

# THE METAPHYSICS OF REASONS

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## 1. PRELIMINARIES

It is a commonplace that there are many kinds of reasons. Most notably and fundamentally, there is a conceptual distinction to be made between *explanatory* and *normative* reasons. We talk about the former when we say, for example, that the (or a) reason why the dinosaurs became extinct was the violent change in climate; or when we say the President's reason for not supporting a bill is that she wants to win the next election and that she believes that were she to support the bill she would not obtain enough votes to win the next election; or when we say that the reason why astronomers have not found life on Mars is that there is no life on Mars. We can say that the first kind of explanatory reason is causal, the second teleological and the third neither causal nor teleological.

We talk about normative reasons when we say, for example, that there were no reasons to invade Iraq in 2003; when we say that there is reason to stay sober the night before a final exam; or when we say that there are reasons to believe that the universe is billions of years old. We can say that the first kind of normative reason is moral, the second prudential, and the third epistemic. Normative reasons of these kinds (there may be others) may be reasons for actions and attitudes like beliefs, desires, feelings, emotions, etc. Explanatory reasons *explain*, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes, while normative reasons *justify*, in different ways, events, actions, and attitudes. Note that just as something can be merely a partial explanation of, say, an event, which may or may not be susceptible to a complete explanation, something

can be merely a *pro tanto* justification of, say, an action, which may or may not be all things considered justifiable.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter focuses exclusively on normative reasons, so by ‘reason’ I shall throughout the chapter mean ‘normative reason’. I shall not discuss the intra-normative issue of how different kinds of normative reasons (moral, prudential, epistemic, etc.) relate to one another. The focus will be on the broadly meta-normative (rather than narrowly metaethical) issue of the metaphysics of reasons. Once we have discussed the common ground (section 2) we shall see that the really controversial meta-normative issues do not arise with respect to the metaphysics of reasons but with respect to the metaphysics of the reason *relation*.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent two sections consider competing accounts of the reason relation. We begin with non-naturalism, a view often criticised for its allegedly implausible ontological commitments. Quietist non-naturalism seeks to demonstrate that non-naturalism about the reason relation can be maintained in a way that is ontologically uncostly. Two recent quietist non-naturalist accounts, Derek Parfit’s and John Skorupski’s, are considered in section 3.<sup>3</sup> Section 4 considers naturalism about the reason relation, in particular Mark Schroeder’s recent account. Section 5 summarizes and gives a brief comparative assessment of the accounts considered in the preceding sections.

## 2. THE COMMON GROUND

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<sup>1</sup> According to some philosophers, it is an adequacy constraint on a theory of reasons that agents can act for good reasons, and that in such cases agents’ motivating reasons are the same as their normative reasons (see, e.g., Dancy 2000). This is not to say, however, that an agent’s motivating reasons and normative reasons are always the same, let alone that there is no *conceptual* distinction between them.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase ‘common ground’ is not meant to suggest that there is universal agreement on the views presented in sect. 2, e.g., that the concept of a reason is primitive and that reasons are facts. It is only meant to suggest that they are endorsed by many philosophers who defend different metaethical views, including different accounts of the metaphysics of the reason relation.

<sup>3</sup> Scanlon (2003, 2014) and Matthew Kramer (2009) have defended views similar to Parfit’s and Skorupski’s. For criticisms of Scanlon and Kramer, see McPherson (2011) and Enoch (2011: 122-33).

It has become increasingly popular to take the concept of a reason as primitive.<sup>4</sup> The opening paragraph of the first chapter of T. M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998) is seminal:

Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favour of it. "Counts in favour how?" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer (17).

Similarly, Derek Parfit says:

It is hard to explain the concept of a reason, or what the phrase 'a reason' means. Facts give us reasons, we might say, when they count in favour of our having some attitude, or our acting in some way. But 'counts in favour of' means roughly 'gives a reason for' (2011, vol. I: 31).

On this popular view, reasons, i.e., the kind of entities that justify, or count in favour of, actions and attitudes are *facts*.<sup>5</sup> Granted, we may sometimes say that, for example, the pleasantness (a property) of a resort is a reason to visit that resort, or that some politician (a person) is a reason to vote for some party. But these are plausibly understood as elliptical statements to the effect that the fact that some resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it, and the fact that some politician represents a certain party is a reason to vote for that party.<sup>6</sup> The nature of facts—for example, whether facts are true propositions of a Russellian or Fregean

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<sup>4</sup> There has also been considerable interest recently in the possibility of reducing all other normative and evaluative concepts to the concept of a reason, thus taking the latter to be the one and only primitive normative concept. See, for example, Parfit (2011); Scanlon (1998); Skorupski (2010). I will not challenge such projects here. For some doubts about their prospects of advancing the meta-normative debates, see Olson (2009) and Väyrynen (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Scanlon's and Parfit's locutions that considerations and facts that count in favour of attitudes and actions "provide" or "give" reasons may suggest otherwise, but if so that is unfortunate terminology.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schroeder 2007: 20-21.

kind, or whether they are entities that make propositions true or false, whether they are constituted partly by abstract properties and relations or wholly by concrete particulars—raises contentious issues in metaphysics that are largely orthogonal to the meta-normative debate. We shall therefore set aside metaphysical issues about the nature of facts in this chapter.

Facts that are reasons count in favour of various types of actions and attitudes, or more strictly speaking, they count in favour of agents performing actions of certain types and taking up attitudes of certain types. For example, the fact that I have a headache is a reason for you to offer me an aspirin; the fact that you did offer me an aspirin is a reason for me to feel gratitude; the fact that taking aspirins normally alleviates headache is a reason for you and me to believe that my headache will soon terminate or decrease.

What we have said so far may seem to raise no deep metaphysical worries. The fact that a resort is pleasant, that a politician represents a certain party, that I have a headache, and so on, do not seem especially metaphysically puzzling and neither do action and attitude types. But what about the counting in favour of-relation, or what I shall from now on call the *reason relation*? What is it for a fact to have the property of being a reason for some action or attitude? Is there anything illuminating to be said about the metaphysics of the reason relation?<sup>7</sup> To answer these questions we need to go beyond the common ground.

