

WHY BELIEVE IN NORMATIVE SUPERVENIENCE?

According to many, that the normative supervenes on the non-normative is plain common sense, a 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 as well. 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

I argue that those committed to moral, aesthetic and epistemic supervenience theses of this sort 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.*²

Importantly, (NS*) is closely linked to a *grounding* claim: that normative facts obtain in virtue of non-normative facts.³ For many, this dependence relation explains (NS*).⁴

My main aim is to show that none of the arguments in the literature establish (NS*), or indeed the relevant epistemic, aesthetic and moral supervenience theses. One interesting upshot of my argument is that this affords non-reductivists and non-naturalists a novel way of resisting certain prominent supervenience-based objections to their views.⁵

To my knowledge there is only one epistemologist in the literature who doubts the epistemic supervenience claim, Keith Lehrer.⁶ Those who have doubts about aesthetic supervenience have doubts, it turns out, not about the supervenience claim itself but only about how widely the supervenience base should be construed.⁷ We find more dissenters in metaethics than in any other normative discipline, but still only a few.⁸ 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.⁹

¹ I take it that the list of normative disciplines includes at least ethics, epistemology and aesthetics, but this is not meant to be exhaustive. It is very plausible, for example, that the prudential is also normative. I'm using 'normative' in the broad sense to include both the evaluative and the deontic.

² A base property is one that is not normativity-involving (McPherson 2012). I explain this in §1. Note that (NS*) invokes conceptual necessity. I consider an alternate purely metaphysical version in §5.

³ I'm interested in the normative supervenience relation understood as an asymmetric, 'one way' relation, in contrast with the kind of supervenience relation that Sturgeon (2009) holds.

⁴ See, e.g., Smith (2004), Sibley (1959), Van Cleve (1985).

⁵ Non-naturalists are non-reductivists, but the reverse need not hold. The objections I have in mind are the 'reduction' objection (e.g. Jackson 1998) and the 'explanation' objection (e.g. Dreier 1992, MS & McPherson (2012)). The latter applies only to non-naturalism.

⁶ Lehrer (1997)

⁷ See, for example, the exchange between Wicks (1988, 1992) and Zangwill (1992,1994) in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

⁸ Griffin (1992), Dancy (1995), Raz (2000), Sturgeon (2009), Hills (2009), Hattiangadi (m.s.) and Rosen (m.s.)

⁹ Rosen (m.s) p1-3.

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.’ To repeat the above example, one person cannot be more virtuous than another without there being some other difference between them, such that one is more reliably disposed to help others. And if two people are qualitatively exactly alike in all other ways, they cannot but be morally alike as well. If we make the assumption that ‘other differences’ and ‘other ways’ are non-normative differences and ways, then moral features look to be supervenient on non-normative features. The same is plausibly true across all other normative domains, including epistemology and aesthetics.

The basic idea of supervenience can be made more precise in a number of ways, depending on how its modal strength is interpreted (metaphysical, conceptual, nomological) 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 supervenience claim that I am focusing on is the following:

(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.

I have two main aims in this section. The first is to show that those committed to more specific epistemic, moral and aesthetic supervenience theses also hold (NS). The second is to clarify certain aspects of (NS).

(i) Epistemic, Aesthetic, Moral and Normative Supervenience

Here is a recent statement of the epistemic version of this thesis:

(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

A recent statement of the aesthetic supervenience thesis:

(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

And a recent statement of the moral supervenience thesis:

¹⁰ Kallestrup and Prichard (forthcoming) p1

¹¹ Hick (2012) p309.

(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

Here is why anyone defending (ES), (AS) or (MS) should accept (NS):

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 a bit more complicated. 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 In my view, this controversy is connected to the main debate about aesthetic supervenience which is over *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. But 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. The non-normative includes the non-moral, the non-epistemic and the non-aesthetic. Thus, putting aside the issue of the first necessity for the moment, (NS) 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).

So, in theory, a defender of (ES) for example could reject (NS) on the grounds that (ES) allows moral, aesthetic, and other kinds of normative but non-epistemic properties into the base whereas (NS) does not. Similarly for defenders of (AS) and (MS).

