

XV—NORMATIVE NON-NATURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

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Normative non-naturalism is the view that some normative properties are irreducible and non-natural. Against this view, it has been objected that non-natural properties like these would have no ‘normative authority’ over us. This paper formulates the objection in a particular way, and argues that standard non-naturalist responses are inadequate. The formulation here is distinctive in so far as it rests on no controversial principles connecting normative judgement and motivation.

I

Normative Authority. Normative non-naturalism is the view that normativity has its source in irreducible, non-natural matters of fact. Here I use ‘normativity’ broadly to include phenomena like rationality, reasons, oughts and shoulds, good and bad, right and wrong, and so on. Thus, if we interpret G. E. Moore as proposing that the property of goodness is *sui generis*, in the sense that it’s irreducible and isn’t identical to any natural property, he would count as a normative non-naturalist. And Scanlon (2014) has recently defended a non-naturalist view on which the relation of *being a reason for* is *sui generis* in the same sense. 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 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 advance my goals; why also care about whether they align with some *sui generis* property?

Nowell-Smith expressed this idea 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 water-sprouts. 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? (Nowell-Smith 1954, p. 41)

Korsgaard made a related point when she said that if reasons are extra, *sui generis* facts about the world, it ‘invites the question why it is rational to conform to those reasons’ (1997, p. 240). Compare also Nagel, who 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 three central objections to non-naturalism.¹ But it can be developed in two different ways. On one construal, it rests on two premisses about normative judgement. The first premiss is an ‘internalist’ principle that posits a necessary connection between a subject’s making a normative judgement and her being in some conative state such as being motivated to act. And the second premiss is that beliefs about a *sui generis* property don’t bear this necessary connection to the conative state. It follows that normative judgements aren’t beliefs about a *sui generis* property.

I’ll call this the ‘internal’ construal because it rests on the internalist principle, and also because its immediate conclusion concerns the nature of normative judgement. Admittedly, internalist principles are many and varied, so this internal construal comes in numerous varieties.² Still, these differences won’t matter for our purposes: they all rest on *some* kind of internal connection between normative judgement and motivation.

But the quotations above—Nowell-Smith’s in particular—can also be heard differently, as concerning the normative properties directly rather than the mental states of normative judgement or motivation. Heard in this key, the idea is that while there may be some

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 ‘spooky’.

² See Arkonovich (2013) for a review of various internalist principles.

sui generis property out there, it is utterly mysterious why our actions should organize around it. Grant Moore that some things have a *sui generis* property *P* and others do not; why should we promote the former over the latter? The objection is that there is no answer; that *P* is normatively inert. Heard like this, the objection has nothing to do with mental states like motivation or normative judgement, 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.³

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

But I think the external construal is formidable. True, the quotations above can be (wilfully?) 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, the argument is not my invention: 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 cleaned up the internal argument and 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 judgement and motivation. Even if non-naturalists are right that they can explain the connection, I want to show that they still have the external argument to contend with.

³ Bedke (2014) presented an ingenious argument against non-naturalism that doesn't fall neatly into the categories I've set up. He argues that normative judgements don't respond to evidence in the way they would were they beliefs about *sui generis* properties. Unfortunately, there is no space to discuss that argument here.

II

Playing Fair. To articulate the 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 *A* should be done when, and because, *A* promotes more good than its alternatives. As I'll put it for short, *goodness should be promoted*. 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 familiar meta-ethical positions. The naturalist says that *x* is good in virtue of natural facts about *x*; the relativist says that '*x* is good' is true in her mouth because her standards imply that *x* is good; the non-cognitivist says that uttering '*x* is good' is not descriptive but expresses some conative state such as approval of *x*; and so on.

By contrast, a non-naturalist position is that goodness is *sui generis* in the sense that it is non-natural and brute. By brute I mean that if *x* is good then this is an inexplicable 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 might 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 above. So for now, focus on this 'goodness-first' variety of non-naturalism on which the *sui generis* property is goodness.