Let me first mention a view on which there is nothing illuminating to be said about the metaphysics of the reason relation, just to set this view aside. This is the expressivist view that judgements about reasons do not primarily purport to represent aspects of reality, but to express non-cognitive attitudes of some kind. On this view, the judgement that the fact that some resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it, or counts in favour of visiting it, may express the

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<sup>7</sup> For ease of exposition and reader friendliness, I will speak in the singular about the reason relation, as if there were one kind of unitary reason relation. But I do not mean to rule out the possibility that there are several distinct reason relations, such as being a *pro tanto* reason, being a conclusive reason, or being a moral reason, being a prudential reason, being an epistemic reason, etc. See Skorupski 2010 for a thorough exploration of these themes.

attitude of intending or planning to give to the fact that the resort is pleasant a certain weight in deliberation about whether to visit it. Expressivists can agree that the concept of a reason is primitive and that reasons are facts that count in favour of actions and attitudes. But they maintain that judgements to the effect that some fact has the property of being a reason raise no metaphysical worries because such judgements do not purport to attribute a property of being a reason. According to views of this kind, we can say many illuminating things about the concept of a reason and about the psychology of judgements about reasons, but since ordinary reason discourse is not about an in-the-world metaphysical relation there arise no metaphysical problems about the reason relation. Some philosophers see this as a highly attractive feature of expressivism about reason discourse. Since the topic of this chapter is the metaphysics of the reason relation, however, it means that we can set expressivism aside.<sup>8</sup>

Among cognitivists about reason discourse there is agreement that there are illuminating things to say about the metaphysics of the reason relation, but there is disagreement on how much can or need to be said.<sup>9</sup> An extreme view is error theory about reasons, which combines cognitivism about thought and discourse about the reason relation with nihilism about the ontology of the reason relation. This view can accept that the concept of a reason is primitive and that reasons are facts that count in favour of actions and attitudes. However, since the reason relation is metaphysically queer, nothing has the property of being a reason.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, judgements to the effect that some fact is a reason are uniformly false. We shall come back presently to error theory and to the question why one might hold that the reason

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<sup>8</sup> Expressivism about reason discourse is subject to the notorious problems that beset expressivism in metaethics. For a critical overview, see Schroeder (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Some cognitivists reject the view that the concept of a reason is primitive. John Broome, for example, holds that for a fact, R, to be a reason for some agent, X, to perform some action or adopt some attitude is for R to *explain* why X *ought* (*pro tanto*) to perform the action or adopt the attitude. See Broome (2004), cf. Tännsjö (2010). This view may seem to blur the commonplace distinction between explanatory and normative reasons described in the introduction. But note that what normative reasons explain, according to Broome and Tännsjö, are normative facts, such as facts about what agents ought to do. A drawback of this kind of view is that it seems committed to two unexplained and potentially metaphysically problematic relations, namely the explanation relation and the ought relation.

<sup>10</sup> The *locus classicus* of error theory about ethics is Mackie (1977). For recent developments, see Olson (2014) and Streumer (2013).

relation is metaphysically queer. The two main views about the metaphysics of the reason relation to be considered in the coming two sections are non-naturalism and naturalism. We begin with the former.

### 3. BEYOND THE COMMON GROUND (I):

#### NON-NATURALISM ABOUT THE REASON RELATION

Consider again the judgement that the fact that some resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it. According to non-naturalism about the reason relation, judgements of that sort purport to attribute to facts the irreducibly normative property of being a reason. On this view, the property of being a reason is profoundly different from the property of being recommended or required by conventional norms, such as juridical law, or norms of etiquette or grammar, or norms pertaining to social or professional roles, or to games such as chess or football. We sometimes say, for example, that there are reasons for writers in English not to split the infinitive, and that for chess players there are reasons to move the pawns in certain ways. Normally, what we mean by this is that norms of grammar recommend writers in English not to split the infinitive and that, given the configuration on the board and the rules and objectives of chess, it is correct for chess players to move the pawns in certain ways. Such properties of being recommended or required by, or correct according to, conventional norms are not irreducibly normative since we can give non-normative explanations of *what it is* to have such properties. Since such explanations will be based on naturalistic facts about human conventions those properties are in a clear sense mind-dependent.<sup>11</sup>

According to non-naturalism, there are no such non-normative explanations of the reason relation, or of what it is to have the property of being a reason. The reason relation is a mind-

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<sup>11</sup> See Parfit 2011, vol. II: 308-10. Parfit calls facts about what is recommended or correct and incorrect according to conventional norms “normative in the *rule-implying* [as opposed to the *reason-implying*] sense” (308).

independent and *sui generis* normative relation; it is an ontologically fundamental addition to naturalistic worldviews.

This is not to deny that the facts that are reasons might be mind-dependent. Non-naturalists may well hold that the fact that some law or norm of etiquette is prevalent in one's society is a reason for one to comply with that law or norm of etiquette. Moreover, the fact that some resort is pleasant and the fact that I have a headache are typical examples of facts that are reasons, and they are clearly mind-dependent facts. To be clear, non-naturalists take the *reason relation* and *facts about which other facts have the property of being reasons* to be mind-independent and irreducibly normative.

At this point some philosophers, usually but not necessarily naturalistically inclined, begin to see mysteries. How can there be counting in favour of-relations that do not admit of naturalistic explanations in terms of human conventions and that are in that sense mind-independent? Such irreducibly normative relations and facts about them seem to these philosophers metaphysically queer.<sup>12</sup> Some of these philosophers also find mysterious the relation between irreducibly normative properties and facts and the non-normative properties and facts on which they supervene.

