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WHY BELIEVE IN NORMATIVE SUPERVENIENCE?
Debbie Roberts

According to many, that the normative supervenes on the non-normative is truism of normative discourse. If one person is morally good and another not, they must differ in some *other* respect. If two paintings are qualitatively alike in all *other* respects they must be aesthetically alike. And if one person is justified in believing that *p* and another not, there must be some *other* difference between them. It's commonly assumed that '*other*' should be interpreted as *non-moral*, *non-aesthetic* and *non-epistemic*, respectively.¹

To my knowledge there is only one epistemologist in the literature who doubts the epistemic supervenience claim, Keith Lehrer.² Those who have doubts about aesthetic supervenience have doubts not about the supervenience claim itself but only about how widely the supervenience base should be construed.³ We find more dissenters in metaethics, but still only a few.⁴ This makes it plausible to say, with Gideon Rosen, that the claim that the normative supervenes on the non-normative is the 'least controversial' thesis in metaethics.⁵

I argue below that those committed to the more specific moral, aesthetic and epistemic supervenience theses should also hold (NS*):

(NS*): *As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that metaphysically necessitates the normative one.*⁶

(NS*) is closely linked to a *grounding* claim: that normative facts obtain in virtue of non-normative facts. Many hold that this dependence relation explains (NS*).⁷

My main aim is to show that none of the available arguments establish (NS*), or indeed the relevant epistemic, aesthetic and moral supervenience theses. (NS*) is not a conceptual truth, or so I will argue.⁸ This has considerable dialectical importance. One interesting upshot is that it affords non-reductivists and non-naturalists a novel way of resisting certain prominent supervenience-based objections to their views, including objections that formulate supervenience as a purely metaphysical thesis.⁹

¹ I take that normative domains include ethics, epistemology and aesthetics. This is not meant to be exhaustive. It is plausible, e.g., that the prudential is also normative. I'm using 'normative' in the broad sense to include both the evaluative and the deontic.

² Lehrer (1997)

³ See, e.g., the exchange between Wicks (1988, 1992) and Zangwill (1992,1994)

⁴ Griffin (1992), Dancy (1995), Raz (2000), Sturgeon (2009), Hills (2009), Hattiangadi (m.s.) and Rosen (m.s.).

⁵ Rosen (m.s) p1-3.

⁶ A base property is one that is not normativity involving (McPherson 2012). I explain this in §1.

⁷ See, e.g., Smith (2004), Sibley (1959), Van Cleve (1985).

⁸ My conclusion is similar to Sturgeon (2009). However, Sturgeon does not consider the arguments given for supervenience. His strategy is to argue that there is no supervenience thesis that is not parochial (i.e. acceptable from some metaethical view(s) but not others). (NS*) is similar to the thesis McPherson (2012) argues, in response to Sturgeon, should be common ground for at least metaethical realists. My version is one anti-realists would also be likely to accept, on the ascriptive understanding of it in the case of some expressivist views.

I explain the relevant supervenience claim in §1 and outline the relation between this claim and a normative grounding claim in §2. In §3 I explain two possible views, radical holism and irreducible thickness, that have starring roles in my argument. §4 lays out the different arguments for supervenience, and my objections to them. I consider key implications in §5 and conclude in §6.

1. Supervenience of the Normative

The basic idea of supervenience is a modal one, captured by the slogan ‘no A difference without a B difference.’ This can be made more precise by specifying how the modal strength is to be interpreted (metaphysical, conceptual, nomological) and what the thesis quantifies over (individuals, regions, entire possible worlds), and whether the distribution of A and B properties is restricted only within possible worlds (weak) or across possible worlds (strong).

An initial statement of the thesis that I am focusing on is the following individual, strong supervenience thesis:

(NS): As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a non-normative property or collection of properties that metaphysically necessitate(s) the normative one.

This statement needs refining in various ways that I detail in §1(ii). Nonetheless, (NS) is useful for my first purpose in this section, which is to show that those committed to epistemic, moral and aesthetic supervenience theses should also be committed to the normative supervenience thesis.

(i) *Epistemic, Aesthetic, Moral and Normative Supervenience*

Here are recent statements of the relevant epistemic, aesthetic and moral supervenience theses:

(ES): Necessarily, if an individual S has epistemic property E, then S has some non-epistemic property N such that, *necessarily*, any individual S* with N also has E.¹⁰

(AS): For any possible worlds, w and w^* , and for any artworks x and y , if x in w has all of the same non-aesthetic properties as y in w^* , then x in w is aesthetically indistinguishable from y in w^* ¹¹

(MS): As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a moral property, it has a non-moral property that *necessitates* the moral one.¹²

⁹ Non-naturalists are non-reductivists, but not necessarily the reverse. The objections are the ‘reduction’ objection (e.g. Jackson 1998) and the ‘explanation’ objection, which applies only to non-naturalism (e.g. Dreier 1992, MS & McPherson (2012)).

¹⁰ Kallestrup and Prichard (forthcoming) p1

¹¹ Hick (2012) p309.

¹² Dreier (m.s.) p2. All these formulations state an ontological connection between properties, not a linguistic connection between types of judgments.¹² However, they are relatively easily recast as ascriptive.

Commonly, in both metaethics and in epistemology, supervenience is understood as individual and strong, holding with metaphysical necessity, i.e. the second ‘necessarily’ in (ES) and the ‘necessitates’ in (MS) are to be understood in terms of metaphysical necessity.

