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Published in:
Philosophy and phenomenological research

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2024

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Standing up for supervenience

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Abstract

There is a well-known argument against irreducibly normative properties that appeals to the following claim about supervenience: 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. This claim used to be uncontroversial, but recently several philosophers have challenged it. Do these challenges undermine this argument? I argue that they do not, since the negation of this claim about supervenience has consequences that are much more implausible than the negations of key premises in these challenges.

KEYWORDS
non-reductive realism, normative properties, reduction, supervenience

There is a well-known argument against irreducibly normative properties that appeals to the following claim about supervenience:

(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]

When Frank Jackson first put forward this argument, he took (S) to be uncontroversial.[2] But recently several philosophers have challenged (S). Do these challenges undermine the argument? I will argue that they do not.

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[1] See, for example, Jackson 1998, Streumer 2008 and 2017, and McPherson 2012. For an overview, see McPherson 2019.

[2] See Jackson 1998, pp. 119-20.

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In §1 I will outline two versions of this argument against irreducibly normative properties, both of which appeal to (S). In §2 I will describe three recent challenges to (S), which are due to Debbie Roberts, Gideon Rosen, and Anandi Hattiangadi. In §§3-5 I will argue that the negation of (S) has consequences that are much more implausible than the negations of key premises in these challenges. In §6 I will argue that the connection between Roberts', Rosen's, and Hattiangadi's wider commitments and their challenges to (S) is looser than it may seem. I will conclude that these challenges do not undermine this argument.

1 | THE REDUCTION ARGUMENT

To distinguish normative from descriptive properties, we first need to distinguish normative from descriptive predicates.[3] We can then say that

> A property is *normative* if and only if it can non-accidentally be ascribed with a normative predicate

and that

> A property is *descriptive* if and only if it can non-accidentally be ascribed with a descriptive predicate.[4]

These claims merely give a necessary and sufficient condition for a property's being normative or descriptive. They are compatible with a wide range of views about what *makes* a property normative or descriptive.[5]

We can next say that

> A normative property is *irreducibly normative* if and only if it is not identical to a descriptive property.

All realists agree that there are normative properties. But whereas *reductive* realists take all normative properties to be identical to descriptive properties, *non-reductive* realists think there are at least some irreducibly normative properties.

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[3] Normative predicates include, for example, 'is right', 'is wrong', and 'is a reason' (if this is equivalent to 'counts in favour'). Descriptive predicates include, for example, 'is a table', 'is white', and 'is made of wood and steel'. Some predicates, such as predicates that express thick concepts, predicates like 'is commendable' and certain taste predicates, seem partly normative and partly descriptive. I follow Jackson 1998, pp. 120-21, in classifying such predicates as normative. In other words, I use the term 'descriptive' to mean *wholly* descriptive.

[4] I follow Dunaway 2015, p. 632, in taking a predicate to *non-accidentally* ascribe a property if and only if this predicate ascribes this property in all contexts of utterance in which this predicate has the same meaning. For example, if I am currently thinking about the normative property of being right, this property can be ascribed with the descriptive predicate 'has the property that I am currently thinking about'. But the predicate 'has the property that I am currently thinking about' does not *non-accidentally* ascribe the property of being right, since there are other contexts of utterance in which this predicate has the same meaning but ascribes a different property: namely, contexts in which I am currently thinking about a different property.

[5] As I argue in Streumer 2017, pp. 101-3.

There is a well-known argument against non-reductive realism that we can call the *reduction argument*.[6] Consider an action A_1 that has a certain normative property, such as the property of being right. Since anything that has normative properties also has descriptive properties, action A_1 also has descriptive properties, which we can call P_{A1-1}, P_{A1-2}, … And the objects O_1, O_2, … that are part of the same possible world as action A_1 have descriptive properties as well, which for each object O_x we can call P_{Ox-1}, P_{Ox-2}, …[7] Action A_1 therefore satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate D_1:

> 'has descriptive properties P_{A1-1}, P_{A1-2}, … and is such that object O_1 has descriptive properties P_{O1-1}, P_{O1-2}, …, object O_2 has descriptive properties P_{O2-1}, P_{O2-2}, …, …'.

