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Davidson's Meta-Normative Naturalism

Robert Myers

Although Donald Davidson is best known for his account of motivating reasons, towards the end of his life he did write about normative reasons, arguing for a novel form of realism we might call anomalous naturalism: *anomalous*, because it is not just non-reductive but also *non-revisionary*, refusing to compromise in any way on the thought that the prescriptive authority of normative reasons is objective and reaches to all possible agents; *naturalism*, because it still treats normative properties as perfectly ordinary *causal* properties, and thus avoids many of the epistemological problems that bedevil realisms of the sort recently advanced by Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, and T. M. Scanlon.

In the first section of the paper, I discuss Davidson's understanding of objective prescriptivity and one important challenge that it faces. In the second section, I show how an answer to this challenge can be found in Davidson's holism of the mental. As we shall see, Davidson's holism of the mental makes the possibility of strongly prescriptive properties much easier to take seriously. In the final section of the paper, I take up various grounds for doubting that such properties could also be causal.

Special Issue:

Donald Davidson: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Edited by Claudine Verheggen

Davidson's Meta-Normative Naturalism

Robert Myers

1. Introductory Remarks on Davidson's Approach to Normative Reasons

Donald Davidson is well known for his early (1963) account of motivating reasons, in which he argued, first, that motivating reasons for actions are combinations of pro-attitudes and beliefs that explain actions by rationalizing them and, second, that these rationalizing explanations are a species of causal explanation. Less well known, however, is his later (1995a) account of normative reasons, in which he began to develop a novel form of naturalism, arguing that normative reasons for actions are attitude-causing properties of situations on which people literally triangulate when they form their first normative concepts.

This is a form of naturalism, inasmuch as Davidson regards these causal relations as perfectly natural.¹ Unlike some proponents of non-naturalism, he does not assign normative properties any occult causal powers. But neither does he deny them causal powers, as most current proponents of non-naturalism do. On the contrary, he takes his triangulation argument to reveal the naturalistic causal role they play. In his view, the best explanation of how people acquire their first normative concepts requires that there be normative properties by which they can be affected and on which they can triangulate.

¹And what is it, more precisely, to regard a causal property or relation as perfectly natural? Davidson thinks it is to regard it as being appropriately dependent on physical properties and relations, and in particular on whatever ground-level properties and relations ultimately figure in basic physics. One question for us, therefore, will be what this idea of dependence commits him to.

As we shall see, however, Davidson's naturalism is unusual inasmuch as it remains strongly prescriptive. Unlike most other proponents of naturalism, he sees no need to concede that the attitude-causing nature of normative properties undercuts or otherwise compromises their prescriptive character in any way. On the contrary, he holds that normative properties are objectively prescriptive in the strongest possible sense. In his view, not even John McDowell's analogy with secondary qualities gives them their full due, for it does not adequately explain how their prescriptive authority could reach to all possible agents.²

In this critically important respect, Davidson's account of normative reasons resembles his account of motivating reasons. For there, too, he sees no need to concede that a causal account of motivating reasons jeopardizes the special (this time, the fully intentional) character either of motivating states or of actions. For Davidson, anomalous monism is not merely a non-reductive form of naturalism about the mind; in seeking to preserve the fully intentional character of motivating states and the actions they cause, it, too, is as non-revisionary as any naturalistic account of the mind could ever be.

If this aspect of his anomalous monism is not always emphasized by his commentators, that is because Davidson himself often presents his causal theory of action in a way that does not emphasize how non-revisionary his understanding of motivating states is. Even in his seminal paper, "Mental Events" (1970), but also in "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963), too much time is spent arguing that fully irreducible states can still be causal, when the more important and controversial issue is whether fully intentional states can be.³

²See especially McDowell (1985), but also McDowell (1996). As the second of these papers makes clear, commentators do not get McDowell right when they insist on counting him as a non-naturalist. McDowell would undoubtedly insist that worries about relativism also reveal a serious misunderstanding of his view; as we shall see, however, he just does seem to be on shakier ground here.

³It's true that Davidson argues for the irreducibility of mental states by

I shall argue that a very similar problem bedevils Davidson's account of normative reasons. Because he does not emphasize how non-revisionary his understanding of motivating states is, he makes it difficult to see how they could answer to anything fully objective. Once again, too much time is spent discussing the causal origins of motivating states, when the more important and controversial issues have rather to do with understanding whether and how it is possible that their causes could also be prescriptive for them.

