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Response to Hattiangadi, Evers, and Tiefensee

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Abstract

I argue that Hattiangadi's, Evers' and Tiefensee's objections to my arguments for the error theory in *Unbelievable Errors* fail.

Keywords

error theory – non-reductive realism – reductive realism – non-cognitivism

1 Introduction

Anandi Hattiangadi, Daan Evers, and Christine Tiefensee want me to reject supervenience, lower my resistance to non-cognitivism and reductive realism, and relax. But I do not want to do this.

2 Hattiangadi's Response to the Reduction Argument

Hattiangadi objects to my argument against non-reductive realism. As I said in the précis, this argument assumes that

- (S) For all possible worlds W and W^* , if the instantiation of descriptive properties in W and W^* is exactly the same, then the instantiation of normative properties in W and W^* is also exactly the same.¹

¹ I say in the book that the first and third version of this argument assume (S), but that the second version does not (2017: 32). I now think that this version assumes (S) too.

Hattiangadi endorses non-reductive realism but rejects (S).² She therefore thinks that the reduction argument fails to refute her view.

If a normative claim is true and its truth does not depend on which objects have which descriptive properties, we can call it a *fundamental normative truth* (Streumer 2017: 34). Suppose that one such truth is that

- (1) An action is right if and only if it maximizes happiness.

Hattiangadi thinks that if we know that (1) is a fundamental normative truth, it is nevertheless “ideally conceivable” that it is a fundamental normative truth that

- (2) An action is right if and only if it complies with the categorical imperative.

What she means by this is that even if we know that (1) is a fundamental normative truth, it “cannot be ruled out a priori even under conditions of ideal, rational reflection” that (2) is a fundamental normative truth.³ She takes this to show that fundamental normative truths do not hold with metaphysical necessity. If so, two possible worlds can have the same instantiation of descriptive properties but different instantiations of normative properties, which means that (S) is false.⁴

But suppose that I told you a lie on Wednesday 7 August 2019, and suppose that my telling you this lie was wrong. If fundamental normative truths do not hold with metaphysical necessity, my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any change in what made me tell you this lie, without any change in my, your, or anyone else’s mental states before, during, or after my telling you this lie, and without any change in the consequences of my telling you this lie. More generally, my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any descriptive change whatsoever in the entire history, present, and future of the world. That is very implausible. It seems to me much more implausible than the negation of Hattiangadi’s claim that

² She calls this view ‘primitivism.’

³ Hattiangadi’s examples are less specific than (1) and (2), but this does not matter.

⁴ Hattiangadi resists my second version of the reduction argument in a similar way, since this version starts by assuming that certain fundamental normative truths hold with metaphysical necessity (2017: 30–4). She notes that this assumption entails (S), contrary to what I suggest in the book. See also Elson forthcoming.

- (3) If (1) is a fundamental normative truth, it cannot be ruled out a priori under conditions of ideal rational reflection that (2) is a fundamental normative truth.

Moreover, non-reductive realists normally take our knowledge of fundamental normative truths to be a priori. But this entails the negation of (3): it entails that if we know that (1) is a fundamental normative truth, it *can* be ruled out a priori under conditions of ideal rational reflection that (2) is a fundamental normative truth. Hattiangadi elsewhere claims that our knowledge of fundamental normative truths is part of “a grey area between a priori and a posteriori knowledge” (2018: 608). Her thought seems to be that empirical facts constrain what the fundamental normative truths can be: for example, given empirical facts about pain, it cannot be a fundamental normative truth that an action is right if and only if it maximizes pain. But non-reductive realists can agree that we need empirical knowledge in order to know what the fundamental normative truths are: for example, they can agree that we need empirical knowledge about happiness in order to know that (1) is true. Their claim is only that the move from such empirical knowledge to knowledge that (1) is true must be made via a priori reflection. And Hattiangadi does not explain how else she thinks this move can be made. I therefore think that non-reductive realists should not reject (S) but should instead reject (3).⁵

Hattiangadi also argues that non-reductive realists can resist the reduction argument by denying that

- (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.

As I said in the *précis*, I argue in the book that non-reductive realists must take properties to be ways objects can be rather than shadows of concepts, since otherwise they do not disagree with reductive realists. I then argue that if properties are ways objects can be, (N) is the correct criterion of property identity (2017: 11–24). But Hattiangadi suggests that non-reductive realists can instead endorse Chalmers’ version of two-dimensional semantics, according to which concepts consist of both a primary intension, which is a function from epistemically possible scenarios to extensions, and a secondary intension, which is a function from metaphysically possible worlds to extensions. She thinks that

5 Hattiangadi denies that plausibility is a good guide to metaphysical possibility (personal communication). But it is hard to deny that how plausible a claim about metaphysical possibility seems after reflection, taking into account both the plausibility of incompatible claims and wider theoretical issues, is a good guide to whether this claim is true.

non-reductive realists can then agree with reductive realists that normative predicates do not have the same primary intensions as any descriptive predicate, but disagree with them about whether normative predicates have the same secondary intensions as certain descriptive predicates.⁶ In that case, she thinks, they do not have to endorse (N).

