

WHAT NORMATIVITY CANNOT BE

Matthew S. Bedke

OVER THE COURSE of many years Derek Parfit argued that reducing the normative to the natural is “conceptually excluded.” His most recent incarnation of this argument is the *Normativity Objection*, where he moves from the conceptual impossibility of identifying rivers with sonnets, or heat with a shade of blue, to the conclusion that all normative-natural property identities are conceptually impossible.¹ This objection to reductive naturalism has been subject to heated debate. On the one hand, many philosophers inclined toward nonreductive normative realism are sympathetic to this view or something very similar. David Enoch, for example, thinks normative facts are “just too different from naturalist, not-obviously-normative facts” to be reducible or identical to them.² On the other hand, plenty of philosophers remain unconvinced, such as Patrick Fleming, who has recently concluded that the Normativity Objection has “no argumentative force against reductionism.”³

Here, I hope to provide some guidance to the perplexed. Section 1 briefly rehearses the main problems with the argument as Parfit articulates it. Section 2 considers and criticizes a recent attempt to improve the argument by Nathan Howard and Nicholas Laskowski.⁴ And sections 3 and 4 suggest and critically evaluate an improved argument. As we shall see, my suggestion relies on the highly controversial claim that normative cognition is *transparent* in the following sense: normative concepts reveal the nature of the properties they are about. I think this is the best way forward for those who wish to conceptually exclude normative-natural reductions.

1 Parfit, *On What Matters*, 2:324–27 and 3:72–84.

2 Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, 80, and see 104–9; see also FitzPatrick, “Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity” and “Skepticism about Naturalizing Normativity”; Dancy, “Nonnaturalism”; Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, 46.

3 Fleming, “The Normativity Objection to Normative Reduction,” 421; see also Copp, “Normativity and Reasons”; Van Roojen, Review of *On What Matters*, vol. 3.

4 Howard and Laskowski, “The World Is Not Enough.”

1. PARFIT'S NORMATIVITY OBJECTION

The version of naturalist realism criticized by Parfit targets property identities, such as the identification of rightness with maximizing happiness, or the (normative) reason relation with something about promoting desire satisfaction. One could argue against these particular identities, of course, but the Normativity Objection is not aimed at the merits of any particular proposal or set of proposals. It is aimed at the reductive gambit *tout court*. Moreover, it does not merely say that no normative property *is* the same as any natural property. It says that no normative property *could be* the same as any natural property. Last, it adds that the modality here is conceptual—normative-natural identities are conceptually excluded.

The main support for this contention comes from other cases where identities seem to be conceptually excluded. Parfit maintains that, just as rivers could not be sonnets, and heat could not have turned out to be a shade of blue, no normative property or fact could be some natural property or fact.⁵

The argument is similar to G. E. Moore's infamous open question argument. Arguably, the "open feel" that accompanies questions like " x is [natural predicate], but is x [normative predicate]?" reflect conceptual gaps. Application of a natural predicate just does not conceptually entail application of a normative predicate. Hence the open feel. Moore then thought that this conceptual gap entailed a metaphysical gap—that the property ascribed by the natural predicate was not the same as the property ascribed by the normative predicate. And that is the Achilles heel of the argument. At most the open feels reveal that our concepts alone do not fix any normative-natural identities. Granted, they do not *entail* identities, but that is a far cry from *excluding* them.

Parfit's Normativity Objection succumbs to a similar criticism. There might be a conceptual gap between application of natural predicates and application of any normative predicate, even an unbridgeable one. However, all this shows is that concepts alone *fail to fix* normative-natural identities. It does not show that concepts alone *rule out* all normative-natural identities.

Parfit's analogies do not show otherwise. We might grant that rivers could not be sonnets, or heat could not be a certain shade of blue, as a conceptual matter. And we might grant that *some* normative-natural property identities are conceptually excluded—as Parfit says, justice could not be the number 4 (for that would be a category mistake). But how are we to rule out *all* such identities? Maybe justice could not be the number 4, but why could it not be the same as an

5 Parfit, *On What Matters*, 2:324–27 and 3:72–84.

extensionally equivalent natural property?⁶ This, in brief, is why the Normativity Objection fails to convince.

It is tempting to conclude that there is no good argument against normative-natural identities based on conceptual gaps. But the long history of meta-ethicists advancing such arguments, from Moore through Parfit and Enoch, suggests a more charitable reaction—that we have yet to uncover the best version of this argument. I will consider and criticize one attempt to improve the argument in section 2 before offering my own improvement in section 3.

2. THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH

In a recent bid to improve the argument, Howard and Laskowski propose that we reformulate it as a dilemma.⁷ On the first horn, the reductive naturalist embraces a theory of meaning for normative terms in tension with the view that some normative-natural property identities are excludable *a priori* and conceptually.⁸ That is problematic because some identities do seem conceptually excluded. Alongside “justice is not the number 4” consider “rightness is not a yellow rose” and “rightness is not a rocket.” These appear to be conceptual truths, or at least *a priori* knowable truths.⁹ Yet many semantic and metasemantic theories popular among naturalists have a hard time explaining how. Howard and Laskowski point out that Kripke-style reference by baptism plus the Millian view that meaning is exhausted by reference fail to explain how truths like these could be conceptual or *a priori* knowable.¹⁰ After all, for such a view the cognitive sig-

6 Cf. Copp, “Normativity and Reasons,” 46–47; Railton, “Two Sides of the Meta-Ethical Mountain?” 54–58; and Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors*, ch. 2. In what follows, property talk is to be robustly construed. There is a weaker claim that normative properties minimally construed (i.e., without metaphysical commitment) are not identical to natural properties minimally construed. But that claim is much less interesting, for it is too close to the uncontroversial claim that normative concepts are not to be identified with natural concepts (without regard to whether they ascribe the same robust properties). That said, Parfit might be happy with the weaker claim. As I read the exchange between Parfit and Railton in volume 3 of *On What Matters*, it appears that Parfit is not only willing to accept the weaker claim, but also willing to grant that, in terms of the robust metaphysics, normative properties and facts can be identified with certain natural properties and facts. These issues are vexed by some puzzling claims and distinctions Parfit draws concerning properties in pleonastic, description-fitting, and necessary co-extensionality senses.

7 Howard and Laskowski, “The World Is Not Enough.”

8 Howard and Laskowski speak of analytic truths, but here I make no distinction between analytic truths and conceptual truths.

9 Cf. Copp, “Normativity and Reasons,” 46–49.

10 Howard and Laskowski, “The World Is Not Enough.”

nificance of a normative concept is not going to be part of its meaning; it will not help to fix reference, and it does not otherwise provide resources for purely conceptual or otherwise *a priori* access to what is excluded from the eligible referents of the normative term.

Now, one could quibble with the alleged conceptual or *a priori* status of these claims. I will not. So I take it that the lesson of the first horn is this: normative naturalists need to have a semantic (or metasemantic) theory whereby *some* normative-natural property identities are conceptually excluded, even if we cannot rule out *all* such identities. This is a nice point. At the very least, we need a semantics (or metasemantics) whereby we can conceptually exclude category mistakes, as this seems to be what is amiss with identifying rightness with roses or rockets.

On the second horn of the dilemma, reductive naturalists embrace a semantic (or metasemantic) theory that is consistent with conceptually excluding *some* normative-natural identities. Howard and Laskowski illustrate one such possibility: neo-descriptivism. For example, it could be that “rightness” is associated with a description such as *the actions of the action-type that a maximally informed observer would desire to perform*, which would constrain the causal chains relevant to reference fixation. In turn, such a description would also make the truth of the sentence “rightness is not a yellow rose” knowable *a priori*, in part because it is plausibly *a priori* that a yellow rose is not an action type.¹¹

Once reductive naturalists go down this road they can grant that some *but not all* normative-natural identities are conceptually excluded. That sounds like the right thing to say. So what is the remaining problem with this horn of the dilemma?

Howard and Laskowski think the problem appears when we turn our attention to fundamental normative principles. They ask us to suppose that the Principle of Utility is a fundamental normative principle, and then they ask this question: Is this principle true because of (or in virtue of) some natural fact? *A priori*, it seems not. Consider:

- 2a. That it’s Monday does not partly explain why we ought morally to do what would maximize the balance of pleasure over pain.
- 2b. The Principle of Utility is true not even partly in virtue of the fact that it’s Monday.
- 2c. The Principle of Utility is not even partly grounded in the fact that it’s Monday.

11 Howard and Laskowski, “The World Is Not Enough.”

- 2d. The Principle of Utility is not even true partly in virtue of the fact that we're in Chicago.
- 2e. The Principle of Utility is not even partly grounded in the fact that we're in Chicago.¹²

Howard and Laskowski argue that these are conceptual truths knowable *a priori* (assuming that the Principle of Utility is a true moral principle). Granted, these are just examples, and grounding morality in facts about days of the week or cities is really implausible. But, like Moore's open question argument, we are supposed to see that *any* natural fact, or at least any spatiotemporal fact, can be plugged into these grounding claims to yield the same result: grounding in such facts is conceptually excluded.

