

Explaining Practical Normativity

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Introduction

Sometimes different sorts of considerations for or against an action can pull against each other, and in such cases, it is natural for an agent to ask a central deliberative question: *what ought I to do?* Call the concept deployed in these deliberative contexts the PRACTICAL OUGHT (I use small caps to denote concepts). This concept can be provisionally characterized by its role in settling what to do in a way that is distinctively normative for an agent simply as an agent. One central metaethical task is to explain what (if anything) vindicates this distinctive *practical* normativity. It is natural for the realist addressing this task to appeal to the nature of the property picked out by the PRACTICAL OUGHT in her explanation.

This paper examines the significance of this explanatory task to the dialectic between naturalistic and non-naturalistic realists about practical normativity. I begin by clarifying the idea of practical normativity that is the explanatory target in this paper (§1). I then introduce a central strand of criticism of naturalistic normative realism by non-naturalists, which appeals to pessimism about the naturalist's ability to adequately explain the distinctive normativity of the PRACTICAL OUGHT (§2). The heart of this paper is a two-pronged reply to this pessimism. I first argue that the explanatory poverty of the non-naturalist's view mitigates the force of this pessimism (§3). I then argue that, once the explanatory task is appropriately interpreted as comparative, there is reason for optimism about the ability of naturalistic normative realists to accomplish it (§4). Finally, I briefly explore connections between my defense of the naturalist, and debates between particularists and generalists about the structure of the normative (§5). I

conclude by suggesting that, in light of the broader dialectic between naturalistic and non-naturalistic normative realists, my argument casts significant doubt on the plausibility of non-naturalism (§6).

1. Practical normativity: clarifying the issue

As I mentioned in the introduction, our topic is the distinctive normativity associated with the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. In contrast to a narrowly moral concept like WRONG, it is difficult to locate the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT simply by pointing to familiar uses. In this section, I thus aim to say enough about this concept to orient readers. It will sometimes be useful to talk directly about the property this concept picks out. Because this property has no familiar name, I will introduce one, calling it ‘obligatoriness.’ (In this paper I will never use this term with its more familiar narrowly moral sense.)

I begin by distinguishing the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT from two more tractable notions. First, one characteristic of all norms is that one can *make a mistake* relative to a norm. Call this feature *generic normativity*.¹ There are important puzzles about generic normativity.² However, these puzzles are not central to metaethics, because generic normativity is ubiquitous.³ For example, the rules of chess have generic normativity in two ways: you can play an illegal move or a legal but losing move. Each is a kind of mistake relative to the rules of chess. Second, note that some norms are *inescapable*. Contrast the norms of chess and of etiquette. If I choose not to play chess, I make no mistake by moving a knight diagonally across the board. By contrast, choosing to opt out of the ‘politeness game’ doesn’t make politeness norms fail to apply to you: these norms apply inescapably.⁴

¹ The ‘generic’ label is from Copp 2005. I previously called this sort of normativity ‘formal’ in my 2011. I now think Copp’s term is more apt.

² Compare the literature on ‘rule-following’ that developed around Kripke 1984.

³ Although see Wedgwood 2007 and Gibbard 2012 for recent accounts heavily influenced by the Kripkean idea that meaning is normative.

⁴ Compare Foot 1997.

Obligatoriness is both generically and inescapably normative. However, it also appears to have a distinctive kind of authority that the rules of chess and the norms of etiquette lack. This distinctive authority can be illuminated by considering part of the functional role of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. This role is to settle deliberative conflicts. When an act is impolite but obligatory, failing to perform it would not merely be a mistake relative to some normative standard, but a mistake simpliciter, or perhaps *qua* deliberator and actor.⁵

The apparently distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT is a central metaethical explanandum.⁶ Different sorts of explanations are possible. For example, it is natural for non-cognitivists to offer a *psychological* explanation, according to which the distinctive normativity of ought-thoughts is explained by the fact that such thoughts are constituted by a distinctive kind of non-cognitive attitude or state. By contrast, it is natural for a non-deflationary normative realist to offer an explanation of this distinctive normativity that appeals centrally to the nature of the property of obligatoriness. Call such an explanation a *metaphysical vindication* of the distinctive normativity of the PRACTICAL OUGHT. Metaphysical vindication is not essential to realism.⁷ However, because metaphysical vindication would give normative reality a central explanatory role, there is a natural sense in which a metaethic which achieves it is more robustly realist than one that does not.

2. The non-naturalist's challenge

It is common to divide non-deflationary normative realists into *naturalists* and *non-naturalists*. This distinction is itself highly contentious, and here I provide only a brief gloss on it. Suppose that you wanted to sort properties into metaphysically important groups. One salient group would

⁵ For an account of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT that develops this point, see my *forthcoming*.

