



NON-NATURALISM AND REFERENCE

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ACCORDING TO METAETHICAL REALISTS, some actions, character-traits, states of affairs and the like (hereafter simply “objects”) have stance-independent normative properties: there are actions we ought to do and outcomes that are good in a way that does not depend on our attitudes toward them. Metaethical realists then disagree about the nature of these properties. Naturalists think that they are ordinary natural properties: causally efficacious, *a posteriori* knowable, and usable in the best explanations of natural and social sciences.¹ Non-naturalists, in contrast, argue that they are *sui generis*: causally inert, *a priori* knowable, not a part of the subject matter of sciences and yet a “part of the fundamental nature of the universe” (Ross 2002/1930: 29-30).²

The metaphysical and epistemological objections to non-naturalism have already been discussed extensively.³ This article focuses therefore on a less-discussed metasemantic question.⁴ Our natural language contains a number of normative predicates such as “ought,” “is a reason to,” “good,” “better,” “right” and so on.⁵ According to non-naturalists, there are non-natural normative properties: the property of doing what one ought to do, the relation of reasonhood, the property of goodness and so on. Non-naturalists then believe that the normative predicates refer to the previous normative properties: “ought” refers to being what one ought to do, “is a reason to” to the reasonhood relation, “good” to goodness and so on.

¹ There is a disagreement about the distinguishing features of natural properties. Causal efficacy was emphasized by Lewis (1983, § 2), empirical knowability by Copp (2003) and used in scientific explanations by Little (1994). Moore (1903: 40) and Shafer-Landau (2006: 211) believe that naturalness is a matter of being part of the subject matter of the sciences. I also count disjunctive properties, the disjuncts of which are natural properties as natural properties even if they might not satisfy the previous criteria themselves. This is because such properties are not different kinds of properties in the way that the non-naturalists assume normative properties are.

² Some non-naturalists do not think that normative properties exist metaphysically (see, for example, Parfit (2011b: 479), Scanlon (2014, ch. 2) and Nagel (1996: 205)). For my objections to these views, see Suikkanen (forthcoming). The metaphysically robust non-naturalists discussed here include at least Enoch (2011), Huemer (2005), Ross (2002/1930), Shafer-Landau (2003) and Wielenberg (2014).

³ See Mackie (1977, ch. 1). For a recent version of the epistemological objection, see Bedke (2009), and for a corresponding metaphysical objection, see McPherson (2012). For responses, see Enoch (2011, chs. 6-7), Huemer (2005, chs. 5 and 8), Shafer-Landau (2003, chs. 3-4 and 10-12), Wedgwood (2007: 6-11) and Wielenberg (2014, chs. 1 and 3).

⁴ See Wedgwood (2007, § 1.2) and Setiya (2011: 1283). The question of what the referents of normative predicates are is a semantic question, whereas how they came to have those referents is a metasemantic question.

⁵ Following Wedgwood (2007: § 1.3), I take the defining feature of normative predicates to be that, when we use them to make judgments, there is a requirement of rationality to have certain motivational states. This is why some evaluative concepts such as “good” and deontic concepts such as “wrong” are also normative concepts. I say more about the sense of normative concepts in § 4.

The metasemantic challenge for non-naturalists is to provide an explanation of how the previous normative predicates manage to refer to the relevant non-natural normative properties. What is the “semantic glue” that binds the relevant predicates to the corresponding properties?⁶ There are, furthermore, three adequacy conditions for the solutions to the previous challenge – three further challenges that non-naturalists must be able to meet. They need to explain, first of all, how the normative words manage to refer to the non-natural properties instead of natural ones. This “contrast challenge” has become more pressing recently because it has become evident that, for every non-natural normative property that the non-naturalists posit, there is a necessarily co-instantiated natural property.⁷

Any good object, for example, will have the conjunctive natural property constituted by its basic natural properties (it has the property of being F, G, not-H ... and Z – D₁ for short). Every possible good object will then have a similar comprehensive conjunctive natural property. This means that all possible good objects have the disjunctive natural property of being D₁, D₂ ... or D_n. And given supervenience, no object that is not good has that property.⁸ This is why goodness and being D₁, D₂ ... or D_n are necessarily co-instantiated. A central part of the contrast challenge is then to explain how the predicate “good” manages to refer to the non-natural property of goodness instead of the underlying necessarily co-instantiated property of being D₁, D₂ ... or D_n.

The non-naturalists also need to explain why “good,” for example, refers to the property of goodness rather than to some other non-natural property such as rightness. Call this the “correct property challenge.” This challenge is a surprisingly pressing concern for two reasons. First, some non-naturalists believe that there are thick normative predicates, such as the aesthetic predicates “has grace” and “is delicate,” and they also assume that these predicates refer to the non-natural properties of grace and delicacy (see Crisp 2005: 82). Here the task for non-naturalists is to explain just how the predicate “has grace” manages to refer to grace rather than delicacy, given that the ways in which these predicates are used are almost identical. Many of the same objects are both graceful and

⁶ The normative concepts need not pick out the same property on each occasion of use. Following Kripke (1979), we can distinguish between what the concept itself refers to and what a speaker refers to when using the expression. The metasemantic challenge investigated here concerns the former question.

⁷ See Kim (1984), Jackson (1998: 122-23) and Gibbard (2003: 94-102). Majors (2005) denies that the base property would be a natural property. As explained in n. 1, I count all properties formed by Boolean operations from the paradigmatic natural properties to be natural properties, too. Jackson (1998: 123) goes on to argue that necessarily co-instantiated properties are identical. If Jackson’s criterion of property identity is correct, then the question of how normative predicates could refer to non-natural properties would not arise – there would not be such properties. For a discussion, see Suikkanen (2010).

⁸ Supervenience is roughly the thesis that two objects cannot have different normative properties without having different natural properties. Jackson (1998: 119) relied on global supervenience, but Williamson (2001) showed that Jackson’s argument requires the truth of strong supervenience.

delicate and the reactions these properties call for are also very similar. The second reason this challenge is rather pressing is that, as explained in § 4, below, it turns out to be the most difficult to respond to.

Finally, non-naturalists also face a version of the grue problem – call it the “gruesome normative property challenge.”⁹ Grueness is stipulated to be the property of being green when examined before a certain time *t* in the distant future or being blue otherwise. In the case of colors, one metasemantic challenge is to explain how “green” manages to refer to greenness rather than to grueness. Similarly, non-naturalists need to explain how the normative predicates manage to refer to the standard normative properties rather than to their gruesome counterparts. Why does “good,” for example, refer to goodness rather than to the property of being good if inside this light cone, and being cruel elsewhere?

