there is just a striking correlation, the need to explain it, and the apparent unavailability of any explanation to the challenged view.” Instead of being an epistemic objection, this looks much more like a metaphysical one. To see this, consider another paradigmatic metaphysical difficulty to normative non-naturalism: the supervenience problem. As discussed in section 2.3, according to the supervenience challenge, moral facts necessarily supervene on natural base facts. But non-naturalists can’t give any account of why moral facts necessarily supervene in this way. This explanatory shortcoming of non-naturalism – its inability to explain a striking phenomenon – counts against it. Or so the argument goes. Whether or not this argument succeeds, it is noteworthy that the supervenience and the

---

246 Enoch 2011, 159.
247 Lutz (MS, §2) draws this analogy.
248 See section 2.3.2.
‘epistemological’ objection have the same structure. There is a striking explanandum; the non-naturalist (apparently) lacks the resources to explain it; this reflects poorly on non-naturalism.

The similarities run even deeper than this. The two objections are both instances of a more general explanatory predicament. They both begin with the same observation: that moral facts are strongly correlated with facts of some other kind. The challenges are interested in different kinds of correlations: the supervenience challenge concerns modal covariation across possible worlds, while the epistemological challenge concerns reliably true beliefs in the actual world. But in both cases, the fundamental worry is the same: it’s in principle impossible to explain these correlations if we are non-causal realists. So when we encounter the unexpected correlation, that looks bad for the theory that can’t explain it.

Thirdly, we see that non-naturalists typically try to answer both challenges in the same way. Positing a moral law that ‘hooks up’ natural facts and normative facts saves both correlations from bruteness. If there is such a law, then, in both cases, it explains the correlation. It explains why, in all possible worlds where it obtains, there is a correlation between the natural facts and the normative facts. And the same moral law figures in third-factor explanations of the reliability of our moral beliefs.

The upshot: the reliability challenge is not a specific challenge to the justification of our moral beliefs. It is, instead, a general theoretical challenge to the explanatory adequacy of the metaphysical theory of non-naturalism, of the same kind as the supervenience challenge. At this stage, then, the argument for an epistemological challenge isn’t complete. Specifically, this is not an epistemological challenge unless an explainable correlation is a necessary condition on justification, reliability, or knowledge. Otherwise it poses no threat to the epistemological status of any of our moral beliefs. This gives us some independent reason to think that the putative explanation of our reliability provided by third-factor accounts does not address the epistemic worries underlying evolutionary debunking arguments. As Vavova’s dilemma shows, these worries can’t be that the evolutionary origins of our moral beliefs can provide us with evidence of error. So what are they?

In what follows, I formulate a debunking argument based on the thought that we need to justify maintaining beliefs whose content seems to play no role in the best explanation of why we believe them. We can explain why we possess our moral beliefs without invoking them. Any competitor explanation assuming their truth is less compact and thereby worse. Our moral beliefs are thereby explanatorily impotent in explaining why we have them, so we need to justify
continuing to believe them. We can thereby conclude that we should only maintain these beliefs if there is some additional reason to do so.

My aim in the rest of this chapter is to offer a systematic, comprehensive defense of an evolutionary debunking argument inspired by that line of thinking. Unlike more basic explanatory dispensability arguments, it involves a burden shift: its conclusion is conditional on the lack of additional, non-abductive reasons for robust moral realism. I assess these reasons later in the chapter.

3.3 AN EXPLANATORY CONSTRAINT ON JUSTIFIED BELIEF

A few evolutionary debunkers, including Richard Joyce, Philipp Kitcher and Jack Woods, rely on a variation of the epistemic principle that, for our beliefs to be justified, they must be best explained by the facts they are about. Despite differences in detail, their arguments roughly share the following structure:

The argument from an explanatory constraint on justified belief:
1. Evolutionary and otherwise historical, not non-natural, facts most adequately explain why we hold certain moral beliefs and not others.
2. If our beliefs in non-natural facts are not best explained by non-natural facts and there are no additional, non-abductive reasons for maintaining them, that defeats their justification.
3. There are no additional, non-abductive reasons for maintaining moral belief, non-naturalistically construed.
4. Therefore, facts about evolution defeat(s) the justification of our moral beliefs, non-naturalistically construed.

Before moving on to a comprehensive defense of each premise, let me clarify one aspect of this conclusion. As it stands, the conclusion seems ambiguous between an epistemological and a (primarily) metaphysical interpretation. The argument could either show that robust moral realists don’t have justified moral beliefs. Or that robust moral facts don’t exist (and that the corresponding beliefs are thus unjustified). Corresponding to this ambiguity, the discussion below speaks both of

---

249 Joyce 2006, ch.6.
251 Woods 2016.
losing justification for believing in robust moral facts and of losing justification for an ontological commitment to these facts.

But isn’t that objectionably imprecise? Indeed, some argue that this ambiguity is problematic. We should explicitly separate debunking arguments with epistemological conclusions from those with metaphysical upshots.

I reply that I doubt whether this distinction matters that much in our context. Yes, it’s possible that, given non-naturalism, we might lack justification or knowledge of moral entities, despite the fact that those entities do exist. That, though, doesn’t seem more than a theoretical possibility. It would not be a convincing metaethic. So it’s unclear whether we can draw the requisite distinction here. Moreover, assume we’d limit the argument’s conclusion to epistemology: robust moral realists don’t have justified moral beliefs (due to evolutionary forces and the lack of additional, non-abductive reasons). In that case, it seems plausible that we are licensed to also draw a metaphysical conclusion. After all, if there really are no genuine reasons for belief in robust moral facts, why think that they even exist? So, it once again doesn’t seem problematic that the conclusion of the argument above is ambiguous in that sense.

In the remainder of section 3.3, I shall explain in more detail what these premises mean and why they might be true.

---

253 Miller 2003, ch.8; Das 2016.
3.3.1 Premise 1: Evolutionary Explanations of Moral Belief

The first premise invokes the evolutionary explanation of moral beliefs. Approximately, such theories maintain that we believe what we believe in virtue of natural selection. For example, we believe in objective and universal obligations to family members because that was adaptive and aided our forebears in survival. Evolutionary explanations share three characteristics that are crucial for evolutionary debunking.

First, evolutionary explanations don’t avert to (or imply or irreducibly feature) robust moral facts or truths. After all, evolution hasn’t selected for robustly true, but adaptive, moral beliefs. As Street puts it: “The best explanation of why we tend to value our survival is not that it’s independently true that our survival is valuable ... but rather, much more simply, that creatures who valued their survival tended to do what promoted it, and therefore left more descendants.”

Second, evolutionary explanations are – what we might call – competitive: they battle with other theories for adequacy and, if successful, are incompatible with them. For instance, evolutionary explanations of moral belief cannot hold true at the same time as moral explanations of moral beliefs in terms of apprehending non-natural facts. Rather, if the evolutionary explanation proves successful, that rules out moral explanations.

Some realists argue that this is not the case. They point out that evolutionary explanations only operate at the level of ultimate causes: causes that belong to evolutionary history (e.g. natural selection). Proximate causes of a trait, by contrast, operate within an organism’s lifetime (e.g. immediate triggering causes and developmental factors). This objection from historical incompleteness further observes that the contents of some of our endorsed moral judgments cannot be adequately explained in evolutionary terms, and questions the EDA’s premise that evolutionary forces have had a significant impact on the moral judgments we make. Many philosophers have argued that while there are some moral beliefs that have clear and plausible evolutionary explanations (like the belief that incest is wrong), other moral beliefs do not have such clear evolutionary explanations (like the belief that all human persons have equal rights). Instead, the objector maintains, they are primarily products of our capacity to reflect on mind-independent moral truths, social learning and deliberation. If these various non-evolutionary factors play a major role in shaping the contents of our moral judgments, it’s not clear the debunker’s argument can get off the ground.

---

254 Street 2008, 209.
However, debunkers can readily respond to this objection. They should clarify that their claim is that there are explanations for our moral beliefs that, when fully filled-out, appeal at every level only to causal factors such as cognitive or emotional dispositions that have nothing to do with tracking or responding to non-natural facts. Debunkers may still argue that the best historical explanation of our moral endorsements involves no appeal to robust moral facts. If the best historical explanation of our moral endorsements nowhere involves an appeal to the fact that over the course of human history we responded to mind-independent moral truths, then the realist’s truth-tracking hypothesis should be abandoned on historical grounds.\(^{255}\) Or at least, the existence of non-natural moral facts may not be inferred from this explanation. The conclusion stands: moral facts have no role to play in the explanation of our moral beliefs, and moral facts don’t seem to be located in the right place in the explanatory history of our moral evidence either. The epistemic status of those beliefs remains undercut and the justification for whatever moral assumption proposed (when construed non-naturally) remains eliminated.

Third and lastly, evolutionary theories of moral beliefs are more adequate than non-naturalistic explanations. This seems quite likely: to start with, moral explanations cannot be causal. After all, (most) robust moral realist deny that moral facts have causal powers. But if moral explanations aren’t causal, what are they — and why think of them as explanations at all? Further, evolutionary explanations of moral beliefs also satisfy multiple criteria of what makes explanations better. More specifically, they are more parsimonious than moral explanations: they don’t feature *sui generis* ontology in the explaining phrase or explanans. Finally, evolutionary explanations of moral beliefs are more general than moral explanations: they don’t just explain why we hold the moral beliefs we hold, but also other characteristics of human psychology, such as why we perceive the world as we do or why we reason the way we do. In sum, the best explanation of moral belief, evolutionary or not, doesn’t appeal to non-natural moral facts or truths. So as the first premise states, evolutionary facts explain why we hold certain moral beliefs and why we believe in strong moral objectivity. Non-natural facts are dispensable to the explanations of both datums.

### 3.3.2 Premise 2: Explanatory Idleness and Defeat

Interestingly, Robust Realists *themselves* typically do not aim for an empirical vindication of their accounts, nor do they always accept the relevance of an empirical vindication of their claims.\(^{256}\) On the contrary, non-naturalists argue that moral properties are of an altogether different sort than natural properties. Hence, while they might hold that our beliefs about moral properties might

\(^{255}\) This was very quick. See Hopster (2018) for a fuller version of the argument.

\(^{256}\) Though see section 3.3.3 of this dissertation for a noteworthy exception.
have played an evolutionary role, they would not require that moral properties themselves played any relevant role in our evolutionary history.

Against this leniency, the second premise states an epistemic principle that links explanatory dispensability to the defeat of justification. More precisely, it says that if non-natural facts are superfluous in explaining our beliefs in non-natural facts, and there are no additional, non-abductive reasons for maintaining them, that defeats the justification of those beliefs. Jack Woods puts it like this: “If the truth and content of our moral beliefs is not involved in the best explanation for our possession of them, then we need additional reasons to believe them.”\(^\text{257}\)

This criterion seems, intuitively, to get at something. Just as figuring in the best explanation of a given phenomenon (e.g. our possession of scientific beliefs) generates a reason for belief in a given entity (e.g. scientific truths), not figuring in the best explanation of a given phenomenon (e.g. our possession of moral beliefs) raises the requirement of giving additional reasons in support of belief in a given entity (e.g. non-natural moral facts).

In ethics, this intuition has famously been fleshed out by Gilbert Harman.\(^\text{258}\) He contrasts the case of a physicist observing a trail appeal in a cloud chamber and thinking, “There goes a proton,” with that of a person seeing some hoodlums setting a cat on fire and thinking, “That’s wrong.” Part of our best explanation for why we observe a vapor trail in a cloud chamber includes the existence of protons. Therefore, we should believe that protons exist. On the other hand, the wrongness of burning a cat is not required to explain our observation that the hoodlums are doing something wrong. The fact that you immediately make a wrongness-judgment is best explained by psychological, sociological, historical, cultural, and other such facts about you.

As the relevant observation or judgment is best explained without invoking the existence of the relevant purported moral property, Harman concludes we have no reason to believe there are such properties. Nor are there any other observations which (partly) rely on moral ontology for their explanation: moral ontology isn’t part of the best explanation of any other part of our evidence either. Moral ontology plays no such explanatory role, and we have no reason to believe it ever will. It follows we are not justified in believing in the existence of moral ontology: “Ockham’s Razor really can come in and do its thing, for non-naturalism and super-naturalism do posit extra ontology in the world, but the presence of the non-moral genealogy shows this ontology to be explanatorily superfluous.”\(^\text{259}\)

\(^{257}\) Woods 2018, 53.  
\(^{258}\) Harman 1977, 3-10.  
\(^{259}\) Joyce 2006, 209-10.
In response, some non-naturalists critically question how tightly we should hold on to the ban on redundant properties. Were we to require that all our beliefs pass an explanatory test, then not only Robust Realism would fail the test, but so would many other beliefs.\textsuperscript{260} Erik Wielenberg, for instance, points out that by appealing to a ban on redundant properties, one could refute traditional monotheism,\textsuperscript{261} new mysterianism,\textsuperscript{262} and robust normative realism in one fell swoop.\textsuperscript{263} Perhaps, the suggestion is, the fact that there are these partners in guilt provides reason to believe that Harman’s argument rests on a parsimony premise that, for all its intuitiveness, has counterintuitive implications. Some authors have even flatly rejected Harman’s epistemic principle. Clarke-Doane, for example, recasts Harman’s explanatory requirement as the guiding principle of a type of empiricism developed by Quine. He then claims that an argument premised on Quinean empiricism “would have no traction with … ‘non-naturalist’ moral realists—who … of course, reject Quinean empiricism.”\textsuperscript{264}

So interpreted, Harman’s argument relies on something’s dispensability to our best science being sufficient reason to not believe in it, a view associated with Quinean empiricism. If anything, it seems to me that if one concludes that Harman-style debunking arguments lose their force once we reject Quinean empiricism – then this would strain credulity. Harman’s style of argument still seems intuitively probative. If we want to do justice to our intuition, we should explicitly reconstruct these arguments without relying on contentious epistemological assumptions like the claim about dispensability just mentioned. Premise 2 attempts to do just this, as it is a burden-shifting claim. It does not attempt to undermine robust moral beliefs directly.

Neither do I think, contra Wielenberg, that it counts against Harman’s test if it calls for the rejection of a few arcane philosophical theories. In fact, that would seem to me to be the result of the criterion doing its work and resulting in philosophical progress.

A stronger partners-in-crime response, however, appeals to mathematical realism. According to mathematical realists, some mathematical statements are objectively and mind-independently true and are made true by the existence of abstract objects, namely numbers, sets, functions, and

\textsuperscript{260} I’m indebted to conversations with Ferenc Huoranszki for helping me understand this objection.
\textsuperscript{261} Wielenberg argues that a ban on redundant properties entails atheism because it is incompatible with the existence of a God that is distinct from and instantiates the divine attributes, and with the existence of a simple God that is identical with His divine attributes.
\textsuperscript{262} This view implies that every pair of possible worlds that are indistinguishable with respect to at least all properties except their phenomenal properties are also indistinguishable with respect to all properties. Consequently, it implies that phenomenal properties are real yet make no observational difference. Therefore, it’s incompatible with a ban on redundant properties.
\textsuperscript{263} Wielenberg 2014, 26-8.
\textsuperscript{264} Clarke-Doane 2015, 84.
the like. These objects, by virtue of being abstract, cannot enter into causal networks, and are traditionally thought to not play a role in causal explanations. Mathematical realism is historically an important and prominent position in the philosophy of mathematics that also posits seemingly spooky abstract objects outside the causal realm, and has no convincing epistemology. Non-naturalistic moral realists can thus argue that they have independent reason to reject the explanatory criterion of ontological commitment since it will lead us astray with respect to mathematical realism. Like mathematical facts, normative facts don’t need to earn their keep by figuring in the best explanation of an empirical anything. As such, even if mind-independent moral facts fail Harman’s test, that doesn’t settle whether we can justifiably believe in their existence.

However, the relevant disanalogy is that mathematical facts do play an explanatory role in ordinary scientific explanations and thereby escape Harman-like charges. For instance, mathematical facts are an ineliminable part of the best explanation of why physical objects are arranged in a certain way. Sarah McGrath cites an example from Peter Lipton:

Suppose that some sticks are thrown in the air with a lot of spin, so that they separate and tumble out as they fall. Now freeze the scene at some point during the sticks’ descent. Why are appreciably more of them near the horizontal axis than the vertical, rather than in more or less equal numbers near each orientation, as one would have expected? The answer, roughly speaking, is that there are many more ways for a stick to be near the horizontal than near the vertical. To see this, consider purely horizontal and vertical orientations for a single stick with a fixed midpoint. There are infinitely many of the former, but only two of the latter. Or think of the shell that the ends of the stick trace as it takes every possible orientation. The areas that correspond to the near vertical are caps centered on the north and south poles formed when the stick is forty-five degrees or less off the vertical, and this area is substantially less than half the surface area of the entire sphere. Less roughly, the explanation why more sticks are near the horizontal than near the vertical is that there are two horizontal dimensions but only one vertical one.

There have been several cases advanced where it appears that mathematics is playing a crucial role in the explanation of physical phenomena. For example, it has been argued that mathematics contributes to explanations of such diverse phenomena as the Kirkwood gaps in the asteroid belt, the hexagonal shape of honey comb cells, the Lorenz contraction of bodies with large

266 McGrath 2014, 192.
268 Colyvan 2010.
relativistic velocities, the periodic behavior of North American cicadas, the failure of attempts to square the circle, and the search patterns of open-sea aquatic predators. Without going into – and pretending to understand – these purported explanations, we can infer from their presence that in order for the moral non-naturalists to preserve their partners-in-guilt defense, they must now argue that the most recent wave of mathematical realism is in error. Because it seems that unlike non-natural moral facts, mathematical facts sometimes do play a role in the best explanation of our observations of the empirical world. Consequently, they also play a role in the best explanation of why we make certain judgments about the empirical world. And if mathematics does play a genuine explanatory role within science, then the moral non-naturalist stands alone in her rejection of the explanatory criterion.

In reply, the non-naturalist might point out that some mathematical beliefs play no explanatory role in ordinary scientific explanations either. Belief in the axioms of set-theory might be an example of this. And neither are set-theoretical truths plausibly involved in the best explanation of our set-theoretical beliefs, since they are non-causal. It’s also hard to see how sophisticated set-theoretical beliefs wouldn’t have been evolutionarily advantageous to our ancestors. As in the case of robust moral beliefs, this means we need additional reasons for our set-theoretic beliefs. For instance, set theory might be indispensable to mathematics, which might be indispensable to science. The scientific indispensability of mathematics thus might give us non-abductive reason to believe in these facts. Whether we have such additional reason in the case of non-natural moral beliefs is a theme I return to when discussing premise 3. For now the point is that the formulated principle can handle cases like mathematics, which is therefore not a counterexample to it.

Woods argues for another virtue of the second premise, namely that it’s an instance of a more general plausible principle: “If our believing in certain claims of a domain D can be well explained without any appeal to their content and truth, then we acquire the epistemic burden of explaining why we should continue to believe them in spite of their theoretical superfluousness.” This seems right, as explanatory indispensability is the standard roadmap to ontology. So if we cannot rely on that, the burden is on us to come with an equally good protocol.

---

270 Colyvan 2002.
272 Colyvan 2007.
273 Baron 2014.
274 Woods 2018, 54.
Suppose, for instance, that you’ve been using a divination tool to find out what the weather will be tomorrow. Once you realize that it’s just a toy, and that the facts about the weather are in no way influencing the beliefs you’ve formed about it, you should then believe that it is at best a lucky coincidence if those beliefs are correct. In other words, there is no epistemically significant modal connection between your weather beliefs and the weather facts. The realization that your beliefs about the weather aren’t explained by the facts about the weather, and that believing it doesn’t make it so, generates a demand for non-abductive reasons for holding on to those beliefs. Mutatis mutandis, for your moral beliefs and the moral facts:

[Explanatory revelations] leave us in the dark entirely, depriving us of any way of telling whether they are bound to be true. And that is more than enough to “threaten” the judgment that they’re bound to be true, which opens the door to the explanatory concession obligating us to give up the beliefs.276

Once you acknowledge that you would have to have gotten lucky to end up with accurate about any type of non-natural fact, you shouldn’t think that you did. Once you realize you have certain beliefs about the non-natural moral facts for reasons having nothing to do with how moral reality in fact is, you have a defeater for those beliefs, and its irrational to hold onto them. The connection between us and any non-natural evaluative properties is not good enough for beliefs about those properties to count as knowledge. In other words, the presence of an undercutting defeater shifts the burden directly, not in virtue of revealing the beliefs to be in some other way deficient. Contra Epistemic Priority, the discovery that moral beliefs are not influenced by the moral facts has direct burden-shifting import.

Another objection to this premise denies there are no abductive reasons for believing in robust moral facts. Some non-naturalists have argued that robust moral facts somehow figure in the best explanation of the growing body of evidence suggesting that moral prescriptions and values are experienced as “objective” in the sense that they don’t seem to depend on us, or on any authoritative figure.277 This is thus an abductive argument for non-naturalism from the phenomenological features of our moral intuitions. Michael Huemer has, secondly, made an “empirical case” for his version of non-natural moral realism based on observed moral convergence.278 He argues it’s the best explanation for the pervasive trend toward liberalization of

276 Korman and Locke forthcoming, 17-8.
277 For this empirical evidence, see Nichols 2004.
278 Huemer 2016.
values over human history that we observe. I will now spend a section assessing these claims about evidence.

