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HYBRID NON-NATURALISM DOES NOT MEET THE SUPERVENIENCE CHALLENGE

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IT IS WIDELY AGREED that normative properties supervene on natural properties. Non-naturalists face a distinctive challenge to explain this relation. Unlike other metanormative contenders, non-naturalists take normative supervenience to be a relation between *metaphysically discontinuous* kinds: natural properties and *sui generis* normative properties. As Tristram McPherson forcefully argues, that discontinuity makes it difficult, if not impossible, for non-naturalists to explain supervenience.[1] And it is widely accepted that an inability to explain a necessary relation between distinct kinds—at least insofar as that relation *demands* explanation—is a significant theoretical cost.

Stephanie Leary argues that non-naturalists can meet this explanatory demand by positing the existence of *hybrid* normative properties.[2] These properties serve as a kind of "double-sided tape," allowing a natural property to ground a *sui generis* normative property (e.g., goodness) without violating non-naturalism's commitment to metaphysical discontinuity—i.e., without that grounding relation's holding in virtue of the nature of either the natural properties or the *sui generis* normative properties themselves.[3] Each hybrid normative property H has two key features: (i) it is part of the (constitutive immediate) essence of H that some natural property G grounds H's instantiation and (ii) it is part of the essence of H that H grounds the instantiation of some *sui generis* normative property F.[4]

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1 McPherson, "Ethical Non-Naturalism and the Metaphysics of Supervenience."

2 Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities." Many of the passages from Leary herein are offered in response to McPherson's charge that proposals like hers fall prey to "bruteness revenge," that they offer "an explanation of one necessary connection only by covertly relying on a second brute necessary connection" (McPherson, "Ethical Non-Naturalism and the Metaphysics of Supervenience," 222–23). My arguments can be seen as clarification and extension of McPherson's objection.

3 Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities," 99.

4 Leary follows Fine ("Senses of Essence") in distinguishing *constitutive immediate* essences from those that are *consequential* or *mediate*. Except where I rely on these distinctions explicitly, all mentions of "essence" should be taken to refer to constitutive immediate essence.

For example, one might claim that *being in pain* is such a property: that it's part of the essence of being in pain that (a) if one's C-fibers are firing, then one is in pain, and (b) that if x is a painful experience, x is bad.[5]

Unfortunately, this proposal does not meet the supervenience challenge. To see this, begin with Leary's formulation of supervenience:[6]

Strong Supervenience:
$$(\forall F \text{ in } A)(\forall x)[Fx \rightarrow (\exists G \text{ in } B)(Gx \mathrel{\&} \Box_M(\forall y)(Gy \rightarrow Fy))]$$

A is the class of normative properties and B is the class of natural properties. Thus, according to *Strong Supervenience*, for every normative property F, each instantiation of F is metaphysically necessitated by the instantiation of some natural property G. With A_{SG} as the class of *sui generis* normative properties, Leary's proposal entails:

Hybrid Property:
$$(\forall F \text{ in } A_{SG})(\exists H)(\exists G \text{ in } B)[\Box_M(Gx \rightarrow Hx) \mathrel{\&} \Box_M(Hx \rightarrow Fx)]$$

Hybrid Property does not entail *Strong Supervenience*. It entails that G is sufficient for F. It does *not* entail that the instantiation of one or more members of B (i.e., of at least one natural property) is necessary for the instantiation of F, and thus does not entail that F supervenes on the set of natural properties. The latter, Leary claims, is explained by her essentialist metaphysics:

The background essentialist metaphysics explains why it's metaphysically necessary that, if x has some *sui generis* normative property, x has some natural property that is involved in the essence of whatever hybrid properties ground it. On the essentialist framework, no grounding facts are fundamental—they are all grounded in essences. So, no derivative property F can be instantiated by x unless x has some more fundamental property G and there is an essential connection between *being F* and *being G*.[7]

Leary makes two key claims about F in this passage. First, she claims that F is a "derivative property"—i.e., is always grounded. Second, she claims that F is always grounded *in some natural property*. But it is important to see that neither *Hybrid Property* nor essentialist metaphysics entails these claims. Even if H grounds F in

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5   Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities," 98.

6   Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities," 80, adapted from Dreier, "The Supervenience Argument Against Moral Realism."

7   Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities," 102.

one case, *F* might be ungrounded in another.[8] And even if *F is* always grounded, it does not follow that it is always grounded *in some natural property*.