If non-naturalists cannot respond to the previous challenges, then synthetic versions of naturalism might seem to be more plausible views in metaethics.¹⁰ They could, after all, attempt to explain how normative predicates refer to certain natural properties by relying on the essential qualities of the natural properties such as their causal powers. Synthetic naturalists do not face the contrast challenge, and they could try to use the causal connections between normative predicates and natural properties to meet the other two challenges. They could, for example, argue that “good” refers to goodness – a certain natural property – rather than to any other natural property because that property governs causally the core uses of the term in an epistemically beneficial way (Boyd (1988: 195)).

This article attempts to show that the previous assumptions are mistaken. It argues that (i) both non-naturalists and synthetic naturalists have to rely on the same *non-causal* mechanism to explain reference and that (ii) both have *equally good resources* for making use of that mechanism. As a consequence, my conclusion will be that there is no reason to prefer synthetic naturalism to non-naturalism, at least on metasemantic grounds.

My argument proceeds in four sections. Section 1 explains why the non-naturalists cannot rely on basic descriptivist or Fregean metasemantic accounts as a response to the previous challenges. Section 2 then argues that Ralph Wedgwood’s (2001; 2007, ch. 4) conceptual role semantics will not help the non-naturalists either.

In § 3, I argue that the synthetic naturalists cannot give purely causal accounts of how normative predicates refer because of the *qua-problem*, which has not yet received sufficient attention in metaethics. Finally, § 4 suggests both (i) that the most promising way for synthetic naturalists to avoid the qua-problem relies on the *non-causal mechanism of reference mag-*

⁹ The grue problem, i.e., the “new riddle of induction,” was originally formulated by Goodman (1983: 72-81).

¹⁰ According to synthetic naturalists, the sense aspect of the meaning of normative predicates (what cognitive significance they have for the speakers) does not determine their reference. See, e.g., Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Copp (2000) and Schroeder (2007). Analytic naturalists, in contrast, take the meaning of normative predicates to fix their reference (see § 1, below).

netism and (ii) that non-naturalists, too, can rely on it to meet the metase-
mantic challenges they face.

1. Descriptivism and Fregean Views of Predicates

Let us begin from why non-naturalists cannot rely on simple versions of descriptivism. According to them, the meaning of the predicate “is P” consists of a set of descriptions that an object must satisfy in order for it to count as P.¹¹ These are the descriptions that a speaker must know to be able to use the predicate in question with competence. For example, the meaning of “is a bachelor” is said to consist of the descriptions “is male” and “is unmarried,” which a person must satisfy in order to be a bachelor. The idea is then that predicates refer to the property in virtue of which objects satisfy the meaning-constituting descriptions. Thus, because these descriptions pick out, in the previous example, the property of being an unmarried male, the predicate “is a bachelor” refers to that property; after all, a person counts as a bachelor in virtue of having it.

The meaning of the normative predicate “is good” could also be suggested to consist of some descriptions “R” and “S,” which a competent speaker must know and which an object must satisfy in order to count as good. The claim would then be that “good” refers to Rness and Sness because objects count as good in virtue of satisfying the descriptions “R” and “S.”

This view, sadly, is not available for non-naturalists. Either the meaning-constituting descriptions are formulated in wholly nonnormative vocabulary, or they include some normative predicates. If the descriptions are wholly nonnormative, then the view entails that normative predicates refer to natural properties.¹² If they include normative predicates, we face the same question: how did these other normative predicates acquire their reference? If non-naturalists insist that they, too, acquired their reference via some meaning-constituting descriptions, no progress has been made. Again, either the new meaning-constituting descriptions contain only nonnormative predicates, in which case naturalism follows, or they include normative predicates, in which case we face a regress again.

¹¹ Descriptivism can be traced back to Frege (1997a/1892). It has been defended in different forms by Russell (1905), Strawson (1950), Searle (1958) and others.

¹² The resulting view is analytic naturalism. G. E. Moore (1903, § 39) famously attributed this view to John Stuart Mill. Smith (1994) and Finlay (2014) defend more sophisticated versions. These views can provide a plausible metasemantic account for normative predicates if they can explain how the meaning-constituting descriptions pick out the relevant natural properties. Non-naturalists could attempt to avoid the previous problem by appealing to indirect reference-fixing descriptions, like “is the *sui generis* non-natural property that fills such and such role” or “is the *sui generis* non-natural property that is shared by most of these instances.” Here, the question would be how the vocabulary in these definite descriptions manages to pick out their intended referents without relying on further descriptions. It could be suggested that these words (such as “non-natural property”) acquire their semantic values through some form of “direct understanding.” However, if direct understanding is not sufficient to explain how normative predicates refer to the non-natural properties in the first place, then it is difficult to see how it could explain how the previous descriptions acquire their referents either.

Non-naturalists are sometimes accused of “metasemantic quietism” – of ignoring the metasemantic questions (Wedgwood 2007: 3-4 and 21). Perhaps non-naturalists have done so because they have assumed a more general form of descriptivism,¹³ according to which normative predicates refer to the relevant non-natural normative properties because (i) normative predicates refer to whatever properties they must in order for our carefully considered core normative convictions to be true and (ii) if these predicates referred to any other properties then at least some of those convictions would be false.

Non-naturalists could motivate (i) with the principle of charity.¹⁴ It is widely accepted that, in trying to interpret what others mean, we should assume that they talk about objects, properties and facts that make most of their utterances true. Many of the non-naturalists’ arguments against different naturalist reductions of normative properties could then be understood as supporting (ii). They attempt to show that, if the normative predicates referred to the natural properties to which the naturalists claim they refer, some of our core normative convictions would be false.¹⁵

This proposal fails for two reasons. First, it fails to address the contrast challenge. The introduction explained how, for every non-natural normative property posited by non-naturalists, there is a necessarily co-instantiated natural property. The problem is that exactly the same first-order normative claims would be true even when the normative predicates referred to those natural properties. After all, whichever necessarily co-instantiated non-natural and natural property pair we take, exactly the same objects have those properties.

Secondly, it is worthwhile to recall that Hilary Putnam used his model-theoretic argument to show that we cannot use the truth of our first-order theories to explain reference in the previous way because doing so leaves reference “inscrutable” (Putnam (1977; 1981: 32-35 and 217-18)).¹⁶ In this context, the crux of his argument is that, whatever first-order normative theory we accept, every claim of that theory remains true when we systematically reassign new referents to all the terms used to formulate our theory in a structurally isomorphic pattern. The sentence, “Eating

¹³ See Lewis (1984: 224) and Sider (2011: 24). The first type of descriptivism above is “local descriptivism.” It assumes that the meaning-constituting descriptions already refer non-problematically. If, however, the meaning of all expressions consisted of some descriptions, we would face the problem of how our language manages to refer as a whole. “Global descriptivism” is designed to address that question. This view is compatible with the idea that normative predicates are unanalyzable.