The aesthetic case is less clear. It is common to understand aesthetic supervenience as an individual supervenience thesis. However, it is more controversial whether the modal strength of aesthetic supervenience is strong or weak (and often this is left unspecified).¹³ This controversy is connected to the main debate about aesthetic supervenience namely *which* properties aesthetic properties supervene on. Once we include extrinsic, relational properties in the base, including human sensibilities, those attracted to the supervenience thesis are likely to accept the strong version, that is, (AS).

So (ES), (AS), (MS) and (NS) are all strong supervenience theses. They are individual supervenience theses about metaphysical necessities. If one holds that the moral (epistemic, aesthetic) strongly supervenes on the non-moral (non-epistemic, non-aesthetic) does one also then hold that the *normative* strongly supervenes on the *non-normative*?

I take it that it is uncontroversial to hold that the moral is normative, and the same is true for the aesthetic. The epistemic case is more controversial, but it is still a widely held view. Moreover, the main argument for epistemic supervenience in the literature assumes that the epistemic is normative.¹⁴

Characterizing the base is trickier. ‘Non-normative’ is not appropriate for views, for example reductive views, that hold that normative properties are a subset of the base properties. I address this below. There is another issue here. The non-normative includes the non-moral, the non-epistemic and the non-aesthetic. Putting aside the issue of the first necessity, (NS) thus entails each of (ES), (AS) and (MS). However, the reverse is not true since, for example, the non-moral doesn’t obviously include the non-epistemic or the non-aesthetic (or the non-prudential, non-intentional and whatever other kinds of non-normative properties there are). In theory, a defender of (MS) could reject (NS) on the grounds that (MS) allows epistemic, aesthetic, and other kinds of normative but non-moral properties into the base whereas (NS) does not. Similarly for defenders of (AS) and (ES).

However, the proponents of these theses that I am here concerned with don’t have these sorts of views in mind. As well as using the terms ‘non-epistemic’, ‘non-aesthetic’ and ‘non-moral’, proponents of these theses typically use terms, for example, ‘descriptive’, ‘natural’ and ‘physical’, to refer to the supervenience base that make clear that the properties they have in mind are meant to contrast with the normative in general.¹⁵

There is one final matter to consider in resolving whether proponents of (ES), (AS) and (MS) should accept (NS), namely the nature of the first necessity.

Ascriptive version of the points I make below will hold against these versions (indeed, one of the arguments I consider below is the main argument given for ascriptive supervenience).

¹³ See e.g. Levinson (1984), Bender (1987), Zangwill (1992, 1994, 2003), Fudge (2005), Hick (2012).

¹⁴ See e.g. Sosa (1991) p192.

¹⁵ This ‘contrast’ may not, ultimately, be a deep metaphysical one for it may turn out that normative properties are themselves descriptive, natural or physical.

In metaethics, it's widely held that an individual who fails to respect the supervenience thesis thereby reveals themselves to be an incompetent user of moral terms; the supervenience thesis operates as an a priori, conceptual constraint on moral judgments.¹⁶ The first necessity is thus widely held to be conceptual necessity. A proponent of (MS) should accept (NS).

How to understand the first necessity isn't discussed in epistemology or aesthetics. There is good reason to think, though, that those who hold the relevant supervenience theses would take the first necessity to be conceptual necessity. It is true, as in ethics, that which *specific* supervenience claims obtain may well be an a posteriori matter. However, it seems plausible that if you think that there can be no epistemic difference without a non-epistemic difference, or that two objects that share all of same non-aesthetic features share the same aesthetic features, you'd be likely to think of these as a priori conceptual truths. In support of this, note that proponents of aesthetic supervenience do not carefully distinguish this claim from a dependence thesis that is taken to be constitutive of aesthetic thought – someone who fails to respect it manifests incompetence with aesthetic concepts.¹⁷ Moreover, the main arguments given for epistemic and aesthetic supervenience are a priori.¹⁸ Thus, proponents of (AS) and (ES) should too accept (NS).¹⁹

I now turn to considering (NS) in more detail.

(ii) Normative Supervenience

I said above that (NS) is in need of some refinement. These refinements primarily concern the nature of the supervenience base.

The supervenience base is variously characterized, for example, as 'the factual', 'the natural', 'the physical' 'the descriptive', the 'non-evaluative' and the 'non-normative'. Each of these, if Nicholas Sturgeon is correct, comes with certain costs to metanormative neutrality.²⁰ To avoid these issues I adapt a suggestion of Tristram McPherson's and characterize a *base property* as any property that is not *normativity involving*.²¹ A normativity involving property is what might be called a non-natural

¹⁶ This is automatically the case if the thesis in question is ascriptive. Indeed, the ascriptive version is just supposed to be a deep truth about the nature of our normative judgments.

¹⁷ Zangwill (2014). Sibley (1959) is often credited as the origin of discussions of aesthetic supervenience. It is clear that what Sibley is concerned to elucidate is this sort of dependence relation. Many have gone on to characterize this relation as aesthetic supervenience. (In general, dependence and supervenience are not sharply distinguished in the aesthetic or epistemic literature).

¹⁸ Van Cleve (1985) pp. 98-99, Sosa (1991 p152, 179, 192)

¹⁹ Purely metaphysical version of these theses are of course possible. My claim is that this is not how these theses are commonly understood.

²⁰ Sturgeon (2009). Sturgeon doesn't consider 'the non-normative', but he is using non-evaluative to mean what I mean by non-normative. Sturgeon also doesn't consider 'the physical'. This isn't a common construal of the base in metaethics. Unless physicalism is true a priori, the claim that the normative strongly supervenes on the physical is not a conceptual truth - its truth would require that certain substantive metaphysical, physicalist assumptions be true.