Goodness-first non-naturalism really consists in two claims. First, an *ontological claim* that in addition to all the natural properties, there is also a *sui generis* property *P*. And second, an *identification claim* that goodness = *P*. The external argument against this view targets the identification claim. Grant the ontological claim that there is this *sui generis* property *P*; the question is why it should be promoted. What is it about *P* in virtue of which we should promote it? Why shouldn't we promote some other property instead? The

objection—to be developed below—is that there is no answer to this question; hence *P* 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 *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 let us dwell on it. Consider the following toy theory of water: that water is a clear, colourless liquid. This then puts a constraint on a chemical theory of water: whatever chemical substructure constitutes water, it had better behave as a clear, colourless liquid. If someone claimed that water is the element mercury (Hg), we can object that bodies of Hg are not clear and colourless 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 colourless.

Or consider a second analogy. Someone killed Mr Plum in the library, but who? Going by the footprints, we know 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’s feet fit the profile. It would be a legal travesty if they said, ‘Well, our theory is that Jones is the murderer; 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 it’s *obvious* we should promote goodness, I won’t disagree. Indeed, this is exactly what the toy normative

⁴ I’m paraphrasing Lewis’s famous argument against unHumean views of chance. Lewis noted that chance 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’ (1994, p. 484).

theory under assumption states; this ‘obvious’ truth is not in question. But it does put a constraint on what goodness is: whatever it is, it had better be something we should promote. If someone says that goodness = redness, we can object that redness is not something we should promote; 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’s an equal travesty to say, ‘Well, my theory is that goodness = a *sui generis* property P ; hence, since we should promote what’s good, it follows that we should promote P ’. No: the non-naturalist must *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 divine command theory on which goodness = whatever God commands us to promote. There’s a well-known 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 uses it 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. *Anyone* can issue commands, so what makes these commands special? If the divine command theorist says, ‘Well on my theory, goodness *is* whatever God commands us to promote; hence, since we should promote goodness, we should do as 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 goodness; my question is whether we should promote P . I could have started out assuming the non-naturalist’s theory that goodness = P , in which case my question would be whether we should promote goodness *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* assuming that P = goodness. That would be like establishing that Hg is clear by

⁵ Dreier (2015) formulates an internal construal of the normative argument in this fashion, by asking whether a normative belief would motivate *if* its content concerned the non-naturalist’s *sui generis* property.

assuming that water is clear *and* 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 is whether water is clear *if water = Hg*. But as any respectable chemist will confirm, you cannot assume both.

I've focused on 'goodness-first' non-naturalism, but the same applies equally 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. He is then a non-naturalist in so far as he says that the property of *being a reason* is *sui generis*. This is 'reasons-first' non-naturalism. Against this, the external argument grants Scanlon his normative theory that rationality is responding to reasons. This puts a constraint on what the property of *being a reason* is: whatever it is, it had better be rational to respond to *it*. Thus, when Scanlon says that *being a reason* is a *sui generis* property *R*, the external argument asks why it's rational to respond to *R*. In virtue of what is it rational to respond to *it* rather than anything else? Don't say, 'Well, *R just is* the property of being a reason, so *of course* it's rational to respond to it': that's not playing fair. It would be akin to establishing that Hg is clear by assuming water is clear *and* assuming that water = Hg.

More generally, the external objection asks what makes the non-naturalist's *sui generis* property fit to play whatever role she believes it to play in normative theory. I have not yet argued that there is no answer to this question; my point so far is just that one must play fair in answering it.

If I've laboured this point, it's because non-naturalists have systematically ignored it. Just look at Parfit's response to the external argument against a view like Scanlon's: 'If [normative non-naturalists] were asked why it's rational to respond to reasons, they could answer: "That is what being rational *is*"' (Parfit 2006, p. 359).⁶ But the question isn't why it's rational to respond to *reasons*; the question is why it's rational to respond 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.

