

Non-Naturalism and Normative Authority

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1. Normative authority

Normative non-naturalism is the view that some normative properties or relations are *sui generis* in the sense that they are not identical to any natural property or relation, nor explicable in any other terms. Here I use the term ‘normativity’ broadly to include phenomena like rationality, reasons (epistemic and practical), oughts and shoulds, and also phenomena like good and bad, right and wrong, etc. Thus, if we interpret G. E. Moore as proposing that goodness is a brute, non-natural property, he would count as a normative non-naturalist. More recently, Scanlon (2014) defended a non-naturalist view on which the relation of *being a reason for* is brute and non-natural. Non-naturalism has also been defended recently by Oddie (2005), Parfit (2006, 2011), Wedgwood (2007), FitzPatrick (2008, 2014), and Enoch (2011).

Against non-naturalism, it has been objected that these *sui generis* properties and relations would have no “normative authority” over us. When deciding what to do, why would facts about some *sui generis* property be relevant? Grant that I should care about whether my actions cause pain, or treat people with respect, or advance my goals; why care about whether my actions also align with some *sui generis* property?

Nowell-Smith (1954) expressed this point nicely in a now oft-quoted passage. If there are *sui generis* properties of rightness and wrongness, he said, then learning about them

“might well be as exciting as learning about spiral nebulae or watersprouts. But what if I am not interested? Why should I *do* anything about these newly-revealed objects? Some things, I have now learnt, are right and others wrong; but why should I do what is right and eschew what is wrong?” (p. 41).

Korsgaard (1997) made a related point when she said that if reasons are just extra, *sui generis* facts about the world, it “invites the question why it is rational to conform to those reasons, and seems to leave us in need of a reason to be rational” (p. 240). And Nagel expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote that on the non-naturalist’s view “it can only be regarded as a mysterious fact that people care whether what they do is right or wrong” (1970, p. 8).

This “normative argument” is one of the three central objections to non-naturalism.¹ But it can be developed in two rather different ways. On one construal, it rests on two premises about normative *judgment*. The first premise is a so-called “internalist” principle that posits a necessary connection (of some strength or other) between a subject’s making a normative judgment and her being in some conative state such as being motivated to act. And the second premise is that beliefs about a *sui generis* property don’t bear this necessary connection to the conative state. It follows that normative judgments aren’t beliefs about the *sui generis* property.

¹ The other two being an epistemic objection that we could never know about the *sui generis* properties, and a metaphysical objection to the effect that *sui generis* properties are somehow “spooky”. I will not discuss these objections here.

I'll call this the "internal" construal because it rests on the internalist principle. To be sure, internalist principles are many varied, so this internal construal comes in many varieties.² But these differences won't matter for our purposes: they all rest on *some* kind of internal connection between normative judgment and motivation. This style of argument also deserves to be called "internal" because its immediate conclusion concerns the inner mental state of normative *judgment*—that it is not a belief about the non-naturalist's *sui generis* property—not the nature of that *sui generis* property itself.

But the quotations above—Nowell-Smith's in particular—can also be heard differently, as concerning the normative properties directly rather than our mental states of normative judgment or motivation. On this second way of hearing it, the idea is that while there may be some *sui generis* property out there, it is utterly unclear why our actions should organize around it. Grant Moore that some things have a *sui generis* property P and others do not; why does it follow that the former should be promoted over the latter? The objection is that there is no answer to this question; that the possession of P is normatively inert. Heard like this, the objection has nothing to do with mental states like motivation or normative judgment, and everything to do with whether a *sui generis* property could have normative upshots. I'll call this the "external" construal of the normative argument.

Much recent work on the normative argument has focused on the internal construal, and in particular the internalist connection between normative judgment and motivation it rests on. Dreier's (2015) recent presentation of the argument, for example, is a squarely internal construal based on a careful defense of the internalist connection. And when Parfit (2006), Scanlon (2014, chapter 3), and Enoch (2011, chapter 9) defend their non-naturalist views against the normative argument, they focus on arguing that any connection between normative judgment and motivation is in fact weak enough that they can account for it. Insofar as the external construal gets any mention, all these authors see it as based on an elementary confusion and quickly set it aside.³

But I think the external construal is, in fact, formidable. True, the quotations above can be (willfully?) misinterpreted as expressing an elementary confusion, but behind them lies a serious challenge. My aim here is to develop this external argument. To be clear, I don't think the argument I'll develop is my invention: to my mind it has already been voiced over and over again in the quotations above and elsewhere. My contribution is just to present it in its best light; a clean-up job if you will. Dreier (2015) recently did a clean-up job on the internal argument, and indeed some of my points overlap with his. But here I focus on the external argument. One of its virtues is that it rests on no contentious connection between normative judgment and motivation. Even if non-naturalists are right that the connection isn't strong enough to support the internal argument, I want to show that they still have the external argument to contend with.

² A strong version would state that it is an analytic truth that someone making a normative judgement is (say) motivated in some way; another version would state that this is a necessary truth, but perhaps not analytic; yet another version would state that it is a necessary truth about all rational agents; and there are other versions besides.

³ Bedke (2014) presented an ingenious argument against non-naturalism that doesn't fall neatly into the categories I've set up. It's aim is to show that normative judgments aren't beliefs about *sui generis* properties; in that respect it resembles the internal construal of the normative argument. But it rests not on a *practical* connection between normative judgement and motivation, but on an *epistemic* connection between normative judgement and evidence. The argument is that normative judgments do not respond to evidence in the way they would were they beliefs about *sui generis* properties.

2. Playing fair

To articulate the external argument it will help to work with a toy normative theory. By a normative theory, I mean a theory of the explanatory connections between normative phenomena. The toy theory I'll work with has two parts. First, it states that *good* explains *should*, in the sense that an action phi is what one should do when, and because, phi promotes more good than its alternatives. And second, the theory states that goodness is normatively fundamental, in the sense something's being good isn't explained by anything normative. Thus, if x is good, this is not because we have a *reason* to promote x, or because a *rational agent* would desire x, or anything like that.