²¹ McPherson (2012). On his version base properties are those that are not *ethically* involving. Ridge (2007) suggests an alternative response to Sturgeon: that the base be characterized as either descriptive or non-normative. I agree with McPherson that Sturgeon's argument puts Ridge's proposal into doubt (2012) p.213 n.23. However, my arguments below also work given this disjunctive construal of the base.

property. It is to be understood as either a *sui generis* normative property or one whose real definition ineliminably mentions such properties.²²

This means we need to reformulate (NS):

(NS*): As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that metaphysically necessitate(s) the normative one.

(NS*) is as an ontological thesis about properties, rather than an ascriptive thesis about judgments. It should be common ground amongst realists, at least those who accept that supervenience of the normative is a conceptual truth.²³ The thesis could also be understood ascriptively, as a claim that two cases judged to be base-identical must be judged to be normatively identical as well.²⁴ Thus understood, anti-realists who accept normative supervenience but balk at talk of properties should accept (NS*). Error theorists should have no trouble accepting the thesis either. In what follows I shall mostly talk in terms of properties rather than judgments, though the points I make can be fairly easily recast in the ascriptive mode.

(NS*) should be understood *broadly* rather than *narrowly*: on the broad understanding a supervenience relation obtaining does not rule out the supervening properties being part of the supervenience base, on the narrow understanding it does.²⁵ (NS*) understood broadly would be trivially true for naturalist realists, who hold that there are no *sui generis* normative properties. Normative properties are base properties, on these views, and so supervene, in effect, on themselves.²⁶

I formulate (NS*) as the claim that a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property *or collection of base properties* that metaphysically necessitate(s) the normative one. The addition of ‘or collection of base properties’ is non-standard and makes this formulation different from (ES), (AS) or (MS). I include this phrase since all of these theses are supposed to be first-order view neutral. It is thus possible that what necessitates the normative property will be all the base properties (included as relational properties of the individual) *of the entire world* in which the relevant individual is situated.²⁷ It’s not clear that it is plausible to think of this as a property, even a very complex property.

2. Supervenience and Dependence

²² This is a potentially misleading term of art. There can be normative properties that are not normativity involving, as there would be if some version of normative naturalism were true.

²³ Those that don’t should accept the purely metaphysical version of (NS*).

²⁴ Cf. Klagge (1988), McPherson (2015). McPherson discusses a number of different ways that ascriptive supervenience thesis can be understood. I take the ‘must’ here to be conceptual i.e. operating as a constraint on competence with normative concepts, which is how the ascriptive thesis is most commonly understood.

²⁵ Sturgeon (2009) p60.

²⁶ For Sturgeon, supervenience of the normative is only ever true in this trivial sense, when it can be said that the supervening properties are part of the base and thus supervene on themselves. That is why it matters so much how the base is construed, and why he thinks there is no non-parochial version of the thesis.

²⁷ See, for example, Dancy (2004) p86-7. This point is just that (RH) could be true (see §3).

In general, the fact that A properties supervene on B properties does nothing to show that the A properties *depend on* the B properties. All that a supervenience thesis says is that the A and the B properties necessarily co-vary. The supervenience relation is purely modal and is strictly speaking non-symmetric.

Historically, normative supervenience is closely linked to a dependence claim: roughly, things are the way they are normatively speaking because of, or in virtue of, the way they are in terms of (some subset of the) base properties. Some have put this in terms of grounding: the normative is grounded in (some subset of the) base properties. This can be cast in the ascriptive mode as well.

Reductive realists who defend an identity relation between particular base properties and normative properties should also accept this dependence claim. On this kind of view, some subset of the base properties is more fundamental with respect to the normative properties. For example, consider the view that the property of being painful *just is* the property of being bad. On this sort of view it is nonetheless correct to say the fact that an act is bad is *grounded in* the fact that it is painful. An act is bad if and only if, *and because*, it is painful.

The grounding claim is often identified as the explanation for the supervenience claim (see §4). This is a structured picture of the metaphysics of the normative that places (a subset of) the base properties at the more fundamental, foundational, level.²⁸

3. Radical Holism and Irreducible Thickness

In §4 I argue that none of the arguments for (NS*) succeed, largely because these arguments ignore two at least conceptually possible views: radical holism (RH) and irreducible thickness (IT).

(RH) as I understand it is a view concerning the normative grounding relation.

(RH) the base properties that make, for example, an act wrong in one case, may not be wrong-makers and may even make for a different normative property in a different case.²⁹

According to (RH) normative properties are *shapeless* with respect to the (subset of) base properties on which they depend.³⁰ On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is irreducibly normative. There is no commonality at the level of the properties on which they depend.³¹

It will be helpful to have some background in place before formulating (IT). It is a view about the nature of thick concepts. Discussions about thick concepts are typically framed in terms of thick evaluative concepts that range over all evaluative concepts. Moral and aesthetic examples are the most common. Whether there are thick epistemic concepts is

²⁸ See Berker (m.s.) p3 n4.

²⁹ This is to hold that the normative grounding relation is not a necessitation relation. (Cf. Dancy's view of resultance.) In metaphysics, grounding is usually taken to be a necessitation relation but there are some dissenters: see Chudnoff (2011; 2013, §6.2), Leuenberger (2014a), Skiles (2015), and Berker (m.s.) p35 n59.

³⁰ McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993), Roberts (2011).

³¹ Cf. Jackson, Pettit, Smith (2000) who put this as the claim that there is no *descriptive* pattern.

a matter of substantive controversy.³² The view that there are (which certain virtue epistemologists seem committed to) remains possible.