### 3.3.2.1 Objection to Premise 2: Robust Realism and Evidence

In this section, I consider whether non-naturalism gains abductive support from observations about (1) moral phenomenology and (2) moral agreement.

I begin with the point about moral convergence. Many suspect that ethical inquiry is different from more standard empirical investigation because the adequacy of an ethical position is not ultimately a matter of how it fits with our empirical evidence. There could be no empirical evidence for the truth of fundamental normative beliefs. We could not, for example, settle the truth or falsity of utilitarianism by learning more natural facts. At this point, non-naturalists propose that when there is no empirical evidence for or against the truth of certain beliefs, we may be able to support these beliefs by claiming that we are able to recognize their truth, in ways that are shown by our ability to reach agreement on their truth. They then appeal to the fact that moral beliefs are widely shared throughout society. There is broad consensus that, for example, it is morally wrong to inflict pain on random victims. Indeed, observations to the extent that there are “deep and striking patterns, across both time and cultures, in many of the most basic evaluative judgments that humans tend to make” are generally accepted into the debate. And it has seemed to some that postulating non-natural moral facts is the best way to explain this: the reason for the moral convergence is that there are mind-independent and timeless moral truths that we’re converging on.

As mentioned, Michael Huemer has recently developed this argument for non-naturalism. It will be helpful to consider what he has to say. He begins by observing that the historical record exhibits a clear trend of moral convergence. Over the course of centuries, many societies worldwide have been moving towards a set of broadly liberal values. This, he then claims, supports his intuitionist non-naturalism: moral agreement is best explained by more and more people coming to “see” the true distribution of certain inherently normative non-natural properties. Competing evolutionary explanations of the kind the debunker favors, he notes, seem especially insufficient to explain the contents of our more recent moral endorsements such as anti-racism.

---

279 Cf. Van Roojen 2015, §3.1.
280 Parfit 2011, ch.34.
281 Street 2006, 115. For a recent overview of empirical literature on ethical (dis)agreement see Sauer (2018, 110-7).
282 Though see Sauer (2019) and Hopster (2020) for a different perspective.
283 Huemer 2016.
Huemer thinks there’s no good explanation for such general insights such as ‘there is no morally relevant difference between individuals within and outside our tribe’ other than an appeal to a deep-seated moral intuition about mind-independent truths.

But no debunker will deny that values that are of relatively recent origins are beyond the scope of evolutionary explanations. What matters is whether they can adequately be explained without positing the existence of mind-independent moral facts. Many metaethicists, for example, maintain that moral norms and values are typically functional. Now, if moral norms are functionally beneficial, and thus fitness-enhancing, then we should expect that in different societies, under similar conditions, these codes will typically evolve along convergent trajectories. So our baseline expectation should be moral convergence. It’s existence, then, is not evidence for non-naturalism, since it hardly rules out alternative hypotheses. The observation is not one we are more likely to see if the hypothesis is true than if it is false.

Furthermore, as Jeroen Hopster has shown, there’s a clear account of reasoning-induced moral change without appealing to intuitions about mind-independent moral truths: such change comes about through consistency reasoning. Dialogical appeals to consistency have served as an important engine of progressive moral change and as important drivers of moral agreement. For instance, the demand to apply the same norms and privileges consistently to different people, irrespectively of gender, race or sexual orientation, has been a key argument in modern emancipatory struggles. Striving for consistency is an aim that moral reasoners are typically unwilling to give up. This explains the insights Huemer was impressed by without positing ontologically basic moral facts. And it has nothing to do with non-natural properties.

In fact, if we, like Huemer does, assume that discovering moral truths is akin to discovering non-obvious scientific or mathematical truths, we would expect to find, throughout the course of history, small groups of moral experts who defend and debate non-obvious moral claims. But this is not what we actually find. The historical protagonists of moral change were not typically individuals solving moral conundrums, but interest groups pushing to be given their due. Moreover – related to the overall theme of this chapter – if moral facts exist independently of the intuitions of moral reformers and do not causally influence these intuitions, it remains unclear how these

---

284 Three examples. Gibbard (1990) argues that moral norms serve the function of coordinating our actions so that they comply with adaptive rules of conduct. Copp (2008) claims that morality has the function of enabling a society to meet its needs. Kitcher (2011) holds that moral norms serve the function of solving ‘altruism problems’ and fostering social cooperation.


reformers could have reliably tracked moral truths and how other people know that the intuitions of moral reformers are in fact reliable.

Given that, and given the mentioned naturalistic explanation of moral convergence, there’s no reason to think the existence of moral convergence can be marshalled into an argument for the truth of Robust Realism.

On to the second piece of evidence: the phenomenology of moral intuitions. Here, non-naturalists deny that, as Street claims, they don’t have a positive epistemology. Realists’ accounts of how moral believers track moral properties typically do not rely on causal relations between moral properties and moral beliefs in the first place. Whether we believe that stealing is wrong, for instance, because of some Darwinian force, or because of our upbringing, or because of some other causal factor, realists claim they can hold on to the claim that the belief is non-accidentally true because debunkers have not ruled out their non-causal accounts of reliable access to its truth. How do realists defend the claim that our moral beliefs are likely to track realist moral properties? They might claim, for instance, that moral beliefs are reliably formed through rational intuition or direct perception, or that there is a constitutive relation between moral properties and moral beliefs, or that divine revelation plays a role in shaping our moral beliefs. Most often, however, they appeal to an intuitive sense of plausibility that attaches to normative claims such as “survival is good” and “pain is bad”. These statements appear to have a certain intrinsic credibility. What explains this?

A common thread in the writings of many robust normative realists is that the truth of moral realism is obvious and that attempts to reduce ethical properties to something else fail.287 According to this sentiment, we need to hold that irreducible normative properties exist in order to make sense of the fact that some things really are morally obligatory, and some things really are morally wrong. Objective ethical facts are among the data that need explaining, and reductionism fails, so we need to posit ethical properties. Consider how, reminiscent of H.A. Prichard,288 Shafer-Landau presents this justification of our beliefs in realist moral properties:

True, there are skeptics about the external world, and some of them are brilliant and capable of avoiding any logical traps we set. There is nothing we can do but beg a fundamental question against such people … I think a perfectly parallel case can be made on behalf of our confidence in the existence of moral facts. The atrocious immorality of certain actions just impresses itself upon us in a way that makes the abandonment of such a conviction completely untenable … This general commitment to moral facts unifies our moral beliefs and

288 Pritchard 1912.
experiences in just the way that an underlying commitment to the existence of an external world unifies our empirical beliefs.289

Because some moral beliefs strike us as plausible, they enjoy antecedent justification. The realist thus appeals to a principle of epistemic conservatism: if it seems to one that \( p \), then one has at least prima facie justification for believing that \( p \). Building on the point about intrinsic plausibility and epistemic conservatism, Michael Huemer and Philip Stratton-Lake take moral intuitions to be intellectual seemings: non-inferential, non-doxastic mental states that result from thinking about certain moral propositions.290 For instance, it might seem true to you that enjoyment is better than suffering, that it is unjust to punish a person for a crime she did not commit, or that it is morally impermissible to kill one healthy patient to save the lives of five terminally ill patients in need of organ transplants. Our moral intuitions seem to point us toward mind-independent moral facts. The best explanation for that is that there are such facts.

However, the phenomenological aspect of the intrinsic plausibility that attaches to some moral propositions does not license that abductive inference. This is because the reason we ‘feel’ that some moral claims are attitude-independently true has nothing to do with ontologically basic, *sui generis* non-natural moral facts. Evolution would have made us find certain beliefs intrinsically credible, even if they were false. Because of this, the debunker argues we do not know that intrinsic credibility is a guide to truth. An appeal to the apparent plausibility of these claims is therefore illicitly question-begging in the context of an argument undermines the claim that those seemings provide information about the patterning of some *sui generis* non-natural properties.291 Hence we cannot justify believing in them by appealing to them. Evolutionary theory shows that non-natural moral facts aren’t located in the right place in the explanatory history of our moral evidence to license that inference. In short: one cannot reason from humanity’s feelings about moral objectivity to the existence of extra metaphysics beyond the way of the world.

The non-naturalist is likely to respond that our intuitions do vindicate the properties intuited, but not because the intuited non-natural properties causally explain the intuitions. The vindication of our objective intuitions is an *alternative* to the explanatory criterion, not something that’s supposed to survive its application. I don’t think the robust non-naturalist can shrug off the burden-shift of my argument like this. Perhaps the quietist (see chapter 4 for discussion) can reply along the lines of ‘Normative ontology is not like the Higgs particle. Claims that such entities exist must

---

289 Shafer-Landau 2007, 327, my emphasis.
291 Vavova 2015, 110.
stand up against epistemic norms that apply when we consider whether a hypothesis is justified by the evidence. But whether normative ontology exists is not something we know by inference to a substantive explanation of some data.’ But if one claims that moral facts exist in the same sense as physical facts and are as ‘ontologically respectable’ as them, one must deliver the goods and this reply is not an option. The Robust Realist has the harder task of demonstrating that intuitions about morality are somehow capable of providing evidence for the truth of claims about robustly existing non-natural properties. If there’s nothing more to be said here, then what could it mean when they claim that “in whatever sense there are physical facts, there are normative ones; in whatever sense there are truths in biology, there are in normative discourse”? Physical facts exist inside the causal order and (need to) pass Harman’s test. Normative facts, the non-naturalist claims, don’t. That seems to me a very pertinent disanalogy. So the realist needs to explain what she means by existing ‘in the same sense’. As we’ve seen, Robust Realism explains what moral judgments are about, and explains their truth conditions, by postulating non-natural moral properties. I claim that a belief in the existence of any such properties requires having evidence for their instantiation.

This is compatible with the common-sensical thought that evidence for wrongness claims can be facts about pain and suffering. It is only a particular conception of what it is for an act to be wrong – to instantiate a certain non-natural property – that I’m attacking here. The issue not now primarily that non-natural, intrinsically normative properties are weird. The main problem is that the non-naturalist cannot deliver a justification of her ontological commitment to them which is closely tied to the truth of existence-claims about them. There is a certain way the cosmos must be in order for Robust Realism to be true. It must contain the non-natural properties the theory uses to explain the truth conditions and semantics of moral judgments. But none of the considerations the non-naturalist has put forward to support her existence-claims about these properties gives us any reason to believe that the universe actually is like that.

Similar remarks, by the way, apply to the previous point about moral convergence. Humankind’s shared evolutionary history and consequential relative neurological and psychological similarity warrants the prediction that we’d hold certain moral beliefs with great confidence. It also explains why they seem true and much more plausible than any argument to the effect that our beliefs in attitude-independent normative facts are epistemically unjustified. This undermines the claim that widespread endorsement of these beliefs is a phenomenon we could only make sense of by postulating non-natural ontology.

---

292 Enoch 2011, 5.
There’s another element to the phenomenological experience of substantive ethics that’s relevant here. In the words of Michael Ruse: it’s “not just that we feel that we ought to do the right and proper thing, but that we feel that we ought to do the right and proper thing because it truly is the right and proper thing.” 293 As Ruse points out and is generally acknowledged, moral demands seem to have an external authority and are known to give rise to strong feelings of obligation. Indeed, normally people reason as if moral objectivism is correct. And non-naturalists often argue that their view offers the most straightforward way of making sense of this. 294 That may be so, but what matters is not whether non-naturalism is the simplest explanation of some datum, but whether it’s the overall best.

Ruse, for one, argues it’s not. He contends that it has been evolutionarily beneficial for our ancestors to think that morality has mind-independent foundations, but in fact no such foundations exist. Or at least postulating the existence of ontologically basic moral facts is explanatorily redundant, since we can also explain our objectivist commitments as an evolutionary adaptation. Indeed, evolutionary psychologists have recently come up with fairly fine-grained hypotheses about the evolutionary function of moral objectivism, suggesting that perceiving moral judgments as universal may be functional in more intricate ways than Ruse himself proposed. 295 Very roughly, presenting moral demands as objective may serve a signaling function: objectifying a moral issue serves as a public signal that one is willing to stand one’s ground with regard to this issue. Objectifying moral issues typically serves to signal that agents care about an issue and are not easily prepared to change their minds about it. In doing so they give others a choice: on this issue you’re either with me, or against me. Hence, presenting moral issues as objective may be an effective means to form moral alliances and to enhance in-group cohesion. It should be clear that this explanation of the perceived objectivity of moral judgments entails that this feature of moral judgments does not support non-naturalism. The claim that objectivist features of moral discourse provide abductive support for non-naturalism is therefore untenable.

Relatedly, non-naturalists sometimes claim that one’s confidence in fundamental moral intuitions must be far more robust than one’s confidence in any obscure philosophical argument. 296 We have certain fundamental intuitions (about universal moral truth, among other things) that cannot be analyzed except in terms of other intuitions that we seem more rudimentary. We build

293 Ruse 2010, 309
295 DeScioli & Kurzban 2013; Stanford 2018. It should be clear that assessing these accounts is beyond the scope of this thesis.
296 Huemer (2005, 116-7) is one example.
our knowledge on these intuitions: they themselves don’t stand in need of justification but determine what we deem acceptable and even intelligible in every stage of inquiry.

The reply is straightforward. The EDA has the strength to overturn this comparison, by presenting evidence to account for those fundamental intuitions about moral universalizability—which can account even for their persuasive-felt quality—that is compatible with there being no such thing as mind-independent, ontologically basic normative facts.

Let me, in closing of this section, say why I think the project of gathering abductive reasons for beliefs in non-natural facts has a low chance of success. Evidence for our belief in non-natural moral facts might likely, eventually, always be defeated. As we’ll always have the ‘evidence’ that those facts obtain for reasons that do not actually allow us to infer those facts obtain. That is, non-moral explanations can be given of our moral evidence and these explanations don’t allow one to infer the truth of any proposition about a non-natural moral fact:

Evolutionary biologists have shown that forces of natural selection suffice to explain why we have the moral concepts that we have, and why we apply them in (roughly) the way that we do … We can [thus] give an evolutionary explanation of all of our evidence in favor of any of our moral beliefs. The fact that moral beliefs seem so intuitive, that most people can’t bring themselves to violate moral norms without significant distress, the fact that moral beliefs are so widely shared throughout society—all of these can and have received Darwinian explanations. … [So] we learn that moral claims seem true not because they are true but for some other reason. This reasoning only applies when the moral facts in question are non-natural. 297

This explanation is supported by empirical evidence in favor of naturalistic explanations of our moral beliefs: evolutionary explanations of our moral faculties can be given. And the existence of non-natural moral facts cannot be inferred from any of the natural facts in the naturalistic explanation of our moral beliefs. Over and above emphasizing the lack of a causal connection, this naturalistic explanation then also shows that non-natural moral facts don’t seem to be located in the right place in the explanatory history of our moral evidence. It thus undercuts the evidential relation we take there to be between the intrinsic credibility of, and widespread agreement about, (for example) the goodness of survival.

297 Lutz 2018, 1111.
3.2.2.2 Upshot of Premise 2: Shifting the Burden (of Proof)

As we’ve seen, the second premise of the best evolutionary explanation argument moral non-naturalism makes defeat conditional on the robust moral realist’s inability to provide additional, non-explanatory reason for belief in robustly existing, ontologically fundamental, non-natural moral facts. The point is simply that there’s nothing that justifies the leap from any piece of evidence – moral appearances, intuitions about intrinsic plausibility and universalizability, moral convergence, and so on – to the existence of a non-natural realm.

Where does that leave us?

Note, to begin, that we’re now approaching the epistemological challenge to robust realism from the intimate connection between explanatory dispensability and defeat. This means we’re in a different context than when we ask for an explanation of a striking correlation. Accordingly, the dynamics of question-beggingness change.\(^\text{298}\) In the context of explaining a correlation between our normative beliefs and the normative truths, it is arguably allowed to assume certain normative facts that, in turn, help to explain why beliefs about those facts are not merely coincidentally correct. However, the argument from explanatory dispensability doesn’t for the explanation a correlation. The point at issue now is whether we have any justified beliefs about non-natural normative facts. This change of context changes what would (not) be a question-begging response and what one is allowed to assume. Specifically, in responding to an argument that relies on a principle that for our beliefs to be justified, they must be best explained by the facts they are about, one cannot presuppose that one particular belief is justified even if it is not so explained.

Similarly, the non-naturalist can’t respond that she isn’t trying to provide an independent account of how our moral beliefs are justified, but is only providing, in response to debunking arguments, an answer to the question of how we might explain the correlation between our actual moral judgments and the mind-independent moral facts. This is because the most charitable way of understanding the force of undercutting defeat is not merely as the claim that there is no explanation of the correlation between our actual moral judgments and the (alleged) mind-independent moral facts, but instead as the claim that our lack of an explanation of the correlation between our actual moral judgments and the (alleged) mind-independent moral facts, in light of the presence of

\(^{298}\) Since question-beggingness is context-dependent property of arguments (Copp 2018). It is a relationship between the argument and the people using it. In begging the question, a statement is made that presupposes or depends upon the point at issue. What is at issue depends on how the argument is being used and to whom it is addressed.
undercutting defeat, casts rational doubt on whether there are any such mind-independent moral facts at all.299

A justified belief, if true, cannot be true by accident. What makes it justified is that it connects to the facts in the appropriate manner. If a belief is undercut, it doesn’t. Now, third-factor accounts commit themselves to the claim that they are justified to believe that, for example, “survival is good” is a non-natural fact. So they commit themselves to the claim that this belief doesn’t have a defeater. This is precisely what debunkers deny, and it is what needs to be shown (not assumed) in order to defeat the EDA. However, since third-factor replies merely assume their favorite normative assumption, the reply is dialectically suspect. It assumes exactly the kind of judgment for which the evolutionary challenge is meant to supply an undercutting defeater. Safely relying on the claim that survival is good, for example, would seemingly require already having provided an explanation for why the positive epistemic status of our judgment with that content is not undercut, but that is what the claim is meant to help accomplish! To assume that evaluative judgment, even in the face of the evolutionary challenge, is to fail to take the challenge as seriously as it should be – it is to fail to treat it as seriously threatening the justification for whatever normative assumption is proposed, when construed realistically.

As mentioned, many critics of third-factor explanations argue that they beg the question. After all, such explanations crucially depend on a moral claim such as that survival is good. Without that claim, nothing pre-establishes the harmony between moral beliefs and robustly moral facts. But, of course, the argument so far provides a potential undermining defeater for exactly such claims. Or, more precisely, the argument asks for non-explanatory reasons for robustly moral beliefs. In response, robust moral realists cannot just assume that some of their moral beliefs are true – and that this gives them such a reason to maintain their robustly moral beliefs. Doing so would be dialectically inappropriate.

Importantly, the considerations so far have only a modest upshot. They shift the argumentative burden onto robust moral realism. The burden amounts to an epistemological challenge, based on the principle that “if the truth and content of our moral beliefs is not involved in the best explanation for our possession of them, then we need additional reasons to believe them.”300 Given the lack of explanatory or evidential reasons for these beliefs, non-naturalists must provide other reasons. And if robust moral realists cannot meet the challenge by providing such

299 Cf. Dyke 2020, 2123.
300 Woods 2016, 53.
additional, non-abductive reasons, they acquire an undermining defeater for the justification of their moral beliefs.

This is not a surprising result, for most non-naturalists submit that moral beliefs can be justified even if they are not best explained by the facts that they are about or based on empirical evidence. The debunker should thus not try to get a defeater for these beliefs directly from evolutionary theory, without the additional reasons clause, as that would rule out moral justification for the non-naturalist from the start and beg the question. Rather, the considerations so far simply shift the burden on the non-naturalist to provide other reasons for believing in the existence of non-natural facts with primitive normativity. And if they fail to do so and thus cannot discharge this epistemic burden, then the justification of their moral beliefs has been defeated.

In fact, in the absence of additional, non-abductive reasons for belief in robust moral facts, the non-naturalist’s reliance on her moral beliefs is illicit, not because there is no non-question-begging explanation for the reliability of our moral beliefs, but because she has a defeater for those beliefs when understood as being about non-natural facts.

The EDA mitigates the epistemic importance of moral intuitions and moral agreement as indicators of the existence and patterns of instantiation of non-natural normative ontology. Their evidential value for beliefs in non-natural moral facts is neutralized by the presence of an undercutting defeater. The prospect for non-naturalism in shouldering the burden nonetheless look dim. There is no evidence that can be collected about the obtaining of moral facts that is not itself mediated by the very moral judgments in question: “We cannot “triangulate” on moral facts using faculties independently of our moral faculty – the very urge to try to do so is driven by intuitions that are themselves the output of the non-truth-tracking moral faculty.”