Hattiangadi suggests that the secondary intensions of normative predicates are properties. But if non-reductive realists take these secondary intensions to be properties, they must take these properties to be ways objects can be rather than shadows of concepts. For if they take these properties to be shadows of concepts, reductive realists will agree with them that normative predicates do not have the same secondary intensions as any descriptive predicate. And as I have said, I argue in the book that if properties are ways objects can be, (N) is the correct criterion of property identity. I therefore think that if non-reductive realists take the secondary intensions of normative predicates to be properties, they cannot reject (N) the way Hattiangadi suggests.

Alternatively, non-reductive realists could take the secondary intensions of normative predicates to be sets of objects. But if they do this, they must agree with Hattiangadi that fundamental normative truths do not hold with metaphysical necessity. For if these truths do hold with metaphysical necessity, normative predicates have the same secondary intensions as certain descriptive predicates. For example, suppose that it is a fundamental normative truth that

Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it maximizes happiness.

In that case, the predicates 'is right' and 'maximizes happiness' apply to the same set of objects in all metaphysically possible worlds. I therefore think that if non-reductive realists take the secondary intensions of normative predicates to be sets of objects, they can only reject (N) the way Hattiangadi suggests if they also reject (S). And I have already argued that they should not reject (S).

3 Evers' Response to the Symmetry Objection and the False Guarantee Objection

Daan Evers criticizes my objections to non-cognitivism and reductive realism. As I said in the précis, my objection to non-cognitivism is that this view is incompatible with the claim that

⁶ Or at least they can agree with *some* reductive realists that normative predicates do not have the same primary intension as any descriptive predicate. As Hattiangadi points out, analytic reductionists would deny this.

- (A) When two people make conflicting normative judgments, at most one of these judgments is correct.

Evers has three doubts about this. First, he thinks that non-cognitivists can perhaps say that (A) expresses the following attitude:

- (A*) Disapproval of two people approving and disapproving of a single thing.

As I said in the précis, I reject this in the book by imagining a community in which everyone has the following attitude:

- (L*) A dislike of two people liking and disliking a single thing.

I then imagine that, in this community's language, the attitude described by (L*) can be expressed by saying that

- (L) When two people have conflicting likes or dislikes, at most one of these likes or dislikes is correct.

This imagined community then endorses (L) in exactly the same way in which we endorse (A) if this claim expresses the attitude described by (A*). But it is hard not to feel that *something* about the way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L). As I said in the précis, I take this to be evidence that the way we endorse (A) is different from the way this imagined community endorses (L). In other words, I take it to be evidence that (A) does not express the attitude described by (A*).

Evers replies that the reason why we feel this way may be that the attitude described by (L*) is merely a dislike rather than an attitude of disapproval. But since non-cognitivists use the terms 'approval' and 'disapproval' as generic labels for positive and negative non-cognitive attitudes, they can only give this reply if they put forward a more informative account of the nature of approval and disapproval that distinguishes these attitudes from likes and dislikes. Moreover, as Evers says, I could instead imagine a community in which everyone has the following attitude:

- (L**) Disapproval of two people liking and disliking a single thing.

I could then imagine that, in this community's language, the attitude described by (L**) can be expressed by uttering (L). I then still find it hard not to feel that

something about the way we endorse (A) is missing from the way this community endorses (L).

Evers' second doubt about the symmetry objection is that non-cognitivists can perhaps say that (A) expresses a false belief rather than a non-cognitive attitude. As he says, however, they can only say this if there is independent evidence for non-cognitivism.⁷ What could this evidence be? One piece of evidence may be the following version of judgment internalism:

Necessarily, if a person makes a normative judgment, this person is motivated to act accordingly.

But I argue in the book that this version of judgment internalism is false and that weaker or more limited versions do not support non-cognitivism (2017: 89–90). Another piece of evidence may be charity, which may seem to require that we do not interpret all normative judgments as false and that we therefore prefer non-cognitivism to the error theory. But I argue in the book that charity in fact does not require this (2017: 89). And I do not think that there is other evidence for non-cognitivism that is not also evidence for certain versions of cognitivism.⁸

Evers' third doubt about the symmetry objection is that he thinks it does not apply to instrumental normative judgments and judgments about reasons for belief. He suggests that non-cognitivists can say that (A) is true of instrumental normative judgments because we share the following standards:

- (1) If the action is not a means to the end, the relevant instrumental normative judgment is incorrect.
- (2) If the action is a significantly worse means to the end than available alternatives, the relevant instrumental normative judgment is incorrect.