Next, they borrow some ideas from Kit Fine to argue that moral/normative principles are *unworldly*.¹³ For Fine, to be an unworldly truth is to be a truth that is true *regardless* of how things are at any world. This is contrasted with truths that are made true by how things are at a world or at some worlds. Unworldly truths are also to be distinguished from necessary truths. Consider " $2 + 2 = 4$ " and "Socrates exists or Socrates does not exist." Both are true at every world, but for Fine the first sentence is true *regardless* of how things are at any world—for each world, nothing there makes the mathematical claim true—whereas the second sentence is true *whatever* the circumstances—each and every world makes the disjunction true, some by making the first disjunct true, others by making the second disjunct true.

Tapping into this theoretical apparatus, the idea is that the true, fundamental moral principles are unworldly. Howard and Laskowski conclude:

Moral principles have unworldliness as part of their meaning exactly in the way that "seven is prime" does. Put another way, sentences expressing truths about moral principles have *unworldliness* as part of their content. This is why, on a brand of non-reductivism that takes Fine as inspiration, 2a–e are knowable analytically or on the basis of our competence with normative concepts alone. This is also why the impossibility of at least one highly intuitive version of naturalism is knowable on the basis of our competence with normative concepts alone.¹⁴

This argument goes by pretty quickly. But it is clear that the conclusion is that grounding fundamental normative principles in the natural (or at least the spa-

12 Howard and Laskowski, "The World Is Not Enough."

13 Fine, *Modality and Tense*.

14 Howard and Laskowski, "The World Is Not Enough."

tiotemporal) is conceptually excluded. And they take this to vindicate the spirit of Parfit's Normativity Objection.

I am not convinced. First, a minor concern: 2a–2e help to show that the normative principles are not grounded in facts about Monday or Chicago. As already mentioned, these particular grounding claims are not very plausible. Of course, we can fix the claims so that they feature more plausible natural grounds, like facts about pain and pleasure. It might be harder to argue that these grounding claims will also be conceptually excluded, but let me grant conceptual exclusion for the sake of argument.

A more significant concern is that 2a–2e and the surrounding argument only address one way of grounding normative principles in the natural, namely, grounding fundamental moral principles *directly* in particular natural facts. They do not address *indirect* grounding in natural facts. Let me clarify this distinction in the following way. One grounding option—the one Howard and Laskowski seem to have in mind—has it that fundamental normative principles are metaphysically prior to particular normative facts, where the principles help to ground particular normative facts. On this picture, what *makes* an executioner's action wrong, for example, is the Principle of Utility in combination with certain natural facts about the act of execution. If we then ask if the Principle of Utility is itself grounded, it seems plausible to say, no, it is not grounded and *a fortiori* it is not directly grounded in natural facts.

An alternative grounding option has it that particular normative facts are metaphysically prior to the fundamental normative principles, where the principles are simply systematizing and explicitly stating the patterns we find in the particular. On this picture, if the particular normative facts are to be grounded, they are to be grounded in natural facts, so that the executioner's action is wrong, for example, fully because of certain natural features it has. And what would then make the Principle of Utility true? The fact that this execution is wrong, that denying Sally the right to vote is wrong, that donating to an ineffective charity is wrong, and all the other particular normative facts about wrongness that are best systematized (allegedly) by the Principle of Utility. On this view, normative principles are ultimately grounded in the natural, albeit indirectly, by being grounded in particular normative facts that are themselves more directly grounded in the natural.

The examples and arguments of Howard and Laskowski only address the direct grounding of fundamental normative principles in natural facts. So even if they successfully argue that the principles are not so grounded, and this is *a priori* knowable, such a result is consistent with the possibility that the principles are *indirectly* grounded in the natural, and I take it that they would count

this as a form of naturalism. Moreover, when we do consider whether particular normative facts are grounded in natural facts, like whether the wrongness of the executioner's action is grounded in natural facts about the action, even fully grounded, the negation of such claims does not seem to be a conceptual truth and knowable *a priori*. Such grounding claims are contested in the literature and it would be surprising if those on one side of the debates were making a conceptual mistake. In addition, the particular-normative-facts-first option is consistent with *a priori* knowledge of fundamental normative principles, like the Principle of Utility. For it could be that particular normative facts are knowable *a priori* from these natural facts (though probably not *qua* conceptual truths), and systematizing principles are knowable *a priori* from there (again, probably not *qua* conceptual truths). In fact, I think this epistemology is faithful to our normative practices, which are usually case-based and casuistic, not inferential from first principles. But the important point for now is that Howard and Laskowski have not ruled out *a priori* all the ways in which the normative can be grounded in the natural.