¹⁴ See Dennett (1982), Lewis (1974), Quine (1960) and Davidson (2001).

¹⁵ See, for example, Parfit’s (2011a: 73-82) agony argument according to which analytic reductions of reasons cannot guarantee that we have reasons to avoid future agony.

¹⁶ See also, for example, Williams (2007, § 1.2), Sider (2011: 24-27) and Button (2013: § 2.3). It is true that this argument applies more generally also in the nonnormative contexts and so we might think that Putnam’s argument does not pose a special problem for the non-naturalists who are global descriptivists. However, for the sake of what will follow below, it is useful to introduce the problem here. The naturalists might think that they can use the causal powers of natural properties to overcome the model-theoretic objection. In § 3, I argue that this attempt will fail and then, in § 4, I argue that the non-naturalists can give the same response to the objection as the naturalists.

meat is wrong,” thus remains true in the interpretation in which “eating meat” refers to trench coats and “is wrong” to being fashionable. We would, of course, then need to give a new referent to “killing,” too – such as holding a dinner party – given that the sentence, “Killing is wrong,” is true. If we continue reassigning referents in this way, all the normative claims we currently take to be true will remain true. This is why the truth of our first-order normative theory is not sufficient to restrict the reference of the normative predicates to the intended non-natural properties.

The non-naturalists cannot adopt Fregean accounts of predicates, either.¹⁷ According to them, there are two kinds of expressions. Names are “complete” expressions because they refer to objects. In addition, there are also “unsaturated” expressions: predicates with empty places that can be filled up by names. Frege then understood the latter expressions with the analogy of mathematical functions. The idea is that the predicates refer to functions from objects to truth-values (true and false), which Frege thought to be the referents of the standard subject-predicate sentences (Frege 1997b/1891: 139-40).¹⁸

This view, unfortunately, does not leave room for metaethical non-naturalism. Recall that, for every assumed non-natural normative property, there is a necessarily co-instantiated natural property (see the introduction). This entails that there must also be a necessarily coextensive nonnormative predicate for every normative predicate. Such predicates are long, disjunctive predicates in which each disjunct consists of a long conjunction formulated in terms of the nonnormative predicates that wholly describe the natural properties of a given object. So, for “is good,” there is a necessarily coextensive predicate of the form “is $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n .”

The problem is that functions are extensional.¹⁹ If two seemingly different functions have the same extension for every argument, they are the same function. If we in this situation understand predicates in the Fregean way as functions from arguments to truth-values, then the two predicates in the necessarily coextensive normative and nonnormative predicate pairs will always refer to the same function. As a consequence, the Fregean understanding of predicates leaves no room for non-naturalists to argue that normative predicates refer to something different (the *sui generis* normative properties) than to what the naturalists claim they refer.

¹⁷ See Frege (1997b/1891). Even if this view is discussed in this section, it is not a form of descriptivism. Frege’s idea was that the logical qualities of the predicates (mainly their unsaturatedness) are sufficient to fix their reference to functions. I argue below that this metasemantic account is not available for non-naturalists because of the kind of semantic values it assigns to predicates.

¹⁸ Frege called functions whose value is always a truth-value “concepts,” which is why he thought that predicates refer to concepts, i.e., functions whose value is either true or false.

¹⁹ See Miller (2007: 16). Frege himself, however, might have resisted this claim (Dummett (1981: 209)).

2. Conceptual Role Semantics

Ralph Wedgwood (2001; 2007, ch. 4) has suggested that non-naturalists, too, could use conceptual role semantics to explain how normative predicates acquire their reference.²⁰ Its starting point is that there are basic rules of use that determine both when each word in our language can be used rationally and what a speaker must understand in order to be competent with the meaning of a given word. Wedgwood then argues that these rules are sufficient to determine the reference of each word.²¹ The reference of a given word is roughly the object or a property that best makes sense of the basic rule that governs its rational use (Wedgwood 2001: 10).

Take the logical connective “or.” According to Wedgwood, being competent with its meaning requires mastering two basic rules: (i) accepting $\langle P \rangle$ commits you to accepting $\langle P \text{ or } Q \rangle$ and (ii) accepting $\langle Q \rangle$ commits you to accepting $\langle P \text{ or } Q \rangle$ (Wedgwood 2001: 7). Their mastery consists of having a disposition to follow them in reasoning and of finding the transitions that comply with them obviously correct and in no need of further justification.

Wedgwood then offers two principles of interpretation, *validity* and *completeness*, which take us from the basic rules to the referents (2001: 10-12; 2007: 86-87). We must assign “or” such a referent that in virtue of it (i) each instance of applying the previous two rules is “valid” and (ii) the basic rule provides a “complete” specification of the referent (Wedgwood 2001: 10). So, (i) entails that the referent must make it necessary that, if the input state to an inference according to the previous rules (belief that P , for example) is true, then the conclusion state (belief that $P \text{ or } Q$) is true, too; (ii), in contrast, entails that the referent of “or” must make it impossible that the belief that $P \text{ or } Q$ is true except when the belief that P is true or the belief that Q is true.²² Wedgwood then claims that, because of these constraints set by the previous two rules of interpretation, the

²⁰ As Wedgwood (2001: 7, n. 12) acknowledges, his conceptual role semantics owes much to Christopher Peacocke’s (1987; 1992: 1-40) account of logical constants. David Enoch (2011, § 7.6) has adopted Wedgwood’s semantic account (with minor amendments) to provide a non-naturalist account of reference. Wedgwood’s (2001; 2007, ch. 7) own formulation of the view is technical. Schroeter and Schroeter (2003: §§ 2-4) and Merli (2009, § 2) are helpful.

²¹ Here, Wedgwood follows Block (1987) and Peacocke (1987; 1992, ch. 1). Harman (1999), in contrast, believes that conceptual role semantics conflicts with truth-conditional semantics, whereas Field (1977) takes the two elements of meaning, conceptual role and reference, to be independent of one another.

²² The basic rule captures the conditions in which it is a mistake to reject the conclusion state. The crux of completeness is that the meaning-constituting basic rules must capture all such conditions (Wedgwood 2001: 10-11). A set of rules does so when the conditions built into it are the only conditions in which rejecting the conclusion would be a mistake. Thus, the weaker referent “ $p \text{ or } q \text{ or } r$ ” would make inferences in accordance with the introduction rule for disjunction correct (and so this referent would satisfy validity), but it would not satisfy completeness because rejecting p or q is not a mistake when one believes that only r is true.

referent of “or” must be the truth function of the classical disjunction as defined by the standard truth tables (Wedgwood 2001: 11).