I agree that we share these standards. But since (1) and (2) use the term 'incorrect,' these claims themselves express normative judgments.⁹ To be able to say that (A) is true of instrumental normative judgments, non-cognitivists

7 See his footnote 3. He goes on to suggest that the function of normative language may make it hard for us to see that (A) expresses a false belief.

8 For example, arguments against realism are not just evidence for non-cognitivism but also for the error theory, arguments that appeal to supervenience are not just evidence for non-cognitivism but also for reductive realism and for the error theory, and arguments that appeal to the impossibility of analyzing normative concepts in non-normative terms are not just arguments for non-cognitivism but also for most versions of realism and for the error theory.

9 Evers considers whether (2) expresses normative judgments because it uses the term 'worse,' but not because it uses the term 'correct.'

therefore have to say that (A) is true of (1) and (2) as well. For consider the claim that

- (~2) If the action is a significantly worse means to the end than available alternatives, the relevant instrumental normative judgment may nevertheless be correct.

If (A) were not true of (2), it would follow that (2) and (~2) can both be correct. The mere fact that we share certain standards is therefore not enough to make (A) true of instrumental normative judgments. Similar claims apply to what Evers says about judgments about reasons for belief: the mere fact that we all share certain standards is not enough to make (A) true of these judgments either.¹⁰

Finally, Evers points out a mistake in my application of the false guarantee objection to instrumental normative judgments. As I said in the précis, I argue in the book that we take the following claim to be true:

- (G) There are no descriptively specified conditions in which people's normative judgments are guaranteed to be correct.

Instrumental normative judgments may seem to be an exception to (G): there may seem to be descriptively specified conditions in which such judgments are guaranteed to be correct, such as conditions in which the person who makes the judgment has considered all relevant descriptive information. In response, I imagine someone who is deeply attached to homeopathy and who endorses ad hoc hypotheses whenever he is confronted with evidence against the effectiveness of homeopathy (2017: 113–4). After considering all relevant descriptive information, this person may think that

If you want to become a doctor, you ought to study homeopathy.

I claim in the book that we clearly do not think that his judgment is guaranteed to be correct, and I take this to show that (G) is true of instrumental normative judgments. But Evers notes that if examples like this show that (G) is true of these judgments, they also show that (G) is true of purely descriptive beliefs,

10 Moreover, we may hold different first-order views about what there is instrumental reason to do and about what there is reason to believe. (1) and (2) do not settle which of these views is correct. But to be able to say that (A) is true of instrumental normative judgments and judgments about reasons for belief, non-cognitivists must say that (A) is true of these first-order views. I will return to this below.

such as the belief that a certain scientific theory is true. And (G) is clearly not true of such beliefs.

Fortunately, Conrad Bakka has suggested a better way to show that (G) is true of instrumental normative judgments.¹¹ According to what Matthew Bedke calls *present aim instrumentalism*,

If doing X would satisfy one of your current desires, there is a reason for you to do X,

whereas according to what he calls *complete life instrumentalism*,

If doing X would maximize the satisfaction of your desires over your complete life, there is a reason for you to do X.

Which instrumental normative judgments are correct depends on which of these views is correct. For example, consider the judgment that

If you want to eat a giant chocolate bar, there is a reason for you to eat one.

If present aim instrumentalism is correct, this judgment is correct, but if complete life instrumentalism is correct, this judgment may well be incorrect, particularly if you often want to eat giant chocolate bars. And there are no descriptively specified conditions in which either view is guaranteed to be correct. This shows that (G) is true of instrumental normative judgments.

Similar claims apply to judgments about reasons for belief. For example, according to *epistemic conservatism*,

The fact that you currently believe that *p* is a reason for you to believe that *p*,

whereas according to what we can call *epistemic anti-conservatism*,

The fact that you currently believe that *p* is no reason for you to believe that *p*.

Which judgments about reasons for belief are correct depends on which of these views is correct. And there are no descriptively specified conditions in

¹¹ See Bakka unpublished and Bedke (2010). Bakka also pointed out the mistake, independently from Evers.

which either view is guaranteed to be correct. This shows that (G) is true of judgments about reasons for belief.

4 Tiefensee's Response to the Reduction Argument and the False Guarantee and Regress Objections

Christine Tiefensee denies that my arguments against realism apply to what she calls *relaxed realists*: realists who endorse minimalism about truth, properties, and representation. She thinks there are two ways in which such realists can avoid my arguments.