(II) holds that thick concepts and properties are inherently evaluative and shapeless with respect to those base properties on which they depend, but it is not merely an instance of radical holism.³³ On this view, thick concepts are just more specific evaluative concepts. Perhaps there are almost no restrictions on the things that can count as GOOD, and no restrictions on the kinds of features that can make things good; GOOD, we can say, operates in a relatively unrestricted domain. What makes KIND a more specific concept than GOOD is that it operates within a narrower domain. KIND applies to actions or people in virtue of those people or actions having features of a certain sort. According to (II) we won't be able to specify what sort of features kind people and actions must have, and perhaps not even what features they do have in a particular case, without using further, more specific evaluative terms. In the case of 'kind' these might be, for example, 'considerate', 'sensitive' or 'thoughtful'. This last point is important: Given the possibility that normative properties are normativity involving, on this view there is *no guarantee* that we will be able to give a purely base characterisation of the features of the individual that the thick concept applies to. *There is no guarantee, in other words, that we will be able to give a purely base account of the grounds of the thick property.*

To make more clear why this is the case, consider the notion of 'embedded evaluation'.³⁴ When it comes to thick terms and concepts, an evaluation is *global* if that evaluation applies to all the features that distinguish the things falling under that term or concept. We can contrast this with *embedded* evaluations, which are evaluations required to specify the very thing over which the global evaluation will take scope. Take 'distributively just' as an example, and assume that 'x is distributively just' means something like 'x has features X, Y and Z as a distribution and is good for having those features'. The 'good' that occurs in the analysis is a global evaluation. An embedded evaluation would be present if specifying the type of thing to which the global evaluation applies required evaluative information. In this case, if one or more of X, Y, or Z were an evaluative feature (e.g. perhaps X is "is the result of a *fair* procedure") then 'distributively just' would contain an embedded evaluation. And, 'fair' on this view would also contain an embedded evaluation or evaluations. We have no reason to assume in advance in any token case that we will be able to identify the *base* properties in virtue of which an institution, say, is just.³⁵

On the non-reductivist view of the thick, the paradigmatic cases of thick concepts contain embedded evaluation. Moreover, that embedded evaluation is itself thick, and there is no reason to assume that there will be a chain of embeddings that bottoms out, in some way, in base concepts ascribing base properties.

The salient features for this discussion are as follows:

(II) thick concepts and properties are inherently evaluative and shapeless with respect to base properties. There is *no guarantee, in any token case*, that we will be able to give a purely base characterization of the features of the individual in virtue of which the thick concept applies.

³² See the papers collected in Philosophical Papers (2008) 37(3) especially Väyrynen (2008).

³³ Roberts (2011, 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming)

³⁴ Elstein & Hurka (2009) p526

³⁵ Cf. Hurley (1989) ch. 2

Neither (RH) nor (IT) straightforwardly entail the denial of (NS*). (RH), as has been pointed out many times, is perfectly compatible with the supervenience of the normative on the base.³⁶ And it is consistent with (IT) that in each token case the properties that make the act kind, say, are base features, even if there is no guarantee that we can identify those features in base terms.

4. Arguments and Replies

Arguments for (NS)* (and for (ES), (AS), (MS)) are thin on the ground, perhaps because many have found the claim so obvious as to not need argument. Nonetheless, there are some to be found: a *consistency* argument, a *grounding* argument and a *conceivability* argument.³⁷ In this section I set out, and raise problems for, each of these in turn.

i) The Consistency Argument

This is an argument typically given by expressivists for ascriptive supervenience. Strictly speaking the conclusion is not (NS*) but an ascriptive version (NS**) where the second necessity must be understood as logical or conceptual necessity.³⁸

P3: We judge objects to have normative properties because of the base properties they (we judge them to) have

P4: It is not possible to count as engaging in normative thought if you judge that an object has a normative property because of certain base properties and at the same time do not judge that another object exactly alike in its base properties has the same normative property

C: (NS**) As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that necessitate(s) the normative one

The motivation for this argument in the moral case is the thought that morality requires consistency. One version of this thought is that morality would not be fit for purpose if there were no consistency, for morality is essentially a system for regulating behavior. It thus needs to be regular so we can tell in advance what difference certain features make to how we should behave. Coupled with this view is the assumption that to be regular in this way, the features that we recommend or prohibit or permit actions on the basis of need to be non-normative, or the sort of features that we use 'recognition concepts' to pick out.³⁹

³⁶ McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993, ch.5). (RH) (and I think (IT)) are in principle compatible with any particular metaethical view, which is not to say that any naturalist or anti-realist has found (RH) or (IT) plausible.

³⁷ All three types appear in metaethics, the second in epistemology and the third in aesthetics. As an aside, it is worth noting the main argument for (ES) is one that appeals to the claim that epistemic properties are normative properties. Kim (1988) p. 310, Sosa (1991) p. 152, 179,192. See also Turri (2010). This argument can be formulated as follows:

P1: All normative properties supervene on base properties

P2: All epistemic properties are normative properties

C1: Therefore, all epistemic properties supervene on base properties.

This is clearly valid, and I've defended the assumption of P2 above. Its soundness thus rests on the plausibility of P1, which the rest of this section discusses arguments for.

³⁸ Blackburn (1971) p. 122, (1984a) p. 186

³⁹ Gibbard (2003) p102-6, 107-8.

