



DISCUSSION NOTE

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METAETHICAL NON-ANALYTICAL NATURALISM consists in the metaphysical thesis that normative properties are identical with or reducible to natural properties, and the epistemological thesis that we cannot come to a complete understanding of the nature of normative properties via conceptual analysis alone. In *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit (2011) argues that non-analytical naturalism is either false or incoherent. In Section 1, I show that his argument for this claim is unsuccessful by showing that it rests on a tacit assumption about the nature of normative thought that non-analytical naturalists need not accept. In Section 2, I show that escaping Parfit's argument in this way is no ad hoc maneuver; as I demonstrate, the idea that non-analytical naturalists can exploit to escape Parfit's argument is a familiar one.

1. Parfit's Argument

Parfit (2011: 364) kicks off his argument against non-analytical naturalism ("naturalism" from here on) by distinguishing between two versions of the view – hard and soft naturalism. While both hard and soft naturalists accept the metaphysical and epistemological theses above, *hard* naturalists also accept the further dispensability thesis that we do not need or have any reasons to think normative thoughts. *Soft* naturalists¹ deny this, claiming that we do need or have reasons to think normative thoughts.² Parfit goes on to claim that if naturalism is hard, then naturalism is false,³ but that if naturalism is

¹ Note that Parfit does not use the phrase "normative thought." Instead, he uses the phrase "normative claim." He does this, it seems, because part of the soft naturalist view is that we need or have reasons to think normative *thoughts* and speak normative *language*, and the phrase "normative claim" allows him to say this in fewer words. I am going to focus on the soft naturalist idea that we need normative thoughts, not the idea that we need normative language. I will be doing this not only because I think it would be more perspicuous to investigate the need for normative language and thoughts separately, but because a recurring scenario that Parfit employs throughout part 6 of *On What Matters* (i.e., the Burning Hotel) is a scenario principally involving normative thoughts, not language.

² Parfit suggests that the motivation for hard naturalism is the idea that, if we think normative and natural thoughts to think about the same properties, then normative thoughts would be superfluous, since we can just as well think natural thoughts to think about everything. As he writes, "... as Hard Naturalists claim, we would lose nothing if we replaced ... normative beliefs with beliefs about certain natural facts" (369). While Parfit explicitly characterizes the motivation for hard naturalism, he does not do so with soft naturalism. Instead, he merely points out that Railton and Darwall favor such a view (365). Presumably, however, the motivation for soft naturalism is just the idea that it seems like we would be at some kind of loss if we only thought natural thoughts.

³ See Parfit (2011: 368-77) for his attempt to show that hard naturalism is false.

soft, then naturalism is incoherent.⁴ Thus, according to Parfit, naturalism is either false or incoherent.

Of course, the source of the threat of this argument to soft naturalism is the premise that soft naturalism is incoherent, which Parfit defends with the following auxiliary argument. He begins by assuming the truth of soft naturalism for reductio. If, according to Parfit, we need or have reasons to think normative thoughts, then we need or have reasons to think them because there are irreducibly normative properties that we can only think about with them. So, we need or have reasons to think normative thoughts because there are irreducibly normative properties that we can only think about with them. But it is part of the soft naturalist view, Parfit claims, that there are no irreducibly normative properties. So, according to Parfit, soft naturalists are committed to the incoherent claim that there are and are not irreducibly normative properties.⁵

Soft naturalists can resist this auxiliary argument and thereby resist Parfit's main argument by attending to the premise that if we need or have reasons to think normative thoughts, then we need or have reasons to think them because there are irreducibly normative properties that we can only think about with them. Parfit does not outright argue for this premise, but it is at least clear why he holds it. It is part of the soft naturalist view, Parfit says, that normative thoughts "state facts."⁶ In other words, it is part of the soft naturalist view that we think normative thoughts to think about normative properties.⁷ Since, according to Parfit, we think normative thoughts to think about normative properties, *that* we think normative thoughts to think about normative properties is a reason to think them. If so, however, then it really is hard to see why we would need or have reason to think normative thoughts unless there are irreducibly normative properties that we could only think about with them. For if there were not, then we could instead think natural thoughts to think about everything, just as hard naturalists claim.

But if normative thoughts have some other feature that distinguishes them from natural thoughts, then we might need or have reasons to continue

⁴ "Soft Naturalism is, I believe, an incoherent view" (Parfit 2011: 365).

⁵ "If we had strong reasons to make irreducibly normative claims, that would have to be because (A) there are some important irreducibly normative facts, which we cannot state except by making such normative claims. If (A) is true, however, Soft Naturalism would fail. Naturalism is the view that (B) all normative facts are also, in the reductive sense, natural facts. Facts are in this sense natural if they could be restated by making nonnormative and naturalistic claims. So (A)'s truth would make (B) false, thereby undermining Naturalism" (Parfit 2011: 365-66).

⁶ "... Naturalists assume that normative claims are intended to state facts" (Parfit 2011: 365, emphasis mine).