There are several ways for non-naturalists to respond to these kinds of worries. One line that robust non-naturalists can take is to concede that irreducibly normative relations and facts are *prima facie*, or pre-theoretically, metaphysically queer.<sup>13</sup> But at the end of the day, when we have compared the commitments and implications of non-naturalism to the commitments and implications of rival theories, and when "plausibility points" have been awarded and computed accordingly, it turns out that non-naturalism gets the highest

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<sup>12</sup> One need not be a philosophical naturalist in order to find irreducibly normative facts queer. For example, a theist might hold that the reason relation reduces to God's will and might judge metaphysically queer any normative fact that is independent of human or divine minds. 'Non-naturalism' is thus used as a technical term for the view that the normative is irreducible. Divine command theories, that reduce the normative to the theological are thus not counted as non-naturalistic theories.

<sup>13</sup> A less concessive line is to maintain that irreducible normativity is not even pre-theoretically metaphysically queer.

plausibility score.<sup>14</sup> It might then be the case either that the non-naturalist theoretical framework is such that what appeared pre-theoretically queer no longer appears queer, or that some queerness remains but is rendered tolerable by the overall plausibility of the theoretical framework. This approach typically involves appeals to companions in guilt, i.e., claims to the effect that allegedly queer features of irreducibly normative relations and facts are shared by other entities that critics of non-naturalism are reluctant to reject.<sup>15</sup> If there is anything uniquely queer about irreducibly normative relations and facts, these features are according to this approach, ultimately not intolerably queer.

Other non-naturalists argue that irreducibly normative relations and facts are not even *prima facie* queer because they incur no metaphysical costs at all. These views can be called ‘quietist non-naturalism’. They reject the robust non-naturalist’s concessive line that irreducibly normative relations and facts are *prima facie* metaphysically queer but in the end not intolerably so, as well as the error theorist line that such relations and facts are intolerably queer. In the following two subsections we shall consider two recent versions of quietist non-naturalism, Derek Parfit’s non-metaphysical cognitivism and John Skorupski’s cognitive irrationalism.

### 3.1. Parfit’s Non-Metaphysical Cognitivism

According to Parfit, there are irreducibly normative truths. These are truths about which facts have the property of being reasons. Two examples of such truths that we have already encountered are that the fact that a resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it, and that the fact that I have a headache is a reason for you to offer me an aspirin. Now, Parfit claims that

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<sup>14</sup> This is David Enoch’s approach in his defence of what he calls “robust (meta-normative) realism”, which is a modernized version of old-school non-naturalism (Enoch, 2011). The phrase “plausibility points” is Enoch’s. Mark Schroeder advocates a similar methodology (2007: 197), but as we shall see in sect. 4 below, he defends a very different account of the reason relation.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Cuneo (2007). According to Cuneo, epistemic reasons are irreducibly normative, so if there are no irreducibly normative reasons, there are no epistemic reasons. But, Cuneo argues, there *are* epistemic reasons. Cuneo thus offers a *modus tollens* argument for the existence of irreducibly normative reasons. For criticisms, see Olson (2014: Ch. 8).



truths such as these “have no ontological implications”.<sup>16</sup> This claim is likely to surprise many readers and before we try to unpack it, let us note some immediate objections.

Consider again the claim that the fact that a certain resort is pleasant is reason to visit it. This is a normative claim and if it is true it follows that the resort exists and that it has the property of being pleasant. It seems difficult to deny that these are implications of the supposed normative truth and that these implications are ontological. To give another example, suppose that hedonistic utilitarianism is true. Suppose, that is, that there is reason to perform some action if and only if performing that action promotes happiness. Suppose further that it is true that there is reason to  $\phi$ . This is clearly a normative truth and given our assumptions it follows that  $\phi$ -ing has the property of promoting happiness. Again, it is difficult to deny that this is an ontological implication of the supposed normative truths. In fact, we need not even make substantive normative assumptions in order to cast doubt on Parfit’s claim. For suppose simply that there are reasons. Then it follows that there are facts that have the property of being a reason. It is difficult to deny that the implication that there are facts is an ontological implication.

Perhaps Parfit would not deny that normative truths have *non-normative* ontological implications, for example, that there is a resort and that it is pleasant; that some action promotes happiness; and that there are facts. Perhaps what he means to say is only that normative truths have no ontological implications that are also normative: “For [normative] claims to be true, [...] reason-involving properties need not exist either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-spatio-temporal part of reality”.<sup>17</sup>

As we shall see below, Parfit holds that the reason relation, i.e., the property of being a reason *does* not (and not merely that it need not) exist either in time and space, or in some abstract realm outside of time and space. This is why Parfit thinks that normative truths have

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<sup>16</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 486.

<sup>17</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 486.

no ontological implications. Nevertheless, he clearly believes that there *are* reason relations; there exists many facts that have the property of being a reason. How can these truths lack ontological implications? Here we must turn to the claim that there are several different senses of ‘exist’.

According to Parfit’s “plural sense view” of ‘exist’, there are many concrete entities, such as stars, rocks, computers, and philosophers, as well as many abstract entities, such as numbers and logical truths, and many merely possible entities, such as a palace that could have been built but that was never actually built. In saying this, we use “there are” (or “there exists”) in a wide sense. In addition to existing in a wide sense, concrete entities also exist in a narrow actualist sense, which involves having spatio-temporal location. Merely possible entities, in contrast, do not exist in a narrow actualist sense and have a lesser ontological status.<sup>18</sup>

Abstract entities exist in a non-ontological sense, which is to say that they lack ontological status.<sup>19</sup> Irreducibly normative properties, such as the reason relation, are in these respects like abstract entities: they have *no* ontological status (rather than a lesser ontological status). Their non-ontological existence entails that they are neither actual nor merely possible, and neither real nor unreal.<sup>20</sup> Parfit sums this up by making the quietist claim that “[i]n asking whether there are [...] normative truths, we need not answer ontological questions”.<sup>21</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that it is not immediately obvious what it is for an entity to exist in a non-ontological sense or to have no ontological status. It is not any easier to see that there is a third category in addition to the categories of the real and the unreal. To get a firmer grip

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<sup>18</sup> There is a critique of this kind of view in Quine (1947). In an appendix that bears the same name as Quine’s classic paper (“On What There Is”), Parfit addresses various Quinean views on ontology (Parfit, 2011 vol. II: 719-49).