I don't believe for a moment that this toy normative theory is true, but it will be instructive to work with it. The theory states that if x is good there's no *normative* explanation why that's so, but is there some other explanation? Here we find the various familiar positions in meta-ethics. A naturalist view would be that x is good in virtue of various natural facts about x; a relativist might say that "x is good" is true, at least in her mouth, because her standards imply that x is good; a non-cognitivist might say that an utterance of "x is good" is not a descriptive assertion but rather expresses some conative state such as approval of x; and so on.

By contrast, a non-naturalist position would be that goodness is *sui generis* in the sense that it is non-natural and inexplicable. By saying that goodness is inexplicable, I mean that if x is good then this is a brute fact about x; there is nothing about x in virtue of which it is good. To be clear, this is just one non-naturalist position amongst many. Other non-naturalists say that some other normative property is *sui generis*, and they would then explain goodness in terms of it. But that is to reject the toy normative theory I'm working with. So for now let us focus on this particular "goodness-first" variety of non-naturalism, on which the *sui generis* property is goodness.

Goodness-first non-naturalism really consists in two claims. First, there is an *ontological claim* that in addition to all the natural properties and relations out there, there is also a non-natural, *sui-generis* property P. And second, there is an *identification claim* that goodness = P. The external normative argument against this view is then easy to state. In brief, it targets the identification claim. Grant for the sake of argument the ontological claim that there is this *sui generis* property P that some things have and others lack. The question is *why* it should be promoted. What is it about P in virtue of which we should promote things that have *it*? Why shouldn't we promote things with some other property instead? The objection—to be developed below—will be that there is no answer to this question; hence P, if there is such a property, cannot be the property *goodness*.

You might think that the objection is confused. "Look", the non-naturalist might reply, "my view is that P *is* the property goodness. It's *obvious* that we should promote goodness, hence it's *obvious* that we should promote P." But this misses the point of the objection. To paraphrase David Lewis: be my guest—posit all the primitive *sui generis* whatnots you like. But play fair in

naming your whatnots. Don't call any alleged feature of reality "goodness" unless you've already shown that you have something we should promote.⁴

This requirement that we "play fair" is crucial to the external argument, so it is worth dwelling on it. An analogy may help. Consider the following toy theory of water: that water is a clear, colorless liquid. This then puts a constraint on a theory of what water is: if I wish to identify water with some chemical substructure, it had better be the case that the chemical substructure yields the clear, colorless behavior noted in our theory. If someone claimed that water is the element Mercury (Hg), we can object that given the chemical properties of Hg, bodies of Hg are not clear and colorless but opaque and silvery. It would be a scientific travesty to respond "Well on my theory water = Hg; hence, since water is clear, it follows that Hg *must* be clear too!" Posit all the chemical substructures you like, we might say, but play fair in naming them. Don't call one of them "water" unless you've already shown that you have something that is clear and colorless.

Or consider a second analogy. Someone killed Mr Plum in the library, but who? Going by the footprints, we know that the killer has big feet. This then puts a constraint on a theory of who the killer is: whoever it is, they must have big feet. Suppose Jones is in the dock, and the prosecution is asked to show that Jones' feet fit the profile. It would be a legal travesty if they said "Well our theory is that Jones is the murder; hence, since the killer has big feet, it follows that Jones must have big feet!" This is not playing fair. Don't call someone the killer until you've already shown that they have big feet.

I claim that we should play fair in naming *sui generis* whatnots too. If a non-naturalist says that it's *obvious* we should promote goodness, I won't disagree. This is exactly what the toy normative theory under assumption states, so this "obvious" truth is not in question. But it does put a constraint on what goodness is: whatever it is, it had better be the case that we should promote *it*. If someone says that goodness is identical to the property of being red, we can object that it's not the case that we should promote red things; hence goodness \neq redness. It would be a travesty to respond "Well, on my theory goodness = redness; hence, since we should promote what's good, we should promote what's red." I say it is an equal travesty to say "Well my theory is that goodness = P; hence since we should promote what's good it follows that we should promote P." No: what the non-naturalist must do is *first* establish that we should promote P; only then is it fair to call P "goodness".

This requirement that we play fair is nothing new to meta-ethics. Consider a simple divine command theory of goodness, on which goodness = whatever God commands us to promote. What is wrong with this view? Put aside the objection that God does not exist; focus instead on the famous objection that even if there were a supernatural agent issuing commands, it would be utterly mysterious why we should obey. This objection assumes the toy normative theory that we should promote what's good, and it uses the theory as a constraint on what goodness could be. And the objection is that just because someone *commands* us to promote something, this doesn't mean that we *should* promote it. If the divine command theorist says "Well on my theory, the property of being commanded by God that we promote it *is* the property of being good;

⁴ I'm paraphrasing Lewis' famous argument against anti-Humean views of chance, which hold that chance is a primitive, irreducible property. Against this view, Lewis noted that chance (whatever it is) constrains rational credence, and he asked how a primitive property could play that role: "Be my guest—posit all the primitive unHumean whatnots you like... But play fair in naming your whatnots. Don't call any alleged feature of reality "chance" unless you've already shown that you have something, knowledge of which could constrain rational credence." (Lewis 1994, p. 484).

hence we should promote what God commands”, we should reply that this is not playing fair. “Be my guest, posit all the supernatural whatnots you like”, we might say, “but play fair in naming what these whatnots command. Don’t call it goodness unless you’ve already shown that you have something that we should promote.”

I started out assuming the toy normative theory that we should promote what’s good; the question is then whether we should promote P. I could instead have started out assuming the non-naturalist’s theory that goodness = P, in which case the question would be whether we should promote what’s good *if goodness = P*.⁵ But it’s not playing fair to assume both: you cannot establish that we should promote P by assuming that we should promote goodness *and at the same time* assuming that P = goodness. That would be like establishing that Hg is clear by assuming that water is clear *and at the same time* assuming that water = Hg. You can assume that water is clear, in which case the question is whether Hg is clear. *Or* you can assume that water = Hg, in which case the question would be whether water is clear *if water = Hg*. But as any respectable chemist will confirm, you cannot assume both.