In the second section of the paper, I explain how Humean conceptions of pro-attitudes make strong prescriptivity difficult to understand. In the third section, I show how an alternative conception of pro-attitudes is implicit in Davidson's holism of the mental. As we shall see, this alternative conception of pro-attitudes makes the possibility of strongly prescriptive properties easier to take seriously. But we shall also find grounds to worry whether this is a possibility that naturalists are in a position to exploit.

Nowadays, the worry here is often put, especially by non-naturalists but also by many reductive and revisionary naturalists, by saying that strongly prescriptive properties would be "just too different" from basic causal properties to be causal properties themselves.⁴ In the concluding section of the paper, I suggest some ways in which Davidson might have pushed back against this worry. But the issues that emerge are complex, so the final determination of who wins this debate is left for another occasion.

pointing to their rationality, but it's not clear that he understands their rationality in a way that implicates full intentionality. (To be more precise, it's not clear that he does this in these very early papers. As I argue in Myers 2017, he does become much clearer on these points later on.)

⁴This very influential way of putting the worry is due to David Enoch (2011, 4). The worry itself, however, had of course previously been raised by many other philosophers. Derek Parfit, in particular, made a great deal of this worry over his last twenty years. See Parfit (2006, 2011, vol. 2, chaps. 24–25, 2017, chap. 4).

2. Davidson's Understanding of Normative Properties, and a Problem

Unlike many, perhaps even most, naturalists, Davidson holds that normative properties are not reducible to non-normative properties. By this he means to deny, not just that normative properties are "analytically" reducible to non-normative properties, but also that properties of the former sort are "non-analytically" reducible to properties of the latter sort.⁵ But this, by itself, does not tell us very much about what he takes normative properties to be. It does not even tell us whether he takes normative properties to be prescriptive in any distinctive sense, since it leaves open the possibility that he traces their irreducibility to other differences with non-normative properties.

To say that normative properties are prescriptive is somehow to say that people's motivations are answerable to them. All properties are prescriptive in the minimal sense that people's beliefs must represent them accurately to be true. Normative properties are prescriptive in the further sense that people's motivations must follow them accurately to be correct. But must they follow them only in light of other motivations their bearers have, or somehow more objectively? If Davidson takes the first option, he owes us an alternative story about what makes normative properties distinctive; if he takes the second option, he owes us a further story about what objective prescriptivity amounts to.

Now, as I have already indicated, it's the second of these options that Davidson means to be taking. This is because he regards his triangulation argument as applying to pro-attitudes as well as to beliefs, and he regards this as requiring not simply that normative properties be capable of influencing people's

⁵Many naturalists would happily agree that normative properties are not "analytically" reducible to non-normative properties. The more contentious point on which Davidson insists is that they are not "non-analytically" reducible either.

pro-attitudes but also that they set objective standards for them that people, when triangulating, are seeking to get right.⁶ This sharply distinguishes his non-reductionism from many others, such as that of the so-called “Cornell” realists, who trace the irreducibility of normative properties to nothing more than the special complexity of their causal roles.⁷

Davidson’s non-reductionism starts to look even more intriguing once we realize that he does not mean to be explaining objective prescriptivity by modelling normative properties on secondary qualities in the manner of John McDowell (1985). This may not be immediately obvious, for in his brief (1995a) discussion of John Mackie’s “argument from queerness” he endorses McDowell’s complaint that Mackie is not thinking about primary and secondary qualities in the right way.⁸ But Davidson does this with a view to arguing that normative properties can be modelled on primary qualities.⁹ In his view, modelling normative properties on secondary qualities does not do justice to their essentially public character.

⁶Davidson (1995a). Not surprisingly, commentators who downplay the triangulation argument tend to read Davidson very differently. For example, Bilgrami (2010), emphasizing the causal theory of action, reads him as a revisionary naturalist, whereas Hurley (2002), emphasizing the holism of the mental, takes him to be rejecting naturalism. For more on the merits of my middle path, see Myers and Verheggen (2016, part 2).

⁷See Boyd (1988), Brink (1989) and Sturgeon (2006) for three very influential examples of this approach. Despite these differences over the nature of prescriptivity, which I believe stem from differences over the proper understanding of the causal theory of action, Davidson shares a lot with the Cornell realists. I hope on another occasion to provide a detailed comparison of these two forms of naturalism.