⁶ For important skepticism about the explanandum, see Tiffany 2007.

⁷ A realist could aim to offer an account that combined a purely psychological account of normativity with a recognizeably realist account of reference. Certain forms of hybrid expressivism could be understood in this way, as could certain broadly Fregean approaches to the semantics of the normative which located the distinctive normativity of the PRACTICAL OUGHT in the *sinn* rather than the *bedeutung* (cf. Wedgwood 2004). I do not pursue these alternatives here.

be the *natural*: this would include, among others, physical and biological properties. Roughly, a *naturalistic normative realist* thinks that normative properties either are, or reduce to, properties in this group. Various possible properties are good candidates to fall outside of the naturalistic group: supernatural properties are one example. The non-naturalistic normative realist insists that normative properties form their own metaphysically important group, which does not overlap with the natural, the supernatural, or any other such metaphysically important group of this sort. This view is often glossed by the claim that normative properties are *sui generis*.⁸

Non-naturalistic normative realism has recently been undergoing an impressive revival.⁹ In this section, I reconstruct a central theme that I take to underlie this revival. This is the charge that naturalistic realism is incapable of offering a plausible metaphysical vindication of the distinctive normativity possessed by the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. Put less precisely, the charge is that *the naturalist cannot explain practical normativity*.

The notion of explanation at issue in this charge (and throughout this paper) is metaphysical, not psychological or pragmatic. This sort of metaphysical explanation is often expressed using ‘in virtue of’ claims. For example, some claim that objects have their dispositional properties *in virtue of* their categorical properties, and some divine command theorists claim that acts are right *in virtue of* being commanded by God.¹⁰ It will be important for the non-naturalist to hold that metaphysical explanation is *hyperintensional*: that there can be metaphysical explanations that hold between necessarily coextensive properties. This idea can be illustrated by a theist, convinced both that utilitarianism is true, and that necessarily, God exists and commands maximizing happiness. That theist can wonder acts are right *in virtue of* being commanded by God, or whether God is perfectly responsive to the independently existing right.

⁸ For a more careful discussion of the distinction, see my 2015b.

⁹ Among many others, see Shafer-Landau 2003, FitzPatrick 2008, and Enoch 2011.

¹⁰ There is an active controversy about whether metaphysical explanations can be regimented in terms of a single grounding relation, or whether there is an irreducible plurality of metaphysical grounding relations (for contrasting views, see for example Rosen 2010 and Wilson 2014). The dialectic of this paper would survive either resolution of this dispute.

This theist's puzzlement concerns the explanatory priority between necessarily coextensive properties.

The charge of explanatory inadequacy is sometimes levied against specific naturalistic proposals, and sometimes against naturalistic realism as such. Consider an example of each approach. First, T. M. Scanlon offers the following complaint about the theory that reasons for action are reducible to second-order desires:

But if second-order desires are really *desires*, then there is the question of how their second-order character, if it is just a difference in the objects of these desires, can give them the kind of authority [characteristic of reasons]. (1998, 55; emphasis in original)

Scanlon's complaint here is not extensional: it is not that the second-order desire account is intuitively incorrect concerning which reasons we have. Rather, Scanlon finds a desire's being second-order to be too arbitrary a feature to explain the *normative authority* of a consideration.

Even if such piecemeal objections succeed against their specific targets, it is unclear why this should lead us to a dim view about the prospects of naturalistic realism as such. Non-naturalists thus sometimes make a more ambitious general version of the charge of explanatory inadequacy. For example, according to Derek Parfit (2011, 324), the normative and the natural are like rivers and sonnets. Our knowledge of the meaning of 'river' and 'sonnet', although perhaps incomplete, is *obviously enough* to rule out the possibility that rivers and sonnets turn out to be identical. The same, Parfit suggests, is true of the terms 'normative' and 'natural'.¹¹ There is little that is distinctive of the thinnest normative terms (like 'practical ought') besides relation to the distinctive normativity that is our focus. So it is plausible that Parfit's judgment is an expression of disbelief that a naturalist could conceivably metaphysically vindicate this distinctive normativity. This paves the way to the non-naturalist's characteristic thesis. If metaphysical

¹¹ For sympathetic discussion, see Dancy 2006, §§4-8. Compare also Shafer-Landau 2003, 58, and Enoch 2011, who pithily dubs this the 'just too different' intuition. It is worth emphasizing that the relationship between both Scanlon and Parfit and non-naturalism is complicated by their meta-ontological views (e.g. Scanlon 2014, Parfit 2011 §31). For critical discussion see Enoch and McPherson *forthcoming*.

vindication is a crucial task for normative realists, and naturalists (and supernaturalists) are unable to provide it, the only realist alternative left is non-naturalism.¹²

The non-naturalist's hand is strengthened by the fact that leading naturalistic normative realists rarely address the explanatory challenge squarely, either evading the demand for metaphysical vindication, or explaining the wrong sort of normativity. Consider an example of each vice, in otherwise superb work.