I’ve focused on the “goodness-first” variety of non-naturalism, but the external argument generalizes to other non-naturalist views such as Scanlon’s (2014). Scanlon accepts a normative theory on which rationality is explained by reasons: an agent is rational in virtue of responding to reasons.⁶ He is then a non-naturalist insofar as he says that the property of *being a reason* is *sui generis*. This is “reasons-first” non-naturalism. Against this view, the external argument grants Scanlon his normative theory that rationality is responding to reasons. This then puts a constraint on what the property of *being a reason* is: whatever it is, it had better be the case that it’s rational to respond to *it*. Thus, when Scanlon says that *being a reason* is a *sui generis* property R, the external argument asks whether it’s rational to respond to R. What is it about R in virtue of which it’s rational to respond to *it*, rather than one of the myriad other properties and relations out there? Don’t say “well R *just is* the property of being a reason, so *of course* it’s rational to respond to R”: that’s not playing fair. It would be akin to establishing that Hg is clear by assuming water is clear *and at the same time* assuming that water = Hg.

More generally, the external objection asks the following question: In virtue of what does the non-naturalist’s *sui generis* property play the role she believes it to play in normative theory? This question can be tailored to the specific non-naturalist in question, depending on what normative theory they accept. I have not yet argued that there is no answer to these questions; I’ll turn to that soon. My point so far is just that one must play fair in answering it.

If I’ve belabored this point, it’s because non-naturalists have systematically ignored it. Consider Parfit’s (2006) response to Korsgaard. In the passage I quoted on p. 1, Korsgaard voices something like the question I’ve asked of Scanlon, of why it’s rational to respond to R. Parfit’s response is telling: “If [normative non-naturalists] were asked why it is rational to respond to reasons, they could answer: ‘That is what being rational *is*.’” (p. 359). But our question isn’t why it’s rational to respond to *reasons*; our question is why it’s rational to respond

⁵ Dreier (2015) raises an internal version of the normative argument in this fashion, by stressing that the question is whether a normative belief would motivate *if* its content concerned the non-naturalist’s *sui generis* property.

⁶ More fully, “a rational agent is, first, one that is capable of thinking about the reasons for certain actions or attitudes, and for reaching conclusions about which of these are good reasons. Second, a being is a rational agent only if the judgments that it makes about reasons make a difference to the actions and attitudes that it proceeds to have” Scanlon (2014), p. 54.

to *R*. If Parfit thinks he's answered our question, he must have conflated the questions. And the questions are indeed the same *if one assumes that R = the property of being a reason*. But that's not playing fair, as we now know.⁷

Similarly, Scanlon writes that "a person cannot coherently say 'Yes, I see that C is a conclusive reason to do X, but what reason do I have to do it?'" (2003, p. 14). He was discussing a more internalist construal of the normative argument, but the application to our external argument should be clear. His point would be that the question of why it's rational to respond to reasons is somehow "incoherent". But that's not our question: our question is why it's rational to respond to *R*. Since he doesn't play fair, he thinks these questions are the same and hence that our question is incoherent. But properly understood, our question is no more incoherent than the question of whether Hg is clear, or whether Jones is the killer.

Enoch (2011) makes the same mistake. Having distinguished the external from the internal construal of the objection, he goes on to dismiss the external construal as a non-starter:

"...it is one thing to insist—quite plausibly, if somewhat trivially—that normative truths... should be relevant to what we *should* do, or what we *have (normative) reason* to do, or some such. It's quite another to insist that normative truths must be able to bear *motivationally* on our actions... [Non-naturalism] has absolutely no problem with the first of these two claims. *Of course* the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do—after all, many of them *just are* truths about what we have reason to do." (p. 239; emphasis in the original).

This is not playing fair. Imagine he had said, "*Of course* Hg is clear—after all, Hg *just is* water, and water is clear". If he wants to assume that water is clear, fine; but then he must *first* establish that Hg is clear *before* assuming that Hg is water. Likewise, if he wants to assume that normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do, fine: that strikes me as a sound normative theory. But then he must *first* show that his non-natural whatnots bear on what we have reason to do *before* proposing that truths about those whatnots deserve the title 'normative truths'. He must play fair in naming his whatnots.

Even Dreier (2015), when *objecting* to non-naturalism, sometimes misses the point that his opponent must play fair. He writes that "plainly, *if* there is a Normative Question that remains after all the normative facts are in, it cannot be the question of whether one *should* act in a certain way, or *ought* to act in a certain way, since one of the normative facts might simply *be* the fact that one should act in that way" (p. 172). This leads Dreier to abandon these external construals in favor of an internal construal that asks how "our judgements of what we ought to do [could] motivate us to do things" (p. 177). But I disagree: if faced with a goodness-first non-naturalist, I think we *can* ask why we should promote P. To think that one of the normative facts might simply *be* the fact that one should promote P, as Dreier does, is to not play fair. Indeed, elsewhere in the same paper he emphasizes that the question pressed by his internal construal is not really how normative judgments could motivate action, but rather how this could be so *if normative judgements are beliefs about sui generis properties*. This is just another way of saying that we must play fair when answering the internal question, and I agree with Dreier on this entirely. My point is that the same goes for the external question.

⁷ Parfit makes this same mistake throughout the paper, in which he discusses the normative argument as voiced by a host of different authors. In each case he says the argument has a trivial answer, but that's just because he's not playing fair.

3. The external normative argument

I haven't yet given the external argument against non-naturalism; I've just said what counts as fair play when discussing it. To set the argument out, let's use the analogous objection to the divine command theory above as a guide.

That objection first assumed the normative theory that goodness should be promoted; or as I'll put it for short, that goodness is "action-guiding":

1. Goodness is action-guiding.

This puts a constraint on what goodness could be: whatever it is, it must be action-guiding. The objection was then that God's commands are not action-guiding. Why not? The idea was that commands are cheap, issued by all manner of people. My children, my parents, lunatics on the street—I've heard commands from all of them. Often I shouldn't obey them. Why then are the commands of some supernatural whatnot any different? What is it about *it* in virtue of which we should obey its commands rather others'? The objection is that there is no answer. One might respond that it is a primitive fact that we should obey the supernatural whatnot; that I should obey the whatnot rather than my parents *even though there is nothing that makes the whatnot special*. But this, presumably, is an unattractive bullet to bite. Thus, the objection can be seen as proceeding as follows:

2. If God's commands are action-guiding, there must be something about God's commands that make them action guiding.
3. There is nothing about God's commands in virtue of which they would be action-guiding.