These concerns all assume that grounding in the natural suffices for naturalism. But this itself is highly questionable. Distinguish two kinds of reductive projects. On one project, *A* is reduced to *B* just in case *A* is grounded in *B*. Note that, on this notion of reduction, one could "reduce" *A* to *B* even if *A* is a distinct existence from *B*, for grounding could be a real (explanatory) relation between distinct existences. Another reductive project is to come up with type-type property identities (or fact identities). On this second notion of reduction, if *A* is reduced to *B* (*A* is a property-type identical to *B*), *A* is not a distinct existence from *B*. I think naturalists worthy of the name should aim for the second sort of reduction. Why? Because even if the first project succeeds and normative properties are fully grounded in the natural, normative properties could still be distinct existences from natural properties, and what is more, they could have a *nature* that can only be articulated in normative terms. This possibility seems to me more clearly on the nonnatural side of the naturalism/nonnaturalism divide. After all, Mackie was not assuaged of his metaphysical concerns over nonnaturalism after admitting that there might be some sort of *because* relation between the moral properties and their natural subvenient base.

Note that Howard and Laskowski themselves characterize reduction as follows: "the metaphysical *nature* of morality—and of normativity, more generally—is . . . fully explicable in nonnormative terms."¹⁵ I like this focus on the metaphysical *nature* of normativity, but it is not clear how grounding one property (or fact) in another distinct property (or fact) directly addresses the question of the

¹⁵ Howard and Laskowski, "The World Is Not Enough," emphasis added.

nature of the grounded property (or fact). To address that, Howard and Laskowski need to defend a controversial theory of grounding according to which the grounded cannot enjoy a nature/essence not enjoyed by its grounds.

This is not the place to provide an argument against those controversial theories of grounding. But it is worth noting that property or fact identities would *uncontroversially* address the nature of normativity and its naturalizability. An argument against natural to normative grounding, on the other hand, only questionably addresses the nature of normativity and its naturalizability.

Last, even if grounding the normative in the natural suffices for naturalism, arguments against such grounding do not suffice to rule out naturalism. For even if the normative is not grounded in the natural, the existence of normative-natural property identities—the most straightforward form of naturalism—is a live option. In a way, this is easy to see. For suppose that the property of being wrong is identical to the property of failing to maximize happiness, and suppose the fact that *x* is wrong and the fact that *x* fails to maximize happiness are the same fact. It is fairly uncontroversial that grounding is irreflexive, so this one fact would not be grounded in itself. We can even make it a conceptual truth that the fact that *x* is wrong is not grounded in the fact that *x* fails to maximize happiness. We just need two ways of conceiving of this fact that build in the lack of grounding. So here we have *a priori* knowledge that this wrongness fact is not grounded in a natural fact, combined with a normative-natural fact identity. This shows that those who wish to argue against naturalism should not rest content with an argument that the normative is not grounded in the natural. They must do what Parfit tried to do and rule out property identities.

Let me make a similar point using Fine's language: unworldly normative principles might nevertheless trade in properties that are type identical to worldly (natural) properties.¹⁶ First, from Fine's own discussion, it is not entirely clear which sentences count as unworldly—as true *regardless* of the circumstances. In addition to mathematical truths, Fine talks about applications of *transcendental predicates* (he gives as an example, "Socrates is self-identical"), and certain substance sortals (he gives as an example, "Socrates is a man"). His animating metaphor is what is not under God's control as they go about creating a possible world.¹⁷ Whether there is an intelligible grouping of unworldly truths to be found here and whether positing the group does important theoretical work is disputed.¹⁸ But even if we grant for the sake of argument an intelligible and theoretically useful category of unworldly truths, and grant as *a priori*/conceptual

16 Fine, *Modality and Tense*.

17 Fine, *Modality and Tense*, 325.

18 See, e.g., Forbes, "Critical Notice of Kit Fine's *Modality and Tense*."

truths propositions to the effect that fundamental normative principles are not grounded in the natural, it is still a leap to infer the conceptual impossibility of normative-natural property identities.