This is to view morality as ‘something like a set of traffic regulations’.⁴⁰ It might be nice if morality were something like a simple set of traffic regulations, but it’s not clear that it isn’t more complex than that. Importantly in this context, the ‘traffic regulation view’ of morality is a substantive view. If it is being assumed in an argument for supervenience as a conceptual truth it can safely be set aside.⁴¹

But there is another, more fundamental way to cash out the motivation behind this argument. Moral practice, and normative practice more generally, is *rational*; providing reasons and justifications for one’s normative judgments is an essential part of the practice. Rationality requires, at least, consistency. Dancy expresses this point as follows:

It is often held [...] that the thesis of the supervenience of the moral on the natural *is held in place by the concept of a reason*; it is effectively an expression of the thought that where exactly the same *reasons* are in place, one must make the same moral judgment.⁴²

The conclusion here, that if the same reasons are in place we must make the same moral judgment, is plausible in the case of the normative in general. This is more or less P4 in different terms. That if the same reasons are in place we must make the same normative judgment is not something that I wish to dispute. I do, however, wish to dispute P3 and the thought that, necessarily, when we judge objects to have certain normative properties this is *because* of the *base* properties we take them to have. This is to dispute the thought that the reasons for our normative judgments must always be specifiable in base terms.

P3 could be interpreted as an empirical/phenomenological claim, as a description of how we do in fact always make normative judgments. If it were such a claim I think it would be false.⁴³ More importantly if it were such a claim and if it were true it would not be a conceptual truth. Thus P3 interpreted in this way has no place in an argument for (NS*).

P3 is more plausible, and more plausible as a conceptual truth, interpreted normatively as a claim about the nature of the reasons, or justification, we must give for our normative judgments. But even on this interpretation P3 fails to be a conceptual truth. Often the grounds we point to in justifying, or giving the reasons for, a normative judgment will be other normative properties, thick properties for example. These function perfectly well as reasons. For example, the building is beautiful because of its elegant lines; the belief is unjustified because gullible; the action is wrong because cruel. And it is possible that normative properties are normativity involving, and not base.

A common response at this point is ‘Aha! But these thick normative judgments are themselves judgments that must be justified by appeal to base features!’ I address this in detail below. Note though that first, this is not to take P3 at face value, which does not make explicit that the focus is only ultimate reasons or grounds, and second, that this response ignores the possibility of (IT).

⁴⁰ Dancy (2004) p83

⁴¹ Cf. the literature on ‘government house’ utilitarianism.

⁴² Dancy (1995) p279 (my italics). The consistency argument is connected in interesting ways to the notion of universalizability, and also to the debate about the publicity of reasons (cf. Korsgaard (1993)).

⁴³ Sometimes we make normative judgments without consciously first identifying the grounds. Sometimes the grounds we do identify are themselves normative. Then, even in the cases where we are seemingly consciously identifying base properties as grounds for our normative judgments, we take those to be *reasons*, which may be sufficient for them to count as normative (§4ii).

i) *The Grounding Argument*

The grounding argument is offered as an explanation of why the supervenience relation holds. I set out two versions of this argument here. The first is Michael Smith's argument for the supervenience of the evaluative, and the second is adapted from James Van Cleve's argument for epistemic supervenience.⁴⁴

P5: It is a conceptual constraint on normative judgments that normative claims can't be barely true; they must always be made true by other claims, ultimately by claims about base properties that make the normative claim appropriate.

P6: (From P5) If an individual has a normative property, it has that normative property, ultimately in virtue of base properties that it has.

P7: In a possible world that agrees in the truth of all the same claims about base properties, the same normative claim will be true.

P8: (From P7) In a possible world where another individual has all of the same base properties, it will have the same normative property

C: (NS*) As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that necessitate(s) the normative one.⁴⁵

P9: Either the normative supervenes on the base or there could be (e.g.) a justified belief with no base properties, or there could be a justified belief with some base properties but none that necessitates its normative properties.

P10: There could not be (e.g.) a justified belief with no base properties

P11: There could not be (e.g.) a justified belief with some base properties but none that necessitates its normative properties

C: (NS*) As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that necessitate(s) the normative one.⁴⁶

My targets in this section will be P5 and P11. It is crucial to keep in mind the possibility, which (NS*) leaves open, that normative properties might be normativity involving properties (i.e. not base properties).

Consider P5. Smith claims that this is evident from our ordinary normative practice. But while it is plausible that ordinary practice establishes that normative claims can't be

⁴⁴ Smith (2004), Van Cleve (1985). Smith phrases his argument in terms of true 'claims' and Van Cleve talks of 'properties'. In the recent literature on grounding it is most common to construe the relata of the grounding relation as facts, rather than properties. I am going to use the notion of grounding more loosely however, and in this section and in §5 allow talk of the grounding of properties as shorthand. Similar grounding arguments are at least implicit in aesthetics, e.g. Zangwill (2014) "[t]he aesthetic properties of a thing depend on its nonaesthetic properties. This dependence relation implies (but is not identical with) the supervenience relation or relations: (a) two aesthetically unlike things must also be nonaesthetically unlike; (b) something couldn't change aesthetically unless it also changed nonaesthetically; and (c) something could not have been aesthetically different unless it were also nonaesthetically different."

⁴⁵ Smith (2004) p225-9. This is my formulation.

⁴⁶ Van Cleve (1985) p98-99. My formulation, following Turri (2010)p4-5. Van Cleve's argument trades on 'grounding' assumptions: about normative properties being unable to 'float free', and about what the nature of the grounds of normative properties must be. But he also appeals to conceivability. Strictly speaking this is probably best categorized as both a grounding and a conceivability argument.

barely true, it is not clear that it reveals (as a conceptual constraint) that normative claims must be made true, ultimately, by claims about base properties.