Mark Schroeder has recently offered one of the most impressive defenses of reductive normative realism. A key element of Schroeder's defense is the claim that he can do everything that is required to 'capture' normativity simply by arguing that practical normativity is fundamentally about reasons (as many philosophers agree), and then offering a reductive account of reasons (2007, 79-82). However, this reply appears to evade rather than address the demand for metaphysical vindication. To see this, note that we might ask two very different questions about a theory of reasons. First, we might ask whether that theory could account for central intuitions about what we have reason to do. Schroeder dedicates enormous energy to this task in his (2007). Second, we might ask whether the theory explains what makes reasons distinctively normative. Schroeder's book can appear to take for granted that if it has accomplished the first task, it has also accomplished the second.

Peter Railton's (1989) is an important attempt to elucidate a naturalist framework for explaining normativity. However, this paper appears to aim to explain generic normativity, rather than what is distinctive of practical normativity. Railton begins by examining how a naturalist should understand the seaworthiness of a ship. He uses this case as a model of how we

¹² Note that the non-naturalist's most (in-)famous argument against naturalism - G.E. Moore's open question argument - may best be developed as a way of pressing the same explanatory complaint. Compare Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, 1997b, 4, which links the best version of the open question argument to 'action-guidingness', or D'Arms and Jacobsen 2000, 726-7, which links this argument to the distinctive 'critical function' of normative concepts. Moore's own argument is difficult to interpret this way, because of its seemingly purely semantic focus. The purely semantic version of the argument seems more promising as a defense of expressivism than non-naturalism; see for example Horgan and Timmons 1992.

could develop a naturalist account of ethical discourse. Given a background of our interests (such as in staying afloat!), he suggests, it is possible to explain "...how the term 'seaworthy' could come to seem to have something like 'intrinsic commending force'" (1989, 165). Even setting aside Railton's striking hedging, this is unsatisfying. For on Railton's positive account, the normativity at stake in this example is merely *generic* normativity. We use normatively loaded language to keep track of the seaworthiness of our vessels because of our contingent interests in this issue, just as we talk of illegal or strategically brilliant chess moves because of a sufficient background of contingent interest in playing the game. But given the ubiquity of naturalistically tractable generic norms, this is rather beside the point: the non-naturalist takes practical normativity to be strikingly *different* from these.

These sorts of responses to the explanatory demand can easily lead non-naturalists to think that naturalists simply don't get the central metaethical issue of explaining practical normativity.¹³ Non-naturalists are correct to press this point. In what follows I argue that the naturalist has more reason for optimism here than non-naturalists have realized.

3. Explanatory poverty and mysterianism

As we have seen, one way of understanding a cluster of central non-naturalist objections to naturalistic realism is as expressing an explanatory poverty thesis: that natural properties cannot metaphysically vindicate the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. This section develops an obvious worry about the non-naturalist's use of this objection: that the non-naturalist himself is incapable of providing a satisfying explanatory account. I take this objection to be *independent* of a variety of familiar naturalist challenges to the non-naturalist. For the sake of this paper, I thus provisionally assume that the non-naturalist is able to answer a range of these

¹³ The most notable contemporary instance being Parfit's conviction (displayed throughout Part Six of his 2011), that his naturalist interlocutors are simply not really talking about normative concepts at all.

challenges, for example concerning supervenience and epistemic and semantic access to normative properties.¹⁴

As we have seen, the non-naturalist is a kind of primitivist about normativity: he suggests that obligatoriness is (or fundamentally involves) a metaphysically distinctive class of properties. It would be a mistake to reject non-naturalism on this basis alone: all but the most exotic metaphysical views posit some primitive properties. It would also be a mistake to assume that simply because he is a primitivist, the non-naturalist cannot offer powerful metaphysical explanations.¹⁵

A metaphysical primitive can be explanatorily powerful if it meets two conditions. The first is that the primitive is more than a black box: that it is possible to have a substantial grasp on its primitive nature. The second is that the primitive does significant explanatory work. David Lewis' defense of modal realism (1986) is an exemplary attempt to meet these conditions. Lewis proposes concrete possible worlds as metaphysical primitives. This view arguably meets both desiderata. First, on his view, we arguably have a very rich grasp of what a concrete possible world would be like, since they are composed in the same way of the same broad sorts of elements as the actual world. Second, Lewis argues that positing such worlds can solve a host of otherwise intractable philosophical problems. They are, to use his phrase, a "philosophers' paradise". This does not mean that Lewis' theory is *correct*, but it does illustrate how explanatorily powerful a primitivist view can be.¹⁶

¹⁴ For supervenience, see e.g. my 2012a. For epistemic access, see much of the literature following Street 2006, and especially Bedke 2009.