If the non-naturalist can’t help herself to a moral assumption, third-factor accounts fail to come off the ground. Perhaps such replies can succeed at the task of providing an explanation of why our moral beliefs might be reliably formed. But it seems to follow from the undercutting challenge that they are nevertheless unlikely to be reliably formed. And we shouldn’t crucially rely on our belief that P when replying to an argument that purports to show that our belief in P is defeated by certain considerations. Accordingly, third-factor theorists can’t begin with assuming that a belief in one particular non-natural normative fact has a positive epistemic status. That vindication of their beliefs in non-natural normative facts proceeds from moral beliefs for which they already possess a defeater. If the epistemological challenge turns on the presence of a defeater

---

**Joyce 2016a, 157.**
for our normative beliefs rather than on there being an unexplained correlation, then the realist can’t rely on a substantive normative belief to vindicate her normative beliefs. In responding to this (reading of the) epistemological challenge, third-factor accounts are a non-starter.

As we’ve seen, the overall question we’re asking in the perception and the moral case is one about why we should think that the causes described by our best scientific explanations would have led us to the truth in this domain. It won’t do to reply that “My judgments in this domain are true, and they’re also the ones that the causes described by our best scientific explanations led me to.” Such a reply offers no reason for thinking that the causes led us to the truth; it merely reasserts that they did. It seems to posit only a trivial explanation between moral beliefs and moral truth – an ‘explanation’ provided by the mere conjunction of the origin of those beliefs and the (origins of the) truth. The problem for non-naturalism is that it can only give such empty replies of the form “X, Y, and Z are non-natural facts and that’s also what the causes led me to believe.”

Third-factor replies aim to show it would not be so unlikely after all that our relevant moral beliefs are largely accurate. They do so by providing an explanation that appeals to some assumed moral fact, plus certain facts about the causal history of our relevant moral beliefs. But, of course, merely noting that we tend to make certain judgments, which are causally influenced by evolutionary pressures, leaves entirely open to the question of whether our normative beliefs are accurate reports of mind-independent moral laws. The appeal to an assumed moral fact, the third factor, was supposed to add something new, and to increase our confidence that those moral beliefs are reliably formed. But the non-naturalist seems to have no additional reason to endorse, e.g., ‘It is a sui generis mind-independent moral fact that survival (pleasure) is good’ then exactly those considerations than the EDA undercuts. Rather than providing a legitimate basis for the conclusion that our relevant moral beliefs are indeed largely accurate reports of the mind-independent moral facts, this means third-factor replies count as question-begging instances of bootstrapping.

Which is why, at the end of the day, third-factor accounts merely insist the causes led us to the truth without providing any reason to think so. But when these truths concern mind-independent and causally inefficacious facts, what really needs to be explained is the coincidence itself, and third-factor accounts fail to do so. They only confidently reassert that the causal forces shaped our normative judgments in ways that might have led those judgments to track certain non-natural properties. The replies simply posit whatever is required and that’s that. The assumption

---

302 Street 2016, 320.
that ‘survival is good’, for instance, smells like an auxiliary assumption devised ad hoc to account for the ‘coincidence’.

In conclusion: each of us get some initial entitlement to our beliefs, even absent a non-question-begging defense of those beliefs. However, default entitlement does not amount to indefeasible entitlement. And any assumption about non-natural moral beliefs cannot be maintained in the face of undercutting defeat.

If the non-naturalist can offer plausible non-abductive reasons for maintaining robust moral belief, she can straightforwardly discharge the argumentative burden. Phrasing the EDA as an undercutting defeater of evidential relations aims to show this the robust realist’s only option. If we understand the EDA as an undercutting defeater, its role is to undermine our beliefs in non-natural moral facts not merely by highlighting their unconnectedness, but also to mitigate the epistemic significance of pieces of explained away pieces of evidence. What it takes to (really) meet the epistemological challenge implied by the EDA, then, is showing that any beliefs about non-natural normative reality are epistemically justified despite the presence of an undercutting defeater for these beliefs (which gives us reason to think that our reasons fail to support them). For, as the previous section showed, robust moral facts really don’t figure in the best available explanation of anything – whether we’re talking about moral beliefs, moral convergence of moral intuitions. There is a complete explanation that can be given of moral judgments for which their truth or falsity is irrelevant. So, following the argument, the crucial question now becomes whether the non-naturalist can supply a non-explanatory reason for robustly moral beliefs. In the next section, I discuss the most influential proposal that tries to meet this challenge.

### 3.3.3 Premise 3: Non-Explanatory Reasons for Believing in Non-Natural Facts

In this section, my aim is to defend the third premise of the evolutionary debunking argument outlined earlier: there are no additional, non-abductive reasons for belief in robust moral facts. For even non-natural facts don’t play an explanatory role or can be inferred from moral convergence or moral seemings, one might think, that doesn’t jeopardize their ontological respectability. The kind of justification that purportedly justifies ontological commitment need not be explanatory.\(^{303}\) Perhaps we have independent reasons to think normative additions to our ontology justified. If so, it’s not yet settled whether we lack justification to believe that robust moral properties exist.

---

\(^{303}\) Enoch 2011, 50.
David Enoch has developed an influential response to the explanatory challenge, exploiting the thought that non-explanatory projects might vindicate ontological commitment too. He suggests that irreducible normative properties are deliberatively – as opposed to explanatorily – indispensable: robust moral facts, despite not figuring in our best scientific explanations, are indispensable to practical deliberation. And that, his thought goes, gives us non-abductive reason to believe in their existence. If that was indeed correct, the third premise would be false. However, as I shall argue, Enoch’s appeal to deliberative indispensability turns out to lack bite.

According to Enoch, our inventory of what exists must contain inherently normative items for us to sensibly engage in practical deliberation and decide what to do. He notes that the deliberative project is rationally non-optional for us, and we commit ourselves to the existence of irreducible normative facts when engaging in it. And then proposes that deliberative indispensability is an independent, equally legitimate guide to ontology, alongside explanatory indispensability. Insisting that this purported deliberative indispensability of normative-properties-we-can-discover suffices to support their inclusion in our ontology, even if they are not necessary for the explanation of any observable phenomena. This argument thus has two prongs:

- Deliberative indispensability and explanatory indispensability are on a par when it comes to being a respectable guide to what there is.
- Due to their deliberative indispensability, irreducibly normative facts deserve admission into our ontology, even if they are explanatorily useless.

Enoch’s proposal is that getting precise about why explanatory indispensability is relevant to ontology will show us that the explanatory requirement is too restrictive. In general, indispensability arguments attempt to convince us to accept a particular claim because doing so is indispensable for some project. It is such an indispensability to the explanatory project that supports our belief in the existence of electrons. On Enoch’s construal, we accept that electrons exist because our best explanations of numerous phenomena invoke electrons, and would become impoverished without such appeals. Now, besides the explanatory project, there are, Enoch argues, other projects that can support ontological commitments. In particular, he suggests, the deliberative project—the project of working out what makes most sense to do—is another

---

304 Enoch 2011, ch.3; 2016.
305 There are some other proposals of this sort, which I cannot address here for reasons of space. Shafer-Landau (2007, 323) argues that the ‘job’ of moral facts is not to “explain non-normative phenomena but rather to specify ideals, or standards that in some way must be met.” Sober (2009, 141) similarly suggests that normative ethical propositions have the job of telling us how we ought to act, not of explaining why we in fact act as we do”. See Joyce (2016b, 134) for criticism.
intrinsically indispensable project. Therefore, the explanatory project and the deliberative project are on a par in the sense that thinkers are justified in holding those beliefs and employing those rules of inference that are indispensable for successfully carrying out either one of these projects.

Enoch further argues that belief in the existence of normative truths is indispensable to the deliberative project. When we ponder the multiple courses of action we might pursue, we often proceed as if there are right answers to questions about which choices are most favored by the reasons we have.\textsuperscript{306} We need normative facts because we need reference to them in order to make sense of this. It does not feel as if we are creating these answers. Instead, it feels like we are trying to discover the correct answers. And, Enoch argues, only irreducibly normative facts seem capable of supporting such answers, since mere natural facts seem “just too different” from normative facts, with their prescriptive character.\textsuperscript{307} Therefore, when we deliberate, we commit ourselves to the existence of attitude-independent, irreducibly normative facts.

First, it seems to me there’s a gap in Enoch’s argument. The idea that standards of deliberation about what to do are inescapable doesn’t support adding substantial non-natural normative facts to our ontology. This is because these standards can be understood meta-ethically neutrally. It seems that even if everything Enoch says about indispensability is true, all he has shown is that we need normative reasons in deliberation. Considerations that \textit{for us}, individually, make it the case that when deliberating there are correct answers to the normative questions we ask ourselves. Anyone who is clear about what her normative principles are and why she holds them can deliberate about what to do, whether affirmations about these principles are to be understood as claims about a timeless normative reality, or as expressions of taste or values, or as emotional commitments, or as universally prescribed imperatives, or anything else.\textsuperscript{308} In short, that we all \textit{need} standards of deliberation that work for us, doesn’t show there \textit{are} attitude-independent ones. Enoch’s point about the \textit{structure} of deliberation doesn’t support his thesis about its \textit{content} (that it must include beliefs about non-natural normative ontology). The phenomenology of deliberation isn’t rich enough to license the inference to the existence of \textit{robustly} normative reasons. Rather, the phenomenology of deliberation seems to support the existence of normative reasons \textit{simpliciter}. That is, the phenomenology of deliberation (unlike the one of arbitrary picking) seems to commit us to the existence of normative reasons – but doesn’t put any further constraints on their nature.

\textsuperscript{306} Enoch 2011, 71-5.
\textsuperscript{307} Enoch 2011, 100-9.
\textsuperscript{308} See also Cohen 2008, 257.
A second worry is that while epistemic justification is closely tied to truth, being indispensable to deliberation is not, in part because deliberation is a non-epistemic project. So deliberative indispensability might not suffice to yield epistemic justification. After presenting his argument, Enoch challenges those who feel so inclined to point to a relevant asymmetry between explanation and deliberation that shows why explanatory indispensability, but not deliberative indispensability, is a legitimate guide to ontology. Here’s one: if some entity figures in the best explanation of something, you may infer there’s ‘something there’, ‘doing the causing’, as it were. There’s no such similar inference available for deliberative indispensability: it is possible for one to be committed in deliberation to things that do not exist. For example, most philosophers think it’s at least coherent to doubt the existence of libertarian free will even for those who think it is deliberatively indispensable. With respect to being an independent guide to what there is, then, commitments of deliberation do not function the same way as commitments of explanations. As David Plunkett and Tristram McPherson point out, deliberative indispensability, construed as a pragmatic vindication of the basic sources of epistemic justification, conflicts with a distinctive feature of epistemic justification, namely its truth-directedness. That feature states that “the sources of basic epistemic justification have the content that they do (in part) because of some positive connection between those sources and the truth of the beliefs that they govern.” Deliberative indispensability violates this constraint because “…the fact that the belief that p is indispensable to our deliberative projects bears no positive relationship to the truth of p.” So, it looks like Enoch’s pragmatic vindication fails to capture a distinctive feature of epistemic justification. Therefore, Enoch’s argument fails to establish deliberative indispensability as a basic source of epistemic justification.

309 McPherson and Plunkett 2015; Cline 2016.
310 McPherson and Plunkett 2015.
311 Ibid., 114.
312 Ibid., 121.
3.4 CONCLUSION AND LOOK AHEAD

In this chapter, I offered a structured defense of an evolutionary debunking argument inspired by the epistemic principle that, for our beliefs to be justified, they must be best explained by the facts they are about. According to the more specific argument, since non-natural moral facts are dispensable to the best explanation of non-natural moral beliefs and there are no additional, non-abductive reasons to maintain them, beliefs in non-natural moral facts – or: ‘external’, mind-independent correctness conditions on our morality – lose their justification.

I’ve argued that the EDA is not primarily epistemically troublesome because it highlights an unexplained correlation. Rather, it is epistemically troublesome because it shows that the assumptions third-factor accounts rely on for their very possibility cannot be rationally maintained. Moral judgments might be epistemologically undermined on the grounds that they can be explained entirely without invoking their truth—i.e., without invoking any moral facts which they represent. And evolution explains away the evidence in favor of propositions about non-natural moral facts. It’s true that certain moral claims seem true to us and are supported by a broad social consensus. But while we may be prima facie justified in having these moral beliefs, once we learn about their evolutionary history, we are no longer justified in believing them. Therefore, third-factor accounts cannot rationally maintain their assumptions in light of complete Darwinian explanation of why they seem plausible. If third-factor accounts are the only available response for the Robust Realist to the epistemological challenge, the view is incompatible with us having justified beliefs about morality. So, at the end of the day, we get a defeater for our moral beliefs.
insofar as they are about non-natural facts, and some evidence that – if we, you and me, know what’s right and wrong – our moral beliefs are not about non-natural facts after all.

In the previous chapter, we saw how there are numerous serious explanatory deficiencies of the metaphysical theory of moral non-naturalism. By standard criteria for assessing theories, we ought to reject it and not believe that its postulates – such as non-natural moral facts – obtain. In this chapter, I argued that non-naturalism can’t escape the epistemic challenges it famously faces. If there are non-natural, ontologically basic moral laws, we could not know what they were.

In the next chapter, we turn to a program that, like me, thinks robust non-natural moral facts are metaphysically suspect. So to make non-natural normative facts less metaphysically suspect, these people claim these facts are non-metaphysical, and exist ‘non-ontologically’.

Why, that doesn’t sound metaphysically suspect at all.
In recent years, some philosophers have developed an ontologically lightweight version of moral non-naturalism. They accept the difficulties plaguing metaphysically inflated accounts of moral truths, some of which I outlined in the two previous chapters. And so seek to secure the benefits of traditional non-naturalism – the mind-independence, objectivity and necessity, or, together, the significance, of normative truths – while avoiding metaphysical costs in doing so.

As the eschewing of metaphysical commitments is its most distinctive characteristic, the approach has variously been labeled “irrealism” or “non-realism” by its proponents and “quietism” by its critics. Derek Parfit, in his latest work, settled for the label ‘Non-Realist Cognitivism’. I will use this newest label. While the details of their accounts vary, defenders of this view that are typically grouped together include Derek Parfit,\textsuperscript{313} Tim Scanlon,\textsuperscript{314} John Skorupski,\textsuperscript{315} Matt Kramer,\textsuperscript{316} Ronald Dworkin,\textsuperscript{317} and, sometimes, Thomas Nagel.\textsuperscript{318}

This chapter discusses their program. I first explain the general view. In section 4.2, I consider some arguments that have been made in favor of it. I argue they don’t lend much support to the view. In their attempt to secure mind-independent correctness conditions without metaphysical commitment, Non-Realists disagree among themselves about what, in the absence of ontology, settles truth values of normative statements. I discuss the framework defended by Scanlon and Skorupski in section 4.3. I argue it doesn’t have the resources to break the reasons-schmeasons symmetry and therefore doesn’t succeed in procuring mind-independent correctness conditions. It therefore fails to do the explanatory work that seemed to call for an ontologically robust non-naturalism. I evaluate Parfit’s proposal in section 4.4. I argue it cannot make sense of what normative truth consists in. It therefore also fails to do the explanatory work that seemed to call for an ontologically robust non-naturalism.

\textsuperscript{313} Parfit 2011, vol.1, vol.2; Parfit 2017.
\textsuperscript{314} Scanlon 2014.
\textsuperscript{315} Skorupski 2010.
\textsuperscript{316} Kramer 2009.
\textsuperscript{317} Dworkin 2011.
\textsuperscript{318} Nagel 1986.
4.1 WHAT IS NON-REALIST COGNITIVISM?

Like Robust Realism discussed in Chapter 2, Non-Realist Cognitivism endorses Bridge-Law Non-Naturalism (see section 2.3.1). On this view, recall, particular ethical facts obtain in virtue of more general ethical facts together with pertinent non-ethical facts. “Whenever a particular action A possesses a normative property F, this fact is grounded in the fact that A satisfies some non-normative condition φ, together with a general law to the effect that whatever φs is F.” Any token moral fact of the form [A has M] obtains, is fully grounded in the combination of (i) a general moral principle specifying a connection between M and some set of non-moral properties or relations and (ii) various particular facts about the instantiation of those non-moral properties or relations.

A distinction worth repeating here is the one between pure and impure moral laws. Impure moral laws are partly grounded in non-normative facts. For example, a moral law specifying that humiliating people is wrong, would be grounded in part in contingent facts of human physiology, and in part in a more fundamental law to the effect that it’s wrong to disrespect sentient beings. In a sense, then, the moral law against humiliating people depends on contingent natural facts (about canine physiology). Pure moral laws, in contrast to their impure counterparts, are moral laws that are independent of natural facts. The non-naturalist may, for example, suggest that whatever the natural facts would have been, for example, it would have been wrong to hurt sentient beings for fun.

Another element of this view is that there’s, at the bottom of the grounding chain, an elite set of metaphysically necessary true moral laws that are the ungrounded normative facts upon which all the other normative facts rest. Because as we ask what grounds the moral laws, ‘deeper’ laws will figure at every step. The regress could conceivably be infinite. But more likely is that it will terminate in fundamental laws: the supreme principles of normativity. On the non-naturalist picture, there is thus an elite set of metaphysically necessary true moral laws that are the ungrounded normative facts upon which all the other normative facts rest. Such fundamental normative principles are metaphysically prior to particular normative facts and help to ground them.

Now, the novel move made by Non-Realist Cognitivism is to insist that pure normative principles (including the fundamental ones) have no ontological status. The Non-Realists’ distinctive

319 Perhaps with the exception of Scanlon, see section 4.3.5.
320 Rosen 2017c, 138. See also Maguire (2015, 194).
claim is that pure normative facts take the form of non-ontological truths that carry no ontological commitment but are nevertheless true in the strongest sense. The attempt is thus to do the sort of explanatory work that seemed to call for an ontologically committal non-naturalism without being committed to moral ontology.

To see how this might be done, the easiest way in is to begin by noting that this program is still a species of cognitivism: it holds that normative judgments are beliefs with the mind-to-world direction of fit. As it’s not a form of nihilism, it insists that some normative beliefs are true. So far so good.

Next, it generally subscribes to, as Scanlon calls it, Reasons Fundamentalism. This is the claim that facts about reasons “are not reducible to or identifiable with non-normative truths, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects”. As Scanlon makes plain, this claim of irreducibility is not a claim about words or concepts. It is a claim about the reason relation, the purported non-ontologically existing feature we talk about when we talk about reasons. The Fundamentalist’s key claim is that there is no way to say in more fundamental terms what it is for a fact to be a reason for \( X \) to do \( A \), in the sense in which there is a way to say in more fundamental terms what it is for a stone to have a certain density, or for a table to be made of wood.

As Fundamentalists, Non-Realist Cognitivists claim that normative propositions and their constituent normative concepts are irreducible and of their own unique kind. This means the purely normative concept of a reason cannot be helpfully explained in other terms. In recent metanormative debate, it has become increasingly common to take the concept of a reason as primitive. Thus, Non-Realist Cognitivists are not alone in observing that any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favour of it. “Counts in favour how?” one might ask. “By providing a reason for it” seems to be the only answer.

Fourthly, on this popular view of the structure of the normative domain, reasons – the kinds of entities that count in favor – are facts. Facts that are reasons count in favor of agents performing some actions or taking up some attitudes. For example, the fact that someone did me a favor is

\[ \text{321 Scanlon 2014, 2.} \]

\[ \text{322 Scanlon 2014, 2.} \]

\[ \text{323 To be clear, there seems to be nothing in commitments of Non-Realist Cognitivism that says it necessarily endorses Reasons Fundamentalism.} \]

\[ \text{324 Parfit 2011, vol. 2, 266; Parfit 2017, 19-21.} \]

\[ \text{325 Parfit 2011, vol. 1, 31.} \]

\[ \text{326 See Olson (2009), Väyrynen (2011), and Wedgwood (2015) for doubts about the fruitfulness of this trend.} \]

\[ \text{327 As Scanlon (1998, 17) did in this oft-quoted passage.} \]
reason for me to express my gratitude. The fact that eating food usually fills my stomach is a reason for me to believe that my feelings of hunger will soon decrease after I’ve finished this sandwich.\footnote{Parfit 2011, vol. 2, 486-7; 2017, 14-5; Scanlon 2014, 2; Skorupski 2010, 1-2.}

Fifthly, according to Non-Realist Cognitivism, the reason-relation is not a worldly, robust normative-reason relation, but a non-ontological one. For pure normative principles to meet their truth conditions, we do not need to ‘add anything to our ontology’. This distinguishes the view from Robust Non-Naturalism. According to that view, by contrast, one part of the fact that [we have reasons to avoid future agony] is a robust, worldly normative reason-relation between future agony and attempts to avoid it. Non-Realist Cognitivism rejects metaphysical non-naturalism because it denies that the true irreducible normative propositions need to be made true by any part of reality.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 100.}

For example, accepting the proposition \(<\text{WE HAVE REASONS TO AVOID FUTURE AGONY}>\) as true, and thereby accepting that ‘there are’ true pure normative principles, or that some facts ‘have the property’ of being a reason, can be done without adding any sort of ontologically weighty non-natural property to future agony. In general, normative truths have no ontological implications that are also normative. For such claims to be true these reason-involving properties need not exist either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-natural part of reality. Therefore, while these truths might raise perennial issues, these questions are not about what exists.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 58-9, 114-6; Skorupski 2010, 499-501.}

Indeed, in opposition to Robust Non-Naturalism, Non-Realist Cognitivism is claimed to be compatible with metaphysical naturalism. Nothing needs to be added the natural world for objective reasons to exist, and for positive claims or propositions essentially involving normative concepts like \(<\text{WE HAVE REASONS TO AVOID FUTURE AGONY}>\) to be true.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 58-9, 114-6; Skorupski 2010, 499-501.}

But doesn’t that proposition state a non-natural fact? Yes, but Non-Realist Cognitivism insists that we needn’t think of such facts ‘realistically’ – i.e., involving metaphysical commitment. What is a ‘non-real’ fact? Just what is stated by a true proposition. There are propositions essentially involving irreducibly normative concepts. When these are true, they state non-natural facts. Such
truths do not have normative truthmakers. Nor any other normative-metaphysical grounds. *Truths stated by true propositions involving an irreducibly normative concept are non-real, non-natural facts.*

Normative beliefs, accordingly, aren’t about ontologically weighty properties. Nor are properties like goodness and badness ontologically weighty properties. They are merely used to make true claims about something when this proposition involves an irreducibly normative concept.332 As Stefan Fischer puts this point: “[On Non-Realist Cognitivism], The ontology of the normative is an entirely conceptual matter. Ontology becomes linguistics … Normative facts [are just] true normative thoughts.”333 So on Non-Realist Cognitivism, there are true normative statements, but their truth implies no ontological commitments, and their normativity consists in irreducibly normative concepts.