⁶ Here he is responding to some passages from Korsgaard, including the one I quoted at the beginning.

Or consider Scanlon's claim 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 responding to an internalist argument, but applied to our external argument his point is that the question why it's rational to respond to reasons is '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. Understood fairly, our question is no more incoherent than the question of whether *Hg* is clear.

Or consider how swiftly Enoch dismisses the external argument: '*Of course* the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do', he says, 'after all, many of them *just are* truths about what we have reason to do' (2011, p. 239; emphasis in the original). Imagine he had said, '*Of course Hg* is clear—after all, *Hg just is* water, and water is clear! Clearly, he's not playing fair. 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'.

Even Dreier, when *developing* the normative argument against 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 ... since one of the normative facts might simply *be* the fact that one should act in that way' (2015, p. 172). This leads Dreier to abandon the external construal in favour of an internal construal. But I disagree: 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, isn't playing fair.

III

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 out the argument, let's use the analogous objection to the divine command theory above as a guide.

That objection first assumed our toy normative theory:

- (1) Goodness should be promoted.

This puts a constraint on what goodness could be: it must be something that should be promoted. The objection was then that what God's commands us to promote doesn't satisfy this constraint. Why not? Well, all sorts of people issue commands: my children, my parents, lunatics on the street. Often I shouldn't obey them. So what makes the commands of this supernatural whatnot special? The objection is that there is no answer. One might respond that I should obey the whatnot rather than my parents *even though there is nothing that makes the whatnot special*. But presumably this is an unattractive bullet to bite. Thus, the objection proceeds as follows:

- (2) If we should promote what God commands us to promote, there must be some explanation of why that is so.
- (3) There is no explanation.

It follows from (2) and (3) that what God commands us to promote isn't what we should promote. Hence, by (1), goodness \neq what God commands us to promote.

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

- (1) Goodness is action-guiding.

Whatever goodness is, it must be something that should be promoted. So, when the non-naturalist says that goodness is a *sui generis* property P , the question is whether P should be promoted. And the objection is that it isn't because there could be no explanation of *why P is special in this regard*, of why we shouldn't promote something else instead. Thus:

- (2) If P should be promoted, there must be some explanation of why P should be promoted.
- (3) There is no explanation of why P should be promoted.

By (2) and (3), it follows that *P* is not something that should be promoted; by (1), it follows that *P* isn't *goodness*.

Let me now defend each premiss in turn.

IV

Primitive Action-Guiders. Premiss (1) is part of the toy normative theory under assumption, which the ‘goodness-first’ non-naturalist under discussion accepts.⁷ When directed against other non-naturalist views, premiss (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 premiss (1). For example, when objecting to Scanlon, the first premiss will state that rationality is a matter of responding to reasons, which, by design, Scanlon accepts.

Premiss (2) says that if a *sui generis* property *P* should be promoted, there must be some explanation of why *P*, rather than some other property, should be promoted. This is a demand for *explanation*, not *justification*. Against the divine command theory, premiss (2) does not ask for a *reason to believe* that we should obey God; it asks for some fact about God that would *make it the case* that we should obey God rather than (say) my parents.

Nor does premiss (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*. 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

⁷ Note that premiss (1) can be read in two ways. A *de re* reading is that *x* should be promoted iff *x* is good, while a *de dicto* reading is that goodness *as such* should be promoted. Chappell (MS) argues that the non-naturalist should only accept the *de re* reading, and that is how I will read it. But I will mostly slur over the distinction for ease of prose and say that goodness should be promoted. In any case, the external argument would apply equally to a non-naturalist who adopted the *de dicto* reading.

⁸ Korsgaard 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 facts about the distribution of some *sui generis* property *P* wouldn’t help ‘someone who has fallen into doubt about whether moral requirements are really normative’ (*ibid.*).