Insofar as I get my head around unworldly truths, outside of normativity there seem to be many claims that are not grounded in natural facts (as a matter of conceptual necessity, knowable *a priori*), but that leave open interesting property identities. Consider:

1. That water is whatever shares the fundamental explanatory nature as the stuff around here that falls from the skies, fills lakes, etc., *is not even partly grounded in* [fill in natural world fact].¹⁹
2. That red is a color *is not even partly grounded in* [fill in natural world fact].
3. x is luminous iff x radiates light, and this *is not even partly grounded in* [fill in natural world fact].

The truths on the left-hand side of these grounding claims are not within God's control. It is not up to them to decide whether water is going to be the watery stuff, red is going to be a color, or being luminous is coextensive with radiating light. These seem to be true regardless of how things are at any world. And there are lots of ways to fill in the brackets such that we can know these claims *a priori* (as a matter of concepts?). We seem to be able to infer that these truths are not grounded in *any* natural facts. Nevertheless, 1 leaves open whether water is a substance identical to H_2O , 2 leaves open whether redness is to be property-type identified with some natural property (like a surface reflectance property), and 3 states an extension equivalence similar to the one stated by the Principle of Utility (x is right iff x maximizes net happiness) that clearly leaves open this identity: luminous = radiates light.²⁰ Generally, the conceptual exclusion of grounding claims like these leaves open genuine property identities.

And so it goes with Howard and Laskowski's argument. Even if our normative concepts rule out the possibility that the fundamental normative principles are grounded in the natural (directly or indirectly), this leaves open certain normative-natural property identities. As I put it earlier, even if grounding the normative in the natural *suffices for* naturalism, arguing against such grounding does

19 I do not think the use of "here" in the principle makes its truth worldly. The principle is still true regardless of how things are at each world. What is worldly is the truth that water is H_2O , but the principle is neutral on that question.

20 The property identity is taken from Parfit (*On What Matters*, 3:66). He also maintains that these properties are identical in the "description fitting" sense, though I admit it is not clear to me what "description fitting" means.

not suffice to reject naturalism. To strike at the heart of naturalism we need to address normative-natural property identities.

3. NORMATIVE TRANSPARENCY

Let me suggest the Argument from Normative Transparency.

1. Normative concepts have a distinctive cognitive significance, and they present the properties they ascribe as having a certain nature, one that can only be characterized in normative terms (e.g., in terms of inherent, authoritative guidance).
2. Natural properties are properties whose nature need not be characterized in normative terms.
3. So normative-natural identities, including property identities and fact identities, are conceptually excluded.

Premise 1 has three key ingredients: cognitive significance, mode of presentation, and nature revealing. First, it makes a claim about the cognitive significance of normative concepts. I take this to include their inferential and motivational roles as well as their distinctive modes of presentation, including the phenomenal qualities of occurrent normative thoughts. And I take it that this cognitive significance is distinctive—it helps us identify a normative thought as a normative thought. This should be fairly uncontroversial, for it leaves open whether or not the concept is in the business of ascribing properties, and if it is in that business, it leaves unsettled what kind of property is ascribed.

Second, premise 1 says that normative concepts *present* their properties in a certain way. The concept of being a reason presents the property under the guise of inherent, authoritative guidance (or favoring), for example. This serves to further characterize at least some aspects of the cognitive significance of normative terms. It is not a full characterization of that significance, which likely includes certain inferential roles and perhaps links to motivation or intention. But it does characterize a rather salient and important part of cognitive significance—the mode of presentation as of inherent, authoritative guidance. Again, this should not be too controversial, for so far we are just focused on cognition. We have not yet said that there is inherent, authoritative guidance *in the world*, built into the property being ascribed. And even if this mode of presentation does lay down a condition on the properties being ascribed, being a property of “inherent, authoritative guidance” needs to be interpreted. It could turn out that what it is to be a property of inherent, authoritative guidance is to be a certain sort of natural

property, like promoting desire satisfaction, or being the basis of advice for an ideal advisor. So far, nothing excludes normative-natural property identities.

Hence premise 1 includes the third, stronger idea that normative concepts present the properties they ascribe as having a certain *nature*, one that can only be characterized in normative terms, such as in terms of inherent, authoritative guidance.²¹ When we add this element, the mode of presentation as of inherent, authoritative guidance is no longer confined to cognition, as it were. It is representing something worldly—or, as I like to put it, it is acting as a transparent window onto something worldly—as having a nature only describable in the very terms we use to describe that distinctive mode of presentation in cognition—in terms of inherent, authoritative guidance. This is certainly controversial, and I discuss some of my reservations in section 4. Before I do, let me finish unpacking the argument.