We must make a minor adjustment to the previous theory, because the relevant meaning-constituting basic rules of competence for normative predicates can contain practical mental states such as intentions, preferences and plans. For example, the basic rule of competency for “better than” is, according to Wedgwood, roughly the following: the rational acceptance of <X is better than Y> commits you to prefer X to Y (Wedgwood 2001: 15). Here, the interpretation rules cannot be formulated in terms of truth-preservation because the output state, a preference, lacks a truth-value.

Wedgwood therefore reformulates the interpretation rules in terms of more general correctness (ibid.: 18): the referents must (i) make following the basic rules “correctness preserving” (validity) and (ii) the output states of those rules correct only if the input states are correct (completeness). He then needs to explain what it is for preferences and other practical states to be correct in the same way as beliefs are correct when they are true. Here, Wedgwood believes that it is enough to think that these states are correct when they conform to the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they may be (ibid.: 19).

To what property does this account then fix the reference of “better than”? Wedgwood claims that this predicate must refer to the normative property of betterness – that is, the property of *being what it is practically correct to prefer, given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are*, because only then it would be the case both that:

- necessarily, if the input to using the previous basic rule is correct (the belief that X is better than Y is true), then preferring X to Y is correct (i.e., it conforms to the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are), and
- necessarily, preferring X to Y is correct (i.e., it conforms to the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are) only if the belief that X is better than Y is true.

The idea is that, if “better than” referred to any other property, then the previous conditionals would fail in some cases. That, however, just cannot happen because they capture the basic general rules of interpretation as they apply to the predicate in question.

The problem of this metasemantic account in the non-naturalists’ framework is that it cannot meet the contrast challenge.²³ This is because the basic rule of competence for “better than” and the two interpretation rules of validity and completeness are too sparse to fix the reference of this predicate uniquely to a non-natural property.

According to Wedgwood, betterness is the property of being what it is correct to prefer given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they

²³ For alternative criticisms, see Schroeter and Schroeter (2003) and Merli (2009). Schroeter and Schroeter argue that Wedgwood’s conceptual roles for normative predicates either fail to rule out obviously nonnormative referents or they presuppose a prior understanding of normative notions. Merli, in contrast, argues that Wedgwood’s account cannot be applied to moral normative notions.

are. This is because he believes that only if the latter property is the referent of “better than” validity and completeness will be respected. This means that non-naturalists can adopt Wedgwood’s theory only if they think that the normative property of being what it is practically correct to prefer given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are, is *a sui generis non-natural property*. The problem is that Wedgwood’s conceptual role account fails to fix the reference of “is better than” uniquely to that kind of a property.

In the introduction, we saw that there is a disjunctive natural property that would be necessarily co-instantiated with the assumed non-natural property of being what it is correct to prefer, given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are. The worry is that, if “better than” referred to this natural property, this too would (i) make all the instances of inferring in accordance to the meaning-constituting basic rule of competence for “better than” valid and (ii) it would enable that basic rule to provide a complete characterization of the referent.

According to this alternative interpretation, the input state to the rule – the belief that X is better than Y – attributes to preferring X to Y the natural property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n . When this belief is true, preferring X to Y will have exactly that natural property. This entails that inferring according to the rule, “Acceptance of <X is better than Y> commits you to prefer X to Y,” will always be valid in Wedgwood’s sense. Necessarily, if the belief that constitutes the input to following this rule is true under the current assignment of reference (i.e., preferring X to Y has the natural property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n), then it will be correct to prefer X to Y given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are. This is because doing so will have the property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n and it and being correct given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are, are necessarily co-instantiated properties.

The same goes for completeness. Completeness requires that, necessarily, preferring X to Y is correct (that is, it conforms to the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are) only if the belief that X is better than Y is true. Or, in other words, it is impossible for the given preference to be correct given the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are, except when the latter belief is true. Let us assume both (i) that the property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n is necessarily co-instantiated with the property of conforming to the goals of practical reasoning, whatever they are, and (ii) that it is the referent of the predicate “is better than.” In this situation, it cannot be that preferring X to Y is correct and yet the belief according to which it has the property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n is false. After all, given necessary co-instantiation, the correctness of a preference entails that it has the property of being $D_1, D_2 \dots$ or D_n .

This means that the constraints provided by the two interpretation principles of validity and completeness leave it open whether “better than” refers to the non-natural property posited by the non-naturalists or to the natural property that is necessarily co-instantiated with it. Both potential referents satisfy the interpretation principles equally well. Because

of this, Wedgwood's conceptual role semantics fails to provide non-naturalists with a solution to the contrast challenge.²⁴ We have been given no explanation of why the normative predicates would refer to the non-natural properties rather than to the underlying natural properties.

3. Synthetic Naturalism and the Qua-Problem

It could then be thought that different forms of synthetic naturalism will have a theoretical advantage: unlike non-naturalists, their defenders can use the essential qualities of natural properties to explain reference (Dunaway and McPherson (forthcoming: 1)). Synthetic naturalists believe that normative properties are ordinary natural properties and thereby causally efficacious. Perhaps they could therefore rely on causal connections between the core uses of normative predicates and natural properties to explain how the normative predicates manage to refer.

Let us begin from a well-known naturalist causal theory of how normative predicates acquire their reference (Boyd (1988: 195 especially)).²⁵ On this view, the uses of "good" in our linguistic community are causally regulated by certain natural properties in a certain epistemically privileged way. When we causally interact with these properties, our assertions about what is good come to be more frequently true over time – under the assumption that we are referring to those properties. The claim then is that the reference of "good" is directly fixed to the natural properties that causally regulate the core uses of this term in the previous reliability-conducive way. Boyd (1988, § 4.3) also argues that, in the framework of this theory, we should think that "good," for example, refers to a certain consequentialist homeostatic property cluster related to central human needs.

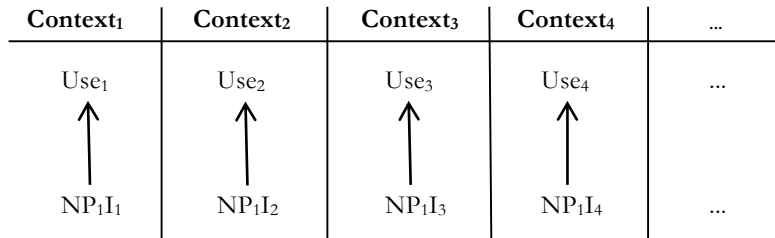
For the present purposes, it does not matter which causal mechanism is argued to fix the reference of normative predicates or to which natural properties that mechanism is claimed to fix their reference. This is

²⁴ Wedgwood might endorse this result. He notes that the interpretation rules leave it open whether "or" refers to the familiar truth function of disjunction or to the function that maps any two sets of possible worlds onto their union (2001: 11). This is because both functions, given their isomorphic extensions, make sense of the basic rule of use for "or" equally well. He also admits that, if the goal of practical reasoning can be described entirely in naturalist vocabulary, then the conceptual role semantic account of "is better than" will be compatible with reductive naturalism (2001: 20).