Instead, what premiss (2) demands is some explanation of why *P* is special. The explanation may not be available to ordinary practical reasoners; premiss (2) just demands that there must be some explanation or other.

Thus, if the divine command theorist rejects their analogue of premiss (2), she is saying not just that there is a supernatural, command-giving whatnot; she is saying that it is an *inexplicable* fact that we should obey *it* rather anyone else. This is highly implausible. Suppose there were many supernatural whatnots issuing commands. Then her view would be that we should all obey her favoured one *even though there is nothing that makes it special*. That's not just religion; that's fanaticism.

Likewise, if the non-naturalist rejects premiss (2), she is saying not just that it is an inexplicable fact that certain things have a *sui generis* property *P*; she is saying further that it is an inexplicable fact that *P* should be promoted. Again, this is highly implausible. Just think of all the properties out there, many natural and perhaps some non-natural. If the non-naturalist rejects (2), her view is that we should all promote *P* over the others *even though there is nothing that makes P special*. This too is a kind of fanaticism.

Admittedly, there is nothing *incoherent* about rejecting premiss (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 it for what it is. One way non-naturalists try to conceal it is by not playing fair. They say it's *obvious* that we should promote goodness, so what's the harm in saying this is brute? But if you reject premiss (2), what you think is brute isn't the obvious truth that we should promote *goodness*; it's the *highly non-obvious* truth that we should promote some *sui generis* whatnot *P*.⁹ Don't say 'But *P* is goodness'—that's not playing fair.

Moreover, even if the truth *were* obvious it wouldn't be harmless to say it's brute. The question is not whether we should believe that *P* should be promoted, but what explains why *P* should be promoted. It's obvious that water is clear, but it would be shocking if there were no explanation why! Similarly, someone might find it obvious that their favoured supernatural whatnot should be obeyed;

⁹ Put otherwise, it's the highly non-obvious, non-trivial truth that we should promote goodness if *goodness = P*.

that just makes them devout. But if they add that we should all obey the whatnot *even though there's nothing that makes it special*, that's something else entirely.

So the denial of (2) isn't Enoch's unobjectionable claim that 'of course the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do' (2011, p. 239). No, it's the extraordinary claim that some *sui generis* bit of the world should be promoted, even though *there's nothing about it that makes it special*. I have no argument against this view, but I do insist that we describe as it is and not conceal it with smoke and mirrors.

Some non-naturalists try to conceal it by arguing that we can only refer to their *sui generis* whatnot under its normative guise, as 'goodness'. It's a mistake, they say, to think that we can denote the whatnot with letters like '*P*' and then ask whether *P* should be promoted. As Chappell puts it, 'it makes no sense at all to question the normativity of a purely normative property', because 'the only way to directly pick out the property in question is via the corresponding normative concept' (MS, p. 8).¹⁰

But this is doubly misleading. First, even if the *sui generis* whatnot can only be denoted by 'good', my question is still pressing. As emphasized, the question is not *whether* goodness should be promoted, but *what explains why* that is so—this is a fair question even if it's obvious *that* goodness should be promoted.

Second, the claim that I cannot denote their *sui generis* whatnot with the letter '*P*' may be true, but irrelevant. I was never using '*P*' to denote a specific property; I was using it as a variable. I initially characterized non-naturalism as follows:

Goodness is a *sui generis* property.

In first-order logic this implies:

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

I made this inference when I said that non-naturalism consisted in two claims: the ontological claim and the identification claim. I've just been using *P* as a bound variable ranging over *sui generis* whatnots ever since. If non-naturalists want to claim that this use of '*P*' is

¹⁰ Scanlon (2014) makes similar remarks at times; see in particular chapter 2.

illegitimate, they must reject first-order logic. I assume that is not their position.¹¹