However, the proponents of these theses that I am here concerned with don’t have this sort of view in mind.¹⁴ As well as using the terms ‘non-epistemic’, ‘non-aesthetic’ and ‘non-moral’, proponents of these theses typically use terms to refer to supervenience base properties that make clear that the properties they have in mind are meant to

¹² Dreier (m.s.) p2. All these formulations, (NS) included, state an ontological connection between properties, not an ascriptive or linguistic connection between types of judgments.¹² I don’t think anything much hangs on this. The theses are relatively easily recast as ascriptive and similarly recast version of the points I make below will still 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 I don’t know of anyone who defends an epistemic, aesthetic or moral supervenience thesis who doesn’t also hold that the normative supervenes on the non-normative, or similar.

contrast with the normative in general, for example, ‘descriptive’, ‘natural’ and ‘physical’.¹⁵

Should proponents of (ES), (AS) and (MS) accept (NS)? There is one further matter to consider, namely the nature of the first necessity in each of the theses.

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. The first necessity is thus widely held to be conceptual necessity.

How to understand the first necessity isn’t widely discussed in epistemology or aesthetics.¹⁶ 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

(ii) Normative Supervenience

In all of these domains the supervenience base is variously characterized, for example, as ‘the factual’, ‘the natural’, ‘the physical’ ‘the descriptive’, the ‘non-moral’, the ‘non-evaluative’ and the ‘non-normative’. Each of these, if Nicholas Sturgeon is correct, comes with certain costs to metanormative neutrality.¹⁹ To avoid these issues I will adapt a suggestion of Tristram McPherson’s and characterise a *base property* as any property that is not *normativity involving*.²⁰ A normativity involving property is to be understood as either

¹⁵ In fact I think that the specific supervenience theses are more plausible if they allow other kinds of normative properties into the base. I address this in §4. Of course on some metanormative views normative properties are natural properties. But the kind of supervenience thesis I have in mind here, i.e. (NS) is a one-way, asymmetric thesis, closely linked to a dependence claim where the normative properties are held to supervene on the non-normative natural properties. And it is clear from the relevant contexts that the more specific supervenience theses I have in mind are also understood in this way.

¹⁶ So far as I can tell, it is not discussed at all in either literature.

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 a dependence relation. Many have gone on to attempt to characterize this relation in terms of aesthetic supervenience. In general, the dependence relation and the supervenience relation are not often sharply distinguished in the literature on aesthetic supervenience.

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

¹⁹ Sturgeon (2009). Sturgeon doesn’t consider the non-normative, but it’s fairly clear from his discussion that he is using non-evaluative to mean what I mean by non-normative in this paper. Sturgeon also doesn’t consider the supervenience base construed as the physical. This isn’t a common construal of the base in metaethics. In my view it is a fairly easy task to show that the claim that the normative strongly supervenes on the physical is not a conceptual truth. The truth of the supervenience claim requires certain substantive metaphysical, physicalist assumptions be true. (Of course, I would be wrong about this if physicalism turns out to be true a priori).

²⁰ McPherson (2012). McPherson is concerned only with the moral case, so on his version base properties are those that are not *ethically* involving. Ridge (2007) also suggests a response to Sturgeon: that the base properties be characterized as either descriptive or non-normative. I take it that McPherson is correct in

a sui generis normative property or one whose real definition ineliminably mentions such properties.

This means we need to reformulate (NS) as follows:

(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.

Since the supervenience thesis says nothing about which specific base properties normative properties supervene on, it's neutral between various first-order theories (for example, normative ethical theories).

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). It is important to note that, since all of these theses are supposed to be first-order view independent, it is possible that the subvenient base that 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.²¹ It's not clear to me that it is plausible to think of this as a property, even a very complex property.

2. Supervenience and Dependence

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 a purely modal relation and is strictly speaking non-symmetric. And supervenience without dependence is possible. In the normative case, typically the supervenience relation is taken to hold asymmetrically: however plausible it is that there can be no normative difference without a base difference, it seems perfectly possible that there can be base differences without normative differences.