²⁵ See also Schroeter and Schroeter (2013, § 3) and van Roojen (2015, § 11.2). Boyd's account was inspired by the direct reference theories of Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975). Other synthetic naturalists have developed improved versions of Boyd's account (see, e.g., Brink (2001: 167-70)). Also other types of causal theories of reference are available for synthetic naturalists. Janice Dowell (2016), for example, applies Ruth Millikan's (1984) teleological metasemantic account to normative predicates. On this view, roughly, what property a predicate refers to is determined by which mapping has contributed in the normal circumstances causally to the selection of the "consumer systems" of the audience. See n. 28, below.

because all causal theories of reference face the same decisive objection, the so-called *qua-problem*.²⁶

The natural properties that causally regulate the core uses of normative predicates can only do so by causing token uses. Synthetic naturalists must thus have in mind the following picture:



Here, NP_xI_y stands for a token *y* of the instantiations of the natural property (NP_x), which is assumed to causally regulate our uses of “good” in the right way and which thus is its alleged referent. This property meets the causal regulation requirement by causing the core uses of “good” in every normal context of use. The arrows then represent the causal relations between the relevant instantiations of the natural property and the token uses of the predicate.

The instantiations of the relevant natural property, however, never directly cause “good” to be used but rather this always happens through causal chains. First, the instantiations of the natural property, which the naturalists take to regulate our uses of “good,” are caused by the instantiations of some other natural properties. The instantiations of that property then cause various other things to happen – such as certain processes in our brains – which finally cause us to use the predicate “good” in thought and speech. The picture should thus be more like this:

²⁶ See, for example, Papineau (1979, § 5.7) and Devitt and Sterelny (1987, §§ 4.4 and 5.3). For a modern version, see Sider (2011: 34-35). The standard objection to causal theories of reference in metaethics is the Moral Twin-Earth objection (Horgan and Timmons 1991, 1992a and 1992b). For responses, see Copp (2000); Dowell (2016); Dunaway and McPherson (forthcoming); Laurence, Margolis and Dawson (1999); Merli (2002); and van Roojen (2006).

Context ₁	Context ₂	Context ₃	Context ₄	...
Use ₁	Use ₂	Use ₃	Use ₄	...
↑	↑	↑	↑	
NP ₁ I ₁	NP ₁ I ₂	NP ₁ I ₃	NP ₁ I ₄	...
↑	↑	↑	↑	
NP ₄ I ₁	NP ₇ I ₁	NP ₁₄ I ₁	NP ₂ I ₁	...
↑	↑	↑	↑	
NP ₁₁ I ₁	NP ₁ I ₂	NP ₁ I ₃	NP ₁ I ₄	...
↑	↑	↑	↑	
NP ₂₃ I ₁	NP ₁₄ I ₂	NP ₅ I ₁	NP ₁₀₄ I ₁	...

This table represents the idea that, in the relevant causal chains, there is always one instantiation of a different natural property between the instantiations of the property that allegedly is the referent of “good” and the relevant uses of the predicate. It also suggests that there is one instantiation of another natural property in these causal chains before the instantiation of the natural property that is the alleged referent of “good.” In these causal chains there will, however, always be many instantiations of many different natural properties both between the core uses and the instantiations of the alleged referent natural property and also before the relevant instantiations of that natural property.

As a consequence, there will be many disjunctive properties that are always present in the relevant causal chains that connect the instantiations of the natural property that is claimed to be the referent of “good” to the core uses of “good.” In the previous table, one such property would be the property of being NP₄-in-Context₁-or-NP₇-in-Context₂-or-NP₁₄-in-Context₃-or-NP₂-in-Context₄-or-...-or-NP₁₁-in-Context_n. By selecting instantiations of different natural properties from the relevant causal chains in this way, we can pick out uncountable new, gerrymandered, disjunctive properties that are part of all the same causal chains with the core uses of “good” as NP₁.²⁷

The qua-problem is the concern that, if NP₁ is causally connected to the core uses of “good” in the way specified by the naturalists’ causal metasemantic theory, then all the previous disjunctive properties will be

²⁷ We might even be able to form a single aggregated property from all the disjuncts in all the relevant causal chains, which would leave us with a single, horribly gerrymandered natural property. The problem is that the causal theories of reference as such leave it open whether the normative predicates would refer to this type of properties, the original natural properties that naturalists take to be the referents, or the other gerrymandered natural properties we can construct that are always co-present.

causally connected to the same core uses exactly in the same way. Hence, if NP_1 is claimed to causally regulate the core uses in the right way, the constructed properties must do so, too. This leaves the reference of “good” underdetermined. Given the constraints set by the synthetic naturalists’ causal theories of reference, the referent of “good” could be any one of the natural properties that are a part of the very same causal chains. For this reason, no amount of theorizing about causal connections will solve the problem.²⁸

4. Reference Magnetism and Non-Naturalism

In the previous argument, nothing turns on the fact that we are discussing normative predicates. The qua-problem is, after all, a general challenge for all causal-historic theories of reference no matter to what expressions they are applied. Synthetic naturalists should therefore begin from how the problem can be solved elsewhere.

The most promising solution to the qua-problem relies on “reference magnetism.”²⁹ On this view, properties are on a spectrum with respect to how similar having them makes their bearers. It is a brute fact that some properties are *elite*: having them constitutes fundamental structural similarities among objects. Metaphorically speaking, these properties constitute nature’s joints. For example, the property of being gold is an elite property, because its bearers must have the atomic number 79. This microphysical property constitutes a fundamental similarity among the objects that have the property in question. In contrast, fashionableness is not elite: trench coats and dinner parties, for example, need not have much in common *qua* being fashionable. Properties are not, of course, either wholly elite or not elite at all but rather they can be more or less elite depending on how structurally similar objects are in virtue of having them.