Perhaps what lies behind Chappell's remarks is the idea that the non-naturalist didn't *first* find a *sui generis* whatnot and only *then* discover that it was goodness; rather, she started with the property *goodness* and discovered that it was *sui generis*. But nothing I've said presumes otherwise. My question is just what could make a *sui generis* property something we should promote. This question is intelligible even if we never identified a *sui generis* property prior to calling it 'goodness'. What premiss (2) states is that there must be an answer. You can reject premiss (2) if you like; all I insist is that we remove the smoke and mirrors and call the resulting position what it is: it's the claim that some *sui generis* bit of the world should be promoted even though there's nothing that makes it special.¹²

V

Correlative Explanations. Turn now to premiss (3), the claim that there's no explanation of why a *sui generis* property *P* should be promoted. Remember, the claim that *P* should be promoted is this:

- (*) An action *A* should be done iff *A* promotes more *P* than its alternatives.

If the non-naturalist rejects premiss (3), her challenge is to say what could explain (*). But we must be clear on what kind of explanation is required. The non-naturalist cannot say 'We happen to like *P*; that is why we should promote *P*'. For this would ground normativity in our contingent preferences, which is contrary to the non-naturalist's

¹¹ To be precise about the structure of the argument, then, premiss (2) can be read as: For all properties *P*, if *P* is *sui generis* and *P* should be promoted, there must be some explanation of why *P* should be promoted. And premiss (3) can be read as: For any property *P*, if *P* is *sui generis* and should be promoted, there is no explanation of why *P* should be promoted. It follows that there is no property *P* that is *sui generis* and should be promoted. Hence, if goodness should be promoted (premiss (1)), then goodness is not a *sui generis* property.

¹² Some of Chappell's remarks suggest that his view is rather that the *sui generis* property is *essentially* normative. That may be so, but that would then be an *explanation* of what makes the property special. If that's his idea, he rejects premiss (3), not premiss (2). I'll discuss this idea in due course.

position. 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. The central idea is that normativity comes from the *sui generis* whatnots themselves, independently of facts about us. As I'll put it for short, the 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 (*) like *P*, or action, or should-be-done-ness. 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. I cannot hope to be exhaustive, so it's possible that an explanation I miss does better. But I do hope to illustrate the difficulties involved.

Let's start with the second strategy, the explanation by correlation. A non-naturalist is likely to think that *P* is correlated with other properties. For example, she may think that things like pleasure, desire-satisfaction, happiness, or love, have *P*. For simplicity, 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: 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 this gets things exactly the wrong way round by the non-naturalist's own lights. 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 pleasure has P!* On her view, *P* was supposed to be the source of normativity, not some natural property like pleasure. Thus, (i) was supposed to be *explained* by the fact that *P* should be promoted, not the other way round.

Another way to put the point is that the current 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 *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.¹³

I just focused on ‘goodness-first’ non-naturalism, but the current point applies equally to other non-naturalist views. Consider Scanlon’s (2014) ‘reasons-first’ non-naturalism from §II. 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, normativity is supposed to be grounded in *R*, not *X*.¹⁴

I conclude that this strategy of explanation by correlation is not promising.

VI

Explanations from Essential Natures. Perhaps more promising are explanations 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.

Non-naturalists sometimes talk of their *sui generis* property being ‘essentially’ normative, that it is in the ‘constitutive nature’ of *P* to be something we should promote.¹⁵ This might then explain what make *P* special: only *P* has this nature.

To assess this proposal, we must ask what is meant by ‘essence’. For the explanation to work, the claim that it’s *essential* to *P* that we should promote it cannot just mean that it’s *necessarily true* that we should promote *P*. For this would not explain why *P* should be

¹³ Jackson (1998) claims that *sui generis* properties are idle in the sense that a *motivating reason* for action would never appeal to such a thing. But my point concerns idleness regarding *constitutive explanations*, not motivating reasons. Thus, Chappell (MS) responds to Jackson by arguing that while *P* may never figure in a motivating reason, it nonetheless explains *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 is that the current strategy leaves *P* idle in exactly this sense that Chappell wanted to avoid.