It follows from 2 and 3 that God's commands aren't action-guiding. Hence, by 1, goodness ≠ what God commands us to promote.

The external argument against non-naturalism proceeds similarly. The first premise is the same:

1. Goodness is action-guiding.

This then puts a constraint on what goodness could be: whatever it is, it should be promoted. The question then is whether the non-naturalist's property P should be promoted. If we're playing fair, this question isn't trivial; nor is it settled by a normative theory such as that goodness should be promoted. The external objection is that P is not something that should be promoted. And the argument for this is that there is nothing about P that would make it the case that we should promote it. After all, there are myriad properties out there, so if one of them should be promoted over the others there must be something about it *in virtue of which* it stands out. Thus:

2. If P is action-guiding, there must be something about P in virtue of which P is action-guiding.
3. There is nothing about P in virtue of which it is action-guiding.

By 2 and 3, it follows that P is not action-guiding. And by 1, it follows that goodness \neq P.

Let me now defend each premise in turn.

4. Primitive action-guiders

Premise 1 states that goodness is action-guiding. I said that X is action-guiding iff it should be promoted, so premise 1 states that goodness should be promoted. This is part of the toy normative theory under assumption, which the “goodness-first” non-naturalist under discussion accepts. When the external argument is directed against other non-naturalist views, premise 1 will be a statement of *whatever normative theory the non-naturalist under discussion accepts*. So the non-naturalist will never be in a position to reject premise 1. Thus, when objecting to Scanlon the first premise will state that rationality is a matter of responding to reasons. If we wanted to press this into the mould of premise 1 above, we could stipulate that X is *action-guiding* iff rationality is a matter of responding to X. The first premise would then say that reasons are action-guiding. By design, Scanlon accepts this.

For now, I continue to focus on “goodness-first” non-naturalism, so premise 1 states that goodness should be promoted. I should mention that this can be read in two ways. A *de re* reading is that x should be promoted iff x is good. If pleasure is good, this implies that pleasure should be promoted. By contrast, a *de dicto* reading is that goodness *as such* should be promoted. Chappell (manuscript) argues that the non-naturalist should only accept the *de re* reading, so that is how I will read it. But for ease of prose I will sometimes slur over the distinction and say that goodness should be promoted, when what this really means is that things that are good should be promoted. In any case, nothing hangs on the issue: the external argument would apply equally to a non-naturalist who adopted the *de dicto* reading.

Premise 2 says that if P should be promoted, there must be something about P in virtue of which *it* should be promoted rather than any other property. Note that this is a demand for *explanation*, not *justification*. Against the divine command theory, premise 2 does not ask for a *reason to believe* that we should obey God. Rather, it asks for some fact about God that would *make it the case* that we should obey *God* rather than, say, my next door neighbor.

Nor does premise 2 demand a *motivating reason* to promote P. It does not ask for some fact about P that, if known, would *move* or *convince* someone to promote P, or would explain or rationalize their action. For the argument would then collapse into something more like the internal construal, on which the question is how beliefs about P could connect up with motivation and decision-making.⁸

Instead, what premise 2 demands is some explanation of why P is special; some fact about P that explains why it, rather than any other property, should be promoted. The explanation may not be available to ordinary practical reasoners; premise 2 just demands that there must be some explanation or other.

⁸ Korsgaard (1996) might be read as formulating the normative argument around motivating reasons. She imagines that ‘you are being asked to face death... You ask the normative question: you want to know whether this terrible claim on you is justified’ (1996, p. 38). And her worry is that being informed of facts about the distribution of some *sui generis* property P wouldn’t help; it wouldn’t help ‘someone who has falling into doubt about whether moral requirements are really normative’ (p. 38). She appears to be asking what motivating reason there could be to promote a *sui generis* whatnot, and concluding that there is none.

Thus, if the divine command theorist rejects their analogue of premise 2, she is saying not just that there is a supernatural, command-giving whatnot; she is saying that it is a *brute, inexplicable* fact about the whatnot that we should obey *its* commands rather than the commands of others. This is highly implausible. Suppose there were many supernatural agents. Then what the divine command theorist would be saying is that we should all obey her favored one *even though there is nothing about it in virtue of which that's so*. This is not just religion; this is fanaticism.⁹

Likewise, if the non-naturalist rejects premise 2, she is saying not just that it is an inexplicable fact that (say) pleasure has P; she is saying that it is an inexplicable fact *that P should be promoted*. As I'll put it, she is saying that P is *primitively* action-guiding. Again, this is highly implausible. For there are a *multitude* of properties out there—P, Q, R, etc—some natural and perhaps some non-natural. If the non-naturalist rejects 2, she is saying that we should all promote P, and not Q or R, *even though there is nothing about P that makes it special*. This too is a kind of fanaticism.

Admittedly, there is nothing *logically* incoherent about rejecting premise 2. In fact, I think this is the non-naturalist's only refuge and I have no decisive argument against it. Still, once exposed for what it is, it seems to me a clearly unattractive position.

But the challenge is to expose the position for what it really is. One way that non-naturalists try to conceal it is by not playing fair. If you reject premise 2, what you think is inexplicable isn't the obvious or trivial truth that we should promote *what's good*; it's the *highly non-obvious, non-trivial* truth that we should promote the *sui generis* whatnot P. Don't say "But P *is* the property of being good"—that's not playing fair. By not playing fair you can make it *sound* like your unexplained truth is obvious, or banal, or trivial, and so you can invite your reader to think that it's innocuous to say it has no explanation. But the truth in question is not obvious or banal or trivial at all. It's no more obvious or banal or trivial than the claim that out of thousands of supernatural agents out there, we should obey exactly one of them.

In any case, even if the truth *were* obvious it wouldn't follow that it's innocuous to say it has no explanation. Remember, the question is not *whether we should think* that P is action-guiding, but *what explains why* P is action-guiding. It's obvious that water is clear, but I would like to know why. If there really were *no* explanation that would be shocking! Similarly, a Christian might find it obvious that his favored supernatural whatnot should be obeyed; that just makes him a committed Christian. But if he adds that we should all obey his whatnot *even though there's nothing that makes it special*, that's something else entirely.

Thus, if a non-naturalist rejects 2, her view is not the innocuous claim that it's *obvious* that we should promote the good; it isn't just Enoch's (2011) unobjectionable claim that "*of course* the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do" (p. 239). No, it's the extraordinary view that some bit of the world P should be promoted, even though *there's nothing about P that makes it special*. Like I said, I have no decisive argument against this view. But I do insist that we describe the view for what is and not conceal it in innocuous clothing.

⁹ Thanks to Nico Kolodny for raising the possibility that there could be many supernatural agents.

Chappell (manuscript) tries to conceal it arguing that it is illegitimate to refer to the *sui generis* property with the letter “P”. There may be no answer to the question why P should be promoted, he argues, but that’s just because the label P is “indirect”. Instead, “the only way to directly pick out the [*sui generis*] property in question is via the corresponding normative concept, and so we cannot even bring the property into our thoughts except by thinking of it as normative” (p. 8). The idea is that once we pick out P under a normative guise as “the property of being good”, there is nothing extra-ordinary about saying that the question of why goodness should be promoted has no answer. “It makes no sense at all to question the normativity of a purely normative property,” says Chappell, “for their normative guise is the only (direct) guise they have” (p. 8).

But this is all just clothing stitched up to look innocuous. For one thing, even if we pick out P as “goodness”, this does not make it any more innocuous to say that the question has no answer. As emphasized, the question is not *whether* goodness should be promoted—I agree it’s obvious that it should—but *what explains why* goodness should be promoted. But more importantly, I deny that it’s illegitimate to refer to the property as P. I initially characterized non-naturalism as follows:

Goodness is a *sui generis* property.

As far as I can tell, Chappell accepts this characterization. But in first-order logic this implies:

There is a property P such that P is *sui generis* and P = goodness.

This is the inference I made when I said that non-naturalism consisted in two claims: the ontological claim that there is a *sui generis* property, and the identification claim that it is identical with goodness. In effect, I’ve been using P as a bound variable ever since to talk about whatever non-natural whatnot the non-naturalist posits. If Chappell claims that this talk is illegitimate, he must reject first-order logic.

I doubt Chappell wants to reject first-order logic. Elsewhere in the same paper, he accepts that you can refer to the *sui generis* property with all sorts of labels like “P”. But he says that those labels don’t pick it out under a guise that reveals its essence. Thus, his view seems to be that P is *essentially* normative, so that when we pick it out with a label like “goodness” that reveals this essence, it is clear why P should be promoted. This view may be correct, but it doesn’t reject premise 2. Rather, it’s a view on which P should be promoted *because of what it essentially is*. I will discuss the viability of this kind of explanation soon. But for now, the point is that this is not a rejection of premise 2. To reject 2 is to deny that even *this* kind of explanation is available; it is to say that there is *nothing* about P, not even its essence, in virtue of which it should be promoted over other properties. Again, I have no refutation of this view; my claim is just that we should describe it as what it is.

5. Connective explanations

That leaves premise 3, the claim that there is no explanation of why P should be promoted. Spelled out more fully, the claim that P should be promoted is this:

(*) One should do an action phi iff phi promotes more P than its alternatives.

If the non-naturalist rejects premise 3, her challenge is to say what could explain (*). But we must be clear on what kind of explanation is required. It would not do for the non-naturalist to say “we happen to like P; that is why we should promote P”. For this would ground normativity in our contingent preferences, and this is not what the non-naturalist wants. More generally, non-naturalism rejects the idea that normativity has its source in facts about *us* such as our desires, our projects, our language or conceptual scheme, or such-like. Rather, the central idea is supposed to be that normativity comes from the *sui generis* whatnots themselves, independently of facts about us. As I’ll put it for short, her view is that (*) is an *objective* fact, one that isn’t explained in terms of facts about us. The non-naturalist must explain (*), so understood.

I can think of two explanatory strategies. One is to explain (*) in terms of the “essences” of the things involved in (*), such as P, or action, or “should”. The other is to say that P is correlated with something else that should be promoted. I will argue that neither strategy works, indicating along the way how the discussion generalizes to other non-naturalist views such as Scanlon’s. Of course, I cannot be exhaustive so it’s possible that some explanation I miss does better. But I hope the discussion illustrates the difficulties involved in providing an explanation. I leave it as a challenge for the non-naturalist to find an explanation that avoids them.

Let us start with the second strategy, the one that draws on a correlation between P and something else. A non-naturalist is very likely to think that there are such connections. For example, she may have views about which things have P, such as pleasure, desire-satisfaction, happiness, love, and so on. For the sake of specificity, let us assume she believes that pleasure has P, and nothing else does. Then one obvious strategy is to say that it’s the *pleasure* that makes P action-guiding. More fully, the idea is that P should be promoted because (i) pleasure should be promoted, and (ii) pleasure is the only thing with P.

But the problem is that on the non-naturalist’s own view, this gets things exactly the wrong way round. After all, what makes (i) true? Why should we promote *pleasure*, rather than something else? For the non-naturalist, the answer was supposed to be that we should promote pleasure *because pleasure has P!* On her view, *P* was supposed to be the source of normativity, not some natural property like pleasure. Thus, for the non-naturalist (i) was not supposed to *explain why* P should be promoted, it was supposed to be *explained by* the fact that P should be promoted.

Another way to put the point is that this strategy leaves P explanatorily *idle*. For suppose we grant (i), the claim that pleasure should be promoted. If charitable donations promote pleasure, this explains on its own why we should donate to charity. What is the non-naturalist adding to this story? Only that pleasure has P, and that P should be promoted. And why should P be promoted? On the current strategy, it’s because pleasure should be promoted. But was already enough on its own to explain why we should donate to charity. The detour through P does no work.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jackson (1998) also claimed that the non-naturalist’s *sui generis* properties would be idle, but his point was different from mine. His point was that a *justificatory* or *motivating* reason for action would never appeal to such properties. But our discussion here concerns constitutive explanations, not justificatory or motivating reasons (see section 4). Thus, Chappell (manuscript) responds to Jackson by arguing that while P may never contribute to justificatory reasons, it nonetheless play a role in explaining *why all the things that have it should be promoted*, and hence isn’t idle *in that sense*. This may be a good reply to Jackson; my point here is that the current strategy leaves P idle in exactly this latter sense. Hence, Chappell would presumably join me in rejecting this current strategy.