<sup>19</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 480-81. Parfit also says about abstract entities and truths that they do not exist in space or time (484) and he apparently holds that the same goes for normative entities and truths. It seems plausible that normative facts lack spatial location since it seems plausible that no facts have spatial location. It is less obvious that no normative facts have temporal location. Suppose again that it is a fact that there is a reason to visit some resort and suppose again that the reason is that the resort is pleasant. Resorts can surely begin and cease to be pleasant, so the fact that a resort is pleasant seems capable of being temporally located. Consequently, the normative fact that the fact that a particular resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it seems capable of having temporal location.

<sup>20</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 481, 487.

<sup>21</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 487; see also 479-80.

on all this we shall discuss briefly one of Parfit's arguments for why we need to recognise plural senses of 'exist'.

Let us stick to Parfit's example and consider the following statement about a planned palace at Hampton Court, which was never built:

- (E) There was such a possible palace designed by Wren, but this palace was not built and never actually existed.<sup>22</sup>

According to Parfit, if the single sense view of existence were true, i.e., if 'exist' were univocal, (E) would mean

- (S) There actually existed such a possible palace, but this place was not built so that, in the same sense of 'exists', this possible palace never actually existed.<sup>23</sup>

As Parfit points out, (S) is contradictory. But we need not accept the plural sense view of 'exist' in order to make good sense of (E). If we want to allow merely possible objects in our ontology, such as palaces that could have been built but were never actually built, we could say that (E) means that there exists such a merely possible palace, but in the same sense of 'exists', there exists no such actual palace. Some philosophers will balk at allowing merely possible objects, like merely possible palaces, in our ontology on the ground that they seem metaphysically queer in various ways. An alternative view is that (E) means that there exists a non-obtaining state of affairs that there is a palace designed by Wren at Hampton Court, but that, in the same sense of 'exists', there exists no palace designed by Wren at Hampton Court.

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<sup>22</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II; 721.

<sup>23</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 725.

If any of these alternatives are viable, we need not accept Parfit's plural sense view of 'exist' in order to make good sense of statements like (E).

Not only is the plural sense view of 'exist' poorly motivated, it also fails to perform the philosophical work it is supposed to. To illustrate, philosophers who find merely possible objects metaphysically queer will not find them less metaphysically queer if they are told that these objects exist only in a lesser ontological sense. This is because what these philosophers find queer is not the mode of existence of merely possible objects, but their very nature, and it is on this basis that they reject the existence of merely possible objects.

This indicates that invoking the plural sense view of 'exist' fails to touch the main issue. For similarly, critics of Platonism about numbers typically do not object primarily to the mode of existence of numbers and other abstract entities, they find the nature of these entities queer and on that basis they reject their existence; critics of non-naturalism about normativity typically do not object primarily to the mode of existence of the reason relation and other irreducibly normative properties and facts, they find these very relations, properties, and facts queer, and on that basis they reject their existence. Critics of Platonism about numbers and non-naturalism about the normative will not find abstract entities and irreducibly normative properties and facts less metaphysically queer if they are told that these entities exist in a non-ontological sense. In fact, they might well respond that this only adds to the mysteries since it is unclear what it is to exist in a non-ontological sense and to be neither real nor unreal.

To further illustrate this point, let us ask what the difference is between the worldview Parfit thinks is correct and the worldview error theorist and nihilist J. L. Mackie thinks is correct. Let us call them the Parfitian and the Mackian worldview respectively. The first contains normative truths about reason relations, but these truths have no ontological implications, which means that these reason relations do not exist spatiotemporally and not in an abstract realm outside of space and time. The second worldview contains no normative truths. Normally, we would want to say that the Parfitian and the Mackian worldviews differ

in their ontologies. The Parfitian worldview is in at least one obvious respect richer than the Mackian worldview. But Parfit would not want to call this an ontological difference, since according to him normative truths have no ontological implications, i.e., no implications for what exists either spatiotemporally or outside of time and space.

Surprisingly, then, it turns out that the Parfitian and the Mackian worldviews do not differ on issues of ontology, as long as we follow Parfit in taking issues of ontology to be exhausted by issues concerning what exists spatiotemporally and what exists in some abstract realm outside space and time. How, then, can we distinguish between the Parfitian and the Mackian worldviews? It certainly seems that there must be a way of doing so since after all, Parfit is a non-naturalist realist who thinks that there are irreducibly normative reason relations while Mackie is a nihilist who thinks that there are none.

Luckily, we can capture the difference between the Parfitian and Mackian worldviews even if we drop talk about ontology and about existential quantification, which Parfit thinks is ambiguous since he advocates the plural senses view of ‘exist’. Instead we can express the difference in terms of universal quantification and negation.<sup>24</sup> According to the Mackian worldview:

(MW) Every relation is not an irreducibly normative reason relation.<sup>25</sup>

Plural sense views of ‘every’ or ‘not’ seem even more strikingly unattractive than a plural sense view of ‘exist’, so it seems clear that according to the Parfitian worldview, (MW) is unambiguously false. But Parfit might perhaps object anyway that there is ambiguity in (MW) concerning the domain of quantification, and that given a suitable restriction of the domain he accepts (MW). To remedy this, proponents of the Parfitian and the Mackian worldviews

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<sup>24</sup> Here I follow van Inwagen (2001) and (2008).

<sup>25</sup> More colloquially: ‘Every relation is something that is not an irreducibly normative reason relation’.

may simply agree to quantify over the least restricted domain. On this disambiguation, (MW) is, according to the Parfitian worldview, unambiguously false.

The difference between the Parfitian and the Mackian worldview could also be expressed by employing what we, following van Inwagen, can call the Kant-Frege-Russell view of existence. According to this view, statements that something exists are statements that ascribe a relational feature to an abstract object, such as a property.<sup>26</sup> To say that there are reasons is on this view to say that the property of being a reason is instantiated. According to the Parfitian worldview, the property of being a reason is instantiated, but according to the Mackian worldview it is not. Parfit might propose that there is ambiguity in what it is for a property to be instantiated, but the remedy is once again for proponents of the Parfitian and the Mackian worldviews respectively to agree to use the least restricted sense of ‘instantiate’.

In summing up his discussion, Parfit says about fundamental normative truths, such as “we have reasons to prevent or relieve the suffering of any conscious being, if we can” (2011, vol. II: 747), that

[t]hese truths are real only in the trivial sense that they are really true. And, since these truths are necessary, they do not have to be made true by there being some part of reality to which they correspond. This dependence goes the other way around. It is reality that must correspond to these truths (2011, vol. II: 749).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> van Inwagen 2008: 37.

<sup>27</sup> According to Parfit, this also holds for mathematical truths, such as “there are prime numbers greater than 100” (Parfit 2011, vol. II: 746, 749). Might Parfit mean to say that the ‘must’ in his claim that it is reality that must correspond to normative and mathematical truths is a normative ‘must’? That would be difficult to understand. What does it mean to say that reality must normatively be such that we have reasons to prevent or relieve the suffering of any conscious being, if we can; and what does it mean to say that reality must normatively be such that there are prime numbers greater than 100?

The view that fundamental normative truths determine the way reality is, is open to challenge by those who hold that any truth is determined by the way reality is.<sup>28</sup> It is also open to challenge by those who see no asymmetric relation of dependence in either direction. These are general matters for debate in metaphysics and as such they are orthogonal to the debate about non-naturalism about the reason relation. In any case, it is not easy to see how the view that reality must correspond to necessary normative truths makes non-naturalism about the reason relation ontologically uncult.

Parfit's non-metaphysical cognitivism attempts to avoid paying any seeming ontological costs by claiming that irreducibly normative truths have no ontological implications, since irreducibly normative reason relations belong in the category of non-ontological existences. But it is highly unclear what it is for something to exist in a non-ontological sense. Parfit characterises it in negative terms only: for something to exist non-ontologically is for that thing to exist neither in space-time and nor in some abstract realm outside of space-time. This third category of the neither real nor unreal, to which belongs the reason relation, is introduced in order to demystify the ontology of the reason relation. As we have seen, however, it fails to achieve this. Moreover, it fails to accord with intuitive views of what there is. Consequently, postulating a category of the neither real nor unreal is highly uneconomical and unmotivated because the category fails to perform the theoretical work it is introduced to do and because it lacks intuitive support.

### 3.2. *Skorupski's Cognitive Irrealism*

John Skorupski's cognitive irrealism and Parfit's non-metaphysical cognitivism are similar in spirit but different in letter.<sup>29</sup> Cognitive irrealism is not based on a plural sense view of 'exist'. According to Skorupski, all and only entities that are *real* exist. To be real is to have causal

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<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Lewis 2001. This view is sometimes called 'truth supervenes on being'.

<sup>29</sup> This subsection draws on Olson (2012).

standing. For a property or relation to have causal standing is for that property or relation to be such that objects can cause or be caused in virtue of having that property or relation.<sup>30</sup> Facts, properties, and relations that lack causal standing are nominal as opposed to substantive; substantive properties and relations are also called ‘attributes’. Cognitive irrealism holds that the reason relation lacks causal standing, hence it is *irreal* and does not exist. But the view is not a form of nihilism about reasons. There *are* entities and relations that lack causal standing and hence *do not exist*.<sup>31</sup> Fictional entities and characters are one example; the reason relation is another.

This does not mean, however, that the reason relation is a fiction and nor that it is a construction. The reason relation is objective, i.e., mind-independent, and what reasons there are is something we as reflective agents recognize rather than conjure up or construct.

A pertinent question here is whether this marks a genuine difference between cognitive irrealism and robust non-naturalism regarding the ontology of the reason relation. Skorupski takes intuitionist non-naturalism to be committed to the view that normative facts are causally efficacious and that normative judgement involves receptive awareness of normative facts to which normative intuitions are causally linked.<sup>32</sup> But those were not the views of the philosophers who are normally counted as intuitionist non-naturalists in metaethics, particularly the British philosophers in the tradition from Sidgwick to Ewing. For example, Ewing wrote in 1959 that “nobody would ever think of [goodness or obligation] as playing a part in causing anything” and he stated that he had not heard it suggested that the goodness of a thing could play a part in causing cognition of the fact that it is good.<sup>33</sup> It is highly probable that Ewing and his intuitionist non-naturalist contemporaries would say the same

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<sup>30</sup> Skorupski 2010: 428.

<sup>31</sup> Skorupski 2010: 423-8. Since cognitivism irrealism holds that there are things that do not exist it qualifies as a version of the view Peter van Inwagen calls ‘neo-Meinongianism’ (van Inwagen 2008: 41, 47).

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of receptivity and its role in epistemology, see Skorupski 2010: Ch. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ewing 1959: 55.



about normative facts more generally, including facts about reasons. Present-day robust non-naturalists like Enoch certainly do.<sup>34</sup>

If there is no genuine difference between cognitive irrealism and robust non-naturalism it might in the end not be apt to categorize the former as a kind of quietist non-naturalism, as I did above. However, cognitive irrealism is quietist at least in spirit in that it attempts to ward off accusations of mysterious ontological commitments by claiming that the reason relation lacks causal standing and therefore is unreal and non-existent.

According to Skorupski, error theory about the reason relation is incorrect since we do not think of the property of being a reason as a putative attribute.<sup>35</sup> Importantly, however, the foremost sceptical worries put forward by error theorists do not target the putative causal standing of normative properties and facts.<sup>36</sup> Two well-known worries that we have encountered already are the ones that focus on supervenience and irreducible normativity (see section 3 above). Can the claim that the reason relation lacks causal standing and hence is unreal allay these worries?

Begin with supervenience. As we know, non-naturalism holds that normative properties and natural properties are distinct, but that the latter somehow determine or necessitate the former. Critics find this relation mysterious. Skorupski agrees that the supervenience relation is “rather puzzling”<sup>37</sup> and “somewhat mysterious”<sup>38</sup>, and he claims that it is a virtue of his view that it “eliminates” supervenience,<sup>39</sup> since the relation that holds between the natural and the normative simply reduces to the reason relation: “Since reasons are facts, if you fix the

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<sup>34</sup> See Enoch 2011: 7, 159, 162, 177.

<sup>35</sup> Skorupski 2010: 429.

<sup>36</sup> In fairness to Skorupski, the claim that normative facts have causal standing plays some role in one of Mackie’s queerness arguments. According to Mackie, normative facts make people who are acquainted with them act in certain ways (Mackie 1977: 40). However, it is far from obvious why any kind of normative realist should accept this view of normative facts. (See Olson, 2014: Chs. 5 and 6 for a discussion of Mackie’s queerness arguments.) Note also that critics of normative realism have argued that if normative facts lack causal standing, they do not appear in the best explanations of normative judgements. But this is normally considered a problem rather than a virtue of cognitivist views. For discussions of the epistemological elements of cognitive irrealism, see Skorupski 2010: ch. 16 and 2012, and Olson 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Skorupski 2010: 56.

<sup>38</sup> Skorupski 2010: 449.

<sup>39</sup> Skorupski 2010: 449.

facts you fix the reasons, and thus if normative properties are all reducible to reason relations, you fix them too” (2010: 56).

This claim is either trivial or too quick. It is trivially true that if you fix *all* facts, you fix the reasons since facts about reasons are a subset of all facts. Skorupski presumably means that if you fix all the *substantial* (as opposed to *nominal*) facts, you thereby fix the reasons. But if you fix all the substantial facts, do you thereby fix the distribution of the (nominal) property of being a reason? You do if there is a relation of normative necessity; if, for example the property of being the fact that an action causes pain necessitates the property of being a reason not to perform that action; necessarily, the fact that an action causes pain has the latter property *in virtue of* having the former property. The upshot is that Skorupski has not *eliminated* the supervenience relation. He still has to rely on there being a necessitating ‘in virtue of’-relation between the natural and the normative: necessarily, a fact has the property of being a reason in virtue of some other property of that fact, for example the property of being the fact that an action causes pain.<sup>40</sup>

We could call this ‘in virtue of’-relation the *reason-making relation* and the properties that make a fact a reason *reason-making properties*.<sup>41</sup> (Analogously, many philosophers agree that whatever is good or bad, or right or wrong, have properties that are good- or bad-making, or right- or wrong-making.) Cognitive irrealism, then, does not eliminate but *reduce* supervenience to the reason-making relation. Plausibly, if the property of being a reason is irreducibly normative, the property of being reason-making is irreducibly normative too.

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<sup>40</sup> Even if Skorupski were right that his view eliminates the supervenience relation in the case of reasons, he would need to establish that all other normative and evaluative properties are reducible to reasons in order to eliminate supervenience across the board. This is a highly controversial view, but Skorupski defends it at some length in his 2010.

<sup>41</sup> The reason-making relation holds between the property of a fact that makes it a reason and that fact’s being a reason; the reason relation holds between a fact and an action or attitude.

As a consequence, metaphysical worries about supervenience reduce to more general and fundamental metaphysical worries about irreducible normativity.<sup>42</sup> Recall that critics of non-naturalism find it mysterious how there can be counting in favour of-relations that do not admit of naturalistic explanations in terms of human conventions. As we saw, this kind of worry need not be premised on the idea that the irreducibly normative properties, such as the property of being a reason and the property of being reason-making, have causal standing. But the only thing that cognitive irrealism offers by way of demystification is the claim that the reason relation is unreal, i.e., lacks causal standing. In so far as the notion of irreducible normativity calls for demystification in the first place, cognitive irrealism fails to achieve it.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. BEYOND THE COMMON GROUND (II):

##### NATURALISM ABOUT THE REASON RELATION

The general lesson of the preceding section is that it is difficult to endorse the view that the reason relation is non-natural without incurring metaphysical costs. Let us turn, then, to naturalistic views about the reason relation. There are of course very many such views. One possibility is for naturalists to hold that the property of being a reason is a natural property for which we have no non-normative vocabulary. This view is naturalist because although we cannot pick out the property of being a reason without using the phrase ‘is a reason’, the reason relation is not an ontologically fundamental addition to naturalistic worldviews. On

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<sup>42</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the supervenience challenge to moral non-naturalism reduces to general worries about non-natural properties and relations. See Olson 2014, sect. 5.1. In his (2012: 215), Skorupski takes the challenge to concern modality rather than irreducible normativity and he refers to his account of modality in terms of the irreducibly normative reason relation (Skorupski 2010: Ch. 8). I suspect that this interpretation was prompted by the presentation of the challenge in my (2012).

<sup>43</sup> Skorupski disagrees and insists that any lingering worry that the reason relation is metaphysically queer “arises from a false, reifying, conception” of what the reason relation is (2012: 216). I simply fail to see that reification has anything to do with the worry that the irreducibly normative reason relation is metaphysically queer.

this view, the rationale for taking normative properties to be natural properties is that they are causally efficacious.<sup>44</sup>

I shall state very briefly two worries about this kind of naturalist view. First, while it may sound intuitively plausible that some normative properties are causally efficacious (we may say, for example, that part of the explanation of why a person acted so and so was that she is virtuous), it may well be more difficult to find intuitively plausible examples of the causal efficacy of the property of being a reason. Second, since the main difference between this kind of naturalist view and non-naturalism is that the former takes the property of being a reason to be natural rather than non-natural, it is not much more explanatory than non-naturalism. We still do not know very much about the reason relation.

Let us instead consider a recent naturalistic account that promises to be more explanatory, namely Mark Schroeder's version of the Humean theory of reasons, which he labels 'hypotheticalism' (Schroeder 2007). The heart of the view is the following reductive account of what it is for a fact (true proposition), **R**, to have the property of being a reason for an agent, **X**, to perform some action, **A**:

For **R** to be a reason for **X** to do **A** is for there to be some [proposition] *p*, such that **X** has a desire whose object is *p*, and the truth of **R** is part of what explains why **X**'s doing **A** promotes *p* (Schroeder 2007: 59, 193).

The intuitive case for hypotheticalism is built around the case of Ronnie, who desires to dance and who has been invited to a party at which there will be dancing. Quite plausibly, the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go there. What it is for this fact to be a reason for Ronnie to go, is for this fact to be part of the explanation of why going

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<sup>44</sup> See Sturgeon (2006) for a defence of such a naturalistic view concerning the property of goodness. Note that this does not sit well with Skorupski's distinction between cognitive irrationalism and intuitionist non-naturalism. Skorupski takes the latter view to hold that normative (non-natural) properties are causally efficacious.

to the party promotes (i.e., makes it more likely<sup>45</sup>) that Ronnie dances. The fact that Ronnie desires to dance is a background condition.<sup>46</sup> It is certainly plausible that Ronnie's reason in this case *depends* on a feature of his psychology, i.e., his desire to dance, but it is highly controversial that the property of being a reason *reduces* to the property of being part of an explanation of why acting in a certain way would promote some non-normative proposition. We will return to this important point presently.

Let us first make three observations about hypotheticalism's constitutive account of the reason relation, its account of what it is for a fact to be a reason. First, explanation, according to Schroder, is not an epistemic notion: "facts about explanations [...] are facts about what is true in virtue of what".<sup>47</sup> I take this to mean that explanation is a metaphysical relation. Second, the idea that reasons are facts that are parts of the explanation of why acting in a certain way would promote certain propositions makes for a rather inclusive account of reasons. For example, the fact that the law of gravity holds is part of the explanation of why my now moving my arm and hand in a certain way enables me now to have a sip of coffee. In fact, having a sip of coffee is one of the things I now desire. So, the fact that the law of gravity holds is a reason to do many things, it is for example a reason for me now to move my arm and hand in a certain way. This illustrates that hypotheticalism is vulnerable to the 'too many reasons' objection. Schroeder argues that hypotheticalism can evade the objection by offering a novel account of the weight of reasons along with an account of why we are, on pragmatic grounds, normally not interested in reasons whose weight is very small or negligible and why we are therefore inclined, mistakenly, to ascribe such reasons zero weight.<sup>48</sup> Here I shall not

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<sup>45</sup> According to Schroeder: "X's doing A promotes *p* just in case it increases the likelihood of *p* relative to some baseline. And the baseline [...] is fixed by the likelihood of *p*, conditional on X's doing nothing—conditional on the status quo" (2007: 113).

<sup>46</sup> On desires as background conditions of reasons rather than parts of reasons, see Schroeder 2007: Ch. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Schroeder 2007: 29, n. 12.

<sup>48</sup> See Schroeder 2007: Chs. 5 and 7. Schroeder does not consider the implication that very general laws of nature turn out to be reasons for many things, but Matt Bedke points out that it is "a particularly unattractive version of the too many reasons objection" (2008: 4). Hypotheticalism is also subject to the 'too few reasons' objection. For discussion, see Schroeder 2007: Ch. 6.

endeavour to assess whether this response is successful since I want to consider more general concerns about the reducibility of the reason relation.

Thirdly, consider the fact *that Ronnie's going to the party makes it more likely that he dances*. This fact is plausibly a reason for Ronnie to go the party, at least if we assume as a background condition that Ronnie desires to dance. But now, is the fact *that Ronnie's going to the party makes it more likely that he dances* part of what explains why Ronnie's going to the party makes it more likely that he dances? Schroder holds that it is, claiming that it "serves as a trivial explanation of itself—it is the limiting case of what could count as such an explanation".<sup>49</sup> This is surprising, since it conflicts with the common view that explanations are irreflexive; no fact explains itself, no proposition is true because of itself. I will not, however, pursue this criticism here.<sup>50</sup> Instead we shall move on to more general concerns about the reducibility of the reason relation.

One general adequacy condition that any reductive theory must fulfil is that it must not involve using the terms for whatever it is that is being reduced in *ad hoc* or deviant ways. Schroeder considers an example of a person who used to be a professed atheist but now believes that God is love. The sentence 'God exists' is true according to this person, but that is just because she believes that there is love and because she uses 'God' to mean what other speakers typically mean when they use the word 'love'.<sup>51</sup> Believing in love and using 'God' in this deviant fashion should not suffice for being a theist. As Schroeder explains:

As long as [the referent of 'God'] is the sort of thing that is acceptable to atheists, she will not count as believing in God after all, even though given her new uses of her terms, she will be able to mimic the claims of theists, and to sincerely utter such sentences as

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<sup>49</sup> Schroeder 2007: 31.

<sup>50</sup> See Bedke (2008) for further discussion of this criticism.

<sup>51</sup> Schroeder 2007: 74-5.

‘God exists’. She will merely mean something different by such sentences than we do (2007: 75).

But now note that the analysis that is at the heart of hypotheticalism reduces the property of being a reason to the property of being part of an explanation of a non-normative fact. In other words, the analysis is the sort of thing that is acceptable to nihilists about the reason relation. The non-reductivist about the reason relation can thus claim that just as there is ground for suspicion about the reduction of God to love, there is ground for suspicion about reduction of the property of being a reason to the property of being part of the explanation of why acting in some way promotes the likelihood of some non-normative proposition. These grounds for suspicion are parallel.

Here is an example of what Schroeder considers a successful constitutive explanation: what explains the fact that a figure is a triangle is the fact that it is a closed plane figure with three sides. The property of being a triangle reduces to the property of being a closed, plane, three-sided figure because the latter property has more structure than the former.<sup>52</sup> Now, God is supposed to have properties, such as being omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent. Atheists typically hold that nothing has or can have all of those properties. That is why any reductive account of God in terms of properties atheists hold that something has or can have seems unpromising.<sup>53</sup>

So far so good. The question now is whether reasons have properties that any reductive account fails to capture, just like any reductive account of God fails to capture some of the properties God supposedly has. And it seems that the non-reductivist can indeed claim that they do. Recall again that hypotheticalism reduces the reason relation to an instance of the explanation relation, where both relata are non-normative. This raises the question whether

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<sup>52</sup> Schroeder 2007: 67-72.

<sup>53</sup> Schroeder 2007: 76.

hypotheticalism *eliminates* the reason relation in favour of a kind of explanatory relation, rather than simply reducing it.<sup>54</sup> As we saw in section 1, it is a popular view that reasons count in favour of actions and attitudes; they do not just *explain* non-normative facts. Schroeder is right that talk about ‘counting in favour’ is “slippery”,<sup>55</sup> but as we also saw in section 1, it is a commonplace in philosophy as well as in ordinary thought and discourse that there is a crucial difference between the property of being an explanatory reason and the property of being a normative or justifying reason. In so far as we believe that there is a fundamental contrast between what it is for a fact to justify or count in favour of an action or attitude and what it is for a fact to be part of an explanation of some non-normative fact, this is ground for doubts about hypotheticalism.

This is obviously a profound and very general ground for doubt that any reductive view has to struggle to overcome. I do not claim that no reductive view can in the end do so, nor do I claim that the cons of hypotheticalism in the end outweigh the pros. What I have said is merely an attempt to articulate why non-reductivists are sceptical that any reductive account of reasons can succeed. The worry is in essence that no reductive account can capture the normativity of the reason relation simply because it is irreducible.<sup>56</sup>

## 5. BEYOND THE COMMON GROUND (III): IMPASSE?

Let us recapitulate and take stock of the accounts we have surveyed. Section 2 laid out the common ground about the metaphysics of reasons. We saw that the pertinent questions arise with respect to the reason *relation*. We set aside expressivism about reasons discourse, since on this view there are no pertinent *metaphysical* questions about the reason relation to consider.

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<sup>54</sup> Schroeder argues that the distinction between elimination and reduction is important and maintains that his account of the reason relation is not eliminativist (2007: 72-9).

<sup>55</sup> Schroeder 2007: 11.

<sup>56</sup> Remember that the normativity in question need not be specifically moral (see sect. 1). Schroeder is optimistic about hypotheticalism’s prospects for capturing normativity (2007: 79-83). But this is because he is optimistic about ‘reason basicness’, i.e. the view that the notion of a reason is the primitive notion in terms of which all other normative properties and relations are analysable. But what non-reductivists are pessimistic about are the prospects for any reductive view, such as hypotheticalism, to capture the normativity of the reason relation itself.



Sections 3 and 4 surveyed recent accounts of the reason relation that are all cognitivist about thought and discourse about reasons. In the course of discussing non-naturalism, we considered error theory, which combines cognitivism about thought and discourse about reasons with the nihilistic view that the reason relation is (necessarily) uninstantiated. One implication of this view is that claims about what there is reason to do and what attitudes there is reason to take up are uniformly false. Many philosophers find this view difficult to accept.

Robust non-naturalism holds that the property of being a reason is not exhaustively constituted by natural or supernatural properties; there are thus irreducibly normative properties and some are instantiated. As we saw, some philosophers worry that the ontological commitments of robust non-naturalism are intolerably mysterious. Quietist non-naturalists, like Parfit and Skorupski, attempt to allay these worries by arguing in various ways that these commitments are in the end metaphysically uncostly. In this respect, quietist non-naturalism aspires to be less metaphysically committed than robust non-naturalism, but it only achieved this by making it very unclear what it is in fact committed to.

Naturalists about the reason relation reject the nihilism of error theory, and typically object to non-naturalistic theories that they leave too many metaphysical questions unexplained and thus involve mysteries. Instead, naturalism analyses the property of being a reason entirely in terms of natural properties. In section 4, we considered hypotheticalism, which is one recent sophisticated version of naturalism. In avoiding, or aspiring to avoid, the metaphysical mysteries, naturalism can be considered a less metaphysically committing view than robust non-naturalism. The flipside, however, is that the view that the reason relation is naturalistically reducible is open to serious challenges. The reason relation seems, *prima facie*, very different from any naturalistic relation and one might take this to indicate that any theory

that reduces the former to the latter is doomed to fail.<sup>57</sup> Some critics have argued that naturalism about the reason relation in the end “comes close” to nihilism.<sup>58</sup> Recall also the worry mentioned in section 4, that hypotheticalism eliminates rather than merely reduces the reason relation.<sup>59</sup>

We have also seen that the prospects for quietist non-naturalism are not bright. We saw in section 3 that it is very difficult to carve out theoretical territory in between the less compromising positions like robust non-naturalism, nihilism, and naturalism. The theoretical costs of these views are often obvious, and positions that are less than fully metaphysically committing may seem attractive on their face, but they are in the end difficult to sustain. Where does this leave us? Perhaps not at an impasse, because we have not been able to assess all the arguments for and against the positions surveyed. It seems clear, though, that the emphasis on reasons raises the same issues about metaphysical queerness and reducibility or irreducibility of the normative that have dominated metaethics for a very long time. In that respect the recent turn to reasons may be seen to have been of no help in escaping an impasse.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Enoch 2011: 80-1; 106-9.

<sup>58</sup> Parfit 2011, vol. II: 368.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Jaegwon Kim’s well-known claim that Quine’s attempt at naturalizing epistemology amounts to a change of topic (Kim 1988)

<sup>60</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at seminars at Stockholm University and the University of Vermont, and at a workshop on metaethics at the 2013 ACFAS meeting in Quebec City. I am very grateful to the participants, in particular Lorraine Besser-Jones, Terence Cuneo, Tyler Doggett, Jens Johansson, Andrew Reisner, and Torbjörn Tännsjö, for very helpful discussions. I am also grateful for helpful comments from Joshua Gert, Christine Tappolet, Jonathan Way, Daniel Whiting, and the Editor of this volume.

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