¹⁴ As Scanlon himself emphasizes (2014, ch. 1), he cannot say that it’s rational to respond to *R* because (i) it’s rational to fulfill desires, and (ii) *R* correlates with desire-fulfillment. Even if *R* correlates with desire-fulfillment, what distinguishes his view is that rationality is explained by *R* and not desire-fulfillment.

¹⁵ At times, Chappell (MS, §1.2) appears to advocate a view like this. Scanlon (2014, ch. 2) and Heathwood (2015) also suggest views in this vicinity.

promoted. Compare: if we should obey God, that's arguably a necessary truth. But that wouldn't explain why we should obey God rather than someone else.

So talk of 'essence' must amount to something else. I can think of two readings. On the first reading, essence is to be understood on the model of definition. Just as *words* can have definitions, the idea is that an *entity* or *property* can also be defined in terms of other entities or properties.¹⁶ The former are 'nominal' definitions, the latter 'real' definitions. Understood like this, the idea 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.

This definition would explain why *P* should be promoted, but the non-naturalist cannot accept it. For on this definition, *P* is not *sui generis*, as the non-naturalist claimed; it is *defined* in terms of what we should promote. Suppose pleasure has *P*. Then on the current definition, pleasure has *P* in virtue of it's being something we should promote, contrary to the non-naturalist's claim that *P* is *sui generis*.

To put the point otherwise, the non-naturalist proposes to explain why something like 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 no use here. What is the other reading? It is the more obscure, Scholastic idea that some entities have 'inner natures' that are (at least partly) responsible for what they're like. On this reading the idea would be that *P* contains such an 'inner nature' that somehow leads it to be something we should promote.¹⁷

This idea is at least consistent with non-naturalism. But, I say, it should be rejected as a pernicious remnant of Scholastic metaphysics. Compare again the case of water. Suppose we ask what properties of H₂O explain why water is clear. There is a good answer to this question involving the electrostatic properties of H₂O molecules,

¹⁶ Kit Fine has long advocated a reading of essentialist talk along these lines. See [Fine \(1994\)](#).

¹⁷ So-called psychological essentialism is the empirical claim 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. If true, psychological essentialism might help explain the sway that Scholasticism held over philosophy. But of course it doesn't follow that things *actually have* inner natures.

their interactions with photons, and so on. By contrast, the Scholastic explanation is just that H₂O has an ‘inner nature’ that makes it clear. This ‘explanation’ is now rejected as a scientific travesty, and rightly so. The current explanation of why *P* should be promoted is no different.

To be clear, there is no logical incoherence in this explanation, and perhaps it is the best the non-naturalist can do. Still, it is a revival of a Scholastic method that has been rightly rejected in other domains.

At this point the non-naturalist might say that being something we should promote lies in the nature of *our concept of P*, not *P* itself. To see the idea, let’s play unfair for a moment and call *P* ‘goodness’. Then the idea would be that one possesses the concept ‘good’ only if one is willing to infer from ‘*x* is good’ to ‘*x* should be promoted’. Perhaps this explains, in a sense, why goodness—that is, *P*—should be promoted.

I have nothing against this view. But it’s useless for the non-naturalist, for it doesn’t imply that we should promote *P* in the objective sense she requires. Imagine a community just like us with one exception: their concept with this possession condition is the one they express by ‘red’, not ‘good’. They say that one should promote redness, not goodness, and so they organize their actions accordingly. On the current view, there is no objective sense in which they’re going wrong. Sure, *we* might say that they’re not doing what they should, and that might be true *in our mouths*. But equally, *they* can say that *we’re* not doing as we should, and that would then be true *in their mouths!* On this view, there’s nothing about to break the symmetry. In so far as we can truly say that *P* should be promoted, that’s just because of the language we speak. Yet non-naturalism was supposed to be the view that normativity comes from the *sui generis* whatnots themselves, independently of facts about us.¹⁸

So much for the essence of *P*. What about the essence of *action*? Perhaps promoting *P* 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

¹⁸ This kind of fictional community is related to ‘Moral Twin Earth’ cases (Horgan and Timmons 1991), which are often used to draw lessons about the semantics of normative vocabulary. Dowell (2016) argues that these cases are of no import to semantic theorizing. But I’m not using the case to draw semantic lessons; I’m using it to illustrate the fact that a certain explanation does not secure a kind of objectivity.

at promoting *P*. Perhaps this explains why *P* should be promoted—only actions that promote *P* would fulfil their aim.