The supervenience claim I am interested in is also closely linked to a dependence claim: this is, in very rough terms, things are the way they are normatively speaking because of, or in virtue of, the way they are in terms of base properties. Some have put this in terms of grounding: the normative is grounded in base properties.

(NS*) should be understood linked with a grounding claim of this sort, as a claim about a relation between two (at least ostensibly) distinct sets of properties, the normative and the base. Reductive realists who defend an identity relation between particular base properties and normative properties should also accept (NS*) understood in this way. On this kind of view, the base properties are more fundamental. 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.

claiming that Sturgeon's argument gives us reasons to doubt that Ridge's proposal is indeed a way forward. McPherson (2012) p.213 n.23

²¹ See, for example, Dancy (2004) p86-7. This point is just that (RH) could be true (see §3).

The views that I am targeting do conceive of normative supervenience in this hierarchical way. 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 the base properties at the more fundamental, foundational, level.²²

3. Radical Holism and Irreducible Thickness

Both *radical holism* of the normative (RH) and *irreducible thickness* (IT) are at least *conceptually* possible.

(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.²³

Normative properties are *shapeless* with respect to base properties.²⁴ On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is normative. There is no such commonality at the base level or, as this point is sometimes put, there is *no descriptive pattern* at the base level.²⁵

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 the domains of evaluative concepts that there are. Moral and aesthetic examples are the most common. It is controversial whether or not there are thick epistemic concepts.²⁶ However, this is a matter of substantive controversy. The view that there are thick epistemic concepts (which certain virtue epistemologists seem committed to) remains possible.

(IT) holds that thick concepts and properties are inherently evaluative and shapeless with respect to base properties.²⁷ Irreducible thickness, though, is not merely an instance of radical holism.

Nonreductivists about the thick hold that thick concepts are irreducibly evaluative (so irreducibly normative). On this view, thick concepts are just more specific, wholly evaluative concepts. In what sense are they more specific? 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

²² See Berker (m.s.) p3 n4.

²³ This is to hold that the normative grounding relation is not a necessitation relation. This is precisely Dancy's view of resulance, for example. 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.

²⁴ McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993), Roberts (2011).

²⁵ See Jackson, Pettit, Smith (2000).

²⁶ See the papers collected in Philosophical Papers (2008) 37(3) especially Väyrynen (2008).

²⁷ Roberts (2011, 2013a, 2013b, forthcoming)

having features of a certain sort. On this view we may not be able to specify what sort of features kind people and actions must have, or even what features they 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: 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.

One way to see more clearly why this is the case is to consider the notion of ‘embedded evaluation’.²⁸ 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. In any token case, we have no reason to assume in advance that we will be able to identify the *base* properties in virtue of which an institution, say, is just.²⁹

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 of (IT), for this discussion are as follows:

(IT) 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 that the thick concept applies to.

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.³⁰ 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 be able to identify those features in base terms.

4. Arguments For NS*

Arguments for NS* (and for moral, aesthetic and epistemic supervenience) are thin on the ground, perhaps because many have found the claim so obvious as to not need an argument. Nonetheless, there are arguments to be found: a *consistency* argument, a

²⁸ Elstein & Hurka (2009) p526

²⁹ Compare Hurley (1989) ch. 2

³⁰ See, especially McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993, ch.5)

grounding argument and a *conceivability* argument.³¹ In this section I set out each of these in turn. I raise problems for the arguments in section 5.

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.³² The chief exponent of this argument is Sosa:

The central concept of epistemology is justification: not the practical justification of action, nor even such justification of belief as may come of its being expedient or generous or charitable; but rather the cognitive justification required to distinguish belief that is knowledge from what is little more than a lucky guess. Such cognitive justification is a normative or evaluative notion involved in the guidance or assessment of the intellect. Being thus justified is hence *bound to share in the supervenience of the normative and evaluative generally*. If an apple is a good apple, it is so in virtue of nonevaluative properties, perhaps being juicy, sweet, and large. And any other apple just like it in respect of all such properties could not fail to be equally good. Similarly, if a belief is cognitively justified, it is so presumably in virtue of nonevaluative properties, perhaps having a certain source in perception, introspection, memory, or inference, or some combination of these. And any other belief just like it in respect of all such properties could not fail to be equally well justified.³³

(It's worth noting that Sosa does not distinguish the grounding of the evaluative in the non-evaluative and the supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative in this argument, indeed he clearly takes the two to be closely connected.)