Premise 2 then says that natural properties have a nature that need not be characterized in normative terms. The key idea here is similar to Jean Hampton's claim that normative authority violates the strictures of science because science rejects explanations that invoke Aristotelian final causes.²² Hampton thinks that Aristotelian final causes posit that (a) certain places, states of affairs, or motions are fitting or right for certain objects, (b) the objects are able to detect this fittingness, and (c) the objects can respond to this fittingness. For Hampton, varieties of nonnaturalism countenance this type of explanation for some actions, whereas naturalist realism would appeal to only material, formal, or efficient causes.

To argue against normative naturalism, I do not think we need to talk about different sorts of explanations and we need not claim that relations of fittingness help to explain some actions. All we need is the idea that there are concepts that are about worldly properties whose nature can only be characterized in normative terms. That alone is inconsistent with naturalism, regardless of whether these properties also help explain action. For natural properties have no such nature. That is part of the point of distinguishing the natural from the nonnatural. Just as a divine being would not be a natural entity, any property whose nature is only describable in normative terms would not be a natural property.

In saying this, nonnaturalists need not have a full-blown theory of the natu-

21 Note that I do not offer the much less plausible claim that normative properties can only be ascribed with normative thought and language (well criticized by Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts*, 77). Nonnaturalists should grant that nonnormative concepts might ascribe normative properties (see Eklund's "thgir" example), but they should deny that such ascriptions reveal the nature of the properties ascribed. They should maintain that only normative thought and language can do that.

22 Hampton, *The Authority of Reason*, 111–14.

ral. Maybe the natural is all that can be completely characterized with structural, functional, or causal language. Any proposal here is bound to be controversial. Fortunately, all we need to note is one negative feature of the natural—natural properties do not have a nature that can only be characterized in normative terms. All sides to the debate should agree with that limited claim.

This combined with premise 1 yields Parfit's desired conclusion: normative-natural identities are excluded by normative concepts (plus a negative claim about the natural).²³

4. EVALUATION OF THE ARGUMENT

I think the Argument from Normative Transparency is the best way—perhaps the only plausible way—to argue that normative-natural reductions are conceptually excluded. I submit it as an improvement on Parfit's Normativity Objection and it also might be the best way to develop other objections in this ballpark, like Enoch's "just too different" intuition, and Scanlon's worry that normative-natural identities destroy normativity altogether.²⁴ Moreover, I can see why some would find it plausible and even persuasive.

That said, I am not convinced that premise 1 is true. We should grant that normative concepts have a distinctive cognitive significance and even a distinctive mode of presentation aptly characterized in terms of inherent, authoritative guidance. It is much harder to see how this cognitive significance speaks to the nature of the properties allegedly ascribed. Most concepts do not do this. Most are not transparent windows onto the natures of their worldly contents. If normative concepts are, this cries out for argument and explanation. I think the best strategy for nonnaturalists is to draw our attention to the special mode of presentation enjoyed by normative concepts, including the distinctive phenomenal quality of occurrent normative thoughts, and to argue that this mode of presentation does purport to represent the nature of their worldly referents. It could be that this presentation as of inherent, authoritative guidance *in cognition* uniquely captures the natures of some *worldly* properties or facts—properties or facts of inherent, authoritative guidance *in-the-world*, as it were.

There are examples outside of normativity where similar issues arise. Focus-

23 We could replace premise 2 with the stronger premise that our *concept of a natural property* precludes it from having a nature only describable in normative terms. Then from the concept of the normative and the concept of the natural alone we exclude normative naturalism. I will not weigh in on the merits of this stronger premise, and I will stick with premise 2 as stated.