¹⁵ The argument of this section is in some ways reminiscent of the charge by Korsgaard 1996, 28-47 that the realist merely asserts the normativity that he ought to explain. However, there are several important differences here, of which I will mention only that Korsgaard appears to assume that *any* purely metaphysical thesis will be relevantly unexplanatory. By contrast, I am granting that *in principle* a primitive metaphysical posit could be explanatory.

¹⁶ Another example that illustrates this structure is Rosen's 2010 defense of grounding: Rosen addresses the 'grasp' criterion by showing that we have intuitive facility with grounding, and that we can give a rigorous statement of the distinctive formal structure of grounding relations. He addresses the explanatory power criterion by arguing that grounding relations can play a role in both posing and answering an extraordinary range of philosophical questions.

The non-naturalist might hope to proceed as Lewis does, defending a rich account of the nature of primitive normative properties, and the range of distinctive explanatory work that such properties can do. The obvious way to address the first task involves elucidating the relations between the various properties and relations (obligatoriness, reasons, value, requirements, virtues, etc.) that the non-naturalist takes to comprise the practically normative, as well as the relations between these properties and the non-normative properties.

This approach fails, however, in light of the characteristic metaphysical structure of the non-naturalist's view. To make his view plausible, the non-naturalist must claim that acts are obligatory partly *in virtue of* certain of their non-normative properties, which I will call the *ought-making* properties.¹⁷ Consider an example: I ought not to torture a certain stray puppy partly in virtue of how such torture would make that puppy feel.

In light of this, the non-naturalist is typically committed to the view that the fundamental ought-makers are *necessarily coextensive* with the normative properties. This follows from the plausibility of the supervenience of the normative: roughly, this is the thesis that it is metaphysically or conceptually impossible that two worlds differ only in their normative respects.¹⁸ This thesis can be motivated by appeal to cases. For example, it could not be that another world is a non-normative duplicate of this one, but the duplicate Rwandan genocide there is laudable rather than an atrocity. With supervenience in hand, consider two worlds that are normatively different: I ought to work today, while my counterpart in that world ought to do something else. By supervenience, there must be some non-normative difference between the worlds. But intuitively, only certain non-normative differences are relevant to explaining this normative difference. Those non-normative differences that explain the normative difference are the ought-makers. (Notice here that I am including among the ought-makers features that some

¹⁷ Discussing morality, Audi puts the point pithily: "...certain of the natural properties of a thing *determine* what moral properties it has, (if any)" (1997, 97; emphasis mine). As Shafer Landau 2003, 78 puts the point, the non-moral world 'controls' the moral world.

¹⁸ See my 2015a for more careful discussion of these issues.

philosophers would call background conditions.) Because the pattern in this example will hold for any possible normative difference between worlds, the totality of the fundamental ought-making properties will be necessarily coextensive with obligatoriness.

This point famously forces controversial metaphysical commitments onto the non-naturalist. For example, some metaphysicians suggest that necessary coextension (perhaps together with an explanatory asymmetry condition) is sufficient for property identity or reduction, which would make the non-naturalist's commitments incoherent.¹⁹ Here, I grant the non-naturalist these commitments, in order to show how they weaken his explanatory complaint against the naturalist.

To see this weakness, consider one sort of reductive naturalist: a reductive utilitarian identify obligatoriness with the property of *being the option that maximizes net happiness*. And consider a non-naturalist who agrees with the reductive utilitarian that necessarily, every obligatory act is one that, among the agent's options, maximizes net happiness. In contrast to the reductive utilitarian, the non-naturalist insists that *being the option that maximizes net happiness* is the fundamental ought-making property. Now consider the comparative explanatory merits of the two views. Everything that the non-naturalist can explain by appeal to the ought-maker, the naturalist can explain too. The only explanatory work that the non-naturalist's distinctive posit purports to do is to explain why *being the option that maximizes net happiness* is the ought-making property.