Changing the terminology slightly, we can extract the following argument from this passage:

- P1: All normative properties supervene on base properties
- P2: All epistemic properties are normative properties
- C1: Therefore, all epistemic properties supervene on base properties

The argument is clearly valid, and I've defended the assumption of P2 above. Its soundness thus rests on the plausibility of P1.

Let's turn now to the arguments for (NS*)

i) The Consistency Argument

- 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 practice 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

³¹ Instances of all three types appear in metaethics, of the second in epistemology and the third in aesthetics.

³² Kim (1988) p. 310, Sosa (1991) p. 152, 179,192. See also Turri (2010). I focus on Sosa's version of this argument, because it is the one most often referred to in the literature.

³³ Sosa (1991) p. 192

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

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.

Here is Blackburn's metaethical version:

There can be no question that we often choose, admire, commend or desire, objects because of their naturalistic properties. Now it is not possible to hold an attitude to a thing because of its possessing certain properties and, at the same time, not hold that attitude to another thing that is believed to have the same properties. The non-existence of the attitude in the second case shows that it is not because of the shared properties that I hold it in the first case.... [Thus] it is not possible to hold a moral attitude to one thing, believe a second to be exactly alike, yet at the same time not hold the same attitude to the second thing. Anybody who appears to do this is convicted of misidentifying a caprice as a moral opinion.³⁴

If we allowed ourselves a system (shmoralizing) which was like ordinary evaluative practice, but subject to no such [supervenience] constraint, then it would allow us to treat naturally identical cases in morally different ways. This could be good schmoralizing. But that would unfit schmoralizing from being any kind of guide to practical decision-making (a thing could be properly deemed shbetter than another although it shared with it all the features relevant to choice or desirability).³⁵

ii) *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.³⁶ Both of these arguments employ the notion of the 'in virtue of' relation (the grounding relation) as a distinctively metaphysical explanation of the normative, and in particular of the supervenience of the normative.³⁷

³⁴ Blackburn (1971) p. 122. Blackburn offers this consistency argument as an explanation of why the supervenience thesis holds.

³⁵ Blackburn (1984a) p. 186. It's clear from the context that Blackburn takes natural properties to be non-normativity involving (base) properties. As I argue below (§5&§6) it is not at all clear (it is not a conceptual truth or a truism) that two things that share all the same base properties share all the features relevant to choice or desirability.

³⁶ Smith (2004), Van Cleve (1985). Similar 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."

³⁷ 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

Here is Smith:

[T]he relevant fact seems to me to be that it is *simply incoherent to suppose that normative claims could be barely true*. Normative claims must always be made true by other claims. Because normative claims are always made true by other claims, it follows that, in possible worlds that agree in the truth of all the same claims that make normative claims true, the same normative claims will be true. This is all it means to say that the normative is supervenient.

Note that the fact that normative claims cannot be barely true is reflected in our ordinary practice. Suppose I say that a particular life is good, but then look totally flummoxed when asked to provide the features of the life that make it good. Perhaps I say “You clearly don’t understand. It isn’t made good by other features. Its just good!” If I am using “good” as a normative term, then I would plainly violate the rules that govern the use of the word “good”. When I say of a life that it is good, using “good” as a normative term, *I thereby incur an obligation to say why my ascription of goodness to that life is appropriate in the light of the features that the life possesses*. If the life is good, these are the features of the life that make it good. . . . Having made the claim that a life is good, *I am under conceptual pressure to admit that it made good by other properties it possesses, and so to provide an account of such properties if needs be*. In this way, ordinary practice bears out the fact that claims about the goodness of a life cannot be barely true. Ordinary practice bears out the fact that the evaluative is supervenient.