The same points made in the previous section are relevant here. Often the grounds we point to for our normative claims will themselves be normative – claims about thick properties for example. To think it is a conceptual truth that the grounds for claims about thick properties must ultimately be claims about base properties is to ignore the possibility of (IT) and that thick properties are normativity involving. Why think that justification *must* bottom out in appeal to base properties? Indeed, why think that it is a conceptual truth that justification must bottom out in some foundation? As far as our concepts are concerned, there is *no guarantee* that we will be able to give a purely base characterization of the grounds of any thick property.

To illustrate, imagine we set about uncovering the grounds for the claim that an action was wrong. These grounds must necessitate the action's wrongness. It turns out the action was *wrong* because *cruel*, and cruel because it involved the *gratuitous harming* of an *innocent person*.⁴⁷ Why was it gratuitous? It was *unjustified*. What made it a *harm*? It involved a *malicious deceit* that negatively affected the individual's *welfare*. Why was the person *innocent*? They hadn't done anything *wrong*. It is perfectly possible that this process continues with even further appeal to normative (and normativity involving) features.

Even in the cases where the grounds appear to be base properties, the fact that they function as *reasons* might be sufficient to make them normative, and thus possibly normativity involving (and so not base). Say the action was wrong because it caused pain. Pain here functions as a *wrong-maker*, the *reason* why the act was wrong. The thought now is that it couldn't function as the *grounds* for the wrongness without being normative, or perhaps better normatively relevant, in this way. And the fact this it is normatively relevant is arguably a normative fact. Even in simple cases, then, it appears that it is a live, substantive, issue whether or not we 'bottom out' in base features in the way that the grounding argument has it that we must.⁴⁸

This brings to light the tension between the assumption that normative claims must be fully grounded in claims about (a subset of) base properties and the intuition that no normative claim can be fully explained (or justified) in (the relevant subset of) base terms.⁴⁹ You might think that the tension here would be removed if a reductive account of the normative were correct. There are two points that need to be made about this. The first is that we cannot assume the truth of a reductive account in the context of an argument for (NS*) as a conceptual truth. The second is that even if a reductive account were true, it is not at all clear that the (full) grounds for normative facts would be only base facts. There is the statement of the identity which grounds the reduction itself. It is plausible that this would count as a normative (thus potentially normativity involving) fact, if it were a fact. At the very least this is a substantive issue.⁵⁰

The argument just given targets P11 as well. For the claim is now that our concepts and our normative practice leave open the possibility that no set of base properties could (fully) ground, for example, a justified belief, a beautiful painting or a wrong action.

⁴⁷ I've italicized all the normative terms. Perhaps 'person' is a normative term too, but I leave that aside here.

⁴⁸ Cf. especially Väyrynen (2013), also Korsgaard (1996) and Schroeder (2005).

⁴⁹ See Väyrynen (2013) especially p158-161.

⁵⁰ See Heathwood (2012) p10-11.

There are now two replies to consider.

The first is the claim that I am not being careful enough to distinguish conceptual and metaphysical necessities. It is compatible with the claim that certain base properties of an object ground, and thus *metaphysically* necessitate, its normative properties, that no base description will *conceptually* imply, just as a matter of the concepts involved, any particular normative conclusion.

However, it is important that the argument for the metaphysical necessitation here is supposed to be an a priori argument that appeals to conceptual truths and ordinary normative practice. The point is precisely that *as far as we can tell from our normative concepts*, the possibility is left open that base properties do not metaphysically necessitate normative properties.

The main point of this section can thus be put as follows: the core of the grounding argument for (NS*) is explicitly the claim that there are no brute normative truths and, crucially, *that this is itself a conceptual truth*. My contention is that it is not at all plausible that this is a conceptual truth. I have also given some reasons for doubting that it is true at all.

The second reply to my argument abandons the Smith/Van Cleve-type grounding picture, but substitutes another, one that allows some brute normative truths but also yields (NS*):

“(NS*) is the consequence of the fact that whenever an individual has a normative property, there’s always a grounding explanation of this fact that cites only base properties of the individual together with a general (metaphysically necessary) normative principle. Normative properties are always fully grounded in base properties plus general normative principles. These general principles may themselves be grounded in further principles, but at bedrock there is a normative principle (or principles) that ground the particular normative facts and mid-level principles, but which are not themselves explained by citing base properties.⁵¹”

For this to constitute an argument for (NS*) it would have to be a conceptual truth that general normative principles are metaphysically necessary. This is at least a controversial claim. Fine and Rosen, for example, claim that normative principles are normatively, not metaphysically, necessary.⁵²

There are further reasons to doubt that this account of the structure of the normative is a conceptual truth. First (RH) may be true. According to (RH) the base properties that make, for example, an act wrong in one case, may not be wrong-makers and may even make for a different normative property in a different case. Normative properties are *shapeless* with respect to (the relevant subset of) base properties.⁵³ On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is normative.

⁵¹ See Enoch (2011), Scanlon (2014), Schroeder (2014), Skarsaune (2015), Leary (forthcoming). Although it is commonly non-naturalist realists that defend this sort of picture of the structure of the normative, it is a picture that is open to almost all meta-normative positions, including reductive views. On reductive views the bedrock normative principle would be the identity statement of the reduction itself.

⁵² Fine (2002), Rosen (m.s.)

⁵³ McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993), Roberts (2011).