24 Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, 80, 104–9; Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, 46.

ing on phenomenal and presentational qualities, some have seriously considered whether visual experience reveals the nature of the colors.²⁵ Using Mark Johnston's example, the idea is that the nature of canary yellow is revealed by experiences of canary yellow. It is there, laid bare before the mind when one experiences canary yellow. Putting a similar thesis in terms of concepts, Philip Goff has argued that

in having a direct phenomenal concept, the token conscious state being attended to is directly presented to the concept user, in such a way that ... the complete nature of the type to which it belongs is apparent to the concept user.²⁶

And again:

[direct] phenomenal concepts reveal the complete nature of the conscious states they refer to ... *we know what pain is* through feeling pain.²⁷

I think this is where nonnaturalists should look to develop the argument that normative-natural property identities are conceptually excluded. The key idea is that normative concepts (and particularly their distinctive mode of presentation) are transparent in that they reveal the nature of the properties they are about. Here are some proposals: we *know what the normative reason relation is* by having thoughts about normative reasons; we *know what wrongness is* by having thoughts involving the concept WRONG; etc. To be sure, such thoughts would not transparently reveal whether these properties are *instantiated* in any given case, but the suggestion is just that they reveal the nature of the property type in question. This is no doubt worthy of exploration, but there are difficulties ahead. Let me mention some of my reservations.

First, phenomenal colors might provide the *best case* of worldly natures that are transparent to cognition. Still, the transparency claim about color cognition and the colors is hotly contested. The most plausible version of it would say that what is transparent is the nature of a mental state, or some property of a mental state. But this is implausible in the case of normativity. The normative properties posited by nonnaturalists are not meant to be some subset of phenomenal properties, and more generally they are not mental states or properties thereof. Wrongness, for example, is meant to be a property of actions, which is something instantiated outside of one's mental life. Once you locate it in the world,

25 Campbell, "A Simple View of Colour," 178; Johnston, "How to Speak of the Colors," 138; Yablo, "Singling Out Properties," 480–90.

26 Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, 107.

27 Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, 124–25.

however, any analogy with phenomenal transparency is certainly weaker. That said, not all hope is lost. There is room to maintain that normative concepts reveal the nature of properties that are not properties of the mind, as some have considered whether phenomenal concepts reveal the nature of extra-mental properties in the world.²⁸

However, and this is my second point, once we have this transparency thesis clearly formulated, we are faced with the epistemic problem of how we know whether it is true. In the case of normativity, one possibility is that being nature-revealing is itself somehow manifest in normative cognition, or otherwise evident enough, and in need of no further argument.²⁹ If that is right, one simply needs to carefully attend to certain aspects of normative cognition to establish both that it is about worldly properties and that it is transparently about the natures of those properties. Unfortunately, many philosophers have attentively explored their own normative cognition without finding it manifest that it reveals the nature of some worldly properties. Elizabeth Anscombe, for example, ridiculed what she called the “mesmeric force” that attends the emphatic ought.³⁰ Far from revealing the nature of normative properties in the world, she thought it was a holdover from a defunct conceptual scheme. Others have carefully considered various aspects of normative cognition and have come to the conclusion that such cognition is about perfectly natural properties, or that it is a projection of our sentiments. After paying careful attention to first-personal ought judgments, for example, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons have concluded, “It is not introspectively accessible whether or not direct moral experiences carry ontological objective purport,” where to have ontological objective purport is to “purport to be about some in-the-world moral properties.”³¹ If we cannot tell whether they carry objective ontological purport, we certainly cannot tell whether they purport to reveal the very nature of their worldly referents.

Perhaps Anscombe, Horgan and Timmons, and others are just wrong about what we can glean from careful attention to the normative mode of presentation. Perhaps.³² More promising, I think, is to push a non-introspective argument for

28 Cf. Chalmers, “The Content and Epistemology of Phenomenal Belief,” and his discussion of Edenic content.

29 Cf. Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, 108–9.

30 Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 8.

31 Horgan and Timmons, “What Does Moral Phenomenology Tell Us about Moral Objectivity?”

32 I note that, though Anscombe and Horgan and Timmons do not think their normative cognition is a window onto *robust*, worldly normative reality that is *actually instantiated*, one might grant that it is a window into possible normative reality that is not instantiated, or maybe a minimal normative reality. See note 6 above on properties minimally construed.

the transparency of normative concepts. Perhaps the transparency thesis is part of the best explanation in answer to a question that has received too little attention, namely: Why do normative concepts have the mode of presentation that they have (that of authoritative guidance) rather than some other mode of presentation or perhaps none at all? Of course, it could be that modes of presentation are accidental features and inexplicable. But if one wants an explanation, one answer is that they have this mode of presentation because they are transparent windows onto the nature of their subject matter, and their subject matter has a nature as of authoritative guidance. (Similarly, one could say that the phenomenal concept of yellow has its distinctive mode of presentation because it is a window onto a property whose nature is reflected in the concept itself.)