⁸As McDowell argues, and Davidson agrees, the deeper problem is that Mackie treats experiences like sensations, which prevents him from understanding how either primary or secondary qualities could make demands on them.

⁹As we shall see in just a moment, Davidson doesn’t think the analogy here is perfect. All he wants to claim is that it is better than the analogy with secondary qualities.

The worry here is that secondary qualities are not objectively prescriptive in the unbridled manner normative properties are expected to be because different agents can have very different sensory mechanisms. It may be true, for example, that a blue object should look blue to me, but false that it should look any colour whatsoever to agents incapable of visual experience. Such agents should still accept that the object is blue, but the fact that colours prescribe nothing for their experiences presents a serious problem for the analogy with normative reasons.

Davidson’s assumption is not that normative properties necessarily prescribe the same motivations for every agent. Somebody’s cruelty might give me reason to intervene and you reason to run for help. If the perpetrator is a close colleague of mine but a complete stranger to you, the reasons it gives me might also be stronger than the reasons it gives you. The point is just that the secondary quality model seems problematic because one would not expect genuinely normative properties to make prescriptions for some people’s motivations but not for others’.¹⁰

But now, if it is this unbridled notion of objective prescriptivity that Davidson hopes to capture, the question arises whether and how he can capture it without forsaking his naturalism. This question will seem especially pressing, I think, so long as we are operating with the conception of what motivating reasons are that Davidson himself often appears to be advocating. In fact, if motivating reasons necessarily comprise pro-attitudes, and pro-attitudes are simply brute dispositions to act, it is difficult to understand how any sort of objective prescriptivity could be possible.

McDowell himself is of course famous for holding that normative beliefs can motivate independently of pro-attitudes, but this is somewhat misleading given how he thinks normative judg-

¹⁰One would also not expect these different reasons to have nothing to do with one another. See Wallace (2009) for a very similar account of what the “publicness” of reasons comes to.

ment is developed. He agrees that people start with brute dispositions to react to certain situations in certain ways, and holds that normative judgment is developed as these dispositions to react are trained. It is through affective training that people's motivating reasons are brought under the jurisdiction of various norms; people ultimately should have whatever motivations they have been trained to have.¹¹

This is a neat way of explaining how people's motivating states could become answerable to more objective properties. But the reliance on training makes it difficult to see how this objective prescriptivity could avoid being bridled.¹² Depending on the kind of training that a particular agent has undergone, it would seem to be perfectly possible that one person's cruel treatment of another might not give her any reason to act at all.¹³ On the other hand, however, if normative judgment is not developed through the training of brute dispositions, it is difficult to understand how objective properties could have any prescriptive bearing on such dispositions at all.

To be sure, if there were only one "space of reasons" that people could be trained to appreciate, then relativism would not be the threat to McDowell's account of prescriptivity that I am suggesting it is.¹⁴ However, in order for this to be true, surely a different account of training would be needed, one according

¹¹As I acknowledge below, this is clearly not how McDowell intends his view to be interpreted. But the emphasis on affective training makes it difficult to interpret it in any other way.

¹²A related worry might be put like this: if objectively prescriptive reasons exist only for people who have been adequately trained to appreciate them, how do they emerge in the first place?

¹³Or, perhaps more realistically, it might give her a reason for action that has nothing whatsoever to do with the various sorts of reasons for action that it gives us.

¹⁴This is pretty clearly the way in which McDowell would like his view to be understood. However, as I go on to say, it is not at all clear how this univocal claim about reasons can be squared with his emphasis on the importance of affective training. One would think affective training could lead anywhere, so whence the confidence that norms are univocal?

to which it is not just a moulding of brute dispositions to act, as McDowell suggests, but the development of a capacity for normative cognition.¹⁵ But then we are back with our original problem. For what sense can we make of the claim that people's motivating states are answerable to these reasons?

This leaves Davidson in a bind. If it is an unbridled notion of objective prescriptivity that he wants, it looks like he might have to abandon the claim that motivating reasons comprise brute dispositions to act. However, if motivating reasons do not comprise any dispositions to act, but instead, for example, comprise only combinations of normative and descriptive beliefs, one might wonder how a causal theory of action could be true. Thus Davidson might have to choose: either to give up the idea that normative properties are strongly prescriptive, or to give up his central and defining claim that rationalizing explanation is a species of causal explanation.