Moving on – the sixth key thesis of Non-Realist Cognitivism is that while pure normative principles have no ontological implications, they are nevertheless “in the strongest sense true.”334 This rather vague locution by Parfit seems to mean, as Scanlon for example writes, that they are (i) objective, (ii) mind-independent and (iii) have a robust modal status.335 For now, it’s important to note that the claim is: normative truths need no special metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them.336 And thus, even though these truths have no ontological implications, Parfit claims:

> Since these truths are necessary, they do not have to be made true by there being some part of reality to which they correspond. This dependence goes the other way. It is reality that must correspond to these truths.337

In summary: according to Non-Realist Cognitivism, normative judgments are beliefs, some of which are true. The normative concepts that are a part of the propositions that are the contents of normative beliefs are irreducible and of their own unique kind. Normative truths don’t have,

---

332 Concepts about which especially Parfit says less than we might have hoped. Whereas authors like Blackburn, Gibbard, Street and Railton have tried to come up with answers to question such as what being a reason consists in, Parfit (2017, 208) thinks there’s no informative answer to this question. In similar quietist vein, albeit in a different context, Parfit (2011, vol.2, 476–9) also suggests that there might be no determinate answer to the questions of whether abstract objects exist at all.


334 Parfit 2011, vol.2, 486. Copp (2018) treats this passage as an anomaly, and instead suggests a minimal interpretation of truth instead for what he calls “avant-garde non-naturalism”. While I agree that it’s unclear what Parfit means here, I don’t think it’s out of tune. In discussing his (dis)agreements with Gibbard, Parfit (2017, ch.46), while rejecting the correspondence theory of truth, explicitly maintains that normative truths are true in a deeper, more robust sense than the minimalist sense. A deflationary account of normative truths, secondly, seems out of rhythm with Parfit’s claim that reality depends on them.

335 Scanlon 2014, 40.

336 Scanlon 2014, 52.

337 Parfit 2011, vol.2, 749; 2017, 59. Which, if any, theory of truth is compatible this non-realism-plus-strong-objectivity package is a question without a clear answer and at the center of the objection I’ll raise in section 4.4.
and don’t need, normative truthmakers. Moreover, they are true ‘in the strongest sense’. Yet, they have no ontological implications that are also normative.

In the next section I discuss some arguments in favor of this position.

4.2 THE APPEAL OF NON-REALIST COGNITIVISM

In this section, I discuss arguments in favor of Non-Realist Cognitivism.

4.2.1 A Reply to the Queerness Objection

Sometimes, when a meta-ethical view is committed to Reasons Fundamentalism, it is thereby treated as incompatible with metaphysical naturalism. The rationale for that treatment is this: the reasons relation that figures in propositions essentially involving irreducible normative concepts cannot be defined in more basic terms and is in that sense fundamental. So whereas Robust Realism postulates *sui generis* properties, Non-Realism relies on a *sui generis* relation of *being a reason for* and so the view is equally non-naturalist.\(^{338}\) To demarcate their view from Robust Realism, Non-Realist Cognitivists insist that their *meta-ethical* ‘non-naturalism’ doesn’t flout any principle of *metaphysical* naturalism. Attempts to, with respect to queerness or proliferating *sui generis* non-natural whatnots,\(^ {339}\) put their view on a par with Robust Realism arise from a false, *reifying*, conception of what the irreducibly normative reasons relation is.\(^ {340}\) Or so they claim.

According to me, this is a plausible rebuttal. At least for the sake of argument, we should not set things up in such a way that holding on to the idea that there are answers to moral questions and that they are not reducible to anything else automatically commits one to non-natural whatnots that are equally metaphysically suspicious as ontologically robust moral properties. Maybe, in the end, it will turn out Non-Realists cannot coherently drive this wedge between metaphysical and meta-ethical non-naturalism, but we should not discard their attempts from the get-go.

In fact, a hallmark feature of the program is that actually, *because* pure normative principles incur no metaphysical costs, they are not metaphysically queer. One of its claimed pros is that it gets around Mackie’s queerness argument. This is clear, for example, in the way Parfit argues against Robust Realism. *Incompatibility with the scientific worldview* is what he puts forward as his main objection against it.\(^ {341}\) Since Non-Realists, they insist, salvage mind-independent correctness conditions *without* postulating an additional normative layer to reality, their view doesn’t lose

---

\(^{338}\) For example, Dasgupta (2017, 297).

\(^{339}\) I take the expression “non-natural whatnots” from Dasgupta (2017).

\(^{340}\) Skorupski (2012, 216) puts it in these terms of ‘reification’.

plausibility points here. Non-Realism purports to have found a middle way and claims mind-independent correctness conditions without queerness-damage: since pure normative facts aren’t ‘reified’, we can reject the argument from queerness. The truth of reason-claims does not commit us to ‘queer’ normative facts ‘out there’. So non-ontological versions of non-naturalism are easier to defend because they incur no ontological burden. Normative truths do not involve any ontological mysteries, for there are no states of affairs which correspond to them.

As the reason relation is not an ontological relation – not an addition to the naturalistic worldview – there can be irreducibly normative truths and objectivity about reasons without metaphysical queerness. This is taken to be a, if not the, appeal of the Non-Realist Cognitivism package: it offers non-naturalists non-naturalism and irreducibility and naturalism cognitivism and moral truths and metaphysical naturalism. It maintains a full-blooded cognitivist view while rejecting standard normative non-naturalism and reductive naturalism, while also resisting fictionalism and error theory.

Thus: an important reason that it matters whether facts exist ontologically or non-ontologically is that facts that exist non-ontologically aren’t ‘queer’. Subsequently, Non-Realism loses less plausibility points for queerness than Robust Realism. According to its defenders, that is. So, on at least one of the three traditional objections to non-naturalism, Non-Realism claims to have made progress.

According to me, that’s a surprising claim. Normally, to say that an entity exists just is to be ontologically committed to that entity. And for good reason: it is not immediately obvious what it is for an entity to exist in a non-ontological sense. So if Non-Realists say that normative facts exist in an ontologically non-committing sense, they, at the very least, face an explanatory challenge. They owe us an explanation of their claim that normative facts exist in such a sense.\(^\text{342}\) Maybe they can meet that challenge, maybe not.\(^\text{343}\) But at the very least, ‘non-ontological existence’ seems to be an arcane, ‘queer’ notion. Its introduction doesn’t seem to, by itself, make a lot of queerness-progress.

After all, worries about queerness don’t reduce to worries about metaphysical non-naturalism. Worries about irreducible normativity need not be premised on the condition that irreducibly normative properties have causal standing or instead exist non-ontologically (Parfit) or

\(^{342}\) Cowie (2014, 661-2) makes this point too, although, as I explain in section 4.4, my interpretation of Parfit differs from his.

\(^{343}\) Cowie (2014) considers five candidate explanations and concludes that the prospects look dim.
exist relative to a domain of enquiry (Scanlon) or are objectively unreal (Skorupski).\(^3\) This is because what anti-realists and sceptics find queer is not the mode of existence of irreducible normative entities, but their very nature. It is on this basis that they reject the existence of irreducible normativity. It’s not obvious if, and in what way, non-ontological existence is less queer or plausibility-points-costly than non-natural existence. This is because the idea of non-ontological existence (yet no causal standing) doesn’t seem less obscure than the idea of non-natural existence (yet no causal standing). Merely saying that non-ontological existence is compatible with metaphysical naturalism does not seem to alleviate its mysteriousness.\(^3\) More needs to be said to clarify what it might mean to exist in a non-ontological sense. In the meantime, we have no reason to consider it less queer than ‘ontological’ non-natural existence seems.

4.2.2 A Different Partners-in-Guilt Argument

In meta-ethics, different species of non-naturalism avail themselves of interrelated companions in guilt arguments. The usual purpose is to make the audience less hostile to a commitment to non-natural whatnots by in one way or another gesturing at mathematics and logic.\(^3\) Its dialectical role is thus to remove the sting from the argument from queerness, by showing that allegedly queer features of irreducibly normative relations and facts are shared by other entities that critics of non-naturalism are reluctant to reject. If there are other non-natural phenomena besides normativity that we do think are epistemically and metaphysically respectable, then irreducible normativity might not be that queer.

It is worth noting, however, that Robust Realism and Non-Realist Cognitivism give non-identical versions of the typical companions in guilt argument. For the Robust Realist, according to which sui generis normative ontology is a bona fide ontological addition, the point is to dispel the queerness intuition that tags along automatically when one says that what exists is not (roughly) identical with what is studied by science or what is causally efficacious. As discussed in section 2.2, the upshot of this reply is thus to make the metaphysical price less high in terms of plausibility points.

The upshot of the Non-Realist’s partners in guilt story, on the other hand, is to nullify the plausibility-points costs of a commitment to irreducible normativity. They reject the robust non-

---

344 I will explain these differences between Parfit, Scanlon and Skorupski later in the chapter.

345 Especially on Scanlon’s (2017, 883-5) reading of this technical term, where the English word ‘existence’ has just the one meaning and non-ontological existence is supposed to be a different way of existing in this one sense, so it’s actually misleading to say that normative facts exist non-ontologically, one is left to wonder how exactly the introduction of this machinery was supposed to be a part of a reply to worries about metaphysical queerness.

346 This is the standard strategy, but not the only one. Cuneo (2007) offers a modus tollens argument from the existence of epistemic reasons to the existence of irreducibly normative reasons. Parfit (2011, vol.2, ch.33) can sometimes be read as offering a similar move from epistemic reasons to irreducibly normative reasons. See Rippon (2010, 85-91) for a critical assessment.
naturalist’s concessive line that irreducibly normative relations and facts are prima facie metaphysically queer but, in the end, not intolerably so. The metaphysical realist accepts that he has to answer metaphysical questions about irreducible normativity and points to partners in guilt to substantiate the answer. The non-metaphysical realist points to partners in guilt to deny that he has to give an answer: “When we are trying to form true beliefs about numbers or logical truths, we need not answer ontological questions. Though there are numbers and truths, these entities exist in a non-ontological sense.”

The argument goes as follows. Which mathematical and modal claims are true can be decided independently of which numbers or possible worlds, if any, exist. There are necessary truths in mathematics and logic. There are even truths about what could exist and happen. In these cases, according to Parfit, the relevant propositions can be necessarily true without there being any additional independently existing entities or properties such as numbers or possible worlds (analogous to how normative truths don’t require normative truthmakers). Given the similarities between normative truths and mathematical and logical truths, the normative truths do not need to be based on an independently existing layer of reality either. The similarities furthermore support the generalization that non-empirical truths – both mathematical, logical, and normative ones – do not raise difficult ontological questions.

Note that different branches of metanormative non-naturalism claim a different kind of alliance with the same partners in guilt, supporting incompatible conclusions. The same alleged similarities cannot, at the same time, be a companion in guilt for giving a particular answer and for not having to give any answer. It seems then that if one of the versions of non-naturalism can use the partners in guilt line to respond to queerness worries, the other cannot.

Sarah McGrath has presented two disanalogies between mathematics and the normative that show that the comparison between irreducibly normative properties and mathematical properties is less favorable to the quietist’s cause than is often thought.

The first one concerns the explanatory relevance of normative facts. Gilbert Harman influentially proposed we should believe in the existence of an entity only if it plays a role in the
best explanation of our observations of the empirical world. Originally, Harman’s explanatory test is put to use in the context of *morality*: since the best explanation of why we make moral judgments does not entail that there are irreducibly moral facts, Harman argues we have no reason to believe in such facts. Instead, for example, the best explanation of why we make judgments of this kind appeals to our psychologies only.

On behalf of the Non-Realist, Scanlon uses the analogy between mathematics and the normative to argue that Harman’s test does not apply in the normative domain. It therefore cannot show that we have no reason to believe in irreducibly normative facts. Like mathematical facts, normative facts don’t need to earn their keep by figuring in the best explanation of an empirical anything. As such, *even if* mind-independent normative truths fail Harman’s test, that doesn’t settle whether we can justifiably believe in their existence because the normative domain is not a natural domain.

However, as McGrath argues, there is reasonable doubt as to whether this analogy holds with respect to the explanatory relevance of mathematical facts, on the one hand, and non-ontological normative facts, on the other. Unlike non-ontological facts, mathematical facts sometimes *do* play a role in the best explanation of our observations of the empirical world. Consequently, they also play a role in the best explanation of why we make certain judgments about the empirical world. For instance, mathematical facts are an ineliminable part of the best explanation of why physical objects are arranged in a certain way. If mathematical facts do in fact play explanatory roles, the partners-in-guilt reply might be more suited to avail inflationary responses to metaphysical worries about irreducible normativity rather than deflationary ones. Because, intuitively, it seems harder to see how ‘non-ontological’ facts could ‘do’ something like that.

The second disanalogy between the mathematical domain and the normative domain concerns the perceptual accessibility of facts from these two domains. McGrath points out that we can perceive mathematical truths when instantiated by concrete particulars—something that is not possible in case of normative facts. For example, you cannot perceive that 2+2=4, but you can perceive that “the number of cookies on my son’s plate is equal to the sum of the cookies on my

355 Harman 1977. See also section 3.3.2 of this dissertation.
356 Scanlon 2014, 26. See section 3.3.5 for David Enoch’s reply on behalf of Robust Realism.
357 In this context, Nagel (1986, 144) remarks: “The claim that certain reasons exist is a normative claim, not a claim about the best causal explanation of anything.”
358 McGrath 2014, 192. See also section 3.3.2.
daughter’s plate.” Hence, if the domains of the mathematical and the normative were analogous with respect to perceptual accessibility, we would expect that we can perceive irreducibly normative truths that are instantiated by concrete particulars. So, to use Harman’s example, if hoodlums set a cat on fire, we would have to be able to perceive that they ought not do so. However, we never perceive such things. If, qua perceptual accessibility, mathematical facts behave more like ontological than like non-ontological facts, again, the partners-in-guilt reply might be less favorable to the “relaxed realist’s” – the term McGrath uses to refer to Parfit, Scanlon and Dworkin – purposes than is sometimes thought.

4.2.3 Non-Realist Cognitivism And Moral Epistemology

The Robust Realist claims: “In whatever sense there are physical facts, there are normative ones; in whatever sense there are truths in biology, there are in normative discourse.” Normative facts are facts in exactly the same sense that physical facts are facts but are not identical with any of these. Normative facts are substantial and sui generis.

The Non-Realist, by contrast, maintains that whereas physical and biological (and so forth) facts exist ontologically, normative facts exist non-ontologically. While this gives rise to its own issues, as we’ll see later, an interesting feature of introducing this new mode of existence and this new type of fact is that it has been claimed to give the Non-Realist a way out of the epistemological challenge to Robust Realism.

Non-Realism namely claims that the normative has a different epistemology in virtue of its different mode of existence. Consequentially, different epistemic norms apply to normative knowledge. Since normative and natural facts don’t exist in the same sense, there is logical space to deny that we find out about them in the same way. Which makes it possible that Non-Realist Cognitivism isn’t troubled by the same lack-of-adequate-epistemic-explanation that bedevils Robust Realism.361

Still, it’s a common idea from truthmaker theory that it’s of the nature of truth to depend. That is, according to this plausible idea from truthmaker theory, it is at least part of what it is to be a true proposition to depend upon the world.362 Because truths depend (on something), there is something that makes them true. So, whatever this different mode of existing amounts to, there’s a dilemma for Non-Realist Cognitivism. It either flouts this relatively widely held constraint on truths

359 McGrath 2014, 194.
360 Enoch 2011, 5.
361 See chapter 3 for the epistemological argument against Robust Realism.
362 Tallant and Ingram 2017, 958.
– that they depend on the way the world is, that they supervene on being – or they have to present a truthmaker for pure normative truths. In other words: either, propositions essentially involving irreducibly normative concepts are the kind of propositions one justifiably believes to be true in virtue of standing in a certain relation to the bit of reality on which the truth of the proposition depends. In that case, we want to know more about this bit of reality. Alternatively, propositions essentially involving irreducibly normative concepts are not the kind of propositions one justifiably believes to be true in virtue of standing in a certain relation to a bit of reality on which the truth of the proposition depends. In that case, we want to know how justified belief in these mind-independent, objective truths is possible.

The Non-Realist takes latter horn and insists these truths do not depend. To partly repeat a passage quoted earlier:

[Pure truths about reasons] do not have to be made true by there being some part of reality to which they correspond. This dependence goes the other way. It is reality that must correspond to these truths.363

There is a truth that things ought to be such and such, and reality ought to correspond to it. Because these truths don’t depend on reality, justified belief about them doesn’t require an explanatory connection to a bit of reality, the thought goes. Hence, it is claimed, the explanatory constraint from section 3.3 is avoided.

Even if that’s so, Non-Realist Cognitivism still owes us a story about when normative claims are warranted or when a normative belief is justified.

Here is the Non-Realist’s plan of attack for meeting this desideratum:

We should [at step one] describe our epistemic practice, the conditions which we actually think to be required for a normative claim to be warranted, and in which we consider ourselves to have normative knowledge and [then, at step two, show] we indeed do have warrant when these conditions apply.364

Consequentially, Non-Realism denies that the correspondence theory of truth applies to normative propositions. It will be instructive to elaborate on that a little bit. Because, as we’ll see later, Non-Realist Cognitivism and theories of truth make for unhappy bedfellows.

According to correspondence theories of truth, truth is a relational property. The truth of a proposition consists in there being a chunk of reality such that the proposition is in a

364 Skorupski 2010, 401 (see also 418).
correspondence relation with it. While endorsed by Robust Realism – which explains what moral judgments are about, and explains their truth conditions, by postulating robust non-natural moral properties – this theory is clearly not on the table for Non-Realist Cognitivists. They explicitly deny that there is a chunk of reality that is the normative fact that some natural facts give us a reason. Normative propositions do not depict states of affairs. Therefore, they cannot use a relation to such a fact to explain in what the truth of normative propositions consists in.

Nor do they want to. Parfit, for instance, defines alethic realism as the view that “all truths are made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe how things are in some part of reality.” 365 (This view is Parfit’s stand-in for correspondence theories.) He then affirms that accepting Non-Realist Cognitivism is a way of rejecting alethic realism. 366 By doing so, Parfit explicitly rules out the compatibility of correspondence theories of truth with Non-Realist Cognitivism: there is no additional normative layer that supplies truthmakers for claims about which natural facts have the property of being a reason. 367 We will come back to Non-Realism and theories of truth in section 3.5.

For now, there’s one final point the Non-Realist makes at step one. It’s not just that a truthmaker-less epistemology best describes, as a matter of relative fit, usual ways of figuring out what reasons we have. The Non-Realists further argues that it’s the only epistemology that can be the right one given our ordinary ways of reasoning about reasons. A defensible method of making up one’s mind about moral matters can’t have one’s normative conclusions be hostage to whatever non-natural whatnots are around, or one can justifiably claim to have discerned. 368

Skorupski, for example, discards “attempts to envisage a distinctive kind of ‘normative fact’ that could [be the truthmaker of a normative proposition]” as “philosophical fantasy”. 369 To argue for this claim, Skorupski presents what he calls “Wittgenstein’s open question argument” 370 (it’s not immediately clear to me why this argument is called an open question argument). Skorupski takes from Wittgenstein the idea that normativity and reason relations are not picturable. No ‘picture’ of objects and their attributes would tell us their normative significance. As discussed in section 2.3: it seems that no normative fact can be explained by natural facts alone, but that such an explanation would always need a normative ‘bridge principle’. However, even if we would complete

367 Compare how, on Robust Realism, normativity is its own, extra component of reality – as real and mind-independent as matter (see section 2.1).
368 This shares points of contact with the discussion in section 2.5.1.
369 Skorupski 2010, 443.
the normative explanation by supplying a ‘bridge’, the fact that we needed to do so, tells us that a
normative truth cannot consist in a fact about objects and their attributes. 371 We have no clear
sense of what it would be for a pure normative fact to have a normative truthmaker, for ontology
to be intrinsically normative.