[W]e have seen that the reason that we have for believing that the evaluative supervenes on the natural is that it is a conceptual truth that evaluative claims cannot be barely true. They must be made true by other claims, *and what they must be made true by are claims about naturalistic features*.

The last point needs some explanation. Smith understands natural features as properties that are such as to figure in empirical regularities. And it’s clear from his discussion that such features he thinks would be neither sui generis normative properties nor ones whose real definitions ineliminably mention such properties.

Smith allows that in many cases, normative claims may be made true by other, more specific, normative claims. So a belief might be justified in part because it was arrived at conscientiously. And an action might be wrong because cruel. But then we can ask, says Smith, what makes these more specific normative claims true. For they can’t be barely true either. Eventually, he claims, we must bottom out in a claim about natural features:

If this line of questioning is followed to its *logical* conclusion, then it seems to me simply irresistible to suppose that [the questioner] will eventually have to admit that something in the sphere of the natural is what makes true the normative claims he makes about the Socratic sort’s life. In this particular case, for example, if he has not already appealed to a natural feature in saying that [in explaining why it’s true that the Socratic sort’s life is good] the Socratic sort writes articles

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. Nothing hangs on this.

that display her understanding, then he will eventually have to appeal to such features in any case, because what makes it true that the Socratic sort lives a life in which she writes articles that display her understanding is evidently the fact that she writes the particular words that she writes in those articles...The normative claim about the Socratic sort's life is made true by a claim about the natural features of her life after all.³⁸

I extract from this the following argument for (NS*):

- 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

Here is Van Cleve's version of the argument:

To affirm the supervenience of value is to deny that value properties can float freely, as it were, unanchored in any natural properties. To extend the supervenience idea into epistemology is to hold that epistemic properties must likewise be anchored in natural properties....The idea, then, is that no belief can be justified (or characterized by any other epistemic property) except in virtue of possessing some natural (i.e., nonepistemic) property. This is not meant to preclude the possibility that the partial or proximate ground of a belief's being justified may be its possession of epistemic properties e.g., the property of having been inferred from other justified beliefs. But it does entail that the complete or ultimate ground of a belief's being justified must be its instantiation of some nonepistemic property (or equivalently, the obtaining of some nonepistemic state of affairs). ...To affirm supervenience in value theory is simply to affirm that every instantiated moral property must have a sufficient (i.e., entailing) condition among its natural properties. To deny such supervenience would therefore be to hold either (i) that there could be an object with moral properties, but no natural properties, or (ii) that there could be an object with both moral properties and natural properties, but no natural properties that entail its moral properties. The first alternative is out of the question; everything must have some natural properties. The second alternative runs afoul of [Hare's St Francis observation – see the next section].

Suppose a belief's being justified does not have a sufficient condition among its natural properties. This is possible only if (i) the belief has no natural properties, or (ii) the natural properties it does have do not entail that it is justified. The first

³⁸ Smith (2004) p225-9. My italics. Smith uses the term 'evaluative'. I have substituted 'normative', simply given my choice of terminology for this paper. It is clear I think that Smith means by 'evaluative' what I mean by 'normative'.

alternative is out of the question as before, and the second implies that there could be another belief just like the original in all natural respects directed at the same proposition, caused by similar causes, accompanied by similar experiences, related in the same ways to other beliefs of its subject, and so on, yet not justified. This, too, is absurd. A difference in epistemic status must surely be traceable to some further difference.³⁹

Translated into an argument for (NS*) this is:

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.⁴⁰

I include Van Cleve's argument in this section because I think that it is trading 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 Van Cleve does also appeal to the conceivability argument, so strictly speaking this version is probably best categorized as both a grounding argument and a conceivability argument. I turn now to the latter.

iii) The Conceivability Argument

This is the most common argument for normative supervenience.

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

R. M. Hare is the first to make this argument:

Let me illustrate one of the most characteristic features of value-words in terms of a particular example. It is a feature sometimes described by saying that 'good' and other such words are the names of 'supervenient' or 'consequential'

³⁹ Van Cleve (1985) p98-99.