²⁸ This shows how causal relations are less fine-grained than semantic ones (Loewer 1997: 112). It could be responded that more sophisticated causal theories of reference will have appropriate resources to deal with this problem. On behalf of Boyd, it could be suggested that, even if the gerrymandered properties are part of the same causal chains as the intended referents, they do not causally *explain* the relevant uses of “good” as well. Likewise, drawing from Millikan, it could be argued that the gerrymandered properties fail to explain for which mapping relation the relevant consumer systems are selected in evolution. As Sider (2011: 30) notes, the relevant question then is: why would the gerrymandered properties provide worse evolutionary explanations or worse explanations of our core uses? The intended referents seem to offer better explanations precisely because they are less gerrymandered – they constitute brute similarities in nature. This is why the natural defenses of Boyd and Millikan lead to the metasemantic framework discussed in the next section.

²⁹ This theory was first proposed by G. H. Merrill (1980). It is standardly attributed to David Lewis (1983, 1984 and 1986), even if Schwarz (2014) argues that it was not Lewis’ view. For recent defenses, see Brian Weatherson (2003) and Ted Sider (2011, § 3.2). It is sometimes suggested that the referential intentions of the speakers suffice to solve the qua-problem. Such solutions, however, fail to explain how the referential intentions manage to refer to the salient properties (Lewis 1984: 226).

Reference magnetism, then, is the view that the more elite a property is the more intrinsically eligible it is for being the referent for a given predicate. In other words, elite properties function as “reference magnets.”³⁰ Hence, when the other constraints on the assignment of reference (such fitting linguistic usage, preserving the truth of our first-order theories and making sense of inferential connections) leave many properties as eligible candidates, the genuine referent is the most elite of those properties. According to the reference magnetism, the reference of our predicates attaches more easily to such properties.³¹

Synthetic naturalists can use the previous theory to solve the qua-problem.³² Boyd, for example, could argue that the consequentialist homeostatic property cluster related to human needs is the most elite candidate for being the referent of “good” of all the natural properties that causally regulate the core uses of this predicate in the right way. After all, all the other properties that belong to the relevant causal chains are disjunctive properties constructed from the instantiations of different natural properties in the situations in which the consequentialist, homeostatic property cluster is also present. Boyd could then claim that, because the latter property is the most elite candidate, it attracts the reference of “good.”

There is, however, nothing causal about reference magnetism. The lesson of the qua-problem is that causation always leaves room for many eligible candidates when we consider to what a given word refers. If the more elite candidates are then to attract reference, they must do so in some *non-causal* way. Because of this, there is no antecedent reason to think that only natural properties – *given how naturalness is understood in*

³⁰ In addition, elite properties are also thought to feature in genuine laws, and claims including them are claimed to be easier to confirm (Dunaway (2016: 249); Sider (2011, ch. 3)).

³¹ This solution may seem like an ad hoc response to the previous problem (Putnam 1981: 53). Reference magnetism can, however, be motivated by the fact that it offers a response to a range of semantic paradoxes such as Quine’s (1960) argument for indeterminacy of translation, Putnam’s permutation argument (§ 2) and rule-following paradox (Kripke (1982)). It can also be argued that reference magnetism is able to do so with the help of an attractive metaphysical theory (Dunaway and McPherson (forthcoming, § 1.3)). Secondly, semantic accounts can be used to explain linguistic behaviour. In this situation, reference magnetism can be motivated with the theoretical virtue of simplicity as it guides us to prefer explanations based on sparse properties (Williams 2007, § 2). Despite these advantages, the idea of reference magnetism remains controversial (see, e.g., Schwarz (2014) and Sundell (2012)). My conclusion is, thus, modest: if reference magnetism is a viable metasemantic view, then non-naturalists can use it to explain how normative predicates refer to non-natural properties. This corresponds to Dowell’s (2016) argumentative strategy; she argues that, if Millikan’s teleosemantics – a controversial metasemantic position – is along the right lines, then the Moral Twin Earth objection to synthetic naturalism fails. There may well also be other metasemantic accounts that could help non-naturalists avoid the problem, too (see, for example, Grice (1957) and Horwich (1998)). Here I only want to suggest that there is at least one such account.

³² Synthetic naturalists have already relied on reference magnetism to respond to the Moral Twin Earth objection (van Roojen (2006); Dunaway and McPherson (forthcoming)). Dunaway (2015 and 2016) has argued that non-naturalists should rely on reference magnetism both to distinguish their view from forms of quasi-realism and to respond to Jackson’s (1998) objection to non-naturalism.

metaethics in terms of causal efficacy, a posteriori knowability and being a part of the best explanations of natural and social sciences – can function as reference magnets.³³ This means that non-naturalists, too, should at least in principle be in a position to solve the metasemantic challenges facing them by relying on reference magnetism, on the condition that they can argue that the non-natural properties are elite and thus function as reference magnets (see § 4.1, below).

Of course, a certain amount of modesty is called for at this point.³⁴ As explained in n. 31, it is worth highlighting that reference magnetism itself remains a controversial metasemantic view. The aim of this section is therefore merely to make two suggestions. First, and as I have already argued, metaethical naturalists, too, have at least some good reasons to rely on reference magnetism and thus are likely to be “companions of guilt.” Second, as I will argue below, if the phenomenon of reference magnetism exists, as many have thought, and the non-natural properties are elite, then the non-naturalists seem to be in a position to rely on reference magnetism to solve the metasemantic challenges facing them.

To see how non-naturalists might carry out this project, let us consider global descriptivism, as described in § 1. According to it, normative predicates refer to whatever properties they must in order for our carefully considered normative convictions to be true. Let us assume that the non-naturalists then combine this metasemantic theory with reference magnetism – the view according to which, when there are many eligible candidates, the most elite attract reference.³⁵ We can then consider whether non-naturalists could use the previous combination of views to meet the metasemantic challenges introduced in the introduction. I will begin from the easiest challenge and then move on to the more difficult ones.

4.1. The Gruesome Normative Property Challenge

Non-naturalists have always believed that normative properties are simple, *sui generis*, non-reducible brute similarities that belong to the “fundamental nature of the universe” (Ross 2002/1930: 29-30). One benefit of this metaphysical foundation of non-naturalism is that it makes the normative properties perfectly elite on the criterion of eliteness specified

³³ Lewis (1983: 346) defined naturalness in terms of eliteness, which trivializes the claim that only natural properties are reference magnets. Metaethical non-naturalists can agree that normative properties are natural if naturalness is understood in this way.

³⁴ According to Dunaway, non-naturalists should rely on reference magnetism also to explain both (i) why there is no widespread indeterminacy in what normative predicates refer to and (ii) how communities who use these terms differently can still disagree (Dunaway (2016, § 10.3.1)).