By contrast, in many other cases essentialist metaphysics *does* guarantee necessary conditions for property instantiation. Because it is in the essence of *H* to be grounded in *G*, *G* is necessary (and arguably sufficient) for *H*, and thus we know both that *H* is derivative and that it is always grounded in a natural property. But this is precisely because the relevant grounding relation holds in virtue of the essence of the ground*ed* property. Where the grounding relation holds in virtue of the ground*ing* property, as in the relation between *H* and *F*, it follows only that the base property is sufficient.

Why, then, does Leary claim that, given her essentialist metaphysics, her proposal entails that instantiation of at least one natural property is necessary for instantiation of any given *sui generis* normative property? One possibility is that she is making the mistake of thinking that all essence facts entail some relevant necessity. But a more charitable interpretation is available. Consider the following passage:

> Facts about what is essential of what are *autonomous*: they are brute in the sense that they are simply not the sorts of facts that can, in principle, have a metaphysical explanation. So, taking it to be brute that certain hybrid properties exist and others don't is not problematic. The question of what metaphysically explains such facts does not legitimately arise.[9]

This recommends the following reading. The non-naturalist needs to show that there is a possible metaphysical explanation for natural properties' necessitating *sui generis* normative properties. Hybrid properties provide such an explanation. Now suppose there are hybrid properties with one sort of essence: they "tape" *sui generis* normative properties to natural properties. Suppose also that *sui generis* normative properties are *always* grounded and that there are no properties that "tape" *sui generis* normative properties to themselves or to other non-natural properties. Given those suppositions, *Strong Supervenience* holds as a universal generalization—indeed, a *necessary* one, given that it is a generalization from essences. And since essence facts do not admit of explanation, the explanatory buck stops here.

This reading is more charitable, but the argument fails. If we grant the autonomy of essence, it follows that we cannot raise questions about facts of the

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8   Leary might argue that if "*x* is *F*" is grounded, then for all *y*, "*y* is *F*" is grounded. But there is little reason to think this when the grounding relation holds in virtue of the essence of the grounding property.

9   Leary, "Non-Naturalism and Normative Necessities," 102.

form "*Y* is part of the essence of *H*." But it does not follow that we cannot raise questions about facts of the form "There are no properties with essence *Z*." Crucially, it is a fact of this latter sort we are concerned with, not the former. The non-naturalist is challenged to explain why it is impossible for normative properties to be ungrounded or fully grounded in other non-natural properties. With respect to Leary's proposal, this prompts the questions: (i) why is it impossible for there to be *sui generis* normative properties that are ungrounded, and (ii) why is it impossible for there to be properties whose essence it is to ground *sui generis* normative properties, but which are themselves ungrounded or fully grounded in other non-natural properties? These questions remain unanswered.

Here, Leary might double down on the above reading, insisting that the autonomy of essence entails that facts about which essences are impossible are also brute. But this is not the case. Consider:

Prime: No number has the essence: (i) is greater than 2; (ii) is prime; (iii) is even.

Suppose someone were to claim that any demand to explain *Prime* is both sufficiently met and can only *be* met by listing the prime numbers and noting that none of those greater than 2 are even. This would be doubly mistaken. This response does not meet the explanatory demand in question, for the fact that the prime numbers greater than 2 are all odd is precisely what we are being called to explain. Moreover, an explanation is available: prime numbers are divisible exactly by themselves and 1, but all even numbers greater than 2 are divisible by at least themselves, 1, and 2.

To better understand how this explanation works, it will be useful to mark the distinction between *constitutive* and *consequential* essences. *Q* is part of the *constitutive* essence of *W* if *Q* is essential to *W* but is "not had in virtue of being a consequence of some more basic essential properties" of *W*.[10] *R* is part of the *consequential* essence of *W* if *R* is essential to but not constitutive of *W*. *Prime* claims that a certain constitutive essence is impossible. This turns out to be true because the negation of one of the listed features, evenness, is entailed by the essences of the other two, primeness and being greater than 2—i.e., there are no even prime numbers greater than 2 because oddness is part of the consequential essence of *being a prime number greater than 2*.

In the case of *Prime*, all of this is a matter of logical necessity. In other cases, the explanation is metaphysical. Consider:

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10 Fine, "Senses of Essence," 57.