Since a predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself descriptive, predicate D_1 is a descriptive predicate.

Suppose next that actions A_1, A_2, … are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds.[8] Just as action A_1 satisfies predicate D_1, actions A_2, A_3, … satisfy similarly constructed predicates D_2, D_3, … These actions therefore all satisfy the following predicate, which we can call predicate D^*:

> 'satisfies either predicate D_1, or predicate D_2, or …'.

As before, since a predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself descriptive, predicate D^* is a descriptive predicate.

Return now to the claim 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.[9]

If this claim is true, any action that satisfies predicate D^* also satisfies the predicate 'is right'. For otherwise there would be two possible worlds W and W* that have exactly the same instantiation of descriptive properties but different instantiations of normative properties, which would contradict (S). And any action that satisfies the predicate 'is right' also satisfies predicate D^*. For actions A_1, A_2, … are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds, and these actions satisfy predicates D_1, D_2, …, which means that they satisfy predicate D^*. Predicate D^* is therefore necessarily coextensive with the predicate 'is right'.

There are now two ways to continue the argument. The first, which is due to Frank Jackson, appeals to the claim that

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[6] This argument was first given by Jackson 1998, pp. 122-3, and was inspired by a more general argument given by Kim 1993, pp. 68-71, 149-55. I defend the argument at length in Streumer 2017, pp. 9-29. A closely related version of the argument that does not rely on claims about predicates is given by Brown 2011. My presentation of the argument in what follows assumes for simplicity that the number of objects and properties in all possible worlds is countably infinite.

[7] For simplicity I include descriptive relations among P_{A1-1}, P_{A1-2}, … and among P_{Ox-1}, P_{Ox-2}, …

[8] For simplicity I assume that only actions can be right.

[9] I take (S) to be a claim about strong global supervenience: in other words, I take (S) to say not only that if W and W* are descriptive duplicates they must have the same pattern of normative properties, but also that these normative properties must be paired up with descriptive properties in the same way. See Bennett and McLaughlin 2011, §4.3.2.

> (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.[10]

If this claim is true, the predicate 'is right' and predicate D* ascribe the same property. This means that the property of being right is identical to a descriptive property. Since the same applies to all other normative properties, this version of the argument concludes that non-reductive realism is false.

The second way to continue the argument, which is due to Tristram McPherson, appeals to the weaker claim that

> (U) If a view posits unexplained necessary connections between different properties, this is a strong reason to reject the view.[11]

If (N) is false and the predicate 'is right' and predicate D* ascribe different properties, non-reductive realism seems to posit an unexplained necessary connection between these properties. Since the same applies to all other normative properties, this version of the argument concludes that there is a strong reason to reject non-reductive realism.

Non-reductive realists have tried to resist the reduction argument in different ways: they have rejected (N), they have rejected (U), they have tried to explain the necessary connections between normative and descriptive properties that their view posits, they have rejected the claims about normative and descriptive properties that the argument relies on, they have objected to the argument's use of disjunctive predicates, and they have claimed that the argument overgeneralises.[12] I have argued elsewhere that these responses fail.[13] But there is one premise in the argument that non-reductive realists normally do not reject: (S). Can they instead resist the argument by rejecting this premise?

2 | THREE CHALLENGES TO (S)

They may be encouraged to do so by three recent challenges to (S). We can call normative truths that obtain independently of which objects have which descriptive properties *pure normative truths*.[14] Most non-reductive realists take such truths to have the following form:

> Necessarily, if certain objects have descriptive properties $X_1, \ldots, X_n$, then a certain object has normative property Y,

where 'necessarily' means metaphysically necessarily.[15] But these challenges to (S) deny that pure normative truths have this form.

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[10] See Jackson 1998, pp. 122-3, and Streumer 2017, pp. 9-11. Strictly speaking, (N) should say that two predicates *that both ascribe a property* ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.

[11] See McPherson 2012 and also Schroeder 2014.

[12] See, among others, Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 91, Oddie 2005, pp.153-5, Majors 2005, Kramer 2009, pp. 210-11, Plantinga 2010, