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# Depending on the Thick

Debbie Roberts

‘What [Moore] really wants to insist on, I think, is an inadequacy claim: what is left of language after we cull the ethical terms is in principle inadequate to the task of ascribing the properties we ascribe using the ethical terms.’ Frank Jackson

## Abstract:

The claim that the normative depends on the non-normative is just as entrenched in metanormative theory as the claim that the normative supervenes on the non-normative. It’s widely held to be a genuine truism, a conceptual truth that operates as a constraint on competence with normative concepts. Call it the dependence constraint. I argue that this status is unwarranted. While it is true that the normative is dependent it is not a genuine truism, or a conceptual truth, that it depends on the non-normative. I argue for the following inadequacy claim: that when we cull all the normative terms from our language, and so the concepts that they stand for, what we will be left with will not necessarily be sufficient to adequately describe, conceptualise or represent *what it is that we are supposed to be making normative judgments in virtue of*. This has implications for both ascriptive and metaphysical understandings of the dependence constraint, and the potential to radically reshape the dialectic in metanormative theory.

## I. Introduction

It’s commonly thought that there is a very close connection between the non-normative and the normative, which is not the merely modal one captured by supervenience.<sup>1</sup> But what is this connection precisely? Here is one dominant picture: the normative is *dependent*: it has to be appropriately anchored in what the relevant thing is like. It cannot ‘float free’. So an action can’t be brutally right, or a person merely good, they must have other features that *make* them right or good respectively. A crucial part of this picture is that the features that do the ‘making’ are non-normative features.

On this view the normative *depends on* the non-normative. This is widely held to be a truism. Many take it to be an a priori conceptual truth that operates as a conceptual constraint on normative judgments, in much the same way as the supervenience of the normative does. Call it, then, the dependence constraint.

As in the case of the supervenience thesis, there are not many who challenge the dependence constraint. Of those who do, some have challenged the strength of the connection between the normative and the non-normative. They have argued that the dependence relation is not one that holds with necessity (Dancy, 2004; Zangwill 2008).<sup>2</sup> Others have argued that though the relation holds with necessity, the non-normative only makes up part of the dependence base. Fundamental normative laws, or bridge principles linking the normative to the non-normative, make up the rest (Enoch, 2011; Scanlon, 2014). Still others have argued that though the laws are not themselves part of the base, they ‘underlie’ the dependence relation (Wilsch 2015).<sup>3</sup> And Leary (forthcoming) has recently challenged the standard picture by arguing that there are

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<sup>1</sup> I’m using ‘normative’ in the broad sense which includes the evaluative.

<sup>2</sup> Fine (2012) challenges the nature of the relation in a different sort of way, claiming that it is one that holds with normative, but not metaphysical necessity. Cf Bader (forthcoming). I’m going to leave aside the

<sup>2</sup> Fine (2012) challenges the nature of the relation in a different sort of way, claiming that it is one that holds with normative, but not metaphysical necessity. Cf Bader (forthcoming). I’m going to leave aside the issue of the nature of the necessity, or if the relation is indeed one that holds with necessity

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Leary (forthcoming).

hybrid normative-natural properties that act as the ‘double-sided tape’ sticking the normative and the natural together.

What remains under-scrutinised is the assumption that there are two distinct realms with one, the non-normative, more fundamental than the other at least when it comes to particular normative facts.<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> This assumption is made even by those who hold that normative is a subset of the descriptive or natural.<sup>6</sup>

Although I have not made it explicit, I’ve implied that the dependence relation that I am interested in is metaphysical. But I’m also interested in claims about how we make, or ought to make, normative judgments, and so how we conceptualise, represent, or pick out properties in the world. Indeed, my main point can be illustrated using the Jackson quote above. I’m sympathetic to the inadequacy claim that Jackson ascribes to Moore. However, my focus here is a slightly different inadequacy claim: that when we cull all the normative terms from our language, and so the concepts that they stand for, what we will be left with will not necessarily be sufficient to adequately describe, conceptualise or represent *what it is that we are supposed to be making normative judgments in virtue of*. My aim is to show that, for all that we can tell from our normative concepts, it is possible that this inadequacy claim is true. This has important implications for both claims about how we do, or ought to make normative judgments and, I argue, claims about the metaphysics of the normative.

I proceed as follows: In §II I spend some time on preliminaries and on clarifying my target, particularly concerning how we should characterise the dependence base, and I distinguish different ways that the dependence constraint can be understood. In §III and §IV I show why none of the different ways of understanding the dependence constraint can plausibly be held to be a conceptual truth, or the truism that many take it to be. I conclude in §V.