That is the positive side. Because normative epistemology doesn’t work the same way as
epistemology about substantial (biological etc.) facts, the epistemic norms are different too. Since
Non-Realist Cognitivists deny that normative beliefs are like beliefs about the natural world, they
also deny that normative beliefs need to meet the same epistemic standards as these worldly beliefs.
But that isn’t because normative beliefs need to meet fewer of these standards, and are therefore
only second-rate facts. Like logical and mathematical beliefs, these normative beliefs need to meet
different standards, and these standards are not weaker.

The negative side is that, to be off the hook, the Non-Realist, at step two, owes us a positive
normative epistemology. As, it seems, the error theory and Non-Realists are in a (perhaps
somewhat uncanny) agreement that ‘there’s nothing there’, it follows that, to avoid skepticism, we
would need to be able to establish in some other way that our normative beliefs are true. How can
a belief in a mind-independent truth nevertheless be warranted without an explanatory connection
between the belief and a bit of reality? What are the epistemic norms in these objectivity-without-
truthmaker domains?

Parfit, Scanlon and Skorupski all appeal to reflective equilibrium. This method, Scanlon
helpfully explains, has three steps. First, we identify a “set of considered judgments of any level of
generality about the subject in question”. 372 A considered judgment is a judgment that seems to be
clearly true, in part because it has been formed or (re)evaluated and retained under appropriate
conditions. The second step of reflective equilibrium consists in the attempt to account for our
considered judgments from step one by formulating general principles. 373 The final step of
reflective equilibrium becomes relevant when the desired result of step two doesn’t obtain. If we
somehow cannot manage to come up with general principles accounting for our considered
judgments, we treat this divergence, in step three, by giving up some of our previously accepted
considered judgments or by changing the general principles. By continuing to shift back and forth
between our considered judgments and the principles accounting for them, we might at some point
reach reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is a(n ideal) state of coherence and mutual support

371 Skorupski 2010, 452.
373 Scanlon 2014, 77.
among beliefs, in which there is no divergence between our judgments and the principles accounting for them.\textsuperscript{374} Achieving this state in the field of reasons means that we have, according to Non-Realism, got at objective truths about reasons.

Because applying the method reflective equilibrium is a process of deciding what to believe, its output is a set of justified beliefs regarding the truths of principles and considered judgments, and not a mere description of the principles and judgments we believe in.\textsuperscript{375} When our beliefs about some type of areas of inquiry cannot be criticized on the grounds that we were not ‘in touch’ with the relevant facts via causal processes, as in the case of reasons, what we can justifiably say about it solely depends on the outcome of reflective equilibrium.\textsuperscript{376} No perennial meta-anything question remains after that. Due to its lack of ontological commitments, such a view allows us to address explanatory questions about moral facts in purely normative terms.

However, due to the absence of a connection between belief and fact, (i) a purely first-personal reflective equilibrium is not enough for warrant and (ii) disagreement can defeat one’s warrant for a normative claim. This is because, while they are objective, we could not have any empirical evidence that either supports or counts against beliefs about pure normative truths. As a consequence of their ontological lightness, the Non-Realist Cognitivists can thus not claim that, in cases of disagreement, one of the parties’ worldviews would be inapt. Given that quandary, as Parfit recognizes, we cannot reasonably believe that our state of reflective equilibrium is truth-conducive and our normative beliefs are true unless we can reasonably believe that, in ideal conditions, we and most other people would not deeply disagree.\textsuperscript{377} To defend the claim that a state of reflective equilibrium justifies us in claiming that we have discovered mind-independent moral truths, external correctness conditions, Non-Realists must therefore defend the empirical claim that in such conditions we would nearly all have sufficiently similar normative beliefs.

However, even if this defense would be successful, which we have reason to believe it might very well be,\textsuperscript{378} that would not, I contend, be enough just yet. It’s not necessarily the right kind of explanation of why we agree. Pointing out actual, contingent agreement doesn’t address the deeper worry that cases of (hypothetical) peer disagreement pose for the no-ontology-plus-strong-truth

\textsuperscript{374} Rippon 2010, 61.
\textsuperscript{375} Scanlon 2014, 78.
\textsuperscript{376} Scanlon 2014, 83.
\textsuperscript{377} Parfit 2017, 290.
\textsuperscript{378} Parfit (2011, vol.2, ch.34) and Huemer (2019) are comprehensive attempts. Notably, observations to the extent that there are thorough and striking patterns, across both time and cultures, in many of the fundamental evaluative judgments that humans tend to make are generally accepted adequate by realists and anti-realists alike (for example, Street 2006, 115)). For a recent overview of empirical literature on ethical (dis)agreement see Sauer (2018, 110-7).
package. The source of defeat of disagreement is more principled, and therefore, not a threat than can be neutralized by an explanation that is hostage to empirical fortune – even if the odds are favorable. As such, actual agreement would not justify is claiming to have discovered mind-independent ‘strong’ truths about reasons. Let me explain.

On the Non-Realist framework, peer disagreement can defeat one’s warrant for a normative claim when one finds one has insufficient reason to believe that any of the disagreeing judgments are faulty. It seems that, in such cases, given Non-Realist assumptions, there would be no way to break the symmetry, because the Non-Realist framework has nothing to appeal to except ‘internal’ reasoning errors in reaching reflective equilibrium. It is accordingly unclear what would determine the answer to the additional question as to which community is really getting things right. Yet, in order to procure mind-independent correctness conditions, there needs to be a principled answer to this further query. This shows that actual agreement doesn’t necessarily give us a reason to believe we have discovered an objective truth about reasons.

As Enoch points out, it is characteristic of fictionalism to lack the resources to make such claims. But Non-Realists are not fictionalists. As this short sketch of the problem of moral disagreement indicates, there’s a puzzle concerning how, on the Non-Realist framework, one can purchase mind-independent correctness conditions (and, by extension, non-neutrality in cases of disagreement) without metaphysical commitment. Non-Realists disagree among themselves how to best answer this challenge, which means we’ll have to consider each of the respective replies in turn. To this I turn now.

4.2.4 Where Mountain Paths Diverge

But first, a quick summary and look ahead.

Due to their non-ontological existence, an a priori epistemology is acceptable for normative facts (as it presumably isn’t for our knowledge of things that exist more heavily, in the ontological sense). Because, on the Non-Realist’s view, normative propositions don’t have truthmakers, it has a new way to deny that justified belief in these propositions requires an explanatory connection between its truthmaker and the belief. Because normative epistemology doesn’t proceed via discovering truthmakers, warrant for normative claims isn’t defeated by pointing out that there is...

---

380 This is the idea that when two people make conflicting moral judgments, at most one of these judgements is correct. See section 2.1.2.
381 The other reason why, Parfit claims, it matters whether normative facts exist non-ontologically or ontologically is that, when it comes to non-natural facts, according to Parfit, non-ontological existence is less queer than ontological existence. I raised some criticism about this argument in section 3.2.1.
no such connection. Normative beliefs are, it’s claimed, by contrast, justified when we’ve put them into reflective equilibrium and they survive.

Having said all this, the Non-Realist now takes herself to be justified in concluding that no (intelligible) metaphysical question remains, and that anyone who thinks otherwise is making a category mistake about normative epistemology.

Here then, is the bumper slogan of Non-Realist Cognitivism: irreducibly normative claims can be true in the ‘strongest sense’ but are not made true by correctly describing, or corresponding to, how things are in some part of reality. Facts about the reason-relation are not ontologically costly, and there is no great mystery about how they might be known. And, one might add: only a skeptic would deem our ordinary ways of working out what reasons we have somewhat deficient.

However, as indicated by the worries surrounding disagreement, the move from ‘surviving reflective equilibrium’ to ‘justified belief in a mind-independent normative truth’ raises its own issues. Note that this unusual but attractive combination can only ‘work’ – i.e. defend mind-independent correctness conditions with a strong modal status for normative beliefs – if it can meet the explanatory demands that seemed to call for a robust, ontologically committal non-naturalism in the first place (for example, account for the non-neutrality intuition in moral disagreements).\(^{382}\) The Non-Realist wants to say the same things as her Robust counterpart, yet without the ontological commitment. She needs to show that subtracting this commitment doesn’t handicap her too much in procuring the traditional desiderata surrounding mind-independent correctness conditions, such as the non-neutrality intuition in cases of disagreement.\(^{383}\)

The immediate worry, then, is that it’s not clear that non-metaphysical truths can deliver the traditional virtues – objectivity, mind-independence, strong modality – of a metaphysically committed non-naturalism. In fact, it’s not immediately obvious if, and how, a combination of truths in the strongest sense \textit{without} a metaphysical background of non-naturalism about these truths is a coherent and intelligible package. We should thus ask: in what does the truth of the relevant irreducible normative truths consist? The demand is for Non-Realist Cognitivists to tell us then what ultimately settles the truth conditions for normative claims.

At this point, Parfit, on the one hand, and Skorupski and Scanlon, on the other, part ways. While they all agree that knowledge about reasons doesn’t require a causal connection to reason facts, they give different accounts of \textit{what it is} for a proposition essentially involving irreducibly

\(^{382}\) Enoch and McPherson (2017, 821) make this point.
\(^{383}\) Cf. section 2.1.2 of this dissertation.
normative concepts to be true and in what sense reflective equilibrium justifies us in believing there are objective reasons.

Scanlon and Skorupski hold that this is a matter of the best overall account of the normative domain and the facts give out where our methods for ascertaining them fall silent. Parfit disagrees and insists that normative truth is descriptivist. The truth value of a normative claim isn’t determined by the outcome of our best overall account of the normative domain, but merely provides evidence for independently ‘existing’ truths that we can get right.

Here’s an overview of what’s to come in the rest of this chapter. I first explain Scanlon’s and Skorupski’s domain-based views. I then argue that they fail to do the explanatory work that seemed to call for a robust realism. I’ll show it is committed to a form of – for the non-naturalist – objectionable relativism in symmetry cases. Next, I discuss Parfit’s attempt to combine objectivity, cognitivism and ‘strong truth’ and argue that it cannot make sense of what normative truths consist in.

4.3 SCANLON AND SKORUPSKI

In this section, I discuss John Skorupski’s (drawing mainly on his 2010 book The Domain of Reasons) and T.M. Scanlon’s (drawing mainly on his 2014 book Being Realistic about Reasons) metaethical theories.

4.3.1 A Domain-Based View of Normativity

According to Scanlon, error theorists think that the truthmakers of reason-claims can only be found in the “physical world of particles and planets.” They typically allude to a version of the correspondence theory of truth, according to which, as we saw, a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact ‘out there’ in the world. We also saw that Non-Realists reject the correspondence theory of truth for normative truths. Scanlon has a particular way of explicating the truth-without-correspondence idea – he appeals to ‘domains’. Skorupski’s theory is, I believe, structurally similar. In this section, I explain this domain-based view of normativity.

Scanlon, in Being Realistic About Reasons and later papers, defends a form of procedural normative realism with constructivist elements (which weren’t there, or less so, in What We Owe to Each Other). The notion of a ‘domain’ is central to understanding Scanlon’s most recent (meta)normative view. He defines a ‘domain’ as a certain kind of claims, the subject that certain

384 Scanlon 2014, 17.
385 Scanlon 2014, 18.
statements are about.\textsuperscript{386} For example, the mathematical domain contains mathematical statements, the physical domain contains statements about the physical world, and the domain of moral reasoning contains moral statements. The important idea here is that whether a statement from a certain domain is true can only be settled from within this domain. The truth value of a mathematical statement, for instance, can only be assessed with respect to other mathematical statements. In Scanlon’s words:

[My view] holds that statements within all these domains are capable of truth and falsity, and that the truth values of statements about one domain [...] are properly settled by the standards of the domain they are about.\textsuperscript{387}

(This, we will see, opens the way for propositions essentially involving irreducible normative concepts to have objective truth values but require no metaphysical background for there to be objective truth conditions that settle their truth.)

Whether a statement from a certain domain is true, can only be settled from within this domain, by applying the standards of the domain they are about.\textsuperscript{388} Likewise, what is involved in existing is always a purely domain-specific question. There’s no such thing as being truly said to exist by a statement within a domain yet fail to exist in any more general ‘sense’.\textsuperscript{389} What is required to justify any existential claim accordingly varies depending on the kind of thing that is claimed to exist. The conditions required in order for objects in different domains to exist vary from domain to domain and existential claims in one domain are licensed by other claims from that same domain.\textsuperscript{390}

What this means: asserting that certain reasons exist looks like a metaphysical claim but just comes down to holding that some normative statements are true.

For normative truths to have the significance we normally take them to have, nothing more is required than them being true according to the standards of the normative domain. Scanlon maintains ontological issues in meta-ethics don’t arise for his view:

If we could characterize the method of reasoning through which we arrive at judgments of right and wrong, and could explain why there is good reason to give judgments arrived at in this way the kind of importance that moral judgments are normally thought to have, then we would, I believe, have given sufficient answer to the question of the subject matter

\textsuperscript{386} Scanlon 2017, 880.
\textsuperscript{387} Scanlon 2014, 19.
\textsuperscript{388} Scanlon 2014, 19.
\textsuperscript{389} Scanlon 2014, 28-9.
\textsuperscript{390} Scanlon 2014, 25, fn.12; 2017, 883.
of right and wrong as well. No interesting question would remain about the ontology of morals.\footnote{Scanlon 1998, 2 (see also 59, 63-4).}

Since Scanlon thinks that existence and truth are domain-internal matters, what claims are true and what facts exist is (exclusively) a matter of the best overall account of the statements in the respective domain. Generally, many elements of his reasons fundamentalism depend on sketching the best overall account of the normative domain. Hence it is of crucial importance for Scanlon to come up with a plausible story about how we could find such an account.

Scanlon’s concrete proposal is that to find the best account of all normative statements we need to find the best systemization of our common-sense normative judgments and intuitions. Take, for instance, the judgment that we all have reasons to avoid future agony independent of our desires. If it turns out that the best account of our normative statements contains the statement that everybody has reasons to avoid future agony independently of what they desire, then we are justified in believing that there are at least some attitude-independent reasons. Then it will be domain-internally true that there are attitude-independent reasons. Such reasons will domain-internally exist and that they exist will be a domain-internal fact. This is how Scanlon uses the idea of domains to establish objective reasons.

4.3.2 What Normative Facts Are

We can, to summarize, get at the truth in the normative domain by giving the best general account of common-sense normative judgments and intuitions. Such an account, furthermore, resolves (or more accurately: takes away the need to address) ontological questions. Given its absolutely crucial role, we should here stop to consider how exactly such an account can do this and \textit{in what sense} reflective equilibrium justifies us in believing there are objective reasons. Not in the least because it seems to separate Scanlon’s epistemology from Parfit’s.

In his review of \textit{Being Realistic About Reasons},\footnote{Rosen 2017a.} Gideon Rosen shows that Scanlon’s text is open to two different ways of understanding what the best account of a domain is ‘doing’ here. On one, its function is solely \textit{epistemological}, and Scanlon’s view about the role of the best overall account of common-sense statements and intuitions in a domain is a thesis about the conditions under which domain-specific claims are \textit{justified}. When a claim considers a single domain D, the claim is justified \textit{simpliciter} if and only if it is justified by the standards proper to D. On another understanding, however, the relevant role is \textit{metaphysical} and to be understood as saying that a
statement is *true* when it is fully justified by the standards proper to D. Since truth and justification are not the same thing, these two readings are dissimilar. Most importantly, on Scanlon’s view, the ‘existence’ of reasons tags along for free on – is nothing over and above – true normative judgments. So it’s crucial to know what it means for a normative belief to be true. More specifically: whether this in turn is nothing over and above being part of such a best overall account.

The answer: it is not. Being part of the best overall account isn’t merely evidence for a normative truth, it *constitutes* the normative truth. Rosen judges that the metaphysical reading has the most textual support, and in his response, Scanlon confirms this “substantive” interpretation as “fundamental”. In explicating in what sense the best overall account of a domain ‘settles’ the truth values of statements in that domain, he clarifies: this means that the considerations that settle a question are the ones that make an answer to that question true or false (and are not just things we can rely on for the correctness of an answer).

### 4.3.3 A Problem with Symmetry And Disagreement

In section 4.2.3, I explained that, since Non-Realists can’t appeal to something external to normative practice, it’s not clear they can adjudicate moral disagreements in a way that’s compatible with mind-independent correctness conditions for morality. I then postponed treatment of this problem until later, because defenders of Non-Realist Cognitivism deal with this issue in different ways. It is now time to take up this issue again.

To get a grip on this objection, consider how Enoch and McPherson put it in terms of reasons and ‘schmeasons’. They ask us to consider two linguistic communities – the ‘reasoners’ and the ‘schmeasoners’, both of which have a certain term – ‘reason’ and ‘schmeason’, respectively – they take to be central to their normative practices. And in each community, the thought experiment continues, there are sophisticated practices of criticism and evaluation that use the relevant term. The reasoners and schmeasoners, however, have reached quite deviating substantive views in their respective best overall accounts of their common-sense judgments and intuitions. And if we suppose that these practices are coherent, and constitute their own domains, then both communities might be functioning quite well relative to their respective domains. Unfortunately for the schmeasoners, it is *bad* that they are sensitive to schmeasons rather than reasons. This, unfortunately for the reasoners, and for Scanlon and Skorupski, seems to be an objection that can

---

393 This is where Parfit and Scanlon diverge. Parfit would say it *is* something over and above.
394 Rosen 2017a, 872.
396 Enoch and McPherson 2017, §6; Enoch 2011 §5.3; McPherson 2011.
be raised perfectly symmetrically from within each of the two domains. For the schmeasoners can urge it is ‘schbad’ that we respond to reasons rather than schmeasons. This puts pressure on how there can be mind-independent correctness conditions for morality on Non-Realist Cognitivism.

If this is true, then Scanlon and Skorupski are committed to the view that schmeasons exist, Enoch and McPherson further argue. Which seems incompatible with there being mind-independent correctness conditions. Quantifying over them is licensed by the standards internal to the schmeasons domain. That domain is, we’re allowed to stipulate, as consistent as our own normative domain is. And finally, it doesn’t make claims that contradict those made by statements licensed by the standards of other domains. This exhausts the criteria for existence. So schmeasons, Scanlon and Skorupski seem committed to concluding, exist in the same sense as reasons do. Therefore, the view has failed to secure mind-independent correctness conditions.

4.3.4 Skorupski’s Relativism

In reply, Skorupski admits that his framework doesn’t have the resources to reject the reasons-schmeasons symmetry. He diagnoses that the “removal of the metaphysical background of [robust] realism”, at the end of the day, means that “the question which … theory is really true is empty” since truth is not applicable to entire reflective equilibria but only within them. What warrants a normative judgment, is convergence within a community. He ultimately comes down on the view that whether a fact has the property of being a reason (or not) is actually relative to psychological facts about the agent and her community. Pure normative facts don’t have mind-independent truth values, but their truth values “are grounded in cognitive communities of beings with the same natural dispositions. Reasons [can only be] judged from within … communities.”

In effect, Skorupski introduces a cognitive-community parameter to which the reasons relation relativizes. It follows there can be faultless disagreement about pure normative principles if cognitive communities with different natures are introduced. Yet saying, as Skorupski does, that the question of which theory is really is empty is clearly incompatible with securing ‘community-transcending’ correctness conditions for normative truth, as Non-Realism set out to do. On this view, it seems to depend on my cognitive community which propositions about reasons would be true for us.

In other words, to the extent that reasons exist, schmeasons do too. Their existence is equally merited by there being a community of reasoners and schmeasoners, with natural dispositions

397 Skorupski 2010, 504.
398 Skorupski 2010, 503, my emphasis (see also 417).
sensitive to reasons and schmeasons. This seems to show that a purely domain-specific idea of ‘existence’ is too thin to ground a strong modal status for normative truth, because it leads to a situation where normative truth is merely the propositional reflection of the dispositions and attitudes of a community. Because of this mind-dependence, this does not deliver the mind-independent correctness conditions the Non-Realist Cognitivist was after.

We should note two further things about this.

Earlier, we saw that, given the lack of empirical evidence for normative facts, the Non-Realist has to substantiate her theory with an account of how we are nevertheless able to recognize which reasons we (truly!) have. On the given reflective-equilibrium account, this requires defending (i) an empirical claim about normative convergence and (ii) a philosophical claim about why such convergence justifies believes in mind-independent normative truths. Accepting that burden, Skorupski limits the scale of that convergence to cognitive communities and argues that’s enough for beliefs about which reasons one truly has to be justified.