I just focused on an explanation that involved pleasure, but the point generalizes to any explanatory strategy of this kind. Such a strategy will say that P is action-guiding because (i) some other property X is action-guiding, and (ii) X correlates with P. And the problem is that by the non-naturalist's own lights, this gets things precisely the wrong way round.

I've focused on the "goodness-first" non-naturalist, but the current point applies equally to other non-naturalist views. Consider Scanlon's (2014) "reasons-first" non-naturalism from section 2. For him, the challenge is to explain why his *sui generis* relation R is what it's rational to respond to. The current strategy would explain this by saying that (i) some other relation X is what it's rational to respond to, and (ii) X correlates with R. But again, this gets things the wrong way round. On Scanlon's own view, R is supposed to ground normativity, not X.¹¹

I conclude that this strategy of explanation is not promising.

6. Explanations from essential natures

Perhaps more promising are explanations of (*) that appeal to the "essences", or "constitutive natures", of the items involved in (*). But I'll argue that the non-naturalist finds no joy here either.

Start with explanations that appeal to the essence of P. The idea would be that it is in P's essence to be action-guiding. That's why P, rather than any of the myriad other properties out there, is action-guiding: it isn't in the essence of these other properties to be action-guiding.¹²

To assess this proposal, we must ask what is meant by talk of "essence". For the explanation to work, the claim that P is *essentially* action-guiding cannot just mean that it's *necessarily true* that P is action-guiding. For this is just in need of explanation as the claim that P is action-guiding. After all, many agree that general normative truths are necessarily true, so that if (for example) we should promote what God commands, then it's necessarily true that we should promote what God commands. But this does not explain why we should obey God rather than someone else.

So the talk of "essence" and "constitutive nature" must amount to something else. I can think of two readings. On one, essence is to be understood on the model of definition. Just as a *word* can have a definition in other terms, the idea is that an *entity* or *property* can also have a

¹¹ In more detail, just imagine that X is specified in terms of desire-fulfillment. Then the suggestion would be that it's rational to respond to R because (i) it's rational to fulfill desires, and (ii) R correlates with what would fulfill desire. Obviously this is not an explanation that Scanlon could accept! Indeed, as he emphasizes in (2014, chapter 1), he could agree that R correlates with desire-fulfillment; still, he says, what distinguishes his view is that rationality is explained by R, not desire-fulfillment.

¹² This is the idea we detected earlier in Chappell (manuscript), when we read him as saying that when we refer to P as "goodness" we refer to it under a guise that reveals what it is essentially is, and that referred to this way it's clear why P is action-guiding. Heathwood (2015) also proposes a view in this vicinity, on which normative properties are such that "to attribute one knowingly to something is, *due to the nature of the property* knowingly attributed, necessarily to commend or condemn that thing" (p. 229; my emphasis). Admittedly, he builds attitudes of condemnation or commendation into the nature of the property, whereas the view I discuss in the text builds in normative entailments instead. So his view has a more internalist spin on it than the one I discuss. Still, the views are clearly related.

definition in terms of other entities or properties too.¹³ The former are “nominal” definitions; the latter “real” definitions. If we understand essence like this, the idea would be that P is *defined* in terms of action-guidance. More fully, the suggestion would be that P is *by definition* that property that something has iff it should be promoted. Put otherwise: for something have P is, *by definition*, for it to be something we should promote.

If P were defined like this, it would explain why P should be promoted. But it should be clear that the non-naturalist cannot accept this definition. For on this definition P is not *sui generis* as the non-naturalist wanted to say; it is rather something that’s *defined* in terms of what we should promote. Suppose pleasure has P. Then on the current definition, pleasure has P *in virtue of* pleasure’s being something we should promote, contrary to the non-naturalist’s claim that P is *sui generis*.

It might be objected that I’m trading on an ambiguity in “*sui generis*”. Perhaps the sense in which the naturalist says that P is *sui generis* isn’t in conflict with the claim that P has a real definition in terms of action-guidance. I doubt it, but the point can be put in a way that sidesteps the issue. The non-naturalist proposes to explain why, say, pleasure should be promoted by saying that pleasure has P. If she then says that for pleasure to have P *just is* for pleasure to be something we should promote, she has run a very tight circle indeed.

The definitional reading of essence is therefore of no help here. What is the other reading? It is the more obscure idea from the metaphysics of the Scholastic Aristotelians, that some entities or properties have “inner natures” hiding within them that are (at least partly) responsible for what they’re like, how they behave, etc. Thus, on this reading the idea would be that P contains such an “inner nature” that somehow leads it to be action-guiding.¹⁴

This idea is at least consistent with non-naturalism. It does not contradict the non-naturalist’s claim that P is a *sui generis* property to say that P contains an inner nature that makes it action-guiding. But, I say, this idea should be rejected as a pernicious remnant of Scholastic metaphysics. Imagine the analogous idea in the case of water. Suppose we ask what properties of H₂O explain the fact that water is a clear and colorless. There is a good answer to this question involving the electrostatic properties of H₂O molecules, their interactions with photons, and so on. That is the bread and butter of the physical and chemical sciences. By contrast, the Scholastic would say just that H₂O has an “inner nature” that makes it clear and colorless. That kind of “explanation” is now rejected as a scientific travesty, and rightly so. The current explanation of why P is action-guiding is no different.

To be clear, this is by no means a decisive objection. There is no logical incoherence in the non-naturalist offering this objection, and perhaps it is the best explanation they can give. But I do insist that we call the explanation what it is: a revival of a Scholastic method that has been rightly rejected in other intellectual domains.

¹³ Kit Fine has long advocated a reading of essentialist talk along these lines. See Fine (1994).

¹⁴ So-called “psychological essentialism” is the view that human beings have implicit beliefs to the effect that animals, plants, and other natural kinds have “inner natures” like these. See Leslie (2013) for a review of the empirical evidence for psychological essentialism. If true, psychological essentialism would explain the sway that Scholasticism held over philosophy, and perhaps why it feels so natural to talk of inner natures like these. But it doesn’t follow in the least that things *actually have* inner natures; indeed psychologists who advocate psychological essentialism see themselves as describing part of our cognitive architecture that doesn’t reflect reality.