This leaves open the conceptual possibility that there is *no pattern* at the base grounding level. Principles (or, at least ‘snappy’ principles) require that there be such a pattern.⁵⁴

One might reply that even if (RH) is true there will still be some grounding explanation of particular normative facts. This would cite *only* base properties of the relevant individual-in-a-world together with a general, perhaps infinitely complex, conditional, whether or not we want to call this conditional a (non-snappy) principle.⁵⁵ So the grounds for the wrongness of an action in a particular case would be all of the base properties of the action including all of the base properties of the entire world in which the action is situated, as relational properties of that action, plus a conditional stating that actions with these base properties are wrong.⁵⁶

However, given the possibility of (IT) it is not clear that we would even be able to formulate this *base* description of the individual-in-a-world plus general, perhaps infinitely complex, conditional, in such a way that the instantiation of the normative property is indeed *necessitated*. For this would *require* that we could do precisely what (IT) says there is no guarantee that we can always do, i.e. that we be able to give an account purely in base terms of the grounds of any and all thick properties of this individual-in-a-world. If we can’t formulate it I can’t think what metaethically neutral reason we have to say that it must nonetheless be there.

iii) The Conceivability Argument

This is the most common type of argument for normative supervenience. It was first advanced by R. M. Hare, employing the example of St Francis.⁵⁷ Versions are put forward by, among others, Jamie Dreier and Mike Ridge.⁵⁸ I formulate it as follows:

P12: If we conceive of another individual identical to X in terms of base properties then we conceive of an individual identical to X in terms of normative properties. We cannot conceive of another individual identical to X in respect of all base properties but different from X in respect of normative properties; we know a priori that there cannot be such an individual

P13: If we conceive of an individual different from X in terms of normative properties then we conceive of an individual different from X in terms of base properties. We cannot conceive of X being different in respect of normative properties without a difference in respect of base properties

C: (NS*) As a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative

⁵⁴ See Rosen (m.s.) p2 n1, Jackson, Pettit and Smith (2000).

⁵⁵ If (RH) is the case, and we wanted the guarantee – what a principle would give us – that a particular normative property would be instantiated by an individual then we would need to include at least *every* base property of the world in which the individual was situated, as relational properties of that individual, as part of the grounds.

⁵⁶ There is an interesting question here concerning whether this would amount to an *explanation* of the particular normative fact (grounding is after all supposed to be metaphysical explanation). This point is related to Dancy’s claim that the grounding relation, as far as the normative is concerned, is not a necessitation relation at all. The resultant base for the normative property does not necessitate that property, on his view. Dancy holds this because he holds (RH), or something close to it. And he thinks that to include all of the properties of the entire world in which the individual is situated in the base is to *fail to single out* the wrong-makers, or right-makers or whatever the relevant normative property may be. On the face of it, this looks like a failure to explain what needs to be explained.

⁵⁷ Hare (1952) p145

⁵⁸ Dreier (m.s.) p3. Ridge (2007) p335.

property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that necessitate(s) the normative one.

It is worth emphasizing that this argument is supposed to be metaethically neutral. Crucially, it is supposed to be an argument that should move even the non-naturalist who thinks that normative properties are not base properties. From the perspective of the non-naturalist, we cannot then merely be engaging in the trivial activity of imagining another individual identical to X.

For this argument to generate the conclusion (NS*) we have to be engaging in the exercise of conceiving of another individual identical to X only in respect of base properties that are uncontroversially base properties. In other words, *we are not permitted to use any normative concepts* in conceiving of this individual. Now, if (RH) is true this could include all of the base properties *of the entire world* in which the individual is situated, as relational properties of the individual. Assume that conceiving of this is possible. The argument requires that we conceive of only the (subset of) base properties of X-in-a-world in such a way that necessitates that X* has the same normative property as X. Crucially though, since (IT) may be true, we've *no guarantee* that we will be able to conceive of all and only the base properties for any and all normative properties. For, according to (IT) there is no guarantee that we will be able to identify the base property grounds for the attribution of the thick property in every token case.

We should conclude from this that it is possible that in conceiving of X*, another individual identical to X only in terms of base properties and without employing any normative concepts, that we are *not* conceiving of something which *necessitates* that X* has the same normative property. If we do get the necessitation, it is possible that we have only done so by illegitimately employing a normative concept or two and thus allowing normativity-involving properties into the supervenience base.

As far as our concepts are concerned, it is possible to conceive of an individual identical to X in terms of base properties but different in terms of normative properties. Any resistance that is felt here is caused, I think, by the fact that most of the time when people perform this thought experiment they do not have either (RH) or (IT) in mind, and so they are potentially smuggling normativity-involving properties into the supervenience base.

The upshot is that it is not the case that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, whenever something has a normative property, it has a base property or collection of base properties that necessitate(s) the normative one. (NS*) is not a conceptual truth. It is not a conceptual truth, at least in part, because it can be rejected on a non-naturalist view that accepts both (RH) and (IT).

5. Good news for non-reductivists and non-naturalists?

The supervenience of the normative is used as a dialectical weapon in various ways, particularly against non-reductive and non-naturalist views in meta-normative theory. Any argument relying on (NS*) is undermined by my argument in §4, assuming that argument is correct.⁵⁹ This is indeed good news for defenders of these views. It is also

⁵⁹ Or the epistemic, aesthetic or moral versions of (NS*).

important more generally. The notion that (NS*) or something close to it is a truism of normative discourse is extremely widely held and influential in various ways, not all of them as direct and obvious as the explicit employment of (NS*) in an objection to a view.

Supervenience objections are nonetheless important, and not all supervenience objections employ (NS*). In this section I consider two prominent examples.

(i) Jackson's 'Reduction' Objection

The first is Jackson's argument for the claim that normative supervenience entails that normative properties are descriptive properties. For ease of exposition I use Jackson's terminology, though it should be clear that by 'descriptive' Jackson means (language that ascribes) base properties as defined above.