The first is that they can take normative properties to be shadows of concepts rather than ways objects can be.¹² They can then get around the reduction argument by denying that

- (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive,

since I argue in the book that (N) is the correct criterion of property identity only if we take properties to be ways objects can be.

I agree that relaxed realists can do this. But it cannot be a brute fact that a certain object falls under a certain concept: there must be something that makes it the case that *this* object falls under *this* concept. Realists therefore need to answer the following question:

- (Q₁) What makes it the case that a certain object falls under a certain normative concept?

One plausible answer is that

What makes it the case that a certain object falls under a certain normative concept is that this object has the normative property that this concept refers to.

But this cannot be relaxed realists' final answer to (Q₁). For if normative properties are shadows of concepts, what it is for a certain object to have a certain normative property is for it to fall under a certain normative concept. Relaxed realists who give this answer therefore once again face (Q₁).

¹² Tiefensee calls this the 'direct response.'

They may instead be tempted to say that

What makes it the case that a certain object falls under a certain normative concept is the nature of this concept.

But what makes a certain object fall under a certain concept cannot only be the nature of this concept. It must also have something to do with the way this object is. And if relaxed realists deny that normative properties are ways objects can be, they cannot appeal to a normative way this object is, but will instead have to appeal to a descriptive way this object is. Their answer to (Q1) will therefore have to be that

What makes it the case that a certain object falls under a certain normative concept is that this object has the descriptive property that this concept refers to.

If normative concepts refer to descriptive properties, normative predicates must ascribe these properties. And I argue in the book that if realists claim that normative predicates ascribe descriptive properties, they face the false guarantee and regress objections. I therefore think that if relaxed realists get around the reduction argument the way Tiefensee suggests, they face these objections instead.

But Tiefensee may not be worried by this. For the second way in which she thinks relaxed realists can avoid my arguments is by accepting (N) and agreeing with reductive realists that normative predicates ascribe descriptive properties.¹³ She agrees that relaxed realists then face the following question:

(Q2) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property?

She also agrees that they should not answer this question by saying that

(P1) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain *descriptively* specified conditions, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.¹⁴

¹³ She calls this the 'immunity response.'

¹⁴ I am puzzled, however, by Tiefensee's claim in her footnote 6 that "once we take into account the meaning-truth platitude 'If word w means F , then (x) (w is true of x iff Fx)', it is

But she thinks they can instead say that

- (P₂) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain *normatively* specified conditions, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property.

As I said in the précis, however, if reductive realists endorse (P₂), they face the regress objection: they then have to apply a second version of (P₂) to answer the question which descriptive property is ascribed by the normative term that their first version of (P₂) employs, they have to apply a third version of (P₂) to answer the question which descriptive property is ascribed by the normative term that their second version of (P₂) employs, and so on. Tiefensee suggests that relaxed realists can get around this objection by saying that “we cannot help but employ normative terms so as to specify the meaning and reference of normative concepts.” But this does not help. For the regress makes it indeterminate which descriptive properties normative predicates ascribe, which means that (P₂) does not actually answer (Q₂). We therefore cannot employ a normative metasemantics to answer (Q₂) while assuming that all normative predicates ascribe descriptive properties.

Tiefensee thinks that relaxed realists can also answer (Q₃) by saying that

- (P₃) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that the correct first-order normative view applies this predicate to objects that have this property.

But I argue in the book that endorsing (P₃) makes realists face the following question (2017: 58–60):

- (Q₃) What makes a first-order normative view be correct?

She thinks relaxed realists can answer this question by saying that

What makes a first-order normative view correct is that the objects to which this view ascribes normative properties really have these properties.

hard to see how the ‘guarantee’ that *w* is true of *F* should be false, provided that *w* really means *F*.” For whether *w* really means *F* is precisely what is at issue in the false guarantee objection.

But this cannot be their final answer to (Q3).¹⁵ For if normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, what it is for an object to have a normative property is for this object to have a descriptive property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate. Relaxed realists who give this answer to (Q3) therefore once again face (Q2).

5 Conclusion

I am very grateful to Anandi Hattiangadi, Daan Evers, and Christine Tiefensee for their insightful and challenging responses to my book. I share their feeling that there must be something wrong with my arguments for the error theory. Unlike them, however, I think we have this feeling merely because we cannot believe the theory. I therefore do not want to give in to it.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Tiefensee is puzzled by my claim that reductive realists "cannot say this" (2017: 59). What I should have said is that it cannot be their final answer to (Q3).

¹⁶ I am also grateful for their comments on a draft of this response, and to Daan Evers for organizing this symposium.