## II. Preliminaries

Some might think that the dependence constraint is entailed by the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative. This is not the case. Supervenience, strictly speaking, is a purely modal claim about necessary co-variance. In this context it is, roughly, that there cannot be a normative difference without a non-normative difference. It is true, historically, that many have associated this supervenience claim with the dependence claim. However, supervenience does not *entail* dependence. Those who make explicit the distinction between the supervenience and the dependence of the normative make clear that the relation is the reverse: it is normative dependence that is meant to explain

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<sup>4</sup> Väyrynen (2009, 2013) subjects this assumption to some scrutiny. Dancy also hints (1995, 1999) that things might not be like this, but does not make explicit the alternative or defend it. Leary (forthcoming) effectively challenges the sharpness of the distinction between the two realms, but the natural remains fundamental on her picture. Sturgeon holds that normative properties are natural properties, but natural in their own right and not natural because they can be reduced to some other set of natural properties. In his (2009) he expressly does not explain supervenience by appealing to any kind of dependence relation between normative properties and other natural properties. He seems to leave open the possibility that (some) normative properties are fundamental. See especially pp. 61, pp. 69n36, pp. 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> For views that hold that there are fundamental general normative facts (principles) see section IV.

<sup>6</sup> The non-normative is also characterised as the descriptive and the natural. Metaethicists are typically happy to use these terms interchangeably, as if not much hangs on the differences. See Sturgeon (2009, pp. 70n37). Sturgeon (2009) is an outlier in not assuming that the normative depends on a subset of the descriptive or natural.

normative supervenience (Smith, 2004; Dancy, 1993, ch 5). I will not assume, here, that the supervenience claim is true. I have argued elsewhere that there are reasons to doubt this claim, and at the very least to doubt that it is an a priori conceptual truth (Roberts, forthcomingb).

Until recently though, supervenience in ethics was taken to be an asymmetric dependence relation (Mackie, 1977, p.41; Hare, 1984). More recently, and as just noted above, the supposed dependence relation between the normative and the non-normative has been taken to explain supervenience. So the entrenched nature of the supervenience claim in ethics perhaps goes some way towards explaining the status the dependence constraint is held to have.

The assumption that there are these two distinct realms, the normative and the non-normative, with one is more fundamental than the other is underscrutinised at least partly because so many hold the dependence constraint to be a conceptual truth, or a genuine truism<sup>7</sup>. It strikes people as manifestly evident that the normative depends on the non-normative, and thus that it would just be incredible to deny this (Rosen, forthcoming, pp.4; Väyrynen, 2009, pp. 310).

Here are some examples of this view in action, my italics:

‘In general, when we make a moral *judgment* we judge not just that something has a moral property but that it has a moral property because it has some natural property. This is a *fundamental principle of our moral thought*. ...[W]e *cannot judge* that an act is barely wrong; we *must judge* that it is wrong because of some natural property of the act.’ (Zangwill, 2008, pp. 109-10)<sup>8</sup>

‘It is *simply incoherent* to suppose that evaluative *claims* could be barely true. Evaluative claims *must* always be made true by other claims...The fact that evaluative claims cannot be barely true is reflected in ordinary evaluative practice... [E]valuative claims cannot be barely true but *have to* be made true by facts about naturalistic features...’ (Smith, 2004, pp. 225-9)

‘[I]f something is “good” then that *must* be so “*in virtue of*” its being a “certain way”, that is, having certain factual [naturalistic] properties.” (Kim, 1993, pp. 235)

‘Even if moral properties are not themselves natural, their possession *presupposes* that of certain natural properties as their *basis*.’ (Audi, 1997, pp. 117)

Expressivists think along similar lines:

‘The whole purpose for which we moralise... is to choose, commend, rank, approve, forbid things *on the basis of their natural properties*.’ (Blackburn, 1985, pp. 137)

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<sup>7</sup> By truism I just mean something that is so obvious or self-evident that it’s hardly worth mentioning. I don’t simply mean ‘something that lots of people think is true’. You might think the dependence constraint is a truism without thinking it to be a conceptual truth. The reverse is also true, but those who hold the dependence constraint to be a conceptual truth also take it to be a truism. It’s more difficult to say precisely what a conceptual truth is or would be, but I’m working with the admittedly rough idea that if something is a conceptual truth then our concepts don’t permit the possibility of its falsity.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘in general’ is important. Zangwill notes that he is leaving aside the issue of thick concepts.

On Blackburn's view, the ethical agent can be usefully compared to a device whose function is to take certain inputs and deliver certain outputs. Inputs are ethically salient *naturalistic* features that we believe to be present. Outputs are certain attitudes, or pressure on attitudes, or a favouring of policies, choices and actions (Blackburn, 1998, pp. 48-8).<sup>9</sup>

Gibbard (2003, ch. 5) argues that anyone who thinks and plans is committed to the supervenience of the normative on the natural. On Gibbard's view, this is an a priori practical claim. To accept it is what we commit to by planning any aspect of our lives. Supervenience comes with dependence. Plans *must* be couched, says Gibbard, in terms of features we can recognise. These 'recognitional properties' are, in a liberal sense, natural properties. We use 'recognitionally grounded concepts' to pick out these recognitional properties (the kinds of properties that compose prosaic facts). A concept is recognitionally grounded if it is composable, finitely or infinitely, from recognitional concepts.

In planning what to do, Gibbard claims, we *must* stick to the facts – the prosaic, natural facts, free of all hint of plan-ladenness (Gibbard, 2003, pp. 104-107). The dependence constraint translated into Gibbard's terms then is simply the claim that we must plan in virtue of the prosaically factual, non-normative, features that we take things to have.

There are of course important differences between the views canvassed above, but all of these authors appeal to some kind of dependence relation holding between the normative and some, at least prima facie distinct, realm that is more fundamental in some respect. Some, like Zangwill, Smith, Gibbard and Blackburn make explicit that the dependence constraint they have in mind is meant to be a conceptual truth. In general, though, metaethicists seem to be of the view some version of the dependence constraint, is a genuine truism whose denial is just incredible.

I have characterised the dependence base as the non-normative so far, but in the literature it is variously construed. Some examples: the non-normative, the non-evaluative, the natural, and the descriptive. One way to show that the dependence constraint is not the conceptual constraint or the truism that so many think it is, would be to show that the differences amongst these construals matter, and that there is no one formulation of the dependence constraint that everyone agrees on independently of prior metanormative commitments.

Sturgeon (2009) does just this for the supervenience thesis. He shows that there is no version, for all the common ways in which the supervenience base is construed, which everyone should accept regardless of their metaethical commitments. And, turning to the dependence constraint, Väyrynen (2009) has argued persuasively that the claim that normative facts hold solely in virtue of *natural* facts is one for which there is no non-parochial justification.

Perhaps the same could be shown for all other common construals of the base.<sup>10</sup> I think that it could, but I will not pursue this route here. This is because there is a response to Sturgeon's arguments in the supervenience case that may work equally well in the

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<sup>9</sup> Blackburn emphasises that this is not to say that we are always aware that this is what is going on, or that this process is a one-way street. Often things on the 'output' side will influence what the 'inputs' are.

<sup>10</sup> Väyrynen (2009, pp. 310) suggests that this is likely at least in the case of the non-evaluative.

dependence case (McPherson, 2012; Roberts, forthcomingb). That is, there may be a version of the dependence constraint that is a plausible candidate for the one that everyone should agree to.

Suppose we understand the dependence base as follows: Characterise a *base property* as any property that is not *normativity involving*.<sup>11</sup> A normativity involving property is to be understood as either a sui generis normative property or one whose real definition ineliminably mentions such properties. On this proposal, the dependence constraint is the claim that the normative properties depend on base properties, so understood. Below I will also talk of base terms and base concepts. It is an assumption of my argument that it is at least possible that normative terms and concepts ascribe normativity involving properties.

This version of the dependence constraint looks at least less vulnerable to a potential parochiality charge. Non-naturalist realists can accept it. Since normative properties need not be normativity involving naturalist realists can accept it too. With ‘properties’ suitably construed, so can expressivists (also see below on ascriptive dependence) and error theorists should be happy with the claim that it is part of our concept of the normative that normative properties depend on base properties, even if no normative properties exist.<sup>12</sup>

The dependence constraint still needs further sharpening. It is common in the supervenience literature in metaethics to note a distinction between ontological and ascriptive supervenience (Klagge, 1988). Ontological supervenience posits a necessary connection between properties. Ascriptive supervenience is about a connection between types of judgments. Understood ascriptively, supervenience is the claim that we *cannot* suppose two individuals to differ normatively without taking them to differ in some base respect as well.<sup>13</sup> There are interesting questions about how the ‘cannot’ here should be understood. At the very least we can say that, according to ascriptive supervenience, it is inappropriate to treat two items as normatively distinguishable without believing that they are also distinguishable in base respects. If two actions are base indistinguishable, labeling one as good thereby commits one to labeling the other as good. If you don’t, you’ve made some kind of mistake, be that alethic, conceptual, epistemic or normative (ethical, in this case) or some combination of these (McPherson, 2015). Those who hold this thesis typically take it to be an a priori conceptual truth, a constraint on competence with normative concepts.

The dependence constraint as just stated above was the claim, supposedly a conceptual truth or truism, that normative properties depend on base properties. This is to claim an ontological asymmetric dependence relation between the normative and the base: When

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<sup>11</sup> On McPherson’s version base properties are those that are not *ethically* involving. Ridge (2007) suggests an alternative response to Sturgeon: that the base be characterised as either descriptive or non-normative. I agree with McPherson that Sturgeon’s argument puts Ridge’s proposal into doubt (2012 pp. 213 n.23. Cf Sturgeon, 2009, pp. 67-9). However, my arguments below also work given this disjunctive construal of the base.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Mackie (1977, pp.) “But just *what in the world* is signified by this ‘because?’”

<sup>13</sup> Klagge characterises it as the claim that, logically speaking, a person’s judgment of a certain supervening kind cannot differ unless judgments of the other kind about things differ. This implies one has to actually make the judgments of the other kind, but this seems too strong. There are interesting issues about how precisely to characterise ascriptive supervenience, and the relation between ontological and ascriptive supervenience, that carry over to dependence. Cf. McPherson (2015).

something has a normative property it is *because* that thing has certain base properties. Normative properties obtain in *virtue of* base properties.

This version of the dependence constraint is purely metaphysical. But in many of the examples I gave above, the authors' discussion of the dependence constraint is framed in terms falling on the representational side of things rather than the metaphysical side. That is, in terms of 'judgments', 'claims', 'moralizing', 'concepts' and 'formulating plans'.<sup>14</sup>

This suggests an ascriptive understanding of the dependence constraint. Roughly, this is: it is conceptual truth, or truism, that when you judge that something has a normative property that is because you judge it to have certain base properties; normative judgments must be based on the base features we take the objects of our judgments to have. If you were to make a normative judgment without taking that judgment to be underpinned by certain base features of the object, this would be inappropriate. You would be making a mistake. As with ascriptive supervenience, there are various forms this mistake might take.

I think that there is evidence that both sorts of dependence constraint, ontological and ascriptive, are widely accepted in the metaethics literature. This distinction gives rise to different ways we might understand the dependence constraint. I'm going to focus on four different versions.

*(a) Ascriptive Descriptive:* It is a truism that when you make a normative judgment that is because you judge there to be certain base properties present. This is how we make normative judgments.<sup>15</sup>

*(b) Ascriptive Constitutive:* It is a conceptual truth or truism that when you make a normative judgment it must be based on the base properties you take the object of your judgment to have. This is at least partly constitutive of making a normative judgment.

*(c) Ascriptive Normative:* It is a conceptual truth or truism that when you make normative judgment it must be based on the base properties you take the object of your judgment to have. This is how normative judgments must be justified.

*(d) Ontological:* It is a conceptual truth or truism that normative properties (facts) obtain in virtue of base properties (facts). This is a metaphysical thesis that is a constraint on competence with normative concepts.<sup>16</sup>

In what follows, I argue that none of (a)-(d) is a conceptual truth or truism. This is because there is at least one metanormative view which is not ruled out by conceptual truths, nor obviously false, which can deny each of (a)-(d).

You might think, of course, that in distinguishing these different versions of the dependence constraint, I have already done enough to show that there is not one single

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<sup>14</sup> Zangwill and Smith clearly take their versions of the dependence constraint to be closely related to the purely metaphysical version, but it is notable that both versions have a distinctively ascriptive flavour.

<sup>15</sup> If this is distinct from b, then it is a contingent claim, which is why I don't say that it is a conceptual truth.

<sup>16</sup> In much the same way as supervenience is often understood. Cf Jackson (1998), Smith (2004), Dreier (ms) and many others.

version of the dependence constraint that everyone agrees to in metanormative theorizing. That would be too quick. First, as with supervenience, there is the general assumption that something in the vicinity just must be the case. Second, as I said above, expressivists can accept the ontological version as well as the ascriptive version, construing ‘properties’ in the appropriate way. Error theorists can accept it too. Realists can accept the dependence constraint understood ascriptively. And third, as I said in the introduction, what I am really interested in is challenging the notion that it must be the case that there are these two realms, one more fundamental than the other, whether the relation is understood ascriptively or ontologically.

So why might one think that some version of the dependence constraint is a conceptual truth, or truism? Those who explicitly defend this sort of view appeal to observations about ordinary normative practice. My strategy will be to argue that appeals to ordinary normative practice cannot establish any of (a)-(d).<sup>17</sup>

### *III. Against Ascriptive Dependence Constraints*

*(a) Ascriptive Descriptive:* It is a truism that when you make a normative judgment that is because you judge there to be certain base properties present. This is how we make normative judgments

It is worth noting that a descriptive claim about how we make normative judgments would not by itself establish any of the dependence claims the authors I quote above are concerned with (or (b), (c), or (d)).<sup>18</sup> However, it is still worth discussing this descriptive claim, because it seems to me that many people assume, at least implicitly, that something like it is the case. Moreover, if this descriptive version were true that might plausibly be some evidence for the truth of some of the more interesting versions of the dependence constraint.

However, reflecting on ordinary practice does not reveal that, as a matter of fact, we do always make normative judgments in virtue of base features we take the objects of our judgments to have.

First, there are many cases where we make the overall judgment first: I immediately judge that the building is beautiful, or I have the sense that an argument goes wrong somewhere, or that there is something morally dubious about an action. I may, if I spend time thinking about it, go on to look for other features in the light of which I find my normative judgment appropriate, but I don’t always even do this.

Second, often we appear to make overall judgments on the basis of more specific normative judgments, without first making those more specific normative judgments on the basis of judgments about base features. Perhaps I judge that the act was wrong because it was cruel, or good because kind. These more specific judgments can be immediate: I ‘see’ that the act was cruel or kind. But even if they are not immediate in this way, these can be made on the basis of still more specific normative judgments: that

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<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to see what else one might appeal to that could give the dependence constraint the requisite status. Of course, a particular metanormative view might have certain commitments that generate commitment to a dependence constraint, and that view might end up being correct. Nothing that I say here rules out that possibility.

<sup>18</sup> Blackburn comes closest to making this descriptive claim, but it is clear from the context that he takes ascriptive dependence to be something stronger, i.e. to be constitutive of moralizing, and a conceptual constraint.



the act was cruel because gratuitously harmful or kind because sensitive and thoughtful. It is difficult to see how appeals to ordinary evaluative practice show that we *do always* bottom out in judgments about the base features we take the objects of our normative judgments to have.

But perhaps we should not understand *Ascriptive Descriptive* phenomenologically, as a description of a process we are aware of executing each time we make a normative judgment. Taking a leaf from Blackburn's book, perhaps we should think of representations of base properties as 'inputs' and normative judgments as 'outputs' and acknowledge, as Blackburn does, that the distinction and the process may not be transparent to us. It can seem to me as if I just 'see' that the act was cruel, even if actually I only make that judgment because of certain base 'inputs' I am unaware of. In other words, this would be to say that even if we are not consciously aware of it, when we make a normative judgment we do so in virtue of base features that we take the objects of our judgments to have.

This is certainly possible. But it is difficult to see how appealing to ordinary normative practice could establish this claim. It depends on a claim about a process of which we are unaware when engaging in ordinary normative practice ourselves and which, presumably, others could not observe.<sup>19</sup>

Turn now to (b):

*(b) Ascriptive Constitutive:* It is a conceptual truth or truism that when you make a normative judgment it must be based on the base properties you take the object of your judgment to have. This is at least partly constitutive of making a normative judgment.

Given the observations about ordinary normative practice above, this claim needs revision. It is implausible to hold that every normative judgment we make must be based on the base properties we take the objects of our judgments to have, since many normative judgments are, plausibly, based on more specific normative judgments. Unless we are illegitimately discounting the possibility of those more specific normative judgments ascribing normativity-involving properties, *Ascriptive Constitutive* is false.

The claim must be, instead as follows:

It is a conceptual truth or truism that when you make a normative judgment it *must ultimately* be based on the base properties you take the object of your judgment to have. This is at least partly constitutive of making a normative judgment.

Now why hold this? Appealing to observations about ordinary normative practice could not establish this. At most such observations could establish the descriptive claim that we *do* in fact ultimately base all our normative judgments on the base properties we take the objects of our judgments to have. It is dubitable that this descriptive claim is true, given the observations about ordinary normative practice made above.

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<sup>19</sup> Blackburn (1998, ch. 1, §2; ch. 4, §4) has an argument for why this *must* be the case that does not appeal to observations about ordinary normative practice that I am appealing to here, but rather to distinctively ethical considerations. I address this in my (2013a).

To support *Ascriptive Constitutive* we need an argument which shows that in order for a judgment to count as a genuine normative judgment, it is a conceptual truth or truism that normative judgments *must* be ultimately based on the base properties that the judge takes the object of their judgment to have. Either (c) or (d) could be marshaled for use as premises in such an argument. For consider that it is highly plausible that a necessary condition for a genuine normative judgment is that it be grounded. Imagine an individual who claims that a film they have just seen is good, but then goes on to say that they have absolutely no *reasons* for making the claim, or that the film had no features that *made* it good. This would, I think, be evidence for the claim that they are not competent with the concept GOOD. Support for *Ascriptive Constitutive* could perhaps be secured then if we could show that it is a conceptual truth or truism that normative judgments must be justified, ultimately, by appeal to base features, or that normative properties must obtain in virtue of base properties.

So let us consider (c):

*(c) Ascriptive Normative:* It is a conceptual truth or truism that when you make normative judgment it must ultimately be based on the base properties you take the object of your judgment to have. This is how normative judgments must be justified.

As Smith puts it, it is a conceptual constraint on normative judgments that normative claims can't be barely true; they must always be made true by other claims, ultimately by claims about base properties that make the normative claim *appropriate*. Smith claims that this is evident from our ordinary normative practice: there is conceptual pressure to cite the features which make your normative claim appropriate, and ultimately those features cited must be base features. It is incoherent, he thinks, to suppose otherwise.

But while it is plausible that ordinary practice does establish that normative claims can't be barely true, and that normative judgments can't be ungrounded, it is not at all clear that it shows that normative claims must be made true, ultimately, by claims about base properties. Often the grounds we point to for our normative judgments will themselves be normative – claims about thick properties for example. Is it a conceptual truth or truism that the grounds for thick judgments about thick properties must ultimately be judgments about base properties? Why think that justification *must* bottom out in appeal to base properties? Indeed, why think that it is self-evident or obvious, or a conceptual truth that the justification for a normative judgment *must* bottom out in some foundation at all?

To illustrate, imagine we set about uncovering the grounds for the claim that an action was wrong. It turns out the action was *wrong* because *cruel*, and *cruel* because it involved the *gratuitous harming* of an *innocent person*.<sup>20</sup> Why was it *gratuitous*? It was *unjustified*. What made it a *harm*? It involved a *malicious deceit* which negatively affected the individual's *welfare*. Why was the person innocent? They hadn't done anything *wrong*. Absent any further substantive metanormative assumptions, it is perfectly possible that this process continues with even further appeal to normative, and thus normativity involving, features. It is possible, that is, that the justification for a normative claim is not a matter of tracing, in a linear fashion, the grounds for each successive judgment before coming to a halt in the foundation of the base.

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<sup>20</sup> I've italicised all the (potentially) normative terms.

One way in which justification could fail to be foundationalist in this way was if it were the case that thick concepts were *irreducibly* thick. But it will be helpful to first put some background in place to be able to explain this view.

Those who hold that thick concepts are irreducibly thick also hold *radical holism*. (RH) as I understand it is a view concerning the ontological dependence relation.

(RH) the properties that make, for example, an act wrong in one case, may not be wrong-makers and may even make for a different normative property in a different case.<sup>21</sup>

According to (RH) normative properties are *shapeless* with respect to the properties on which they depend (McDowell, 1981; Dancy, 1993 Ch. 5; Roberts, 2011). On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is irreducibly normative. This is sometimes put as the claim that there is no ‘descriptive pattern’ for normative properties (Jackson, Pettit, Smith, 2000).

(RH) is typically taken to have an ascriptive analogue in so far as we have epistemic and semantic access to the relevant properties. That is, (restricting the claim to correct judgments) when we judge that an act is cruel, for example, the properties that we judge to make the act cruel may not be cruel-markers and may even make for a different normative property in a different case.

Irreducible thickness (IT) is a view about the nature of thick concepts. Examples of thick concepts include KIND, CRUEL, COURAGEOUS, GENEROUS, DISCREET, FRUGAL, SLEAZY and TREACHEROUS. (IT) holds that thick concepts and properties are inherently evaluative and shapeless with respect to those properties on which they depend. It is not, however, merely an instance of radical holism (Roberts, 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

On this view, thick concepts are just *more specific* evaluative concepts, more specific than the thin ones, that is. Perhaps there are almost no restrictions on the things that can count as BAD, and almost no restrictions on the kinds of features that can make things bad; BAD, we can say, operates in a relatively unrestricted domain. What makes CRUEL a more specific concept than BAD is that it operates within a narrower domain (Dancy, 1995). CRUEL applies to actions or people in virtue of those people or actions having features of a certain sort. According to (IT) we won’t be able to specify what sort of features cruel people and actions must have, and perhaps not even what features they do have in a particular case, without using further, more specific evaluative terms. In the case of ‘cruel’ these might be, for example, ‘harmful’, ‘gratuitous’ or ‘thoughtless’.

This last point is important: Given the possibility that normative properties are normativity involving, on this view there is *no guarantee* that we will be able to give a purely base characterization of the features of the individual in virtue of which the thick concept applies. In other words, according to (IT) there is no guarantee that we will be able to give a purely base account of the grounds of the thick property.

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<sup>21</sup> This could be to hold that the normative grounding relation is not a necessitation relation. (Cf. Dancy’s 1993, 2004 view of resultance.) In metaphysics, grounding is usually taken to be a necessitation relation but there are some dissenters: see Chudnoff (2011; 2013, §6.2), Leuenberger (2014b), Skiles (2015), and Berker (m.s.) p35 n59.

To make more clear why this is the case, consider the notion of ‘embedded evaluation’ (Elstein&Hurka, 2009, pp. 526).<sup>22</sup> When it comes to thick terms and concepts, an evaluation is *global* if that evaluation applies to all the features that distinguish the things falling under that term or concept. We can contrast this with *embedded* evaluations, which are evaluations required to specify the very thing over which the global evaluation will take scope. Take ‘distributively just’ as an example, and assume that ‘x is distributively just’ means something like ‘x has features X, Y and Z as a distribution and is good for having those features’. The ‘good’ that occurs in the analysis is a global evaluation. An embedded evaluation would be present if specifying the type of thing to which the global evaluation applies required evaluative information. In this case, if one or more of X, Y, or Z were an evaluative feature (e.g. perhaps X is ‘is the result of a *fair* procedure’) then ‘distributively just’ would contain an embedded evaluation.

On this view, ‘fair’ on this view would also contain an embedded evaluation or evaluations. We thus have no reason to assume in advance in any token case that we will be able to identify the *base* properties in virtue of which an institution, say, is just.<sup>23</sup>

According to irreducible thickness, the paradigmatic cases of thick concepts contain embedded evaluation. Moreover, that embedded evaluation is itself thick, and there is no reason to assume, in advance, that there will be a chain of embeddings that bottoms out, in some way, in base concepts ascribing base properties.

The salient features of (IT) for this discussion are thus as follows:

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

As far as possibilities countenanced by our concepts go then, we cannot take it that it must be the case that normative judgments must ultimately be grounded in base properties that we take the objects of our normative judgments to have.