In order for the non-naturalist's complaint against the naturalist to be effective, it must be that the naturalist's resources are inadequate to the explanatory task, and that adding the non-naturalist's posit of a primitive property transforms an inadequate explanation into an adequate one. But this is implausible in light of both of the desiderata for primitive properties introduced above. First, we have a very thin grasp on the nature of the non-naturalist's property: we know

¹⁹ For this challenge to non-naturalism, see e.g. Jackson 1998, 122-3.

only that it is a *sui generis* property that (allegedly) explains normativity. Second, unlike Lewis' possible worlds, positing this property can explain exactly one thing: why a certain natural property is the fundamental ought-maker.

It might seem that this problem is an artifact of the artificial simplicity of the case just discussed. As mentioned earlier, the non-naturalist could seek to spell out relations between a variety of normative properties and relations (including, e.g. value, virtue, reasons, and rationality). But we are now in a position to see that all of the extra richness will occur at the naturalistic '-maker' side of the non-naturalist's theory, and the naturalist can fully duplicate such explanatory relations. For example, both the reductive naturalist and the non-naturalist could agree that *an action is obligatory in virtue of maximizing value*, and that *a state is intrinsically valuable in virtue of containing happiness*. The added structure does nothing to make the non-naturalist's theory explanatorily richer *relative to* the naturalist's. And this point generalizes to any structure that the non-naturalist might seek to add. The distinctive structure of the non-naturalist's metaphysics adds only one thing that the naturalist cannot duplicate: the positing of a primitive non-natural property as indispensable explanans.

This has important implications for the dialectic between the naturalist and non-naturalist. The non-naturalist claims that the naturalist *cannot* metaphysically vindicate the normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. This commitment implies that his own attempt at metaphysical vindication cannot be notably enhanced by positing ought-making relations that the naturalist can structurally duplicate. So the non-naturalist's metaphysical vindication can only appeal to what is distinctive to his view. As I have shown, this entails that the non-naturalist can say only one thing by way of meeting the explanatory challenge that his own objection identifies as crucial. This is that the contrast between the normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT and that of merely inescapable normative concepts (like those of etiquette) is explained by the fact that the former concept refers to a certain metaphysically primitive property. Nothing more

distinctive can be said about this property, besides the fact that it allegedly does this explanatory work. In this respect, non-naturalism entails a kind of *mysterianism* about normativity: the view that what it is to be normative is fundamentally opaque to us.²⁰

Some philosophers appear to take this sort of mysterianism to be a decisive objection to a view.²¹ I claim more modestly that it weakens the non-naturalist's dialectical position. If my argument here is correct, the non-naturalist must admit that an adequate vindicating explanation of practical normativity can be provided by positing a mysterious primitive property. If such an explanation can be adequate, it would be cheating to hold the naturalist to a higher standard. The non-naturalist's own mysterianism thus reduces the explanatory burden that he can reasonably require the naturalist to meet. Call this point *the dialectical handicap of mysterianism*.

4. Comparative explanatory power

In §2, I introduced the non-naturalist's explanatory poverty objection against naturalistic realism. One important feature of this objection is that it is *non-comparative*. We consider either particular naturalistic accounts, or the idea of a naturalistic theory in general, and simply find them intuitively explanatorily inadequate. However, there is another, *comparative*, way of assessing how well a metaphysical theory explains the normativity of the PRACTICAL OUGHT. In this section, I argue that attention to such comparative assessments significantly strengthens the naturalist's dialectical position against the non-naturalist.

Recall that our aim is to provide a *metaphysical vindication* of the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT: a theory which tells us that this concept is distinctively normative in virtue of referring to a certain property. We can compare two metaphysical theories

²⁰ The term 'mysterianism' is most commonly used in the philosophy of mind, to label the view that the relationship between experiential states and underlying physical causes necessarily eludes our epistemic grasp (for discussion see Stoljar 2006, 91-4). Here the idea is that normativity is similarly something that we must simply accept as a brute and inexplicable feature of reality.

²¹ Compare Gibbard's comment that if we encountered a 'halo of goodness', "We'd need to learn more about halos" before knowing how to respond to it (2002, 180). If my argument here is correct, the awkward conclusion for the non-naturalist is that there is *nothing more to learn* about said 'halo'. Gibbard seems to find this possibility unintelligible in an account of normativity.

with respect to the plausibility of their respective metaphysical vindications. Consider an example: reductive utilitarianism is not a particularly promising metaethical theory. However, compare this theory to what I will call the *repugnant metaethic*, a theory that reduces the property of obligatoriness to the property of being approved of by the powerful. The thesis that the distinctiveness of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT is explained by the fact that it refers to the utilitarian property is far more plausible than the repugnant alternative. The attraction of reductive utilitarianism (and related views) derives in great part from the idea that human flourishing and suffering are plausible candidates to intelligibly explain what we ought to do.²² The approval of the powerful, by contrast, is not.