⁴⁰ See Turri (2010) p4-5.

properties. Suppose that a picture is hanging upon the wall and we are discussing whether it is a good picture; that is to say, we are debating whether to assent to, or dissent from, the judgment 'P is a good picture'. . . . Suppose that there is another picture next to P in the gallery (I will call it Q). Suppose that either P is a replica of Q or Q of P, and we do not know which, but do know that both were painted by the same artist at about the same time. Now there is one thing that we cannot say; we cannot say 'P is exactly like Q in all respects save this one, that P is a good picture and Q not'. If we were to say this, we should invite the comment, 'But how can one be good and the other not, if they are exactly alike? There must be some *further* difference between them to make one good and other not'. Unless we at least admit the relevance of the question 'What makes one good and the other not?' we are bound to puzzle our hearers; they will think that something has gone wrong with our use of the word 'good.' Sometimes we cannot specify just what it is that makes one good and the other not; but there always must be something.⁴¹

[L]et us take that characteristic of "good" which has been called its supervenience. Suppose we say that 'St. Francis was a good man.' It is *logically* impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in exactly the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man.⁴²

Hare is clearly thinking of the supervenience relation in the hierarchical way that I am concerned with here. But for various reasons this version of the conceivability argument is not an argument for (NS*).⁴³

Here are two more recent versions of the argument, which are arguments for (NS*):

Hare observes that there is no man who is just like St Francis in all non-normative respects but different from him in respect of moral goodness; and we seem to know this without checking. But in the same way, we seem to know that there *could not have been* anyone just like the actual St Francis in all non-normative respects but different in his moral goodness. And, indeed, we seem to know that St. Francis himself could not have been different in some moral respect without being different in some non-normative respect. And this is strong supervenience.⁴⁴

(NS*) is extremely plausible, to the point that someone who denied it would thereby betray incompetence with normative concepts. To deny (NS*) would be to allow that it could have been the case that there was another individual exactly like Hitler in all of his base properties, yet that individual's actions were not wrong. Since all the base properties are the same it will still be true that Hitler killed the same people, had the same intentions, etc. Such bare normative differences seem *inconceivable*. In other words, We seem to know that *there could not have been* anyone just like the actual Hitler in respect of all base properties but that person's actions not be wrong. And we seem to know that Hitler's actions

⁴¹ Ibid p80-1.

⁴² Hare (1952) p145

⁴³ See, for example, Dreier (m.s.) p4

⁴⁴ Dreier (m.s.) p3

themselves couldn't have differed normatively without having differed in respect of base properties.⁴⁵

5. Objections

My aim in this section is to show that none of the above arguments succeed in establishing (NS*).

i) The Consistency Argument

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 practice 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. To be such a system, morality 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 common-or-garden ones, the sort of features that we use 'recognition concepts' to pick out, to use Gibbard's terminology.⁴⁶

This is to view morality as 'something like a set of traffic regulations'.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

But there is another, more fundamental way to cash out the motivation behind this argument. Moral practice, and normative practice more generally, is *rational*, by which I mean nothing more than that providing reasons and justifications for one's normative judgments is an essential part of the practice. Rationality requires, at least, consistency. Like cases should be judged alike.

Dancy expresses this point as follows:

It is often held, and I have myself suggested in the past, 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

⁴⁵ This is an adaptation of Ridge (2007) p335

⁴⁶ Gibbard (2003) p102-6, 107-8.

⁴⁷ Dancy (2004) p83

⁴⁸ Cf. the discussion in normative ethics as regards 'government house' utilitarianism.

in place, one must make the same moral judgment.⁴⁹

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 above put 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 it must always be the case that when we judge objects to have certain normative properties that this is because of the base properties we take them to have.⁵⁰ This is to dispute the thought that the reasons for our normative judgments must always be base.

P3 could be interpreted as an empirical/phenomenological claim, perhaps a causal claim, a description of how we do in fact always make normative judgments. If it were such a claim I think it would be false.⁵¹ 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 to point to 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.

A common response at this point is ‘Aha! But these are themselves judgments that must be justified by appeal to base features!’. I address this response in detail in the next section. Note for the moment first that 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).

ii) *The Grounding Argument*

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.