But of course, as a naturalist, Davidson's choice would never be to abandon the causal theory of action.¹⁶ What he would have to conclude is that objective prescriptivity is not as unbridled as he had assumed. As we shall see in the next section, however, things are actually not as bad as this. Davidson can and eventually does give up the claim that motivating reasons necessarily comprise brute dispositions to act, thereby holding on to his hopes for normative reasons, without giving up on his causal theory of action. The trick is to take a more complex view of the sorts of dispositions that motivating reasons comprise.

¹⁵Needless to say, McDowell often reads as if this is what he has in mind. But then, as I go on to say, we lose his answer to questions about motivation. If normative cognition does not develop through a process of affective training, how can it motivate? But if it cannot motivate, in what sense can normative properties prescribe anything for people's motivations?

¹⁶As I argue in [Myers \(2017\)](#), Davidson did eventually shift from a more reductive version of the causal theory to a less reductive one. But he never questioned the causal theory itself.

3. Davidson's Understanding of Motivating Reasons, and the Solution

Davidson is commonly (mis)understood as holding a Humean conception of pro-attitudes, according to which a pro-attitude towards ϕ -ing is, at bottom, a disposition to do whatever one believes will increase one's chances of ϕ -ing.¹⁷ Such dispositions may be described as "brute" inasmuch as their contents are not conditioned by one's beliefs about the reasons there are for ϕ -ing; reasons for ϕ -ing are not relevant, the goal is simply to ϕ . (Of course, one's goal might occasionally be to act on some reason; but even then one's reasons for doing so would not be relevant.)

I agree that Davidson was thinking of pro-attitudes in this way when he introduced his claim that motivating reasons are causes of actions. (Though even in his earliest papers, it is easy to find signs that he was also thinking of pro-attitudes in more complex terms.) But I believe he subsequently shifted to a less simple-minded view, one that gave normative beliefs a much more pivotal role to play. This shift came about as he thought through a series of questions about the manner and the degree to which pro-attitudes are holistic.

Even on the Humean conception, pro-attitudes are holistic to some degree. After all, if a pro-attitude towards ϕ -ing is, at bottom, a disposition to do whatever one believes will increase one's chances of ϕ -ing, then the content of this pro-attitude depends on the contents of those beliefs, and also, through them, if Davidson is right, on the contents of a great many of the other beliefs that one has. However, it typically does not depend either on the contents of one's other pro-attitudes or on the contents of one's normative beliefs; and this is something Davidson eventually came to see as a problem.

Consider one of the few examples actually discussed by Davidson (1990, 89). If I have a pro-attitude towards winning at chess,

¹⁷See Smith (1987) for an influential articulation and defence of this conception. As I mentioned earlier, Bilgrami (2010) is led by this misunderstanding to read Davidson as a kind of revisionary naturalist.

am I disposed to do whatever I believe will increase my chances of winning? Suppose I believe I can increase my chances of winning by playing against only the weakest available opponents: young children, raw beginners, blind drunks, and the like. Are these really things I am disposed to do? Davidson never went so far as to deny that they might be, but he ultimately concluded that in typical cases they would not be because I would not see anything desirable in winning by such means.

Davidson put this point by insisting (1995b, 13) that the holism of the mental is *intra*-attitudinal as well as *inter*-attitudinal, the idea being that the contents of one's pro-attitudes typically depend on the contents of one's other pro-attitudes and not just on the contents of one's descriptive beliefs. But I think he must have meant more than this. He must have meant that the content of one's pro-attitude towards ϕ -ing typically depends on the contents of one's beliefs about the reasons there are for one to ϕ .¹⁸

Of course, it could just be that I have an independent desire to avoid playing chess against very weak opponents, and that, because this desire is stronger than the other, it looks as if the first desire does not at all dispose me to play against the weakest available opponents, when the truth of the matter is that it does. But why should we suppose something like this must be the truth of the matter? Isn't it much more likely that both these desires are conditioned by my normative beliefs?

Further confirmation that Davidson took the holism of the mental to rule out Humean accounts of what pro-attitudes are can be found in his general approach to propositional content. Even in the early years, when his focus was less on the metaphysics of content, and more on its epistemology, a concern for truth was always assumed to be integral. People wouldn't be interpretable if they were motivated to act in just any old way;

¹⁸Further argument for this interpretation can be found in Myers (2012), Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 6), and Myers (2017). (Hurley 2002 takes Davidson more literally at his word on this point.)

they must be striving to be “believers of the true and lovers of the good” (1970, 222).