If this example is sound, it shows that we are able to confidently compare the plausibility of the metaphysical vindications offered by candidate realist metaethics.²³ One way of seeing the force of such comparisons is to note their significance given artificially restricted choices. For example, imagine that the oracle takes pity on my struggles to understand metaethics, and tells me that either reductive utilitarianism or the repugnant metaethic is correct. I take it that comparative plausibility of the metaphysical vindications offered by these theories would make it reasonable for me to become highly confident in reductive utilitarianism.

The varying plausibility of the metaphysical vindications available to naturalistic realist metaethics suggests an important diagnosis of the apparent force of the non-naturalist's non-comparative challenge: that this challenge underestimates the explanatory power of the *explanatorily optimal* naturalistic realist theory, which we may as yet not have identified. As we have seen, some non-naturalists target individual naturalistic theories, while others target naturalistic realism per se, so I will illustrate this diagnosis in each case.

²² I take this point to be one important motive for much utilitarian and more broadly consequentialist ethics.

²³ Another example of the comparative assessment of normative explanation can be extracted from Scanlon's 1982 discussion of what he takes to be the real but comparatively inadequate force of the explanation of moral obligation offered by 'philosophical utilitarianism'.

First, recall Scanlon's reasonable complaint that the second-order status of a desire is an objectionably arbitrary basis for a normative reduction. Even if this is true, many naturalistic properties do not seem normatively arbitrary in this way: promoting human flourishing is one example. Second, recall the Parfitian idea that one can simply *see* that no natural property could metaphysically vindicate the normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. Given debates among naturalistic realism, it is plausible that if a version of naturalistic realism is correct, that version is highly non-obvious. This suggests a natural diagnosis of Parfit's intuitive confidence. This confidence may be generated by our inability to imagine a natural property that can metaphysically vindicate practical normativity. However, we have general reasons to treat such inability as unreliable. This point is illustrated by the frequency with which philosophers are unpleasantly surprised by counterexamples to our generalizations. Another difficulty with the Parfitian intuition is that the naturalism/non-naturalism distinction is a highly technical distinction in metaphysics, whose nature is subject to vigorous dispute. It thus looks like a poor target for confident intuitive speculation.²⁴ We should thus be very cautious in taking the Parfitian intuition to be probative. To sum up: the diagnosis I have offered suggests that the explanatory poverty objection has little if any probative force.

This diagnosis appeals crucially to the comparative judgments of explanatory power concerning candidate naturalistic realist metaethics. In light of the significance of this diagnosis, it is important to consider whether the non-naturalist can offer a *theory of error* that explains away these comparative judgments. I will consider two such theories of error.

The first theory of error that the non-naturalist might consider is that our judgments about these cases track *intensional adequacy* rather than plausibility of metaphysical vindication *per se*. This might seem plausible in light of two relevant problems with the repugnant metaethic. First, it is plausible that the powerful approve of acts that are intuitively not obligatory. Second,

²⁴ See my 2015b, 141-2 for more on this point).

the approval of the powerful can be expected to vary willy-nilly across times and possible worlds, but it is implausible that facts about obligatoriness can vary in this way.

To see why this theory of error is inadequate, consider another toy metaethic. Suppose that at this moment, Bill Gates happens to approve of actions just in case they maximize net happiness. Now consider the *idiosyncratic metaethic*, which says that obligatoriness reduces to the property of *actually now being approved of by Bill Gates*. This metaethic rigidifies the relationship between actual attitudes and the obligatoriness facts, which eliminates the objectionable modal variation worry. Further, together with the stipulated facts about Gates' current attitudes, this metaethic will be necessarily coextensive with reductive utilitarianism. This eliminates the comparative advantage of reductive utilitarianism with respect to intensional plausibility.

The idiosyncratic metaethic thus eliminates the features that motivated the proposed theory of error. Despite this, the idiosyncratic metaethic is arguably *even less plausible* than the repugnant metaethic as a candidate metaphysical vindication. It is hard to think of a more objectionably arbitrary account of the nature of the property of obligatoriness: if being powerful had even a shred of normative significance, surely the attitudes of powerful people other than Bill Gates, and at other times and possible worlds, should have the same significance as his attitudes here and now. Recall my complaint about Mark Schroeder's naturalistic methodology in §2: this complaint was that *intensional* plausibility is not enough to make a naturalistic metaethic plausible. One needs also to provide a plausible explanation of practical normativity. The idiosyncratic metaethic illustrates this point: even if you were a utilitarian (and hence think this metaethic is maximally intensionally plausible), you should find it extremely implausible as an account of practical normativity.