Secondly, notice the ‘bottom up’ direction of explanation here. Normative truth is a domain-internal matter and the best account of normative claims is found by systematizing our common-sense judgments and intuitions. The standards of justification for statements in the normative domain, rather than the normative structure of reality, ‘settle’ (in the metaphysical sense) the truth values of normative statements. So, our intuitions don’t just get at the truth, but, in a way, constitute them. Once we’ve systemized the judgments that seem common-sense to us, we are allowed to assign them a strong modal status. It’s questionable whether, in the absence of anything ‘over and above’ that a coherent reflective equilibrium could ‘get at’, that’s a legitimate move. For if our intuitions are not ‘backed up’ by corresponding mind-independent facts, what licenses it?

To account for mind-independent correctness conditions, it seems the Non-Realists need some non-question-begging idea of the difference between explaining a practice’s internal operation and explaining what might anchor or constrain it. As Railton notes in discussing his agreement with Parfit’s version of Non-Realist Cognitivism (Parfit 2017, 123-4).
4.3.5 Scanlon’s Resistance

Contrary to what I have suggested, there are passages in Scanlon which suggest he does not think that internal coherence and consistency is sufficient for faultless disagreement.\footnote{Similarly, Simon Rippon comments that my discussion of Scanlon insufficiently acknowledges a distinction between Scanlon’s (restricted) constructivism about ethics and his (non-realist cognitivist) realism about reasons. I try to address some such worries in this section. For reasons of space, I cannot go deeper into this exegetical question.} As he writes, “The questions to ask in such a case are, first, “Did this person reach different conclusions than I because she began with different considered judgments than I did?” If so, should I accept those different judgments? Second, “Did the person reach a different conclusion because she considered different principles than I did, or made different choices than I did about whether to revise a principle or modify a judgment that conflicts with it?” If so, should I have made these different choices as well?”\footnote{Scanlon 2014, 79.} The suggestion being that the answers might well, from my perspective, be “no”.

But given other elements of Scanlon’s view, there are reason to think this is an all-too-easy reply on his part. On contractualist views like Scanlon’s, after all, the existence and nature of moral properties are constituted by the agreements that would be reached by appropriately motivated individuals under specified circumstances. And morality is justified by appealing to some such a rational or reasonable agreement among those individuals subject to morality’s demands. As explained in section 4.3.2, the view thus seems a version of moral constructivism, because the essence of moral properties such as rightness and wrongness are constituted by agreements reached by a group of hypothetical agents under certain specified conditions.\footnote{A point made by Timmons (2003).} This means that in cases of disagreement that persist across circumstances, in order for Scanlon to be able to reply like he does, he needs to show that the disagreeing agent – whose reasoning is coherent and consistent – is not part of the relevant set of individuals. So that his dissent does not impinge on the status of the principle in question. Even if he is plausibly interpreted as making no factual errors in relation to his moral judgment about the case at hand and his respective outlook enjoys reflective equilibrium.

One option is to ‘rig (or fix) the outcome of the construction procedure’. That is, impose constraints on the conditions under which some moral judgment is justified that involve substantial moral assumptions. So that we can say that the dissenting opinion under consideration ‘doesn’t count’, because it (let’s suppose) doesn’t meet those standards. But once \emph{this} is allowed, it seems open to disagreeing parties to simply load the account of moral justifiability with \emph{their} preferred
moral assumptions instead. This would get us competing sets of ‘true’ moral principles. Of course, the gut response will be to insist that one set of principles constitutes moral truth while the others do not. But then the burden is on the constructivist to point to some feature of the favored construction to explain this difference in status. And the problem is that there does not seem to be any non-question-begging feature to which the constructivist can help herself in breaking the symmetry among various competing set of constructed principles. Because if the view needs to rely on something intrinsically normative principles or antecedent mind-independent normative truths to make good on its claims to objectivity, the account becomes potentially compatible with non-naturalistic realism.

Another option is to impose morally neutral constraints on the conditions under which some moral principle is justified. Because of their neutrality, these constraints are non-question-begging with respect to different coherent reflective equilibria with competing moral outcomes. However, formal constraints on the rationality figuring in moral thinking – consistency, coherence and the like – are also too weak for specifying some reasonably determinate set of moral principles. Because as Scanlon’s quoted comment suggests, moral disagreement can persist even if these criteria are met. So if the characterization of the constraints is morally thin, we get serious indeterminacy. After all, Scanlon’s view suggests that the facts give out where our procedures for arriving at them fall silent.

At the very least, on this horn, justification may be too hostage to the initial commitments of agents. For views like Scanlon’s, the problem of the non-question-begging reply to symmetry cases is that “relative to one kind of moral sensibility, certain generic personal considerations are going to count as relevant and certain specific judgments about the various weights of reasons are going to count as reasonable. We get convergence among all appropriately motivated individuals who happen to share a certain moral sensibility.” But we also get convergence among all appropriately motivated individuals who happen to share a different moral sensibility.

Despite this, unlike Skorupski, Scanlon doesn’t relativize the reasons relation to a community-parameter. More generally, it might be thought that the preceding discussion ignores Scanlon’s underlying realism about reasons. The idea that normative facts are objective and determinate despite not being located ‘out there’ is a central feature of reasons fundamentalism after all. Whether the ‘existence’ of a domain has normative implications, he says, depends on its normative significance:

403 Timmons 2003, 414.
Nor can one, on my view, create reasons by characterizing a domain in a certain way. For example, we could define a subject matter in terms of a set $C$ of rules about what is to be done in certain circumstances. If these are contentful and coherent they could characterize a domain. Its subject matter would be what it takes to be $C$-compliant and which things have this property, and if the rules were sufficiently clear and coherent there would be a fact of the matter about answers to these questions. But the existence of this domain need not have any normative implications.\footnote{Scanlon 2017, 881.}

A different schmeasons domain can be defined by its internal consistency, but, consistent as it may be, it won’t be about anything of similar normative significance. Even though the existence of a domain amounts to no more than being characterized by concepts that have content and are coherent, one cannot make up reasons merely by characterizing a domain a certain way.\footnote{Scanlon 2017, 881-2.} Domains come cheap, but normative significance does not.

Rather, whether some domain ‘creates’ new reasons depends on whether its directives are true claims about the reasons one has. That, in turn, is settled by what we are justified in believing, which is settled by our best overall account of the normative domain – the outcome of reflective equilibrium.

Here it becomes relevant that, even though moral truth hinges on the best overall account of the normative domain, Scanlon is frank in admitting he doesn’t present it. He further expresses pessimism about whether such an account is likely to be forthcoming.\footnote{Scanlon 2014, 80.} As such, we should instead rely on our confidence in the results of an application of reflective equilibrium in particular cases rather than on some general account of reasons.\footnote{Scanlon 2014, 104.} Yet one wonders what is left of ‘mind-independent correctness conditions’ when it neither means that reality includes robust moral properties and facts that are ‘over and above’ those studied in science,\footnote{Enoch (2011, 101-2) uses the ‘over-and-above’ locution.} nor that there is a general account of reasons to be had. Because of the lack of a general account of the normative domain, it becomes harder to see what it, on the Non-Realist’s picture, means for normative judgments to have determinate truth values independent of us. Since a large part of Scanlon’s view depends on this best overall account, but we’re stuck for an answer regarding that account, a large part of Scanlon’s view remains uncertain.
For both Scanlon and Skorupski, it seems to me that the combined (i) removal of the metaphysical background of realism, (ii) and the substantial/metaphysical way in which the outcome of reflective equilibrium settles the truth values of normative judgments, delivers *formal* truth conditions and not *substantive* ones. However, for the non-naturalist, the real question is not about merely generating correctness conditions (formal truth conditions). Reasons and schmeasons do that equally well. The real question is about reflecting the ‘really true’, or *right*, criteria of correctness (substantive truth conditions). And here the domain-based view falls silent. There’s no non-question-begging feature to which they can help themselves in breaking symmetry among incompatible outcomes of reflective equilibrium. Therefore, this package doesn’t suffice for doing the explanatory work that seemed to call for a metaphysically committed realism.

Even setting aside the lack of a general account of the normative domain, the fact that the direction of explanation proceeds from such a systemization of our common-sense intuitions and judgments to there existing objective normative facts, combined with the thesis that there are no normative facts ‘out there’, makes it hard to see how our normative judgments could have truth values independent of us.

To defend mind-independent correctness conditions, the Non-Realist needs to say there is something special about reasons as opposed to schmeasons, but a domain-based view doesn’t have the resources to do so. To solve this issue, the Non-Realist might embrace something that looks a lot like non-naturalism and claim that outcomes of reflective equilibrium (or the upshots of sound practical reasoning) don’t settle the truth values of normative statements in the metaphysical sense, but only in the epistemological sense – they don’t constitute normative truth, but are evidence of independently ‘existing’ normative truths. That’s Parfit’s gambit.

### 4.4 PARFIT

This section proceeds as follows. I first outline Parfitian Non-Realist Cognitivism. I argue for the ‘no-truthmaker’ interpretation of the view and a corresponding explanatory challenge in section 4.4.1. In section 4.4.2, I consider candidate solutions to the challenge and argue that they are either inconsistent with key ingredients of the program or make Parfitian Non-Realism collapse into another metanormative position. The only option that might be available if we treat some of Parfit’s assertions in the thousand-plus pages of *On What Matters* as slightly unfortunate or anomalous is a deflationary theory of truth. In section 4.4.3, I show why adopting that

---

409 McPherson 2011. See also Parfit’s discussions about the difference between normativity in the rule-implying and the reason-implying senses (for example Parfit 2011, vol.2, §88).
understanding of normative truth nevertheless leads to a host of problems for Parfitian Non-Realism. I conclude that Parfit cannot make sense of what normative truth consists in.

As with Scanlon and Skorupski, the attempt to get the metaphysical, objective support of reality behind one’s normative conclusions without them having any metaphysical grounding fails. I tentatively conclude that this general strategy is doomed from the start. It strikes one as wanting to have one’s cake and eat it too – and turns out to be exactly that.

Let’s start by considering Parfit’s normative epistemology. His normative epistemology is not unlike that of Scanlon. They key difference is that Parfit places a much stronger emphasis on the modal status of normative truths. Thus, Parfit cites Scanlon and agrees with him that the kind of intuitively-based reflective thinking that we do in reflective equilibrium is the best, and only defensible, method of making up one’s mind about moral matters.\(^{410}\) He rightly emphasizes we shouldn’t think of intuitions as a quasi-perceptual faculty. When Parfit uses the word intuitive, he writes, he means what philosophers generally mean when they describe claims as ‘intuitively plausible’ and ‘intuitively quite clear’,\(^{411}\) or, in other words, as having the alethic property of being self-evident. We can thus say that some normative propositions are intrinsically credible, when they have the \emph{alethic} property of being self-evident, and that we have the ability to respond to such intrinsic credibilities and recognize that they give us epistemic reasons.

Parfit’s epistemology thus comprises a two-step view of knowledge about practical reasons. First, we have an ability to respond to epistemic reasons. When some fact makes some belief very likely to be true, or ‘intuitively plausible’, that makes it true that this fact gives us epistemic reason to have the belief.\(^{412}\) Second, enabling us to respond to epistemic reasons for having beliefs about moral and practical reasons in particular, this ability provides us with the further ability to form true beliefs about normative reasons.

That might sound pretty OK, but Parfit isn’t done yet. When some belief has this alethic property, that further \emph{makes it true} that this belief has the normative property of being indubitable.\(^{413}\) That is, we will not only recognize that it’s probably true, but \emph{also} ‘see’ that these beliefs could not have been false. That they are necessarily true in all possible worlds. Thanks to our intuition,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Parfit 2011, vol.2, 545.
\item Rippon (2010, 87-91) has pointed out that this truthmaking claim goes crucially undefended. Yet it stands in need of explanation. And there is good reason to believe that Parfit, as a non-naturalist realist about epistemic reasons, cannot provide a satisfactory one. I will not be pursuing that argument here.
\item Parfit 2011, vol.2, 509.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
metaphysical necessity is knowable by conceptual reflection. Parfit stresses that normative epistemology is a species of modal epistemology: normative beliefs are beliefs that must be true.\textsuperscript{414}

While our ability to see the truth of propositions that must be true is sometimes claimed to be mysterious, when it seems to us clear that some belief must be true, there is nothing in our cognitive experience that is more transparent and intelligible, or less mysterious, Parfit writes.\textsuperscript{415} The mystery could be only how we became able to have these clear beliefs about these necessary truths. Even if we cannot yet explain how we came to have this ability, Parfit claims, we can justifiably believe that we can recognize such necessary truths.

All of which raises the question: What, for Parfit, does it mean for a belief about normative reasons to be true?

On Scanlon’s domain-based view, recall, it’s not clear whether there is a distinction between accepting a normative statement as part of the best overall account of the normative domain and believing that this claim is true. Scanlon called this the “substantive” way in which the outcome of reflective equilibrium ‘settles’ the truth values of normative statements: the considerations that settle a question are the ones that make it true.\textsuperscript{416} Parfit, on the other hand, rejects this metaphysical role for the best overall account of the normative domain. He believes the considerations that settle a question are only things we can rely on for inferring the correctness of an answer. What ultimately settles the truth value of a normative claim, is whether it correctly characterizes normative reality, Parfit writes.\textsuperscript{417}

Contrary to Scanlon’s metaphysical or substantial interpretation of the way reflective equilibrium ‘settles’ truth values of normative statements, Parfit seems to see revisions of our normative beliefs (of the kind typical for reflective equilibrium) as improvements in our thinking that are responsive to the independently ‘existing’ normative truths. Whereas Scanlonian Non-Realism seems friendly to minimalist theories of truth in the normative domain (Skorupski even explicitly endorses it in the normative domain\textsuperscript{418}), Parfitian Non-Realism thus explicitly disavows it. Instead, he embraces what he calls a ‘descriptivist’ sense of ‘true’ for normative claims. Parfit wants to say that some normative claims are true in some more-than-minimal sense, a “strong

\textsuperscript{415} Parfit 2011, vol.2, 520.
\textsuperscript{416} Scanlon 2017, 883-4.
\textsuperscript{417} Parfit 2017, 226.
\textsuperscript{418} Skorupski 2010, §17.5.
Cognitivist sense” that would explain how, in making a normative claim, we might be “getting it right”. 419

So we can ‘get things right’, using an intuition-based reflective equilibrium as epistemology. With that in place, this is how Parfit replies to the evolutionary debunking argument:

Everything here depends on whether we can trust our ability to form some true normative beliefs, by using what Street calls our power of rational reflection. For such beliefs to be justified, it is not enough that these beliefs seem to us intrinsically very credible, or that we seem to have strong reasons to have them. We must also justifiably believe that we are able to recognize, and assess, the credibility of these beliefs and these apparent reasons. In such cases, it makes a great difference whether we and others disagree, and whether and how we can explain these disagreements. 420

As this passage indicates, and as discussed in section 3.2.3, to defend the claim that a state of reflective equilibrium justifies us in claiming that we have discovered objective truths about reasons, Non-Realists must defend the empirical claim that in such conditions we would nearly all have sufficiently similar normative beliefs. 421 There I also explained why even that would not be enough. Given that the source of defeat of disagreement, on the Non-Realists picture, is more principled. On Scanlon and Skorupski’s views, since a normative truth just is being part of the best overall account of the normative domain, they couldn’t break the reasons-schmeasons symmetry. For Parfit, normative truth is more than that: when true, normative propositions are true in a stronger cognitivist sense, and surviving intuitively-based reflective equilibrium is not all there’s to it: what matters is whether a reflective equilibrium gets it right. 422 This gives him a reply to the schmeasons objection that Scanlon and Skorupski couldn’t give. In letter, Parfit is not committed to the existence of schmeasons.

What does this this ‘strong’, ‘cognitivist’ sense of truth mean? It means that, to be justified in calling a claim true in this more-than-minimal sense, we must accept this claim as characterizing the specific way the world is. 423 Yet, Parfit also writes, pure normative truths are not made to be true by correctly describing, or corresponding to, how things are in “some part” of reality. 424 This might seem like a flat contradiction. Here’s how Parfit explains why it is not:

---

419 Parfit 2017, 195.
421 Parfit 2011, vol.2, ch.34.
422 As to be shown, central difficulty with Parfit’s view is that it’s obscure what we would be getting right.
423 Parfit 2017, 226.
424 Parfit 2017, 59.
In the [ontologically weighty sense of the word ‘reality’], merely possible objects, acts, or events are not part of reality, nor are abstract entities, such as valid arguments or prime numbers. We might instead use the word ‘reality’ in a wider sense, which implies that all truths are truths about reality. If that is how we use this word, the phrase ‘about reality’ adds nothing to the word ‘true’. Nor could we say without self-contradiction that some true claims are not made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, some part of reality. But if that is how we use the word ‘reality’, we [could say] that, on [my] view, some non-empirical truths—such as logical, mathematical, and normative truths—do not raise any difficult ontological questions. Mathematicians, for example, should not fear that arithmetical claims might all be false, because there aren’t any numbers. Nor should we fear that our non-empirical normative beliefs might all be false, because there are no non-natural properties of being right or wrong, or being good or bad, or being a normative reason.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 61-2.}

If we use the words ‘the world’ and ‘reality’ in the wide senses in which all truths are about the world or reality, some normative claims are true in this descriptive sense. These claims characterize some features of normative reality.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 226.} On the other hand, normative reality shouldn’t be thought of “ontologically”. Normative truths are not made to be true by correctly describing how things are in an inaccessible, not causally contactable part of reality.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 201.} Again: truths about normative reality have no weighty ontological implications that are also normative. Just like, in deciding which mathematical claims are true, we don’t need to say something about whether, and in what sense, numbers ‘exist’. Likewise, which normative claims are true also doesn’t depend on whether reasons exist in an ontological sense. Normative claims have no metaphysical content.

Parfit emphasizes, in various places throughout the \textit{On What Matters} volumes, that irreducible normative truths are true “in the strongest sense.”\footnote{Parfit 2011, vol.2, 479, 487; 2017, 203.} Their modal status is as robust as it can be. The pure normative truths would be true in every possible world and are thus metaphysically necessary.\footnote{Parfit 2017, 106.} Moreover, if there would be a dependence relation between these truths and reality, it would be reality that depends on them, and not the other way around.\footnote{Parfit 2011, vol.2, 749; 2017, 59.} Despite that they don’t have any ontological implications, pure normative truths are true in ‘descriptivist’ and ‘strongest’ senses. This synthesis cries out for explanation. Specifically, two questions jump out. We need to know more about what it means that pure normative truths have no ontological implications. We
also need to know more about what it means for a claim to be true or false in virtue of whether or not it characterizes a non-ontological reality.

I start with the first.

4.4.1 On Parfit’s Truthmakers

What does it mean for pure normative truths to have no ontological implications? I think Parfit has in mind two things. The first of which is uncontroversial as a correct interpretation of Parfit. The second is not.

For starters, these truths themselves don’t have to ‘exist’ for them to have the significance that we commonly grant normative truths. With respect to the ontological status of these truths, Parfit defends what he calls the No Clear Question View. According to this view, truths are not a kind of entity about which it is a clear enough question whether they exist in some ontological sense.\(^{431}\) Since Parfit denies the question about the ontological status of these truths is clear enough, he denies he has to say more to answer it.

Parfit applies this thesis to irreducibly normative claims by way of an analogical argument. He writes:

> There are some claims that are irreducibly normative in the reason-involving sense, and are in the strongest sense true. […] For such claims to be true, these reason-involving properties need not exist either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-spatio-temporal part of reality.\(^{432}\)

One might think it’s too fast for Parfit to say this. We’re not at bedrock yet. It feels like there’s an explanatory challenge involving non-ontological existence to be explicated here. Once we have done that, Parfit needs to answer it or pay up in plausibility points.

This brings us to the second issue – about truth-makers.

The second interpretation of Parfit’s claim that irreducibly normative truths have no ontological implications is that they have no other ontological implications that are also normative. Parfit acknowledges that most truths are true only because things of some other kind exist and that truthmaker metaphysicians are right to say it is normally of the nature of truth to depend. But he, I believe, denies that pure normative truths are like that as well. According to Parfit, some claims can be true in itself and not in virtue of certain states of affairs obtaining. Irreducible normative

\(^{431}\) Parfit 2011, vol.2, 475-9, 482; 2017, 228.
\(^{432}\) Parfit 2011, vol.2, 486.
truths, for example, are solely and exclusively true in themselves. Neither natural facts nor irreducible normative ones are needed for making them true.