This concern for truth rules out Humean accounts of what pro-attitudes are because it requires people to have what we might call a systemic interest in getting things right. Their individual pro-attitudes may on occasion be insensitive to their judgments about their reasons, but their pro-attitudes as a system must be aiming to get normative matters right.¹⁹ So a pro-attitude towards ϕ -ing will typically be sensitive not just to one’s beliefs about one’s opportunities for ϕ -ing but also to one’s beliefs about one’s reasons for ϕ -ing.

If this is right, then it becomes much easier to understand how normative properties could be strongly prescriptive. On the Humean conception of what pro-attitudes are, they are not naturally conditioned by one’s normative beliefs. It is only as one comes to acquire what McDowell (1996) calls a “second” nature, through affective training, that situations are revealed to have normative properties making objective demands on what one’s motivations should properly be. But then, as we noted in the previous section, it looks like objective prescriptivity cannot be fully unbridled, leaving Davidson vulnerable to the charge that a meta-normative naturalism could never give him everything he wants.

However, if it is true that pro-attitudes share a systemic aim to get normative matters right, then normative properties, assuming there in fact are any, have a bearing on them right from the start. People will presumably still have to undergo a kind of training before they can appreciate these objective reasons, but it will be training of a kind very different from the one on which McDowell is relying—not a training of one’s brute dispositions to act, which might create disconnected reasons for different people, but a training of one’s capacity for normative cognition, enabling people to appreciate reasons common to them all.

¹⁹Yet further confirmation of this reading can be found in Davidson (1969). If the principle of continence is a principle of rationality, that is because people aim to get normative matters right.

But now a different worry might rear its head. Even if the existence of strongly prescriptive properties would be perfectly compatible with the causal theory of action, could strongly prescriptive properties actually be causal themselves? Recent non-naturalists such as Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, and T. M. Scanlon deny that they could be.²⁰ Davidson’s argument for the existence of strongly prescriptive properties would thus strike them as being a hopeless muddle. They would of course applaud his commitment to realism, but they would criticise him for failing to see that the only way to maintain strong prescriptivity is to abandon the idea that normative properties are causal.

Before closing, therefore, I need to say something about why Davidson is not troubled on this score. This is not easy, in part because these non-naturalists rarely make the source of their worries clear, in part because Davidson’s position is equally underdeveloped. Obviously what we need are answers to two questions. First, what is it for properties to be causal? Second, could strongly prescriptive properties have what it takes? As we shall see, Davidson’s answers, though underdeveloped, point us in a direction that is extremely promising, a direction that seems perfectly capable of withstanding assault from intuitions of the “just too different” variety.

4. Concluding Thoughts on Davidson’s Relation to Non-Naturalism

Non-naturalist critiques of naturalism are often marred by the fact that they are not exhaustive. They often neglect non-reductive forms of naturalism, emphasizing instead that strongly prescriptive concepts cannot possibly refer to the same properties as ordinary causal concepts do because they are such different

²⁰See Nagel (1986, chap. 8), Parfit (2011, part 6), and Scanlon (2014, lect. 2). See also Enoch (2011, chap. 5), and Bilgrami (2006, chap. 5) (though the latter isn’t defending non-naturalism).

concepts.²¹ But Davidson does not deny this. He is not claiming that strongly prescriptive properties can be identified in this manner with ordinary causal properties. He is just claiming that strongly prescriptive properties are causal as well. As we might say, his naturalism is not reductive; it is inclusive.

Another problem: even when they do acknowledge the possibility of fully non-reductive forms of naturalism, non-naturalists invariably assume either that such theories forsake strong prescriptivity, and so remain unacceptably revisionary, or that such theories assign strongly prescriptive properties implausible causal powers, and so are patently false.²² Once again, however, this overlooks the possibility that Davidson is pursuing. He is by no means forsaking the strong prescriptivity of normative properties. And the causal powers that he wants to assign to these properties are not ones that he takes to be implausible in any way.

Indeed, it is important to remember that, when he says strongly prescriptive properties are causal, Davidson does not mean to be suggesting that they figure in explanations governed by strict laws. His claim is not that well-placed individuals will always recognize and act on their reasons. On the contrary, as he understands causal concepts, they apply precisely where strict laws do not. They mark connections between kinds of events that, while still counterfactual supporting, can tolerate numerous exceptions, in particular, exceptions of all the sorts one finds when cataloguing people's responses to their reasons.²³

²¹For example, while Parfit does briefly allude to the possibility of what he calls "wide" naturalism, he immediately asserts that we can ignore it. See Parfit (2011, vol. 2, 306ff.).