Moreover, even in the cases where the justification for a normative judgment appears to be an appeal to base properties, the fact that these base judgments function as *reasons* might be sufficient to make them normative, and thus possibly normativity involving (and so not base). Perhaps you judge that the action was wrong because it caused pain. Pain here functions as a wrong-maker, the reason why you judge the act was wrong. The claim now is that it couldn’t function as the justification for the wrongness judgment without being normative, or perhaps better: normatively relevant. Arguably, normative relevance is itself normative. Where there is normativity there is the possibility of normativity involving features. Even in simple cases, then, it appears that it is a substantive, issue whether or not we bottom out in appeals to base features in the way that *Ascriptive Normative* has it that we must.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Elstein&Hurka assume embedded evaluations will be thin, but as far as I can see there is nothing that rules out the possibility that they are thick.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hurley (1989) ch. 2

<sup>24</sup> Cf. especially Väyrynen (2013), also Korsgaard (1996) and Schroeder (2005).

#### IV. Against the Ontological Dependence Constraint

(d) *Ontological*: It is a conceptual truth or truism that normative properties obtain in virtue of base properties. This is a metaphysical thesis that is a constraint on competence with normative concepts

My main claim in this section is that the discussion in §III reveals that our concepts and our normative practice leave open the possibility that no set of base properties could ground, in the ontological sense, a normative property.<sup>25</sup>

The way to bring this out is to first consider a potential objection. In §III I focused on ascriptive understandings of the dependence constraint. That is, it was concerned with terms, concepts and representations rather than metaphysics. Even if my argument in §III is correct and none of (a)-(c) is a conceptual truth or truism, why should that have any implications for (d)? After all, it is compatible with the claim that certain base properties of an object ground, and thus metaphysically necessitate, its normative properties, that no base description will conceptually imply, just as a matter of the concepts involved, any particular normative conclusion.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps my arguments in §III simply trade on the latter, a familiar thought in metaethics, and the same kind of thought which supports open question and is-ought gap intuitions.

However, it is important to remember that what I am challenging is the claim that *Ontological* is a conceptual truth or truism. As with the ascriptive versions of the dependence constraint, my claim is not that it *is* false, just that, for all our concepts tell us, it could be false. The point is precisely that as far as we can tell from our normative concepts and normative practice, the *possibility* is left open that base properties do not metaphysically necessitate normative properties.

But now we need to consider another objection. Why is this news? After all, as I mentioned in the introduction, many understand non-naturalist metaethical views precisely as claiming that normative properties are not fully grounded in base properties. And this is not just a problem for my argument against *Ontological*. Once we make explicit that the notion that we are concerned with here is full, rather than partial grounding, and consider that this notion has ascriptive analogues, the non-naturalist need not hold any version of the dependence constraint I outline above. §III's conclusions were not news either.

A non-naturalist who thinks along these lines has in mind something like the following:

Whenever an a particular individual has a normative property, there's always a grounding explanation of this fact that cites only base properties of the individual together with a general normative principle. Normative properties are always fully grounded in base properties plus general normative principles. These general principles may themselves be grounded in further principles, but at bedrock there is a normative principle (or principles) that ground the particular normative facts

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<sup>25</sup> The grounding literature takes the relata to be facts rather than properties, so I am speaking somewhat loosely here. I do this just for ease of exposition. I'm also talking about full rather than partial grounding here. Griffin (1992), Raz(2000) and Sturgeon (2009) make somewhat similar claims to the ones I go on to make below, but in the context of challenging supervenience.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Väyrynen (2013) especially p158-161.

and mid-level principles, but which are not themselves explained by citing base properties (Rosen, ms, pp. 20)<sup>27</sup>

Recall though that my aim is to challenge the assumption that there are two distinct realms with one, the base, more fundamental than the other at least when it comes to particular normative facts. This non-naturalist account of the structure of the normative does not challenge this assumption. Moreover, although there are irreducible normative principles on this account, these principles are akin to bridge laws linking two distinct realms, one more fundamental than the other. That is, they take us from the base to the normative. For example: 'If an act has base properties X, Y and Z then it is good'.

This account of the structure of the normative is also a target of my argument. I said in the introduction that I aimed to show that when we cull all the normative terms from our language, and so the concepts that they express, what we will be left with will not necessarily be sufficient to adequately describe, conceptualise or represent what it is that we are supposed to be making normative judgments in virtue of. In effect §III does just this. If we were to take away all the thick terms, and thus the thick concepts they stand for, then, the argument of that section implies, we won't necessarily be left with the requisite resources to adequately describe, conceptualise or represent what it is that we are supposed to be making normative judgments in virtue of.

This has metaphysical implications. Appeals to ordinary practice and what is permitted by our concepts cannot license the assumption that even if we can't ascribe the relevant properties in base terms, they *must* nonetheless be base properties. They might be, but they might not. This undermines both *Ontological* as the claim that it is a conceptual truth or truism that normative properties must be fully grounded in base properties AND the alternative, non-naturalist account of the structure of normative reality outlined above. For, given the arguments of §III, we should not assume that we have the linguistic or conceptual resources to formulate the relevant principles. This does not mean that we should conclude that there are no such principles. But it does mean that we cannot rule out the possibility that there are not.