³⁵ This view follows Sider (2011: 31-33); see also Dunaway (2016: 252). For reasons explained by Sider (2011: 31), we should not understand reference magnetism to be a metasemantic view of its own (there are, after all, words that do not refer to elite properties) but rather as a “meta-metasemantic” view, which may be combined with other metasemantic views. The metasemantic views tell us about the nature of reference whereas reference magnetism determines to which eligible candidate the reference-relations attach.

above.³⁶ It is natural to think that especially the *simplicity* of the posited non-natural normative properties makes these properties excellent candidates for being perfectly elite. When we take a less than perfectly elite property, the constitution of such properties can be understood to be analyzable in terms of other, more basic properties exactly as Lewis (1984: 228) thought. When it comes to simple properties that have no other properties as their constituents, there just is no way of giving an account of these properties in terms of anything more basic. Having such properties is a matter of being similar in a fundamental, brute way, which is exactly why it is appealing to think that the properties in question are perfectly elite.

Gruesome normative properties are, in contrast, less elite given that objects that have them need not have much in common (consider, for example, any good action inside our light cone and a cruel one outside it). Because more elite properties then attract reference more easily, the normative predicates, in virtue of their simplicity, can be argued to refer to the standard, non-natural normative properties instead of their gruesome counterparts (see Lewis (1984: 228) and Sider (2011: 33)).

4.2. The Contrast Challenge

Can non-naturalists use reference magnetism also to explain why normative predicates refer to non-natural properties instead of natural properties? Global descriptivism may at first seem to rule out most natural properties as potential referents of normative predicates. According to it, the referents of the normative predicates must make our carefully considered normative convictions true. Consider, then, all the objects that are good according to those convictions. Due to the previous interpretation rule, “good” could only refer to a natural property instantiated by all of them. However, given how many different kinds of actions, character traits and states of affairs we take to be good, the global, descriptivist interpretation principle does not seem to leave many natural properties to be eligible candidates for being the referent of “good” (McDowell (1998/1981: 201-2)).

We know, however, that at least one eligible natural candidate must remain. According to non-naturalists, all objects that are good according to our carefully considered convictions have a certain non-natural property. If that property were the referent of “good,” those convictions would clearly be true. They would be ascribing a property to a set of objects that

³⁶ There are places where Lewis (1984: 228) defines the most fundamental microphysical properties as perfectly elite and then claims that how elite other properties are is a matter of the length of their canonical definitions in terms of the perfectly elite properties (Lewis 1986: 61). For why this view of eliteness fails, see Dunaway (2016: 251-52), Hawthorne (2006: 206; 2007: 434), Schroeter and Schroeter (2013: 17), and Williams (2007). For this reason, I follow Dunaway and McPherson (forthcoming, § 3.2) and Schroeter and Schroeter (2013: 18) in understanding degrees of eliteness as a primitive notion that refers to brute similarities in the world. For a discussion, see Dunaway (2016: 251). Dunaway (ibid.) also rightly points out that non-naturalists have not explicitly stated their views in terms of eliteness.

all of them would have. Given the reasoning explained in the introduction, we know that there is a natural property that would be necessarily co-instantiated with the previous non-natural property. If that natural property were the referent of “good,” this, too, would make our carefully considered convictions equally true (§ 1).

Here, non-naturalists can rely on reference magnetism to explain why “good” would refer to the non-natural property rather than to the necessarily co-instantiated natural property. The thought is that “good” refers to the non-natural property because it is more elite than the natural property in question (Dunaway (2015: 650)). As already explained in § 4.1, the non-naturalists’ metaphysical theory makes the non-natural normative properties perfectly elite, whereas the necessarily co-instantiated natural property could hardly be as elite. That property is, after all, a disjunctive property in which each disjunct consists of all the natural properties of a given object that is good according to our carefully considered convictions.

The problem is that different objects that have the underlying disjunctive natural property are not very similar to one another *qua* having that property. Take, for example, a just, global distribution of resources and Mary’s act of helping her elderly aunt with her shopping, which are both good things. These objects are, however, not very similar to one another in virtue of *all the natural properties they have*. The former affects billions across the globe, whereas the latter concerns only two individuals locally. Because of this, non-naturalists can argue that, of the eligible candidates, the relevant non-natural properties are more elite than the underlying necessarily co-instantiated natural properties, and therefore they must be the referents of the normative predicates.³⁷

Lewis (1984) argued that reference magnetism also blocks Putnam’s permutation challenge. Section 1 explained how our best, first-order normative theory remains true even when we reassign new referents to all the expressions used to formulate that theory. So, “Eating meat is wrong” remains true when “eating meat” refers to trench coats and “is wrong” to being fashionable. If we keep reassigning referents like this in a systematic, structurally isomorphic way (§ 1), then no part of our first-order theo-

³⁷ It could be objected that the disjunctive natural property need not be the only natural property shared by all good things (perhaps the disjunctiveness is merely a matter of the logical complexity of the predicate in question rather than a genuine feature of the world). It could be, for example, thought that the shared natural property must be an empirical dimension of similarity on which the normative properties supervene – a pattern relevant from the point of view of normative thinking (Jackson, Smith and Pettit (2000)). Good things could thus also have, for example, the property of maximizing the amount of pleasure or the property of being the object of consistent rational willing, and they certainly have the sociological property of being conventionally good. Given that all the previous natural properties are presumably less elite than the *perfectly elite* natural properties such as having a negative electric charge, it is not obvious that they would be as elite as the equally perfectly elite, simple non-natural properties posited by non-naturalists. It is true, however, that non-naturalists will need to be able to explain at this point how, for the purposes of the relevant comparisons, we are to evaluate how elite the allegedly less than perfectly natural properties are (see Schroeter and Schroeter (2013: 18-20)).

ry becomes false even with the crazy new referents. Given the constraints set by global descriptivism and the possibility of this type of permutations, the normative predicates could thus refer to any natural properties.

Lewis' insight was that, even if global descriptivism fails to rule out the crazy new assignments of reference, reference magnetism can do so (Lewis 1984: 227). Consider the previous example. According to non-naturalists' original interpretation, a certain simple non-natural property is the referent of "good." Given the possibility of permutations, global descriptivism, however, means that this predicate could equally well refer to any natural property, as we can find suitable new referents to all other words to make our first-order normative theory true even in that case. Reference magnetism, however, rules out all the new reassignments that give "good" a natural referent that is less elite than the initial non-natural property.

According to non-naturalists, the non-natural property of goodness is perfectly elite: it stands for a fundamental brute similarity in the universe – it carves the universe at its joints. This means that non-naturalists can reasonably rule out all the less than perfectly elite candidate referents acquired through the permutations. They can exclude not only fashionableness but also almost all other natural properties, too (n. 37). In fact, perhaps the only eligible, equally perfectly elite, natural-property candidates would be the fundamental physical properties of mass, charge, quark color and flavor, and the like (Lewis (1984: 228), but see n. 35, above).