But the proposal fails for two reasons. First, I doubt that promoting a *sui generis* property *P* is a constitutive aim of action. I don't think I've ever aimed to promote such a thing, but does it follow that I never *act*? Surely not. 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.

But the second problem is that even if we assume that promoting *P* were a constitutive aim of action, this wouldn't explain why *P* should be promoted in the objective sense the non-naturalist wants. Imagine a community just like us with the one exception that their bodily movements aim to promote redness, not *P*. Given our assumption, they don't count as acting. Fine; we can describe them as *schmacting* 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? The current proposal does not explain this. All it implies is that these people aren't *acting*; it does not explain why they should act rather than schmact.

Ironically, this point was made by Enoch (2006) when objecting to theorists who ground normativity in the nature of action or agency. So in Enoch we have at least one non-naturalist who agrees that this explanation is a non-starter! This should be unsurprising. For the explanation grounds normativity in facts about *us as agents* and not in *P*, while the central idea behind non-naturalism is that normativity comes from *P* and not from us.

So much for the essence of action. As a final attempt, the non-naturalist might appeal to the meaning of 'should'. The idea would be that what it means to say that an action *A* should be done is that *A* promotes *P*.¹⁹

But the trouble is that this would not explain why *P* should be promoted in the objective sense that the non-naturalist requires. Imagine this time a community just like us except they use a term 'schmould' instead of 'should'. In their mouths, what it means to say that an action schmould be done is that it promotes redness, and

¹⁹ Compare Strawson's (1952) view that it's part of the meaning of 'rational' that induction is rational. A variant of this view would be that it's part of the meaning of 'should', or of 'action', that we should *act* and not schmact. Combined with the view of action above, this would imply that we should promote *P*.

they organize their actions around what they schmould do. Sure, we can truly say that they are not doing as they should, but equally *they* can truly say that we are not doing as we schmould, and on this view there is nothing to break the symmetry. On the ground floor there are just facts about *P* and about redness, and one community organizes their lives around one property and the other community around the other, and that's all there is to say—there's no further fact about which community is 'really' getting things right. Yet the non-naturalist's position was supposed to be that there *is* a further fact: *P* is supposed to be the source of 'real' normativity in a way that redness isn't. The current proposal does not explain this.

A related proposal could be put in terms of essence: that it is essential to the property of should-be-done-ness that *A* should be done iff *A* promotes *P*. But again, this does not explain what the non-naturalist needs. To be explanatory, we know that talk of essence must be understood on the model of definition: the idea must be that for an action to have the property that it should be done *just is*, by definition, for it to promote *P*. But definitions are cheap, so we can also define the property of schmould-be-done-ness: for an action to have this property *just is* for it to promote redness. And now, again, there is nothing to break the symmetry. On the ground floor are facts about *P* and about redness; there is then a property of should-be-done defined in terms of *P* and a property of schmould-be-done defined in terms of red; and each community organizes themselves around one of those properties. There is, on this view, no further fact to the effect that *P* is the source of 'real' normativity in a way that redness isn't.

I conclude that the non-naturalist cannot explain why *P* should be promoted in terms of the 'natures' of things. The discussion didn't assume anything specific about *P*, so we can expect it to apply to other non-naturalist views. For Scanlon, the challenge is to explain why rationality is a matter of responding to his *sui generis* whatnot *R*. This can't be explained by the essence of the *sui generis* whatnot, for the reasons given earlier. Nor can it be explained by the nature of agency, or the meaning of 'rationality' or 'reason', or the essence of rationality, for this wouldn't deliver the objectivity of normativity that non-naturalism seeks.