   Color: No object has the essence: (i) is red all over; (ii) is green all over.

Like *Prime*, *Color* is a claim about the impossibility of a certain constitutive essence that is true in virtue of the consequential essences of its parts: colors are metaphysically incompatible, such that red metaphysically necessitates not-green and vice versa. Crucially, these explanations do not violate the autonomy of constitutive essence; no explanation is offered for the essences of primeness, oddness, redness, or greenness.

   These cases demonstrate that the *impossibility* of at least some constitutive essences can be explained, either logically or metaphysically, without violating the autonomy of constitutive essence. By contrast, Leary asks us to accept that the following neither can be explained nor demands explanation:

   Natural Grounds: No property has the essence: (i) grounds or is identical to a *sui generis* normative property; (ii) is not grounded in any natural property.[11]

We should reject her request. First, we have good reason to think that *Natural Grounds* in particular is explicable. Return to *Prime* and *Color*. These can be stated as universal generalizations. But our *knowledge* of them does not proceed via generalization; we do not need to know what the prime numbers are, or what the red and green objects are, to know that *Prime* and *Color* are true. The best explanation for this ability is that we (implicitly or explicitly) recognize that they are true in virtue of the nature of the properties they concern. Given this, even if the explanation offered above were not readily apparent, we would have good reason to suspect that such a further explanation is available, that *Prime* and *Color* are not merely true in virtue of which particular numbers are prime and which particular objects are red and green.

   The same is true of *Natural Grounds*. We do not know *Natural Grounds* is true by generalization from our knowledge of particular supervenience relations (and definitely not by knowing which hybrid properties exist!). The supervenience of the normative on the natural is a point of much broader agreement than which things are (e.g.) good and bad. And most of us are confident that supervenience holds regardless of our level of uncertainty about which things are good and bad. Again, this seems best explained by our (implicit or explicit) recognition that *Natural Grounds* is true in virtue of the nature of the related properties themselves, of the natural and *sui generis* normative properties. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of explanation that other views in normative meta-

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11   The "is identical to" disjunct accommodates the possibility that some *sui generis* normative properties are ungrounded.

physics provide—e.g., for some naturalists, that natural properties feature in the essences of normative properties.[12]

What is more, we have good reason to think that *all* claims of the impossibility of constitutive essences are explicable. This is because it is eminently plausible that the possible elements of essences are infinitely re-combinable, *except* where those elements logically or metaphysically exclude one another. Consider an analogy with concepts—a particularly apt analogy, given that essential necessity is often taken to be analogous to analyticity. In general, we expect conceptual elements to be similarly re-combinable. We accept the impossibility of the concept UNMARRIED MARRIED PERSON because its elements are clearly inconsistent. But suppose some theory holds that the concept UNMARRIED TALL PERSON is impossible. This demands explanation. And it should be clear that the theory cannot sidestep this demand by claiming that conceptual content is autonomous.

This last point shows us why hybrid non-naturalism not only fails to *meet* the supervenience challenge, but should not even be taken to have made progress with respect to it.[13] True, hybrid non-naturalism explains how natural properties could necessitate *sui generis* normative ones. But this leaves *Natural Grounds* untouched. I have suggested that, if *Natural Grounds* is true, it must be so because the combination it denies—grounding or being a *sui generis* normative property, but not being grounded in any natural property—is ruled out by some logical or metaphysical relation between those elements. But precisely what motivated the hybrid view was acceptance of critics' claim that non-naturalism is incompatible with the existence of such logical or metaphysical relations between natural and *sui generis* normative properties.

My personal inclination is to think that this is a problem with non-naturalism itself, in which case hybrid non-naturalism's limited victory here is Pyrrhic, since the overarching challenge cannot be met. But if, instead, the problem is essen-

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12 Though for important concerns about this explanation, see Mitchell, "Mixed Up about Mixed Worlds?"

13 See Elliott ("How to Make Progress against the Supervenience Challenge") for arguments that Leary *does* make progress. As will be clear from what follows, I agree with him that she makes progress in one sense: we can separate out *Strong Supervenience* into necessary and sufficient conditions, and Leary's account explains the sufficient condition. But I see this as a Pyrrhic victory, at best, since her proposal seems to make explaining the necessary condition impossible.

tialist metaphysics, hybrid non-naturalism makes progress only inasmuch as it takes one step forward, two steps back.[14]

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