Since this is a contested point, let me elaborate. Parfit clarifies what it means for a truth to have no ontological implications by explicating the kind of considerations that are relevant in settling its truth value. He catalogues the questions normative truths raise, and remarks of them that they “are not about whether certain entities or properties are real, or exist, in what some ontologists claim to be some single, deep, fundamental sense.”433 The truth value of such claims, namely, are not determined by what does or does not exist. By contrast, in trying to decide whether claims about objects like rocks are true, we answer some questions about what exists in an ontological sense (presumably about rocks). But in trying to decide whether truths without positive ontological implications are true, we need not answer questions that speak to items in our ontology.434 These truths do not imply that things exist in an ontological sense. Therefore, what exists, and what these existents are like, is irrelevant for their truth. Pure normative truths are like that. They need no metaphysical grounding.435

There is debate over whether this ‘no-truthmaker interpretation’ of Parfit is the accurate one. The alternative reading claims that, in fact, Parfit’s position is not that pure normative truths do not depend. But that they depend on normative properties, facts, entities that exist non-ontologically. Parfit’s distinctive claim is thus that their truthmakers exist non-ontologically, not that they have no truthmakers. It then asserts that, since the idea of non-ontological existence plays this crucial role in accounting for the ontological status of truthmaking normative ontology, appealing to the No Clear Question View and insisting that the idea of non-ontological existence can’t be further explained, is a serious shortcoming. The demand for an answer to the question about what it means for an entity to exist non-ontologically thus gains dialectical force from the interpretation that the truthmakers of the pure normative truths exist non-ontologically.

Ryan Byerly, for example, reads Parfit along these lines and states that “[Parfit] thinks that positing [normative] properties is justified because their existence (though only their non-ontological existence) is needed in order to make normative truths true.”436 Christopher Cowie likewise portrays Parfit as accepting that his view “implies the existence of normative entities (i.e. normative facts, properties, and so on) to serve as truthmakers for [normative] beliefs” and asks:

433 Parfit 2017, 62.
435 Parfit 2017, 199
436 Byerly 2017, 2704 fn.10.
How could normative beliefs be made true by true non-natural normative facts without thereby entailing ontological commitment to normative entities? Isn’t this trivially false?\textsuperscript{437}

As indicated by my discussion of the second implication of the claim that pure normative truths have no ontological implications, I believe these questions are mistaken. I will now provide some more textual support for the no-truthmaker interpretation.

What passages do Byerly and Cowie base their illustration on? The exegetical culprits are, I think, Parfit’s remarks that there are some claims that are irreducibly normative in the reason-involving sense, and are in the strongest sense true. But, Parfit further claims, these truths have no ontological implications. For such claims to be true, these reason-involving properties need not exist either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-spatio-temporal part of reality.\textsuperscript{438}

These words can be read in (at least) two ways. On Cowie’s and Byerly’s interpretation, it is a statement assigning a particular ontological status to the normative truthmakers of pure normative truths: non-ontologically existing normative ontology makes irreducibly normative truths true. It implies that normative properties exist non-ontologically. On another, I think more accurate, interpretation, these statements mean that, since pure normative truths have no ontological implications, reason-involving properties needn’t exist in any sense. Their ontological status is not: they exist, yes, but only non-ontologically. Rather, as the existence-question as applied to them is not clear enough, they have no ontological status. The pure normative truths are to be thought of along the lines of truthmaking principles, proceeding directly from non-normative ontology to normative truths, without intermediating normative properties.

For example: when it is true that we have reasons to avoid future agony, there is a sense in which, according to Parfit, future agony ‘has’ the relational property of being a reason for us to avoid it.\textsuperscript{439} When we talk of properties in this sense, normative properties merely mirror the relevant true propositions, but they are not themselves non-ontological existents because they are not existents at all. Parfit emphasizes that properties and facts in this sense do not have an ontological status, not even a lesser one,\textsuperscript{440} but rather they are more like mere projections of the normative truths that are prior in the order of explanation.\textsuperscript{441} That’s why Parfit writes that, in the wide sense in which the phrase ‘about reality’ adds nothing to the word ‘true’, irreducible normative facts and

\textsuperscript{437} Cowie, 2014, 661.
\textsuperscript{438} Parfit 2011, vol.2, 486. Cf. section 4.1 of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{439} Parfit 2017, 16-28.
\textsuperscript{440} Parfit 2017, 91.
\textsuperscript{441} Parfit 2011, vol.2, 749.
properties are unavoidable, non-problematic and even acceptable to non-analytical naturalists and non-cognitivists.\footnote{442 Parfit 2017, 46-7, 91.} Properties in this sense come cheap and are more a way of talking than anything else. When we talk of properties in this sense, normative properties merely mirror the relevant true propositions, but they are not a part of the structure of the reality in any ontologically weighty and explanatory sense.

For beliefs about reasons to be true, Parfit maintains, we do not need to populate a world with objects (facts, entities, properties) at all:

If nothing had ever existed in any ontological sense, there would not have been any stars or atoms, nor would there have been space, or time, or God. But it would have been true that nothing ever existed. As we can also claim, there would have been the truth that nothing existed in an ontological sense. This truth would have existed in a different non-ontological sense. … There would also have been some irreducibly normative truths. Compared with nothing’s ever existing, it would have been much better if blissfully happy beings had existed, and it would have been much worse if there had existed conscious beings whose lives involved unrelieved suffering.\footnote{443 Parfit 2011, vol. 2, 485-6.}

In the sense that there are these reason-involving properties, acts have these properties in virtue of the pure normative truths. These properties are explanatorily downstream from, rather than truthmakers of, these truths. These truths, in turn, are not true because of anything that exists. These truths aren’t additions to our ontology, nor do they entail any such additions as their truthmakers.\footnote{444 As I read them, Suikkanen (2017, 198 fn.16) and Mintz-Woo (2018, 707) also subscribe to the no-truthmakers interpretation of Parfit.}

As such, Parfit does not need to explain what it means for a normative ‘entity’ to exist in a non-ontological sense, because there are no normative entities on his view. There is only robust non-normative ontology, and there are normative truths, and truths are not items or objects. There are propositions essentially involving irreducibly normative concepts with a positive truth value, but their truth requires no metaphysical grounding, nor by ontologically existing ontology nor by non-ontologically existing normative ontology.
4.4.2 What Are the Truth Conditions?

However, there is another explanatory challenge around. Parfit does need to explain how there can be normative truths when there is only non-normative ontology. The explanatory challenge is not about the ontological status of the truthmakers of these truths, but about what the truth conditions of these truths are given that there are no normative properties or facts that are prior to them. The view is that nothing needs to be added to the natural world for propositions essentially involving irreducibly normative concepts to have a positive truth value, which they would have in virtue of correctly characterizing normative reality, which is not a part of the natural world, but neither is something over and above it (in the metaphysical sense), yet is the kind of thing that can be correctly or incorrectly described. This combination leaves it very unclear what it would be for a normative claim to correctly or incorrectly characterize normative reality.

Robust Non-Naturalism explains what normative judgments are about, and explains their truth conditions, by postulating robust, non-natural properties with primitive normativity. Parfit subtracts this ontological commitment: the truth conditions of normative judgments are not determined by whatever normative ontology is or is not there. Neither are the truth values of normative judgments settled by our best overall account of the normative domain, as they were for Scanlon. Yet Parfit holds that normative judgments are beliefs, and that they at least purport to describe or represent something. But it’s not clear what is left to explain their truth conditions.445

All of which raises the question: what does it mean for a claim to be true or false in virtue of whether or not it correctly characterizes a non-ontological reality without having ontological implications that are also normative? In this section I’ll consider some candidate explanations and reject them. If the question is intelligible, I don’t know what its answer could be.

The upshot is a trilemma: Parfit’s view is either committed to (a) truth primitivism, or it’s a notational variant of either (b) Robust Realism (when it is coupled with a correspondence theory of truth) or of (c) Scanlonian Non-Realism (when it is coupled with a minimalist theory of truth). All are unattractive options.

Here’s another way of getting to the same trilemma. Parfit is clear to emphasize that normative truths are not truths about our concepts.446 Given that normative claims are true in a descriptivist sense, the necessary connections between natural facts and normative truths that our normative concepts help us to state can’t be accounted for linguistically. If pure normative truths

---

445 See Gibbard (2017, 68) and Blackburn (2017, 87) for related worries.
446 For instance, in his discussions about the difference between normativity in the rule-implying and the reason-implying senses (see for example Parfit 2011, vol.2, §88).
are true in a more-than-minimal descriptivist sense, then conceptual necessity can’t do all the work. The necessary connection is made the case by the non-ontological normative reality and not by our representation of it.\textsuperscript{447} So to make sense of this descriptivist sense of truth, Parfitian Non-Realism needs to provide some kind of (perhaps non-ontological) metaphysical basis for the connection which it represents as conceptually necessary. By analogy, even if (as some philosophers think) it is a conceptual necessity that magnets attract iron, it still remains to be explained why or how magnets do this.\textsuperscript{448} Thus it is hard to see how, at least given the terms and conditions of strong-truth-in-a-descriptivist-sense, conceptual connections would be supposed to explain the necessary connection between natural facts and normative truths. The explanation should point to a connection in non-ontological normative reality, which is then also reflected in our concepts.

Nor can we infer from our concept of \textsc{A Reason} what the pure normative truths are. Especially in meta-ethics, a time-honored test for deducing whether some substantive conclusion is built in a concept is G.E. Moore’s “open question test”.\textsuperscript{449} What questions do competent speakers regard as having an “open feel,” and which do they regard as straightforwardly settled by the meaning of the terms? In the normative context, open-question considerations are regularly invoked to challenge any claim to have found this or that substantive presupposition about what people ought to do built right into the very concept of a normative reason. And one hardly needs to go into a philosophy classroom to competent speakers who regard it as an open question whether absolutism or relativism about normative reasons is correct.\textsuperscript{450} So the concept of a normative reason doesn’t settle whether we all have attitude-independent reasons to do anything in the first place. By extension, it also doesn’t settle whether we all have attitude-independent reason to do this or that. I conclude that, if there are ‘strong’ pure normative truths, we can’t deduce them from our concepts.

Perhaps Parfit will respond to this trilemma with a partners-in-guilt claim. What about the truth that sixteen squared equals 256? Isn’t that a truth that is not conceptual nor natural nor ontological? Indeed, Parfit claims that the necessary truths in mathematics and logic can be necessarily true without any additional independently existing entities or properties such as

\textsuperscript{447} This shares points of contact with the difference between the metaphysical way in which reflective equilibrium ‘settles’ the truth values of normative statements (which Scanlon endorses and Parfit rejects), and the epistemological reading of ‘settling’ (which is the role it plays in Parfit’s normative epistemology).
\textsuperscript{448} Väyrynen 2017, 179.
\textsuperscript{449} Moore 1903. See Gibbard (2003, ch.2) for a discussion and defense of this “Moorean” test of concept identity.
\textsuperscript{450} If you think the folk aren’t competent speakers, what about Bernard Williams and Sharon Street?
numbers or possible worlds. In what follows, I’ll argue that non-realist cognitivism can’t be combined with standard theories of truth, thereby drawing from unique features of the normative domain. So whereas such a mathematical truth can, for all that I say in this chapter, be understood in terms of correspondence to a mathematical reality, in an expressivist or deflationary way, or in ways compatible with different forms of conventionalism and intuitionism that regard mathematical and logical truth to be either a matter of coherence or provability – all these combinations are not on the table for non-realist cognitivism.

The above considerations indicate that what it means to correctly characterize non-ontological normative reality is not a semantic question. The pure normative truths aren’t about, and can’t be inferred from, our concepts. On the other hand, they don’t have truthmakers. There isn’t something in reality – a true-maker – that grants them their positive truth value. This unusual combination seems problematic. Some truths are made true by some things (not) existing. Other truths are analytic ones that don’t require a metaphysical basis. Parfit wants to add another exception: pure normative truths are (1) not made true by natural features of reality nor any additional normative features of reality, and are (2) not conceptual truths either – yet they are true ‘in the strongest sense’.

Making sense of this new category of truth leads Parfit into the advertised trilemma. If we understand it as a deflationary truth, he can’t hold on to his claims about how we would be “getting it right” in making normative claims. A minimalist about truth thinks the concept of ‘truth’ can only be used to express acceptance of a proposition. Not in a more-than-minimal descriptive sense as a way of conveying information about the result of a comparison of your beliefs and reality. Accordingly, there is no such thing as getting it right. I say more about this in the next section.

In contrast, if we understood it as a more-than-minimal truth, and (against Parfit’s wishes) wed it to a correspondence theory of truth, its disagreement with Robust Realism becomes purely verbal. And if we understand it as a more-than-minimal truth, yet not on the model of the correspondence theory of truth, the only live option is truth primitivism. Accepting truth primitivism would be costly in terms of plausibility points and counts heavily against the theory.

To see why rejecting truth minimalism leads Parfit to truth primitivism or indistinguishability from Robust Realism, let’s ask what, on this view, the difference is between the true normative propositions and the ones that are not true – supposing that Non-Realist Cognitivism is right that there are true normative statements, how do these statements differ from normative statements

---

that are not true? Considering some arguments from Jussi Suikkanen that show how the traditional
theories of truth are not available for Parfitian Non-Realist Cognitivism, will make clear the
relevance of this question.\footnote{Suikkanen 2017.}

As explained in section 4.2.3, Non-Realists don’t accept the correspondence theory of truth
for pure normative truths. According to that theory, the truth of a proposition consists in there
being a chunk of reality such that the proposition is in a correspondence relation with it. Parfit,
Scanlon and Skorupski explicitly deny that there is a chunk of reality that is the normative fact that
some natural facts give us a reason. Therefore, they cannot use a relation to such a fact to explain
in what the truth of normative propositions consists. If true normative statements have no
ontological implications, as Parfit maintains, then there is simply no part of reality to which such
statements correspond. Which is why he rejects the idea that normative truths are “made true by
the way they correctly describe … how things are in some part of reality.”\footnote{Parfit 2017, 577.}

In fact, with a correspondence theory of truth, the view would collapse into a notational
variant of traditional, ‘robust’ non-naturalism. Because then it would no longer make sense for
Parfit to insist that Robust Realism is false because there are no normative facts that make our
normative claims true. He would no longer be entitled to claim that, since there are irreducible
normative facts to serve as truthmakers, Robust Realists are wrong about moral statements.

For a similar reason, Non-Realist Cognitivism is not compatible with the identity theories of
truth either. These theories claim that true propositions just are chunks of reality.

What about coherence theories of truth? They see truth as a relation between truth-bearing
propositions and other believed propositions. A proposition <P> is true if and only if, and just
because, the belief that p belongs to the maximally coherent set of beliefs. So if instead of some
set of beliefs S1, some other set of beliefs (S2) could have been the maximally coherent set. If most
people do actually happen to converge on a single set of beliefs they all could have, at least in
principle, converged on a different set.\footnote{Suikkanen 2017, 203.} If that relatively weak modal thesis has some merit, and
normative truth is nothing more than such convergence obtaining, then normative truths are no
longer necessary. Unfortunately, this is clearly incompatible with Parfit’s claims that normative
truths are necessary truths, that normative epistemology is modal epistemology, and that what
reasons people have is independent of their judgments, beliefs, desires and other attitudes.
Normative truth would not have these features if coherentism were true.
The same goes for pragmatist theories of truth. On these theories, truth is a relation between truth-bearing propositions and beneficial consequences. Whether a belief with a certain proposition as its contents leads to successful action depends, for instance, on the circumstances of the believer and what other beliefs and desires she has. Hence pragmatism loses the necessity and mind-independence of normative truth.

Diagnosing: coherentist and pragmatist theories of truth have a procedural structure. They make truth depend on prior commitments. Both types of theories would render normative truth (conditions) relativist (either to the circumstantially instrumental value of accepting or to some set of beliefs). As soon as truth depends on prior commitments, the necessity and mind-independence of normative truth would be jeopardized. That implication is at odds with key features of Parfitian Non-Realist Cognitivism – such as the emphasis on ‘getting it right’ – so these theories of truth are not available for Parfit. Moreover, such theories of truth are intuitively not ‘strong’ senses of true. At least, if we assume that strength requires independence from the instrumental value of accepting a claim or from other beliefs one brings to the table. But these sound like plausible presuppositions.

Next option. Epistemic theories of truth begin from the observation that domains of discourse are governed by their internal epistemic norms. These norms fix the conditions under which one is warranted to assert the sentences that express the propositions of the discourse. The theories here suggest we can use the epistemic norms of a discourse to define a more demanding epistemic property of propositions than merely warranted assertibility, and then use that property to give an account of the nature of truth in the discourse. We can for example introduce a notion of superassertibility. A proposition is superassertible if and only if, and because, (i) there exists an accessible state of information such that (ii) it would warrant asserting that proposition and (iii) this warrant would survive “arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information”.

Can Non-Realist Cognitivists understand under the nature of the truth of normative propositions in terms of such an epistemic property on steroids? Properties like superassertibility are (metaphysically light) normative properties. A proposition has some such property in virtue of some information warranting the assertion of the proposition – such that we have good reason for

---

455 Mintz-Woo 2018, 718.
asserting. This invites the question: how could the Non-Realist Cognitivists understand such epistemic normativity?

Suikkanen argues that Parfit only has (three) bad options here. If he (i) adopts a different metanormative theory for epistemic reasons, he has to deal with his own objections to the alternative metanormative theories. If he (ii) understands the normativity in the Non-Realist Cognitivist’s way but adopts a non-epistemic theory of truth for the relevant normative epistemic propositions the canvassed objections to combining Non-Realist Cognitivism with other theories of truth apply. And if he (iii) also offers an epistemic explanation of the truth for these propositions, we’re on an infinite regress. And, it seems to me, to hold on the ‘strongest sense’ intuition, Parfit would need an account that explains the licensing of a person to assert a sentence due to its truth, not due to anything else.

The last option to consider here is truth primitivism, on which truth is a predicate for which no theory will be forthcoming – a brute, unexplainable property. The property of truth now appears to be very much like the Robust Non-Naturalists’ primitively normative properties. Consequently, it makes it hard to see what benefit Parfit’s theory (still) has over metaphysically committed metanormative non-naturalist theories in terms of fewer problematic commitments (ontological or otherwise):

If non-metaphysical cognitivism was meant to be less queer than non-naturalistic moral realism supposedly is, then we might wonder whether the appeal to primitivism about normative truth succeeds at this aim … Primitivism about truth [has] queerness written all over it.

If that’s the price of giving up ontological commitment, it’s not clear whether doing so was worth it for the non-naturalist in terms of plausibility points. It certainly is not enough to base the agreement that Gibbard and Railton have made with Parfit on. When Parfit writes that these truths have no ontological implications, he cannot defend or explain this claim under truth primitivism. He can only repeat it. Furthermore, being committed to two central unanalyzable notions (reasons fundamentalism and truth primitivism), seems like an undesirable result. I conclude truth primitivism is very difficult for Parfit to accept, since acceptance of this would commit him to a sui generis notion of truth which would be a great cost for the theory.

---

458 Suikkanen 2017, 205-7.
At this point, it doesn’t help Parfit to claim that some normative claims get things right because they describe or refer to true normative thoughts. After all, on Parfit’s view normative facts just are true thoughts. So this reply gains us nothing. We still don’t know why this thought should be objectively true. Indeed, given its problems with theories of truth, it consequently seems unclear whether Non-Realist Cognitivism can explain why, in general, the truth of normative claims is mind-independent and objective.460

4.4.3 Parfitian Non-Realist Cognitivism And Truth Minimalism

A popular set of theories of truth which I mentioned only briefly above go by the name of ‘deflationary’. These theories get their own section, because exploring their compatibility with Non-Realist Cognitivism is more complicated.

On deflationary theories of truth, the truth of a proposition is nothing over and above that proposition. ‘It’s true that suffering is bad’ just means that suffering is bad. There is no (robust) property a proposition can have of being true; to call something true is simply a way of expressing acceptance of it.

These conceptions of truth do not strike one as true ‘in the strongest sense’. If truth adds little or nothing to a claim, that intuitively suggests truth is weak, not strong. Indeed, Parfit himself rejects them as too weak for normative truths.461 The intuition of normative beliefs being ‘strongly’ true – metaphysically necessary and objective – seems one that Parfit felt very, well, strongly about.462

However, since we’ve eliminated all the alternatives, this might be the only option for Parfit. Further support for this conclusion comes from the observation that it’s not easy to see how a more-than-minimal sense of truth is compatible with central components of Non-Realist Cognitivism: (i) the rejection of the correspondence theory for the case of normative claims, (ii) Parfit’s idea that normative properties aren’t the truthmakers of normative propositions, and (iii) his claim that the existence of moral truths has no robust ontological implications that are also normative. Indeed, trying to combine these desiderata led us to primitivism about normative truth. Which amounts to saying that this notion of truth cannot be explained, elucidated, made sense of. So perhaps we ought to take Parfit’s remarks about correctly characterizing normative reality with

461 Parfit 2017, 225.
462 It seems that Parfit was convinced that life is in a certain sense meaningless if there are no ‘strong’ pure normative truths because that would mean that nothing matters absolutely (see, e.g., his 2011, vol.2, 425, 619 and his 2017, endnote to page 107; see also Temkin (2017) and Street (2017, 121)).
a grain of salt.\textsuperscript{463} He would end up with a theory according to which there are normative truths, normative facts and normative properties, but only in minimalist senses of the relevant terms.\textsuperscript{464}

Still, I believe Parfit can’t accept this way of thinking. Normative propositions can get it right, or they can’t. If they can, as Parfit believed, we need to be able to convey \textit{that} information over and above expressing acceptance of a normative proposition. To do so, we would need the concept of ‘truth’ as a comparison between normative beliefs and normative reality. But a minimalist thinks we can’t use the word ‘true’ in this reality-descriptive or comparative sense. Therefore, if Parfit were to embrace a deflationary theory of truth, he would have to forfeit his many claims along the lines of “according to [me], some normative claims are true in [a] descriptive sense, because these claims characterize some features of normative reality.”\textsuperscript{465} Since such claims are central to Parfit’s views, this would a significant departure.