I'm not going to rehearse Jackson's argument here. Suffice to say that the purported conceptual truth of a supervenience thesis plays a crucial role:

[T]he global supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive is special in that an unrestricted form, namely

(S) For all w and w^* , if w and w^* are exactly alike descriptively then they are exactly alike normatively.

is both a priori true and necessary.⁶⁰

There are already a number of objections to Jackson's argument, but none that cut it off, so to speak, at the source. If what I say in §4 is correct, then Jackson's argument fails at the first step.

In general, though strong individual supervenience entails global supervenience, it is controversial whether the reverse is the case. Thus we cannot simply claim that (S) fails to be a conceptual truth because (NS*) does. However, at least some of the arguments I gave against the conceptual truth of (NS*) seem to tell against (S) as well. For consider the question of why we should believe (S)? The argument commonly given here is a global version of the conceivability argument, and Jackson means this argument to move at least all cognitivists including non-naturalists. The same points made against the individual version of that argument thus apply against the global version: Given the possibility of (RH) and, crucially, (IT) how can we be certain that when we conceive of a world w^* identical to w in all *descriptive* respects that we are also necessarily conceiving of a world identical to w in all normative respects? How can we be sure that we are not illegitimately smuggling normative respects into the base?

(ii) The 'Explanation' Objection

This is a supervenience objection to non-naturalist realism in particular.⁶¹ I focus on a

⁶⁰ Jackson (1998) p119. Jackson is concerned with the supervenience of the ethical rather than the normative. I have adapted (S) given the scope of this paper and I think Jackson would be likely to accept (S) so adapted. See §1.

recent statement of the objection, by Tristram McPherson.⁶² McPherson's key claim is that non-naturalist realists are committed to the supervenience of the ethical being a metaphysically brute necessary connection between distinct properties, and that (given a modest version of Hume's dictum) this is a significant theoretical cost.

The supervenience claim that plays a crucial role in this argument is as follows:

(M) No metaphysically possible world that is identical to a second world in all base respects can be different from the second world in its ethical respects.

This is a global supervenience thesis. McPherson explicitly states that his supervenience thesis is purely metaphysical.⁶³ However, this is a purely metaphysical thesis that is also supposed to be one that the non-naturalist realist is committed to, in McPherson's view. The quick and dirty response to McPherson here is that the arguments in §4 establish that the non-naturalist who accepts (RH) and (IT) can reject (M). However, it is worth considering the reasons McPherson gives for holding (M):

I take ethical supervenience theses to be best motivated by a two-part process. The first stage is to consider particular instances of what they rule out. For example, it seems impossible that another world might be identical to this one except that in the other world, a genocide otherwise identical to the actual Rwandan genocide differed solely in being ethically wonderful, rather than being an atrocity. Cases like this postulate a necessary connection: *we seem to have discovered on reflection* that the ethical features of the genocide cannot vary independently of its other features...

The second stage of the process involves noticing that our views about these specific cases do not seem to rest on idiosyncracies of the cases: analogous specific supervenience facts about everyday promising, for example, seem as compelling as such facts about radical evil like genocide. This point can encourage the inductive thought that it is impossible for there to be a case in which supervenience fails. After all, what would such a case look like?⁶⁴

McPherson appeals here to the same kind of conceivability argument that I argued against above. What my arguments in §4 were meant to call into question was precisely whether these kinds of reflections result in discovering, in a suitably metaethically neutral way, that normative features cannot vary independently of base features. It is true that McPherson uses the term 'other' here rather than 'base'. This is important. It is implausible that a genocide could differ *solely* in being ethically wonderful rather than being an atrocity. But this does not establish the thesis of the supervenience of the normative on the base (or the ethical on the base), or even a very specific such supervenience claim *for a non-naturalist realist who holds that normative properties are not base properties and who accepts (RH) and (IT)*.

⁶¹ Simon Blackburn is the original source of this objection, however Blackburn's version is significantly different. See Blackburn (1971, 1984a, 1984b), Miller (m.s.). There are versions of this objection that employ (NS*), and that are thus undermined by my arguments in §4. See Dreier (m.s.)

⁶² McPherson (2012)

⁶³ Ibid p215-6.

⁶⁴ McPherson (2012) p211-2. My italics. In conversation, Jamie Dreier mentioned to me a similar motivation for believing the supervenience thesis: that we cannot think of a counter-example to it. Maybe we can't but that could be because of the complexities introduced by (RH) and (IT). In other words that we can't think of one, if we can't, doesn't show there couldn't be one.

On such a view, to hold fixed (only) the base properties of the Rwandan genocide (R) would not be to try to conceive of the Rwandan genocide* (R*) with all of its properties except the property of being an atrocity. Again, we are not permitted to use any normative concepts in conceiving of (R*). Since we are taking out *all* of the ethical (normative) properties from the base, then, given (RH) and (IT) it is possible that what we are left with would not necessitate the property of being an atrocity.

6. Concluding remarks

The core of my argument in this paper is that supervenience of the normative on the base can be rejected by non-naturalist views that hold (RH) and (IT). This is what allows my responses in §5 above and, though this is not the only reason I argued that (NS*) is not a conceptual truth, it is perhaps the main one.

One might take my arguments to be a reductio of (RH) and (IT). But the dialectic here is important. There are metaphysical commitments that would support the reductio view, but these commitments are not metaethically neutral, and neither is (NS*). The prevalence of (NS*) and similar in metanormative theorizing obscures, and explains the neglect of, the possibility that there is normativity ‘all the way down’.

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