At this point the non-naturalist might retreat to saying that action-guidingness lies in the nature of *our concept of P*, not P itself. To see the idea, let us allow the non-naturalist to play unfair for the sake of argument and call P “goodness”. Then the idea would be that one counts as a possessor of the concept “good” only if one is willing to infer, from the claim that x is good, to the conclusion that x should be promoted. On this view, being action-guiding lies not in the nature of any worldly property, but in the possession-condition of the concept “good”.

I have nothing against this view, but it is not what the non-naturalist needs. For it doesn't imply that P's being action-guiding is objective in the required sense. To see this, imagine a community of people who speak just like us with the one exception: their concept with this possession condition is the one they express by 'red', not 'good'. Their actions are therefore organized around promoting redness, not goodness. On the current view, there is no objective sense in which they're going wrong. By their standards, given their language, they're doing just as they ought. And on this view there's nothing about P in virtue of which their language gets the normative facts incorrect. Sure, we can say that they're not doing as they should, and that would be true *in our mouths*. But this would be true only because of the language we speak and the concepts we possess, not because of anything to do with P itself. As we saw, this is not what the non-naturalist wants. On her view, remember, normativity is supposed to come from P itself, independently of facts about us.

I conclude that the non-naturalist cannot explain why P is action-guiding in terms of the essence of P. What about the essence of action? It might be suggested that promoting goodness is a constitutive aim of action; that part of what it is for a bodily movement to count as an *action* is that it aim at promoting P. Perhaps this explains why our actions should promote P —after all, only actions that promote P would fulfill their aim.

But the proposal fails for two reasons. First, I very much doubt that promoting P is a constitutive aim of action. The non-naturalist's property P is, after all, a property that many think isn't real. I, for one, do not aim to promote P. Does it follow that I never *act*? Surely not. The non-naturalist may say in reply that I aim to promote P without knowing it, but this only serves to emphasize how implausible the claim is.

In this regard, note that the suggestion is not that *goodness* is a constitutive aim of action. That may be true but it wouldn't explain why we should promote P unless we assumed that P = goodness, which wouldn't be playing fair. The non-naturalist must show that promoting P is a constitutive aim of action, without assuming that P = goodness. I don't think this is promising.

But put that aside. The second problem is that even if we assume that promoting P *is* a constitutive aim of action, this would not explain what the non-naturalist needs. Imagine a community of people who are just like us with the one exception that their bodily movements are not aimed at promoting P; they just aim to promote (say) redness instead. Given our assumption, their bodily movements don't count as *actions*. Fine; call them schmactions instead. The non-naturalist wants to say that by promoting redness rather than P, these people are somehow going wrong; that they should promote P instead. But why should that be so? The current proposal does not explain this. All it implies is that these people don't count as *acting*; it does not explain why they should act rather than schmact.

The point is that a constitutive aim of action only yields a success-condition *for actions*; it does not imply that one should act. Consider an analogy I owe to Jack Spencer.¹⁵ If you want to hum Jingle Bells, this induces a success-condition: your hum fulfills its aim only if it reproduces a certain string of notes, so you should hum those notes. If instead you aim to sing Good King Wenceslas, that induces a *different* success-condition, so you should hum a *different* string of notes to fulfill that aim. But of course it does not follow that you should sing Jingle Bells any more than you should sing Good King Wenceslas! Each song delivers a success-condition *for a hum of that song*, but it does not follow that we should hum either song. Likewise, if promoting P is a constitutive aim of action, this yields a success condition for action: it fulfills its aim only if it promotes P. But it does not follow that you should act rather than schmack; hence it does not follow that you should promote P.

Somewhat ironically, this point was made by Enoch (2006), himself a non-naturalist. He objected for more or less the above reason to theorists who propose to ground normativity in the nature of action or agency. So in Enoch we have at least one non-naturalist who agrees that this explanation of why P is action-guiding is a non-starter! But more generally, this indicates that the non-naturalist should not have been tempted by this explanation in the first place. For it grounds normativity in facts about *us as agents or actors*, not in facts about P. And as emphasized, the non-naturalist's guiding idea is that normativity comes from P, not from us.

I conclude that the non-naturalist cannot explain why P should be promoted in terms of the constitutive nature of action. As a final attempt, she might appeal instead to the essence, or meaning, of "should". The idea would be that what it *means* to say that one should phi is that phi-ing promotes P. It follows that P should be promoted.¹⁶

But again, this does not give the non-naturalist what she wants. For on this view normativity comes not from P, but from the meaning of "should". It's because of *us* and the language we speak, not anything about P itself, that P should be promoted. And yet the non-naturalist's idea is supposed to be that normativity comes from P, not us.

The point can be illustrated by considering a community just like us but who use the word "schmould" instead of "should". This is defined as follows: one *schmould* phi iff phi-ing promotes redness. It follows that redness schmould be promoted, and they therefore go around promoting redness. Now, the non-naturalist *wants* to say that they are getting things wrong in some sense; that they are missing the *important* facts. But in what sense are facts about P and what one *should* do any more important than facts about redness and what one *schmould* do? On this view, they aren't. On the ground floor, there are just facts about P, and facts about redness. As far as the current view has it, neither are more "natural" or "glowier" than the other. One community then organizes their normative language and actions around P, the other around redness. Neither community is missing out any more than the other one is. Of course, *we* can say that they're not doing what they *should* do, that their notions aren't properly *normative*, and so on. And we would be right, given what our terms mean. But by the same token, *they* can say that *we're* not doing what we *schmould* do, that our notions aren't properly *schnormative*, and so on. And that would be right in *their* mouth. But on this view, there's no objective sense in which

¹⁵ Who tells me he heard it from Gideon Rosen.

¹⁶ A variant of this view would be that it's part of the meaning of "should" that we should *act*, not schmack. Combined with the view of action above, this would imply that we should promote P.

either community can be said to be “getting things right” more than the other. And this kind of anti-objectivist picture is decidedly *not* what the non-naturalist wants.