The second theory of error I will consider is that when we make intuitive judgments comparing explanatory power, we are in fact judging the explanatory power of such theories qua *ought-maker theories*. If this were true, then rather than competing with the non-naturalist's

metaphysical hypothesis, comparative judgments about ought-makers would concern a different topic.

There are two difficulties with this theory of error. The first is that it is question-begging against at least many naturalists, who reject the generality of the ought-maker structure assumed by the non-naturalist. The second problem is that it is crucial to the non-naturalist project to appeal to *non-comparative* judgments of the plausibility of the metaphysical vindications offered by naturalistic theories. This, after all, is the whole basis of the non-naturalist's challenge. But this means that the non-naturalist is committed to the idea that our judgments *comparing* pairs of naturalistic theories must latch onto one thing (explanatory power *qua* ought-maker), while our *non-comparative* judgments about such theories latch on to something else (explanatory power *qua* fundamental normative property). It is mysterious why this pattern would hold.

The non-naturalist thus appears to have no promising way to debunk the comparative assessments of the plausibility of the metaphysical vindications offered by naturalistic metaethics. This has striking implications for the dialectic between naturalistic realists and non-naturalists. We can imagine generalizing the comparative strategy to generate an ordering of candidate naturalistic metaethics by the plausibility of their explanation of the normativity of the PRACTICAL OUGHT. Call the theory or theories at the top of that ordering the *explanatorily optimal* naturalistic metaethic(s). I take it to be an open question whether the best naturalistic metaethics developed thus far are close to being explanatorily optimal.

The comparative method that I advocate suggests that the right way of assessing the prospects of naturalism versus non-naturalism is itself comparative: to compare the explanatory power of the explanatorily optimal naturalistic theory with that of non-naturalism. This comparative method makes the *dialectical handicap of mysterianism* (introduced in the previous section) highly significant. This handicap stems from the fact that the non-naturalist's own metaphysical explanation of practical normativity was highly impoverished. Treating the task of

explaining normativity as comparative implies that the naturalist need only to produce a metaphysical vindication that has at least as much credibility as the mysterian solution. When we combine this point with the fact that we have likely not identified the most explanatorily plausible naturalistic metaethics, the explanatory poverty objection appears hopeless. If anything, attention to the task of metaphysical vindication suggests that naturalistic realism *more credible* than non-naturalism.²⁵

5. Non-naturalism and normative pluralism

The argument of the preceding two sections suggests apparently grave difficulties for the non-naturalist's argument that the naturalist is incapable of explaining practical normativity. In this section, I identify an important limitation to the force of these arguments. I claim that, perhaps surprisingly, the dialectic clarified thus far could still turn out to favor the non-naturalist, given certain suppositions about the structure of normative ethics.

Consider the distinction between monism and pluralism in normative ethics. A monistic theory like utilitarianism suggests that a single property (happiness) has normative significance in a single way (it is to-be-maximized). Pluralists deny this, accepting multiple normatively significant properties, and/or varying fitting responses to such properties. A theory can clearly be more or less pluralistic. At the limit, normative pluralism becomes radical particularism. On this view, what we ought to do is, in naturalistic terms, wildly disjunctive: obligatoriness corresponds to no interesting naturalistic pattern.

Suppose that the radical particularist is correct that obligatoriness is patternless. The truth of this hypothesis would raise substantial difficulties for certain forms of naturalistic realism. This is because wildly disjunctive properties are inapt as metaphysical *explanantia*. To make this point vivid, suppose that in characterizing the correct normative theory we could do no better

²⁵ On the other hand, if the best possible realist vindication is too underwhelming, this suggests that we should seek a *non-metaphysical* explanation of the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT.

than provide an infinitely long list, of the form *in exactly circumstances C1 one ought to A1; in exactly C2, one ought to A2...* The reductive naturalist would seemingly be forced to propose to reduce obligatoriness to the property of being a member of this infinite set of action/circumstance pairs {A1,C1; A2,C2...}. It is difficult to see how this property could possibly explain the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT.

If this is right, a radically disjunctive naturalistic explanation of obligatoriness may be *less* plausible than the non-naturalist's explanation. After all, the non-naturalist's property may be mysterious in important respects, but at least it would serve to explain the unity of the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT, something that a wildly disjunctive property is incapable of doing.