⁴⁹ Dancy (1995) p279 (my italics). The consistency argument for/explanation of supervenience is concerned in interesting ways to the notion of universalizability, and also to the debate about the publicity of reasons (cf. Korsgaard (1993)).

⁵⁰ Strictly speaking, Blackburn allows that we might choose etc. on the basis of something other than natural (base) properties. But I think it is clear from the rest of his view that this wouldn't count as a *moral* judgment so much as a caprice.

⁵¹ Sometimes we make normative judgments without consciously first identifying the grounds. Sometimes the grounds we do identify are themselves normative (picked out using thick evaluative concepts for example). And then there is the worry that even in the cases where we are seemingly consciously identifying base features as grounds for our normative judgments, we take those features to be *reasons*, which may be sufficient for them to count as normative (see §4ii).

- 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
- 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.⁵²

My targets in this section will be P5 and P11.

First, consider P5. Smith claims that this is evident from our ordinary normative practice. But while it is plausible that ordinary practice does establish that normative claims can't be barely true, it is not at all clear that it reveals (and 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 can be here. Often the grounds we point for our normative claims will themselves be normative – claims about thick properties for example. Is it a conceptual truth that the grounds for claims about thick properties must ultimately be claims about base properties? To think it is, is to ignore the possibility that thick properties and concepts are irreducibly thick. 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? If (IT) is correct, there is *no guarantee* that we will be able to give a purely non-evaluative characterization of the features of the individual that a 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 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.⁵³ Why was it gratuitous? It was *unjustified*. What made it a harm? It involved a *malicious deceit* which 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 features.

There is another worry here, which is that even in the cases where the grounds appear to be base features, the fact that they function as *reasons* is might be sufficient to make them normative, or at least normativity involving (and so not really base features). Lets take an

⁵² See Turri (2010) p4-5.

⁵³ I've italicized all the normative terms. I think it is possible that 'person' is a normative term too, but I leave that aside here.

example. 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 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 that it is normatively relevant is 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.⁵⁴

This brings to light the tension between the assumption that normative claims must be fully grounded in claims about base properties and the intuition that no normative claim can be fully explained (or justified) in base terms.⁵⁵ 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. For there is the statement of the identity which grounds the reduction itself. In my view it is plausible that that itself would count as a normative fact, if it were a fact. But at the very least, this is a substantive issue.⁵⁶

At this point it is worth noting that the argument just given targets P11 as well. For the claim is now that our concepts and our normative practice make possible that no set of base properties (no purely non-normativity involving fact) could (fully) ground, for example, a justified belief, a beautiful pain or a wrong action.

There are two replies to my argument so far that need to be considered here.

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, the reply continues, we can substitute another picture of the structure of normative reality in its place, one that allows some brute normative truths but also yields (NS*):

⁵⁴ Cf. especially Väyrynen (2013), also Korsgaard (1996) and Schroeder (2005).

⁵⁵ See Väyrynen (2013) especially p158-161.

⁵⁶ See Heathwood (2012) p10-11.

(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.⁵⁷

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. Rosen and Fine for example, claim that normative principles are normatively, but not metaphysically, necessary.⁵⁸

Even leaving this issue aside, however, it is not clear that we should accept this picture of the structure of normative reality as 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 base properties.⁵⁹ On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is normative. There is *no descriptive (non-normativity involving) pattern* at the base level. Principles (or, at least 'snappy' principles) require that there be such a pattern.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ 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.

[An aside: I think that 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 a metaphysical explanation). This point is related to Dancy's claim that the grounding relation, as far as the normative is concerned at least, 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

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ Fine (2002), Rosen (m.s.)

⁵⁹ McDowell (1981), Dancy (1993), Roberts (2011).

⁶⁰ See Rosen (m.s.) p2 n1, Jackson, Pettit and Smith (2000).

⁶¹ 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.

whatever the relevant normative property may be. On the face of it, this looks like a failure to explain what needs to be explained.]

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.

iii) The Conceivability Argument

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

What exactly are we conceiving of when we conceive another individual that is identical to X in respect of all base properties? To escape triviality, it must be that we can make sense of conceiving of *just the base properties* being identical. Otherwise, all we are doing is engaging in the trivial activity of imagining another individual identical to X; we are manifestly not showing 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.