No, her view was that *P*, the worldly property itself, is an *objective* ground of normativity, so that *everyone* must organize themselves around it. As we’ve seen over again, if she tries to explain why *P* should be promoted in terms of something about us—the meaning of the normative language of “should” or “good”, or what it is to be an agent—this objectivity is not secured.

I conclude that the non-naturalist cannot explain why *P* is action-guiding in terms of the essences of things such as *P*, or action, or “shouldness”. Note that the discussion did not assume anything specific about *P*, so we can expect the arguments in this section to generalize to other non-naturalist views. Thus, for Scanlon, the challenge will be to explain why rationality is a matter of responding to his *sui generis* whatnot *R*, rather than any other relation out there. This cannot be explained in terms of the nature of agency, or the meaning of “rationality” or “reason”, for this does not give him the objectivity that non-naturalism seeks. Nor can it be explained in terms of the essence of *R*. For this either means that *R* has a real definition, which a non-naturalist is in no position to say; or that *R* has a Scholastic “inner nature”, in which case this is just an unfortunate return to, well, Scholasticism.

8. The limits of explanation

This then is the externalist construal of the normative argument against non-naturalism. We grant the non-naturalist her *sui generis* whatnot. But if it is to deserve a normative title like “goodness” or “reason”, it must play whatever normative role the title plays in her normative theory. And the objection is there is nothing about the *sui generis* whatnot in virtue of which it could play that role; nothing that could explain why *it*, rather than one of the myriad other properties out there, is special.

I am confident that the non-naturalist can’t explain what makes her whatnot special. Her only refuge, I think, is to reject premise 2 and claim that her whatnot has normative upshots *even though there is nothing about P that makes it special in this regard*. This is akin to the divine command theorist insisting that we should all obey his favorite supernatural whatnot while admitting that there is *nothing about that whatnot* that makes it special. I don’t have a decisive argument against this position, but once exposed for what it is it strikes me as deeply unattractive. But the challenge was to expose it for what it is, since non-naturalists sometimes try to conceal it in more innocuous clothing. That was the aim of sections 2 and 4.

It should be clear that this external construal of the normative argument differs markedly from the internal construal. The latter assumes that there is a necessary connection (of some strength or other) between normative judgment and conative states like motivation, and then argues that a belief about a non-natural whatnot wouldn’t have this necessary connection. But the external construal does not mention normative judgment or motivation at all, and so makes no assumptions about them.

Some think that the internal argument refutes more than just non-naturalism. They think that *no* belief stands in the necessary connection to motivation; hence normative judgments aren’t beliefs of *any* kind; hence they’re not beliefs about natural *or* non-natural properties. I won’t comment on whether that’s right, but it’s worth asking the analogous question of whether the

external argument refutes other views like naturalism too. Consider the naturalist view on which the property of being good = the property of being *pleasurable*. Combined with our toy normative theory, the view is that what we should do is explained in terms of facts about what's good, which are just natural facts about what's pleasurable. Does the external objection refute this view?

It's not clear to me either way. The question would be whether pleasure is something we should promote. And the external objection would be that it isn't, because there is nothing about pleasure *in virtue of which* we should promote it. But the force of this is far less clear than in the case of non-naturalism. If asked what makes pleasure something we should promote, one is tempted to say that it is, after all, *pleasure*. Feel it and you'll know. The idea is that our phenomenal acquaintance with pleasure removes any mystery as to why it is action-guiding. Admittedly, it's not entirely clear how to categorize this idea. Perhaps it is offering a constitutive explanation, on which pleasure should be promoted *because of its phenomenal nature*. Or perhaps the idea is that our phenomenal acquaintance with pleasure reveals why there need be no explanation why it should be promoted, so that it is not fanatical in any objectionable sense to say that it's primitively action-guiding. But either way, there is far less mystery as to why pleasure should be promoted than why some *sui generis* whatnot should be.

I just toyed with the idea of a naturalist saying that pleasure is primitively action-guiding. But is that a coherent view? One might worry that if it's a brute fact that pleasure *should* be promoted, then we have a brute *normative* fact and the naturalist's game is up. But this is a mistake. On the naturalist view in question, the normative fact that one should phi is explained by the natural fact that phi promotes pleasure. At the bottom level there are just the natural facts about pleasure; the normative facts are explained by them. This is fully naturalistic. To say that pleasure is primitively action-guiding is to say that there's nothing that explains *why pleasure explains what we should do*. But this doesn't contradict the naturalist's view that at the ground floor there are just facts about pleasure.¹⁷

To be clear, I'm not saying here that naturalism is invulnerable to the external argument; I'm just saying that the question isn't clear and deserves closer scrutiny. Still, I do say that we must play fair when assessing the matter, for naturalists have been guilty of not playing fair just like their non-naturalist counterparts. For example, Schroeder (2007) defends a naturalist theory of reasons, on which (very roughly) someone's having a reason to A consists in facts about their desires. He combines this with a "reasons-first" normative theory, on which truths about reasons explain other normative truths about (say) rationality, what one ought to do, and so on. Now, the external objection would ask whether desire-fulfillment bears the connection to rationality that his normative theory requires. The worry would be that it doesn't; that there is nothing about *desire-fulfillment* in virtue of which rationality is a matter of responding to *it*. Schroeder is aware of the worry. His response that if reasons *just are* a matter of desire-fulfillment, then since reasons are obviously connected to rationality, it follows that desire-fulfillment is connected to rationality too. But this is not playing fair! What one needs show is that rationality is a matter of

¹⁷ There is, admittedly, a delicate point in the background here. For if it's a primitive truth *that pleasure explains what we should do*, isn't *this* a brute truth about "should" after all? Perhaps, but this is a general worry that afflicts any attempt to do metaphysics in terms of explanation. The general worry is what explains why the X facts explain the Y facts: if this is brute, don't we have truths about Y at the ground floor after all? This is Sider's "purity" worry about doing metaphysics in terms of explanation (Sider 2011). I offer a solution to the worry in Dasgupta (2014), but there is no need to reiterate it here. The point is that this worry has nothing specific to do with naturalism or normativity; it's a general worry about doing metaphysics in terms of explanation.

responding to desire-fulfillment *without* assuming that reasons just are a matter of desire-fulfillment. I won't try to settle here what the prospects of this type of view are.¹⁸

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