While important, this point faces at least two significant limitations. First, the relationship between this line of reasoning and *naturalism* should strike the careful reader as opaque. Suppose that obligatoriness were an irreducible *natural* property (perhaps, for example, this property plays a distinctive causal/explanatory role). Then it might well be that, in terms of *other* natural properties, obligatoriness can only be described in massively disjunctive terms. This shows that while the hypothesis of particularism poses difficulties for many naturalistic theories, it does not do so for all.

Second, there are familiar and significant reasons to be suspicious of particularism. It is unclear whether we could successfully refer to a massively naturalistically disjunctive property.²⁶ Further, the search for unification, generality, and comparative explanatory power are crucial and familiar aims of normative ethical theorizing. These aims are illustrated by complaints that Rossian pluralism (for example) posits an explanatorily objectionable 'heap of unconnected duties'.²⁷ In light of these points, it is unclear whether incompatibility with particularism significantly mitigates the credibility of any metaethical theory.

²⁶ Compare especially Jackson, Pettit, and Smith 2000.

²⁷ For discussion and defense of Ross against this charge, see McNaughton 2002.

6. Conclusions and implications

In this paper I have examined the significance of the task of explaining practical normativity for the debate between naturalistic and non-naturalistic realists. I have argued that the non-naturalist faces serious difficulties in attempting to deploy this explanatory demand in objecting to naturalistic realism. I also argued that naturalists should embrace the explanatory task, after reinterpreting it as fundamentally *comparative* in form. Finally, I showed that for some forms of naturalistic realism, this strategy rests crucially on assumptions about the structure of normative ethics. I close by briefly discussing the broader significance of the argument.

The task of explaining the distinctive normativity of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT is at the very heart of realist metaethics. Despite this, it is not always given the explicit attention that it deserves. The dialectic explored in this paper helps to explain why. While non-naturalists have been increasingly explicit about the alleged failure of their naturalist opponents to do this explanatory work, the mysterianism of their views leaves them with little positive to say on the topic. For naturalists, emphasizing this task can appear dialectically disadvantageous, simply because it is, we should admit, so hard. The argument of this paper suggests that naturalists need not evade this challenge. Instead, with the non-naturalist's challenge defused, the naturalist can focus directly on making progress in explaining the normativity of the obligatory.

Some readers will be frustrated that I did not – even schematically – take up this latter task in this paper. While I hope to take up this task in later work, such frustration misunderstands the significance of this paper. To see this, note that because philosophical progress is sometimes elusive, it may be that the explanatorily optimal naturalistic metaethic is beyond our grasp, either temporarily or permanently. A central methodological lesson of this paper is that the plausibility of naturalistic realism is not at the mercy of our ability to identify such a metaethic.

Both the comparative structure of the naturalist's project, and the dialectic with the particularist non-naturalist suggest another important methodological point. The distinction

between metaethics and systematic normative ethics is an important theoretical advance, because these two projects have crucially different aims (see McPherson and Plunkett 2017). However, these projects are closely methodologically linked. For example, in this paper I have suggested that normative theorizing is required in order to assess theories that purport to explain practical normativity.²⁸

In closing, it is worth stepping back and thinking about the dialectic between naturalistic realism in metaethics and non-naturalism. Against the non-naturalist, the naturalist can levy a familiar array of challenges: the non-naturalist's commitment to an apparently inexplicable supervenience of the normative on the non-normative, and puzzles about the possibility of semantic and epistemic access. On top of this, the naturalist seeks to understand ethics in terms continuous with the naturalistic methodologies that have delivered so much of our deepening understanding of the world, while the non-naturalist instead posits a class of primitive and non-natural properties. In light of this, what reasons one could have to favor non-naturalism in metaethics over naturalistic realism? The sense that only non-naturalism could metaphysically vindicate normativity appears to be the most important consideration that non-naturalists can advert to against naturalism, once they have grasped the hopelessness of straightforward interpretations of the open question argument.²⁹ If the argument of this paper is sound, however, it is far from clear whether the issue of metaphysical vindication favors the non-naturalist at all. This casts doubt on how well-motivated the striking contemporary revival of non-naturalism is.³⁰

²⁸ For other ways that theorizing in metaethics and normative ethics are connected, see my 2012b.

²⁹ Dancy 2006 and Enoch 2011 are especially clear examples of this thinking.

³⁰ Thanks to Derek Baker, David Jones, Noah Lemos, David Plunkett, Michael Smith, several anonymous referees, and audiences at the Minnesota Philosophical Society, Australasian Association of Philosophy, and Virginia Philosophical Association for illuminating comments on previous versions of this paper. This paper cites much less richly than it should, in order to meet a word limit. I apologize to the authors of important relevant work that goes unmentioned.

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