²²Mackie (1977, chap. 1) is the classic example. Mackie simply assumes that non-reductive naturalists who are also non-revisionary must be assigning strongly prescriptive properties some unlikely (indeed, "queer") motivating force.

²³See Davidson (1963, 15–17, 1967, 1970, 215–23). Davidson does insist that *token* causes and effects must *also* be describable in more basic terms, and that, at some fundamental level of description, explanations governed by strict laws

However, Davidson allows that causal properties and explanations must supervene on physical properties and explanations.²⁴ If normative properties are to figure in causal explanations of people's normative judgments and motivating states, any differences at the normative level must be accompanied by relevant differences at the physical level. So it would seem that what non-naturalists need to argue, against the sort of naturalism I am attributing to Davidson, is that strongly prescriptive properties are just too different from ordinary physical properties to vary with them in the requisite way, whatever this turns out to be.

Now one question that arises here concerns the scope of the requisite co-variance relations. Most naturalists require the causal properties of token states or events to vary in the right way with the physical properties of those very same states or events. So far as I know, Davidson never explicitly disavows this commitment to "individual" supervenience, but the holistic and historical character of his views would seem to preclude it, so I assume that what he meant to be advocating was some looser requirement.

Another question that needs to be answered here concerns the modality of these relations. Must they hold in all possible worlds, or can they be somewhat more contingent? Here Davidson makes his view very clear; he insists that "weak" supervenience will do.²⁵ These relations must hold in all possible worlds

must be available. But that's a claim about the nature of causal *relations*, not the nature of causal *properties*.

²⁴Most famously, in Davidson (1970, 214). But see also Davidson (1973, 1993). Since many non-naturalists actually agree with Davidson that normative properties must supervene on physical properties, it might seem odd that they should raise this as a potential problem for his view. As we shall see, however, this agreement about co-variance masks a deeper disagreement about grounding.

²⁵See especially Davidson (1993, 186 n.4). Is weak supervenience actually an option for realists? Pace Blackburn (1985), I believe it is, but I won't pursue that issue any further here. Nor will I discuss worries about how a less

governed by our laws of nature, but if there can be other possible worlds governed by different laws of nature, different relations between the causal and the physical should be expected to hold there.

Suppose, however, that Davidson turns out to be wrong on both these counts. Would this prove him wrong in allowing that strongly prescriptive properties could be causal? The point I want to stress here, in closing, is that it might not. Much would still depend on the fuller story about the nature of these relations. And it would still need to be established that strongly prescriptive properties are just too different from ordinary physical properties to be related to them in these ways.

These cautionary points should be perfectly obvious, but, unfortunately, they are easy to forget. As non-naturalists are constantly reminding us, strongly prescriptive properties are, well, strongly prescriptive, whereas ordinary physical properties are not, so of course they are very different. But this is not enough, by itself, to establish that they are too different.²⁶ To establish that they are too different, non-naturalists need to say much more; and this is not something that, to date, many non-naturalists have done.

In fairness, recent non-naturalists such as Nagel, Parfit and Scanlon have said a bit more. Scanlon, in particular, has distinguished “pure” normative claims, which he likens to claims of pure set theory, from what he calls “mixed” normative claims, which he likens to claims of applied set theory. In his view, claims about the normative properties situations possess are al-

individualistic version of supervenience could be formulated. I shall simply assume the worst case for Davidson: that supervenience must be individual and strong.

²⁶It may not even be enough to rule out the possibility that strongly prescriptive properties could be non-analytically reduced to ordinary physical properties. For two interesting attempts to show that it is enough to rule out non-analytic reductions, see Bilgrami (2006, chap. 5) and Parfit (2011, vol. 2, chap. 25). For the other side of the argument, see Schroeder (2007, chap. 4).

ways applied or mixed claims, and the fact that normative properties supervene on physical properties follows from the fact that pure normative claims must be consistently applied to situations in order to be correctly applied to them.²⁷

If this is the correct view of things, normative properties are not likely to be causal. For one would expect the fact that causal properties supervene on physical properties to be explained by facts about the manner in which they are determined by or grounded in those properties, not facts about the manner in which “pure” claims are to be “applied” to concrete cases. When non-naturalists complain that normative properties are too different from physical properties to be causal, we might therefore understand them to be expressing allegiance to an account something like Scanlon’s.