This is an interesting proposal. And it is hard to see how naturalists can offer a better explanation.³³ If the naturalist is to avoid classifying the normative mode of presentation as inexplicable, the best move is to lean on certain metaphors that have cropped up in the literature, like the metaphors of projecting, gilding, staining, or coloring. There, the hope is that *somehow* our conative attitudes help to explain why normative cognition has the authoritative mode of presentation. But a metaphor is no substitute for an explanation. Ideally, we would be given a mechanism that shows just how some conative attitude combines with a concept so as to imbue that concept with the mode of presentation as of authoritative guidance. Without this extra step, the nonnaturalist suggestion that the normative mode of presentation is as it is because there is a worldly subject matter whose nature is reflected in normative concepts might just be the better explanation.³⁴

5. CONCLUSION

This is not the place to fully prosecute the case. The Argument from Normative Transparency has been suggestive and exploratory. But it does strike me as an improvement on similar arguments. Parfit's own attempts to conceptually exclude normative-natural property identities fail in much the same way as Moore's open question argument fails, and relying on a "just too different" intuition seems too thin. Howard and Laskowski try to exclude a certain kind of naturalism—that of grounding fundamental normative principles in the natural—but they do not exclude indirect grounding, and they do not rule out property identities (the

33 But see Bedke, "Naturalism and Normative Cognition." For another attempt to explain away the "just too different" intuition, see Copp, "Just Too Different."

34 Again, for an alternative explanation consistent with a naturalist metaphysics, see Bedke, "Naturalism and Normative Cognition."

holy grail of naturalism). Whether the Argument from Normative Transparency will succeed where these others fall short is yet to be fully adjudicated. It has analogues in the philosophy of mind, but there are important disanalogies between normative and phenomenal concepts, and an epistemic defense needs to be worked out. But it offers a promising way forward for those who wish to argue that normative-natural reductions are conceptually excluded.³⁵

University of British Columbia
matt.bedke@ubc.ca

REFERENCES

- Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 1–19.
- Bedke, Matthew S. "Naturalism and Normative Cognition." *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming). Published ahead of print, February 4, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-020-01425-y>.
- Campbell, John. "A Simple View of Colour." In *Reality, Representation and Projection*, edited by John Haldane and Crispin Wright, 257–68. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Chalmers, David J. "The Content and Epistemology of Phenomenal Belief." In *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Quentin Smith and Aleksandar Jokic, 220–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Copp, David. "Just Too Different: Normative Properties and Natural Properties." *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 1 (January 2020): 263–86.
- . "Normativity and Reasons: Five Arguments from Parfit against Normative Naturalism." In *Ethical Naturalism: Current Debates*, edited by Susana Nuccitelli and Gary Seay, 24–57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Dancy, Jonathan. "Nonnaturalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, edited by David Copp, 122–45. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Enoch, David. *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Eklund, Matti. *Choosing Normative Concepts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

35 Many thanks to two referees for this journal, who made valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper.

- Fine, Kit. *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- FitzPatrick, William. "Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 3, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 159–205. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . "Skepticism about Naturalizing Normativity: In Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism." *Res Philosophica* 91, no. 4 (October 2014): 559–88.
- Fleming, Patrick. "The Normativity Objection to Normative Reduction." *Acta Analytica* 30, no. 4 (December 2015): 419–27.
- Forbes, Graeme. "Critical Notice of Kit Fine's *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*." *Philosophical Review* 117, no. 2 (April 2008): 275–87.
- Goff, Philip. *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Hampton, Jean E. *The Authority of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Horgan, Terry, and Mark Timmons. "What Does Moral Phenomenology Tell Us about Moral Objectivity?" *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (January 2008): 267–300.
- Howard, Nathan Robert, and N.G. Laskowski. "The World Is Not Enough." *Nous* (forthcoming). Published ahead of print, May 15, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12293>.
- Johnston, Mark. "How to Speak of the Colors." *Philosophical Studies* 68, no. 3 (December 1992): 221–63.
- Parfit, Derek. *On What Matters*. 3 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–17.
- Railton, Peter. "Two Sides of the Meta-Ethical Mountain?" In *Does Anything Really Matter?* edited by Peter Singer, 35–60. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Scanlon, T.M. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Streumer, Bart. *Unbelievable Errors: An Error Theory about All Normative Judgments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Van Roojen, Mark. Review of *On What Matters*, vol. 3, by Derek Parfit. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 21, 2017. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/on-what-matters-volume-iii>.
- Yablo, Stephen. "Singling Out Properties." *Philosophical Perspectives* 9 (1995): 477–502.