Could the non-naturalist give up on objectivity and endorse one of these latter explanations? The picture would be that her *sui generis* whatnot is out there in the world *before* it is normative, as it

were, and acquires its status as *normative* only thanks to our nature as agents or the meanings of our normative terms. That is a coherent view, but it is clearly not what non-naturalists want. For one thing, many non-naturalists explicitly reject the idea that their whatnot has a life independently of being normative and has normativity thrust onto it by us; the core of their picture is that normativity comes from the *whatnot itself*, independently of us.²⁰ And in any case, I suspect the position is dialectically unstable. Non-naturalists typically motivate their view by arguing that rival views that ground normativity in something about us don't yield normativity *in the robust sense they seek to capture*. It is then hard to see how a *sui generis* whatnot would help if its status as normative ends up depending on us! But there is no space to pursue this thought here, so I will leave it as a conjecture.

VII

Against Naturalism? This then is the normative argument in its externalist construal. 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 there is nothing about a *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 premiss (2), and claim that her whatnot has normative upshots *even though there is nothing that makes it special*. I haven't argued against this position, but once exposed for what it is it strikes me as deeply unattractive. The challenge in §§2 and 4 was to expose it for what it is.

This external construal differs markedly from the internal construal. The latter rests on a necessary connection between normative judgement 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 doesn't mention normative judgement or motivation, and makes no assumptions about them.

²⁰ Chappell (MS, §1.2) emphasizes this point, as does Scanlon (2014, ch. 2).

If the external argument works against non-naturalism, does it also work against naturalist views on which normative properties are natural properties? I don't know. Consider the naturalist view on which goodness = *pleasure*. Combined with our toy normative theory, the view is that we should do those actions that promote most pleasure. The external argument would then object by asking why pleasure should be promoted. But this time the force of the objection is less clear. If asked what makes pleasure something we should promote, one is tempted to say that it is, well, *pleasure*. Feel it and you'll know. Admittedly, it's not obvious how to categorize this idea. Perhaps the idea is that 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. Either way, one might argue that there is less mystery as to why pleasure should be promoted than why some *sui generis* whatnot should be.

I just said that the naturalist might say it's a brute fact that pleasure *should* be promoted. But can she say that? One might worry that there would then be a brute *normative* fact and the naturalist's game is up. But that is a mistake. On the naturalist view in question, the normative fact that one should do an action *A* is explained by the natural fact that *A* promotes pleasure. This is fully naturalistic: on the ground floor, there are just facts about pleasure, and they explain what we should do. To say that it's a brute fact that pleasure should be promoted is just to say that there's no explanation of *why pleasure explains what we should do*.²¹

In any case, I don't claim that naturalism avoids the external argument, just that the matter is unclear and deserves scrutiny. But I do claim that the naturalist must play fair. She can't say, 'Well, my theory is that goodness = pleasure; hence, since it's obvious that goodness should be promoted, it follows that pleasure should be promoted'—that's not playing fair! No, she must explain why pleasure should be promoted *without* assuming that pleasure = goodness

²¹ There is a delicate point in the background here. If it's a brute fact that *pleasure explains what we should do*, isn't this a brute fact about 'should' that the naturalist must reject? This is an instance of Sider's (2011) 'purity' worry: if it's a brute fact that the *X* facts explain the *Y* facts, don't we still have facts about *Y* on the ground floor? I offer a solution in Dasgupta (2014), but I will not reiterate it here. The point is that this is a general worry about doing metaphysics in terms of explanation, not anything specific to naturalism or normativity.

(or show that no explanation is needed). I won't try to settle here what the prospects of this type of view are.²²

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