This point about formulating the relevant principles needs more discussion. First (RH) may be true. According to (RH) the base properties that make, for example, an act wrong in one case, may not be wrong-makers and may even make for a different normative property in a different case. Normative properties are *shapeless* with respect to (the relevant subset of) base properties. On this view the commonality or real resemblance between different instances of wrongness is normative. This leaves open the conceptual possibility that there is *no pattern* at the base grounding level. Principles (or, at least 'snappy' principles) require that there be such a pattern.<sup>28</sup>

One might reply that even if (RH) is true there will still be some grounding explanation of particular normative facts. This would cite *only* base properties of the relevant individual-in-a-world together with a general, perhaps infinitely complex, conditional, whether or not we want to call this conditional a (non-snappy) principle.<sup>29</sup> So the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Enoch (2011), Scanlon (2014), Schroeder (2014), Skarsaune (2015).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Rosen (m.s.) p2 n1, Jackson, Pettit and Smith (2000). The latter argue that there must be such a pattern otherwise we wouldn't be able to acquire the relevant concepts. However, their argument depends on the assumption that naturalism is true. See Dancy (1999), Roberts (2016).

<sup>29</sup> If (RH) is the case, and we wanted the guarantee – what a principle would give us – that a particular normative property would be instantiated by an individual then we would need to include at least *every* base

grounds for the wrongness of an action in a particular case would be all of the base properties of the action including all of the base properties of the entire world in which the action is situated, as relational properties of that action, plus a conditional stating that actions with these base properties are wrong.<sup>30</sup>

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

### *V. Conclusion*

It is worth emphasizing that I am not denying that normative judgments or normative properties are dependent. As I said above, it is highly plausible that necessary condition for a normative judgment is that it be grounded. An individual who claims that a person is cowardly, but then goes on to say that they have absolutely no *reasons* for making the claim, or that the person has no features that *make* them cowardly would plausibly not be competent with COWARD. It is also equally plausible that normative properties cannot 'float free'. They must be grounded in other features that the relevant object has. Indeed, I think it is plausible to hold that each of these dependence claims, the one about judgments and the one about properties, is a conceptual truth or a genuine truism.

What I have argued is that it is implausible to hold that it is a conceptual truth or truism that normative judgments and properties are grounded in base judgments and base properties, respectively (where 'base' means 'not normativity involving' as specified above). This is so not because normative judgments and properties might be partially grounded in normative principles, but because it is *possible* that more specific, thick, normative judgments and properties are to be found *all the way down* the grounding chain, so to speak.

I suspect that many will find the ascriptive version of this thick grounding claim easier to swallow than the ontological version. For there is no reason to assume that if there is an ontological normative – base distinction, with the base the more fundamental, that this distinction will be found near the surface of language.<sup>31</sup>

As far as the ontological version of my thick grounding claim is concerned, the crucial issue is whether, in order to count as a base property, we must be able to ascribe and not

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property of the world in which the individual was situated, as relational properties of that individual, as part of the grounds.

<sup>30</sup> There is an interesting question here concerning whether this would amount to an *explanation* of the particular normative fact (grounding is after all supposed to be metaphysical explanation). This point is related to Dancy's claim that the grounding relation, as far as the normative is concerned, is not a necessitation relation at all. The resultant base for the normative property does not necessitate that property, on his view. Dancy holds this because he holds (RH), or something close to it. And he thinks that to include all of the properties of the entire world in which the individual is situated in the base is to *fail to single out* the wrong-makers, or right-makers or whatever the relevant normative property may be. On the face of it, this looks like a failure to explain what needs to be explained.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Williams (1985) p144.

merely denote that property in base terms.<sup>32</sup> It's certainly at least possible that this is a reasonable criterion for a property to count as base. Thus, it is possible that more specific normative properties are to be found all the way down.

Showing that this is merely possible might not seem to show very much. However, this is to ignore the deeply entrenched nature of the dependence constraint (and, relatedly, the supervenience constraint). Something like it is assumed at the outset in very many discussions in metanormative theory. If I am correct this is, almost always, dialectically inadmissible.<sup>33 34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 'Is square' and 'is wrong' ascribe, whereas 'that property that X is thinking of at time t' merely denotes Cf. Streumer (2013) pp311-2.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Väyrynen (2009, pp. 308-11). Väyrynen argues that assessment of metaethical (metanormative) hypotheses is theory dependent. If you find it obvious, despite my arguments, that the normative depends on the base then that is likely because of some auxiliary assumptions you hold which make this claim seem obvious.

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to the audience at the Sheffield Conference on Moral Realism for helpful comments, especially David Enoch, Sarah McGrath, Jimmy Lenman, Joe Saunders, Philip Stratton-Lake, and Alex Worsnip. Thanks to Guy Fletcher, Guy Longworth and Matthew Lutz for helpful written comments.



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