⁷ Though I find the locution "think normative thoughts *to think about* normative properties" natural, it is, admittedly, idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, it is a less controversial and hence more charitable way of characterizing Parfit's own terminology of *fact-stating*. Indeed, my characterization is likely the most charitable locution available, since common alternative ways of making this point, like claiming that normative thoughts *describe* normative properties, are also philosophically fraught.

thinking them in addition to thinking natural thoughts. In order for it to follow that we need to think normative thoughts because, and only because, there are irreducibly normative properties that we could only think about with them, it needs to be the case that all there is to thinking normative thoughts is thinking about normative properties. In other words, soft naturalism is in trouble not merely if we think normative thoughts to think about normative properties, but rather if we think normative thoughts *only* to think about normative properties. To get around Parfit's auxiliary argument and hence his main argument against naturalism, then, soft naturalists can reject his tacit assumption that we think normative thoughts only to think about normative properties. This is to say that getting around Parfit's argument merely requires exploiting what I call *Parfit's Loophole*.

2. Parfit's Loophole

There are a number of different ways to exploit Parfit's Loophole. One familiar way is to claim that we need or have reasons to think normative thoughts not only to think about normative properties, but also to do something else. Take an illustrative example of such a view from Tresan (2006), who suggests that *what it is* to have a normative thought is to think an ordinary natural thought in the presence of a desire. For example, it might be that a subject does not have the normative thought that stealing is wrong unless she thinks the ordinary natural thought that stealing fails to maximize happiness *in company* with desiring to avoid failing to maximize happiness. But if something like this is what it takes to think the normative thought that stealing is wrong, then thinking that stealing is wrong is not only a matter of thinking about the property of failing to maximize happiness that stealing instantiates – because having it consists in thinking the ordinary natural thought that stealing fails to maximize happiness – but it is also a matter of doing something else, like *settling the deliberative question* of whether or not to steal, because having it also consists in desiring to avoid failing to maximize happiness. On Tresan's view, then, it is not true that we think normative thoughts only to think about normative properties and so it does not follow that the only reason to think normative thoughts is to think about normative properties.

Nevertheless, it might be thought that this is an uncharitable response to Parfit. After all, Parfit explicitly says that “*unlike Non-Cognitivists, Naturalists assume that normative claims are intended to state facts,*”⁸ which suggests that Parfit is not targeting views like Tresan's – views on which normative thoughts are best understood in terms of *both* cognitive mental states like natural thoughts and noncognitive mental states like desires. But if we do not interpret Parfit as targeting views like Tresan's, then his case against naturalism is incomplete because he does not discuss such views anywhere else in

⁸ Parfit (2011: 365, emphasis mine)

On What Matters. Such an interpretation seems especially uncongenial to Parfit, too, given that his overarching strategy in the book is to argue for his brand of nonnaturalism by eliminating every alternative to it.⁹ Moreover, not strictly cognitivist views of the nature of normative thought like Tresan's have been around awhile. Indeed, Dreier (1990), Jackson and Pettit (1995), Sturgeon (2007) and Boisvert (2008) also suggest that normative thoughts are best understood in both cognitive and noncognitive terms.¹⁰ In any event, however, either Parfit's objection is unsuccessful because it fails to show that all naturalist-friendly views of the nature of normative thought are incoherent, or it is unsuccessful because it is incomplete.¹¹

It would seem that naturalists have a compelling response to Parfit, after all. Recall that, according to Parfit, naturalism is either false or incoherent. Naturalism is incoherent, Parfit claims, if it is held in conjunction with the soft naturalist claim that we need or have reasons to think normative thoughts. This is because, on Parfit's auxiliary argument, soft naturalists are committed to the contradictory claim that there are and are not irreducibly normative properties, since the only reason we could allegedly need or have reasons to think normative thoughts is that there are irreducibly normative properties for us to think about with them. But getting around this auxiliary argument merely requires exploiting Parfit's Loophole or denying that the only reason to think normative thoughts is to think about normative properties. Soft naturalists can do this by claiming that, while we think normative thoughts to think about normative properties, since having them consists in thinking ordinary natural thoughts, normative thoughts can *also* settle deliberative questions, since thinking them also consists in desiring. In fact, as we saw, there are clear examples of philosophers sympathetic to soft naturalism who advocate this very sort of alternative view. So, Parfit's auxiliary argument against soft naturalism fails, and his dilemma for naturalists in general along with it.¹²

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⁹ As Schroeder (2011, emphasis mine) writes in his review of *On What Matters*, "Originally conceived as material for early chapters of the book, and later conceived as an appendix, the published part 6 [where Parfit discusses naturalism] is a complete treatise on metaethics in its own right, *aspiring to survey and reject every possible competitor to Parfit's own view* as well as to defend his own view from every major objection."

¹⁰ More recently, views like this have also been explicitly put forward by Schroeder (2013), Toppinen (2013), and, on a natural understanding, Hay (2013), Finlay (2014).

¹¹ Although it is worth pointing out that Parfit's objection might still be thought of as successful against naturalists who are sympathetic with strictly cognitivist views of the nature of normative thought.

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