Furthermore, Suikkanen argues that accepting minimalism about truth saddles Non-Realist Cognitivism with a dilemma. The Non-Realist either pairs truth deflationism with fact deflationism or he does not. A deflationary theory of facts holds that these facts would not be a genuine part of reality whereas an inflationary theory holds that they would be. On both horns, adding truth deflationism to the program means it collapses into another meta-ethical position.\textsuperscript{466}

The no-truthmaker interpretation of Parfit suggests that Parfit would say that ‘there are’ normative facts only in a minimalist sense. His rejection of normative naturalism, while holding that Non-Realist Cognitivism is compatible with metaphysical naturalism, also points to this interpretation. Saying that normative facts exist in an inflationary sense clearly flouts that commitment and invites a correspondence theory of normative truth that would threaten to make the view collapse into Robust Realism. Yet if Parfit accepts both minimalism about normative truth and normative facts, it would (once more) no longer make sense for him to maintain that Robust Realism is false because there are no normative facts that make our normative claims true. As Suikkanen reasons:

Therefore, in order to distinguish their view from metaphysical non-naturalism, the nonrealist cognitivists who accept deflationism about truth must (i) understand normative facts in an inflationary way (they would be a genuine part of the reality if they existed) and they must also (ii) think that such facts do not obtain. This leads to the second horn of the dilemma. In this case, the non-realist cognitivists would be claiming that we have reasons

---

\textsuperscript{463} Copp (2018) does so explicitly.

\textsuperscript{464} Copp (2018, 580), consequentially, interprets Parfit thusly.

\textsuperscript{465} Parfit 2017, 226.

\textsuperscript{466} Suikkanen 2017, 200-2.
to avoid future agony and that it is true (in the deflationary way) that we have those reasons even if no part of the reality is the (inflated) fact that we have reasons to avoid future agony.\textsuperscript{467}

But this means Parfit can no longer distinguish his view from a conservationist error theory. Because that means both views end up accepting all the same normative and metaethical theses and only those. If the truth predicate is understood in the deflationist transparent fashion, then both sides will be happy to believe that it is true that we have reasons to avoid future agony given that this is the same belief as the belief that we have reasons to avoid future agony, which they both already hold. They both also deny that it is true in the further correspondence sense that we have reasons to avoid future agony. The Parfitian and error-theoretic worldview do not differ on issues of ontology. And when Parfit adopts a minimalist account of truth, he and an error theorist of the conservationist stripe also assign the same truth value to most run-of-the-mill judgments about which reasons people have. So for a normative proposition to be true needs to mean something more than just what is stated by the normative proposition.

You might object that there is a difference as Parfit and the conservationist error theorist ascribe the same truth values, but for different reasons. They do so out of prudential versus ‘descriptivist’ considerations. You would be right – but that’s the point: on this horn of the dilemma there’s no way to draw that distinction!

There’s a third – semantic – difficulty, which also has the upshot that, on Parfitian Non-Realism, for a normative proposition to be true needs to mean something more than just what is stated by the normative proposition. Parfit at various places appeals to a non-causal making-true relation\textsuperscript{468} that relates natural facts to normative truths.\textsuperscript{469} For instance, the claim that lying is wrong is non-causally made to be true by the natural facts about lying in virtue of which it is wrong. The natural facts are robust facts or states of affairs. And on this reading, the normative truths are propositions that do not refer to or describe any ontologically robust facts, and that are true, if they are true, only in a minimalist sense of ‘true.’ It is then no longer clear in what sense a natural fact could make a normative proposition be true, if truth is not a property.\textsuperscript{470} We can agree that there are natural facts about lying that non-causally make it be true that it would be wrong to lie. What this comes to, given truth minimalism, is that, in light of these facts about lying, we are prepared

\textsuperscript{467} Suikkanen 2017, 201.
\textsuperscript{468} Throughout the latest volume of \textit{On What Matters}, Parfit also makes explicit use of non-causal determination, even though he seems to willingly avoid the label ‘grounding’. But he is, of course, talking about grounding.
\textsuperscript{469} For example, Parfit (2017, 78-9).
\textsuperscript{470} Copp 2018, 582.
to affirm that it would be wrong to lie. But we still don’t know what this claim is about. To explain this and to differentiate his view from the conservationist error theory, we need an explanation of what we are affirming.

The main flaw of Parfit’s metaethics, I conclude, is that the truth conditions of normative claims and the objectivity of normative facts and properties remain unclear. Finding an account of normative truth that is (1) stronger than deflationism, (2) weaker than Robust Realists suppose and (3) captures the idea of “getting it right” led us to an unappealing truth primitivism (and to the impression that these features are incompatible to the point of unintelligibility).

4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued that both Scanlonian and Parfitian Non-Realist Cognitivism are unattractive alternatives to Robust Realism. The former collapses into a version of moral constructivism. The latter doesn’t have the resources to make sense of the nature of normative truth. If that’s correct, then shrugging off ontological commitments robs the non-naturalist of the resources required to make sense of mind-independent, ontologically basic and necessary moral truths.

While, on the other hand – as argued in the previous two chapters – a non-naturalist view with these ontological commitments is problematic for metaphysical and epistemological reasons. So then perhaps we shouldn’t be non-naturalist, and perhaps we shouldn’t understand moral facts as ontologically basic, mind-independent and metaphysically necessary.

In the next and final chapter, I explore that alternative very briefly and very roughly.
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Exploratory Reflections on the Source of Morality

In this last, short chapter, I do three things. I first briefly summarize the previous chapters. I then reflect on their implications for a shared assumption of the discussed non-naturalist views: that there is a source of morality in the form of ontologically basic moral facts. And close by considering, extremely roughly, what the considerations presented in this thesis might imply for a positive metaethical theory.

5.1 BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

In the introduction, I formulated my research questions. I wanted to know what makes it the case that certain moral propositions are correct rather than others, and how we can have justified beliefs about those truthmakers. The most prominent version of moral realism is metaethical naturalism, according to which this reality is sui generis and non-natural. Can it be defended, metaphysically, that those truthmakers are ontologically basic moral facts? And how could we know what those facts are?

In chapter 2, I developed an argument against a positive answer to the former question. We saw that non-naturalism needs moral laws to do grounding work. But if non-naturalistic and ontologically fundamental moral laws are needed to make moral propositions true and to metaphysically explain why certain actions have certain moral properties, problems arise. Specifically, we saw three senses in which there’s a tension between (a) non-natural facts playing this role and (b) desiderata of metaethical theories. Issues arise with making sense of (1) the hyperintensional understanding of moral laws and (2) the modal status of moral laws. And a (3) Euthyphronic worry comes up regarding the moral significance of ordinary natural features and non-naturalist-friendly explanations of what makes any property normative. So there are significant metaphysical problems with postulating mind-independent correctness conditions in the form of non-natural facts.

Chapter 3 argued that there are also epistemological issues with such a non-naturalist proposal. Even if there exist these correctness conditions, we could not know what they are. This is because evolutionary and otherwise historical, not non-natural, facts most adequately explain why we hold certain moral beliefs and not others. And if our beliefs in non-natural facts are not best
explained by non-natural facts, that, in the absence of additional, non-abductive reasons for maintaining them, defeats their justification.

Chapter 4, finally, looked at another form of non-naturalism, Non-Realist Cognitivism. This program doesn’t reify the postulated mind-independent correctness conditions as ontologically robust properties and facts, but as non-ontological moral truths. Attractive as it may sound, I argued this is not a coherent view. It either collapses into constructivism or Robust Realism, or cannot make sense of what moral truth consists in.

In closing, and in light of these arguments, I’d like to offer some rough exploratory reflections on the very idea of mind-independent moral correctness conditions which can act as the source of morality.

5.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE SOURCE OF MORALITY

If, say, we accept something like the Kantian principle of universalizability, and then ask why universalizability of the maxim should render an action permissible, non-naturalism answers: because an independent reality dictates that it does. Even though non-naturalists may say there is, strictly speaking, nothing in virtue of which a consideration is reason-providing – there are just the irreducibly normative facts that such-and-such considerations provide reasons which constitute this reality. Nevertheless, they must allow that there is a sense in which the “source” of normativity is found in precisely that non-natural reality. Normative non-naturalism, then, can be said to locate the source of normativity in a realm of external facts about the distribution of sui generis and inherently normative properties.

This source-like way of thinking about moral justification was introduced in section 2.3.2. It revolves around the idea that valid claims about reasons require that there be some facts whose normative status is not grounded in any further normative considerations – that there must be some place where reasons come to an end, facts that at the same time can induce the network of reason’s structure (they are reasons or reason-giving) yet stand outside the network of reasons.

It is, after all, a common doubt in metaethics that perhaps we could not really have reasons to do some things and not others if there were no place where the regress of supporting reasons comes to an end. Constructivist Korsgaard, for example, writes that “if complete justification of an end is to be possible, something must bring this regress to a stop; there must be something

471 Thanks to David Enoch for discussion here.
472 I argue for this claim in section 2.5 of this dissertation.
473 Cf. Chang 2009, 244; Bedke 2020, 1028-32.
about which it’s impossible or unnecessary to ask why. This will be something unconditionally good.”^{474} And self-described non-naturalist Scanlon concurs: “In order to have reasons for action there must be some valid claims about reasons that do not normatively depend on other reasons.”^{475}

We can read this claim about normative independence as saying there’s always at least one truth ‘left out’ as the unexplained explainer of first-order normative facts. Such as facts about non-natural properties, about the constitutive standards of agency, about principles no one could reasonably reject, or about what follows from the normative judgments an agent already accepts. Many metaethical theories thus rely on “at least one moral “bridge principle” (whether a grounding conditional, an identity claim, a claim about property structure, or a constitution claim) bridging the nonmoral to the moral, one of which must be fundamental.”^{476} It seems that although this normative truth falls under the scope of any moral theory, it cannot be explained by the theory. Because it is what makes the theory work at explaining everything else.\footnote{Berker 2019, 29.}

On the source-model of moral explanation, then, meta-ethical theories only differ in which facts they take to be the unexplained explainers of first-order normative facts. As Selim Berker writes: “On this way of viewing things, almost all contemporary metaethical views (other than nihilism) end up counting as a form of non-naturalism about the normative, if you look hard enough for an unexplained first-order normative widget somewhere in the proposal, or for an untethered fact about the tethering of normative facts.”^{478}

Despite the historical prevalence of this view, as documented in section 2.3, I think there’s something off about the idea of valid claims about reasons that do not normatively depend on other reasons. The intuitive punch from Scanlon’s claim, for instance, comes from imagining a chain of justifications, and then fearing that this regress of supporting reasons doesn’t amount to much if it’s not anchored in a fact whose normative significance is not itself a normative fact. But even if you try to have a chain of should stretching into “something about which it’s impossible to ask why”, then you would still simply ask ‘Why that chain rather than some other?’ More pressingly, to insist that the \textit{normative status} of some fact is \textit{not itself a normative matter} is to concede that it is a reason for no normative reason at all! It is to concede that its normative status is unprincipled,

\footnotetext[474]{Korsgaard 1986, 488.} \footnotetext[475]{Scanlon 2009, 17.} \footnotetext[476]{Heathwood 2012, 16.} \footnotetext[477]{Cf. Schroeder 2005.} \footnotetext[478]{Berker 2019, 29.}
ungrounded, arbitrary. And if you’re allowed to end in something assumed-without-(normative-)justification, then why aren’t you allowed to assume anything without justification?

Furthermore, this way of conceiving of moral inquiry has unrealistic upshots for first-person deliberation. As Korsgaard claims: “We should never stop reflecting until we have reached a satisfactory answer, one that admits of no further questioning.”

This account of normative explanation, entailed by the source model, is quite far removed from the real materials of practical thought.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the previous chapters of this dissertation can be seen as one long argument against postulating this external anchor for our morality. Whether intrinsically normative and non-natural properties (chapters 2 and 3) or ontologically basic moral truths (chapter 4).

In this section, I’ve identified the source-model of normative explanation as a shared assumption of non-naturalisms, and presented some considerations against it. In the last section of this thesis, I give a very rough sketch of an outline of a non-viciously epistemically circular alternative to its inferential mode of moral justification.

5.3 DO THESE ARGUMENTS HINT AT A POSITIVE METAETHICAL VIEW IN PARTICULAR?

Non-naturalists hold that moral facts are intrinsically prescriptive in the sense that any rational agent will have a normative reason to respond accordingly. One upshot of my arguments, if accepted, is that this amounts to a substantive theoretical position, not a pre-theoretical datum. There are enough issues with non-naturalism to refrain from anchoring the first-order moral conclusions such a theory yields in ontologically basic and universally compelling moral facts. But what could the alternative be?

Well, if there’s no final court of appeals, then the normative status of every reason is conditional on some further fact(s) whose supporting status is likewise conditional. Nothing is intrinsically and essentially reason-giving. Reasons are conditional all the way down. Though when we are reasoning, we must start and stop somewhere within the network of reasons, it is the very nature of this network that there is no getting outside it.

Any question we can raise about the moral status of some moral argument, some moral chain of justifications, will simply be another moral question. Answerable by what is right, rather than

---

479 Korsgaard 1996, 123.
480 Väyrynen 2021b, 518-9; Bedke 2021; Eklund 2020, 127; Blackburn 1993, 153; Hayward MS; Fleming 2015.
by how some non-natural properties pattern or by what follows from the constitutive standards of agency. After all, we revise our terminal values in response to moral arguments. Not in light of a metaphysical discovery about a non-normative realm or about the truth of some reduction thesis, or some other ultimate moral truth-giver that’s not itself amenable to moral question because of its normative independence. As John McDowell writes: “Ethical thinking aims (explicitly or implicitly) to be directed by standards of good and bad argument, and the standards available to it are not independent of its own substantive and disputable conclusions.”

That is, moral predicates are *recursive*. Whether X is right potentially depends on consideration Y; but whether and how Y *rightly* supports or undermines the rightness of X is itself a moral question, which potentially depends on Z, and so on.

But still: *where* does the recursion ground out? If the arguments of this thesis are on the right track, it *doesn’t*. There is no source, no ultimate grounding and no guarantee of eventual objective correctness.

On this picture, relations of support between moral beliefs are multi-directional, not unidirectional, as in flowing from a source. We are not relying on our starting set of beliefs about rightness and moral justification in an inferentialist manner: believing these things and then using them to infer support for some other beliefs. Rather, we are beginning with some degree of belief in that-which-our-brain-recognizes-as-morality which serves as an input to the holistic, equilibrium process of reasoning that may ultimately modify our confidence in these starting points. Circularity, as William Talbott has convincingly argued, simply plays no useful role such an equilibrium framework. So rather than our moral justifications bottoming out in some brute moral fact, the chain of examination continues. There is no ultimate source, no ‘bridge principle’ with must simply be taken and not further examined. Rather, moral inquiry continues to examine any assumption, with the full force of my intelligence and morality (as opposed to something else, such as by looking at the distribution of certain non-natural properties), even though my present morality happens to be founded on this assumption.

This way, when we look at the logical relation “right” has to our other concepts, including those which we use to justify using “right” rather than “xyz” in our judgments, we find that using “right” is the right thing to do. When we use our moral concepts to investigate our moral chain of justification – when we examine this chain under its own rules – we seem to (by relying on our

---

482 See Talbott 2020, 2294 for this distinction.
own moral judgments and using our own brain) conclude that evolution has produced reliable moral thinkers in our own case.

As Simon Blackburn rightfully notes, “you can ask of a perception whether it is an illusion, but you can’t answer the question without relying on other perceptions.”\footnote{Blackburn 1996, 320.} Similarly, you can ask of a moral intuition instilled in you by evolution whether they’re immoral, but you can’t answer the question without relying on other moral intuitions that, also, eventually, go back to evolution. This sort of appeal to one’s own moral judgments in assessing the likelihood of the outcome of evolution with respect to the reliability of these judgments, does not seem ruled out by the evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism.\footnote{Roger White (2010, 589) notes about this option of reflective endorsement that “[t]he issue here is crucial to the sceptical argument yet receives no attention from Street or Joyce.” Cf. Srinivasan 2019, 134.}

Indeed, the fact that we judge things according to whether they’re right and not according to whether they’re “xyz” contingent on what sorts of being we are. Per there being no external anchor for our morality, which pattern or supervenience base is elite is not something that holds independently of human beings. What makes the patterns that we care about elite (for us), is not their correspondence to something external like a non-natural realm. Which properties are elite, depends on universal facts about humans such as deep features of our shared psychological makeup.\footnote{Here I’m drawing on Dasgupta’s (2018) insightful discussion of what makes properties elite.} The point or rational interest in this shape or similarity would be unavailable to anyone who lacked the moral concept. As John McDowell says, “however long a list we give of the items to which a supervening term applies, described in terms of the level supervened upon, there may be no way, expressible at the level supervened upon, of grouping just such items together ... Understanding why just those things belong together may essentially require understanding the supervening term.”\footnote{McDowell 1981, 145.}

On this view, morality is not, to use Hayward’s phrase, “celestial” (but it is “terrestrial”).\footnote{Hayward MS.}\footnote{Jackson, Pettit, & Smith 2000, 96.} For not all minds are compelled by that-subject-matter-which-we-name-‘morality’. In the words of Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith: “Although we hold that there is a pattern in the resulstance base, we can agree that much of its interest lies in the role it plays. Analogy: there is a pattern in the class of comic situations over and above their effect on us, but much of this pattern’s interest lies in its effect on us. Only those who know about this effect understand the point of going to see a Chaplin film.”

\footnotesize

---

\footnote{Blackburn 1996, 320.}
\footnote{Roger White (2010, 589) notes about this option of reflective endorsement that “[t]he issue here is crucial to the sceptical argument yet receives no attention from Street or Joyce.” Cf. Srinivasan 2019, 134.}
\footnote{Here I’m drawing on Dasgupta’s (2018) insightful discussion of what makes properties elite.}
\footnote{McDowell 1981, 145.}
\footnote{Hayward MS.}
\footnote{Jackson, Pettit, & Smith 2000, 96.}
And when it comes to grounding, such a view could take inspiration from, for example, the “indirect grounding” option Matthew Bedke recently outlined. As discussed in chapter 2, non-naturalism typically favours a grounding story on which fundamental moral principles are metaphysically prior to particular moral facts, where the principles help to ground particular normative facts. Such that, for example, what makes an executioner’s action wrong is some moral law – such as the principle of utility – in combination with certain natural facts about the act of execution. But an alternative grounding option for the naturalist is one on which particular moral facts are prior to moral principles, where those principles “are simply systematizing and explicitly stating the patterns we find in the particular. On this picture, if the particular normative facts are to be grounded, they are to be grounded in natural facts, so that the executioner’s action is wrong, for example, fully because of certain natural features it has. And what would then make the Principle of Utility true? The fact that this execution is wrong, that denying Sally the right to vote is wrong, that donating to an ineffective charity is wrong, and all the other particular normative facts about wrongness that are best systematized (allegedly) by the Principle of Utility.” This seems more faithful to our moral practices than non-naturalism and the source model: these practices are usually case-based and casuistic rather than inferential from principles.

If moral grounding has this nature, it simply follows that it’s unavoidable that we rely on our own moral judgments, rather than something else such as the distribution of certain non-natural properties, to judge the morality of our morality and to judge whether evolution has produced reliable moral thinkers in our own.

In the spirit of Plunkett and McPherson’s “vindicatory circularity challenge”, you might think it’s objectionably circular to use our own normative concepts to evaluate our own normative concepts. First, as they concede, this challenge depends on the idea of a relevant standard external to our normative concepts, relative to which our use of those concepts might be vindicated or improved. That is an idea, I’ve argued at length in earlier chapters, which is highly dubious both metaphysically and epistemically. Second, in this section, I put forth doubts about whether the involved circularity is objectionable to begin with.

490 Bedke 2020.
491 Cf. White 2010; Vavova 2021.
492 Srinivasan 2019, 134; White 2010, 588.
If we do indeed live in a universe without ontologically basic moral facts, I believe a view along the very, very rough lines I’ve sketched in this section is worth exploring. Obviously there is a lot more to be said here. The articulation of which must wait for a future project.
Bibliography


———. MS. “Makers of Good-Makers.”


———. MS. “Undoing the Truth Fetish.”


———, and David Faraci. MS. “Non-Naturalism and the ‘Third Factor’ Gambit.”


———. MS. “Oh, All the Wrongs I Could Have Performed! Or Why Care About Morality, Robustly Realistically Understood.”


———. MS. “Terrestrial Ethics.”
———. MS. “The Reliability Challenge in Moral Epistemology.”


———. MS. “How to Be a Relativist About Normativity.”