But is this the correct view of things? Davidson would not have agreed that it is. He did not regard concrete normative claims as applications of other normative claims that are unsullied; indeed, he would have found the very idea of an unsullied normative claim hugely problematic. How much substantive content could such claims have? What justification could anyone have for believing them? As Davidson sees things, non-naturalists like Scanlon have no answers to questions of these sorts, and so we have no reason to take their alternative to meta-normative naturalism very seriously.²⁸

²⁷Thus, for Scanlon, physical properties determine normative properties, and they do so necessarily, not just contingently, but physical properties do not ground normative properties; their grounding is provided by pure normative truths. See Scanlon (2014, lect. 2, 38ff.). Enoch (2011, chap. 6) advocates a similar approach (although, as chap. 5 makes clear, he thinks of pure normative claims differently than Scanlon does).

²⁸Scanlon does address such worries in his (2014, lect. 4), but not, I believe, terribly persuasively. His idea is that a normative epistemology can be modelled on the method of reflective equilibrium without any independent argument guaranteeing that our pretheoretical judgments about normative matters are presumptively credible. Surely, however, we do need supporting arguments of the sort Davidson’s principle of charity provides.

Of course, Scanlon might counter by insisting that Davidson has no answers to worries about grounding. How could the physical properties of situations possibly suffice to determine what their prescriptive properties are? Worries on this score might seem to establish that there really are only two options here. Those most concerned to explain how normative claims can acquire content and be warranted will have to forsake strong prescriptivity and settle for a revisionary or perhaps even reductive form of naturalism. Those more concerned to retain strong prescriptivity will have to take their chances with non-naturalism.

Until more is said, however, this assessment of the options is clearly premature. We may be getting clearer about the target of the “just too different” intuition, but we still don’t have an argument establishing that strongly prescriptive properties actually are too different from ordinary physical properties to be determined by or grounded in them. So far as I can see, we don’t even have any considerations suggesting that the challenges confronting Davidson are worse than those confronting revisionary naturalism and non-naturalism.²⁹

In fact, it seems to me that Davidson is in the stronger position here. Explaining how ordinary physical properties suffice to determine strongly prescriptive ones may prove difficult, but holding that they (just) do is easier than holding either that strong prescriptivity (just) is an illusion or that pure normative truths (just) are known a priori.³⁰ Much as anomalous monism

²⁹Bilgrami (2006, chap. 5) objects that dependency claims between prescriptive and physical properties aren’t even assessable, since the former are first-personal and justificatory, while the latter are third-personal and explanatory. But of course Davidson’s idea is precisely that prescriptive properties are at once justificatory and explanatory, so he wouldn’t see this as adding anything of note to the “just too different” intuition.

³⁰What I mean to be claiming here is not that revisionary naturalism and non-naturalism are less plausibly thought to be true; it’s that they are less plausibly thought to be “brute” truths. It’s easier to accept that grounding relations aren’t further explicable than it is to accept that the illusion of strong

remains appealing even though the problem of consciousness is hard, so too, I think, does the “problem of prescriptivity” leave anomalous naturalism largely unscathed.

But this could just be me, of course; Davidson’s view clearly does face difficulties, and they could prove to be more serious than the difficulties confronting his rivals, either because they are intrinsically more important or because they prove to be more intractable. I’m not declaring a winner here. All I’m saying is that we should recognize Davidson’s anomalous naturalism as an intriguing alternative to the more familiar meta-normative theories, even if it requires the normative to be very firmly grounded in the physical.³¹

And this isn’t the only possibility. For it could still turn out that Davidson is right in holding that the physical determines the causal only holistically and contingently, in which case the prospects for his anomalous naturalism would presumably be even better.³² My intention in these concluding remarks has been not to rule out this possibility but simply to point out that Davidson’s anomalous naturalism may not depend on it. These are all complex issues on which much more work needs to be done.

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prescriptivity isn’t or that the possession of a priori normative knowledge isn’t.
³¹McLaughlin (2013) comes to a similarly guarded but optimistic conclusion about the prospects of defending Davidson’s anomalous monism against analogous worries about how the physical could possibly suffice to determine the mental.

³²Not because it would be easier to explain how the physical succeeds in grounding the normative, but because it would be easier to accept that the fact that it does is brute.

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