Furthermore, even the idea that normative predicates could refer to the most fundamental microphysical properties is problematic. In order to make our best first-order normative theory true, we would need to assign a different microphysical property as a referent for every normative predicate, given that our best, first-order normative theory gives different extensions for different normative properties. This means that a successful reassignment of referents in a permutation would require exactly as many fundamental microphysical properties as normative properties according to our best first-order normative theory.³⁸ Given how unlikely this is, normative predicates probably cannot be permuted to refer to the fundamental microphysical properties, either.

This means that non-naturalists seem able to exclude the permutations that assign either perfectly elite natural properties or other, less elite natural properties to be the referents of normative predicates.³⁹ Because

³⁸ That this possibility exists illustrates that there are ways the world could be in which reference magnetism would not solve Putnam's paradox. Williams (2007, § 3) offers an account of precisely when the conditions for this are met. He (2007, § 4) also explains why we might actually be in circumstances in which reference magnetism does not rule out that our ordinary expressions have crazy referents, such as numbers. For a further development of Williams' concerns, see Hawthorne (2007). If reference magnetism fails to solve the general semantic paradoxes, then both naturalists and non-naturalists face exactly the same metasemantic problems.

³⁹ It could also be objected that, assuming global descriptivism and reference magnetism, some of our ordinary nonnormative predicates could end up referring to non-natural normative properties, given that such properties would be perfectly elite and thus able to

of this, non-naturalists have reason for optimism: the combination of global descriptivism and reference magnetism seems to help them to respond to the contrast challenge.

4.3. The Correct Property Challenge

This leaves us with the most difficult challenge: why does “good,” for example, refer to the non-natural property *goodness* rather than to any other non-natural normative property? Here non-naturalists cannot rely on reference magnetism because presumably all non-natural normative properties are equally elite. Non-naturalists might perhaps suggest that “good” could not refer to *wrongness*, for instance, because this would make many core normative convictions false. If “good” referred to wrongness, a just distribution of resources could not, for example, be good.

This response, however, takes us right back to Putnam’s paradox. The problem is that, if global descriptivism were the only constraint on interpretation, this would allow us to give new referents also for all the expressions that are used to refer to different actions, character traits, states of affairs and the like. With a suitable reassignment of referents for these expressions (which also does not give them less elite referents), our normative convictions would remain true even if our normative predicates referred to different non-natural normative properties than usually thought. The combination of global descriptivism and reference magnetism thus fails to solve the most difficult metasemantic challenge.

Let me finish by outlining how non-naturalists could respond to this final objection by drawing from moral functionalism.⁴⁰ I have so far referred loosely to our best first-order normative theory, which I have assumed to consist of our carefully considered normative convictions about what one ought to do in different situations, what reasons there are for different actions in them, what is good and bad, and so on. Yet, our best first-order normative theory can also be understood to contain a set of platitudes that connects different normative predicates to one another. These platitudes make explicit defeasible inferential connections between different predicates, which their competent users must master (see § 2, above, and Jackson and Pettit (1995: 22-24)). Jackson, for example, gives the following examples of this type of platitude: “Courageous people are more likely to do what is right than cowardly people”; “The best option is the right option”; and “Rights impose duties” (Jackson (1998: 130-31)).

Non-naturalists could then agree with Jackson and Pettit (1995: 24-25) that one central element of the meaning of a given normative predicate is the place it has in the network constituted by the previous inter-

attract the reference of these terms if the use of them at least roughly fits this interpretation (see Sundell (2012), Schroeter and Schroeter (2013) and Williams (2015)). However, if our ordinary nonnormative predicates referred to non-natural properties, then we would be unable to know whether they applied to an actual object *a posteriori*. If “red” thus referred to a non-natural property, we would be unable to know whether an object is red just by looking at it.

⁴⁰ See Jackson and Pettit (1995) and Jackson (1998, ch. 5). Moral functionalism is based on Lewis’ (1972) account of how psychological terms can be defined functionally.

connecting platitudes. This element of meaning then provides an additional constraint, which the correct assignment of reference must satisfy. The idea is roughly that the place of a given normative predicate in the network provides a “job description,” which a property must fulfill if it is to be an eligible candidate for being the referent of the predicate (Schroeter and Schroeter 2003: 191). This means that the normative property to which, say, “good” refers must be related to other normative properties in the way in which the network of the interconnecting platitudes relates the property to other properties in our best first-order normative theory.

Non-naturalists could then use this additional metasemantic constraint to explain why “good,” for example, must refer to *goodness* instead of any other normative property. For this to succeed, the interconnecting network of platitudes must have one important feature: it must be asymmetrical. The network of relations ascribed to a given normative property by the interconnecting platitudes must be unique – structurally different from how all other properties in the network relate to each other.⁴¹ If this condition is satisfied, then the account will be able to explain why “good” can only refer to goodness rather than to any other non-natural normative property.

This is because, if “good” in this situation referred to any other property, that property would not be related to the other normative properties in a structurally isomorphic way to how goodness relates to other properties. As a consequence, at least some of the interconnecting platitudes in which the predicate “good” features would be false, no matter how we tried to reassign different normative properties to be the referents of the other normative predicates. This is why the network understanding of the meaning of normative predicates promises to help non-naturalists solve the correct property challenge – as long as our best, first-order normative theory connects different normative predicates to each other in structurally asymmetrical ways.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, non-naturalists appear to be in a position to explain how the normative predicates manage to refer to the non-natural properties as they are characterized by non-naturalists’ core metaphysical commitments. By adopting a combination of global descriptivism, reference magnetism and a network account of the meaning of normative predicates, non-naturalists are in a position to explain (i) why normative predicates do not refer to gruesome properties, (ii) why they refer to non-natural properties rather than to natural properties and (iii) why the non-natural properties refer to the non-natural properties they do rather than to some other non-natural properties.

This is significant because, in addition to the already well-known metaphysical assumptions of non-naturalists, the previous metasemantic

⁴¹ See Smith (1994: 48-54). Smith (1994: 54-56) is skeptical about whether there is enough substance in the platitudes to provide the necessary asymmetry. James Lenman (2006, § 4.3) is more optimistic.

explanations rely only on elements of metasemantic views, which are already widely accepted by many naturalists. This means that, other than objecting to their metaphysical commitments in the old-fashioned way, naturalists cannot have any additional objections to non-naturalism on metasemantic grounds. Both metaethical naturalists and non-naturalists must rely on the very same theories in metasemantics, and so we must decide between the views on some other grounds.

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