So we are engaging in the exercise of conceiving of another individual identical to X only in respect of base properties. 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. Assume that this is possible. The argument requires that we conceive of *only the base properties* of X-in-a-world in such a way that necessitates that X* has the same normative property. 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. 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 not at all clear that when we are conceiving of X*, another individual identical to X only in terms of base properties, that we are conceiving of something which *necessitates* that X* has the same normative property. If we do get the necessitation, it is not clear that we haven't done so only by illegitimately allowing normativity-involving properties into the supervenience base.

So is it possible to conceive of an individual identical to X in terms of base properties but different in terms of normative properties? As far as what our concepts allow it

doesn't seem possible to give a definite 'no' answer here. Any resistance that we feel 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.

What this means is that as far as our concepts go, that is, as far as conceptual necessity is concerned, it is not at all clear that 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.

At this point the main goal of this paper has been reached. In the next, and final, section I consider some implications.

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

The supervenience of the normative is used as a dialectical weapon in various ways, particularly against those who hold non-reductive and non-naturalist views in meta-normative theory. Any argument relying on (NS*) is undermined by my argument in §5 above, if that argument is correct.⁶² This is indeed good news for defenders of these views, and it is 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.

However, not all supervenience objections employ (NS*). In this section I consider two such prominent supervenience objections in the metaethics literature.

(i) Jackson's 'Reduction' Objection

The first is Frank 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 here for the supervenience base, though it should be clear that by 'descriptive' Jackson means (language that ascribes) base properties as those were defined above.

I'm not going to rehearse Jackson's argument here. Suffice to say that a supervenience thesis plays a crucial role. Moreover, the purported conceptual truth of that 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.⁶³

There are of course already a number of objections to Jackson's argument, but none that

⁶² Or the epistemic, aesthetic or moral versions of (NS*).

⁶³ 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.

cut it off, so to speak, at the source. But if what I say about (NS*) above is correct, then Jackson's argument fails at the first step.

(S) is not (NS*). 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 the same points made against the individual version of that argument 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 that has pursued by a number of people.⁶⁴ I focus on a recent statement of the objection, by Tristram McPherson.⁶⁵ 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 this (given a modest version of Hume's dictum) is a significant theoretical cost for non-naturalism.

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

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

As in Jackson's argument, this is a global supervenience thesis. However, I cannot employ the same argument against this thesis as I did against (S). This is because McPherson explicitly states that his supervenience thesis is purely metaphysical.⁶⁶ It is worth considering, though, the reasons McPherson gives for holding this thesis:

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. Reflection on such examples thus suggests commitment to a series of "specific supervenience facts", each of which involves a posited necessary connection.

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

⁶⁴ Simon Blackburn is the original source of this objection, however Blackburn's version is significantly different from the two I discuss in the text. See Blackburn (1971, 1984a, 1984b), Miller (m.s.)

⁶⁵ McPherson (2012)

⁶⁶ Ibid p215-6.

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?⁶⁷

McPherson appeals here to the same kind of conceivability argument that I argued against above.⁶⁸ What my arguments in §5 were meant to call into question was precisely whether these kinds of reflections result in discovering that normative features cannot vary independently of base features. However, it is true that McPherson uses the term ‘other’ here rather than ‘base’. And this is important. It is true that 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.

Recall that (RH) and (IT) are possible. It is not at all clear that to hold fixed (only) the base properties of the Rwandan genocide would be simply to try to conceive of the Rwandan genocide* with all of its properties except the property of being an atrocity. Indeed, I’m happy to grant that that would indeed be impossible. But if we are taking out all of the ethical (normative) properties from the base, such that only non-normativity involving properties are left in the base, then it is my contention that it is not at all clear, given the possibility of (RH) and (IT), that what we are left with would indeed *necessitate* the property of being an atrocity.

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⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ There could be other arguments for the supervenience of the normative as a purely metaphysical thesis that appeal instead to certain prior metaphysical views e.g. physicalism or naturalism. I’m not considering such arguments here.

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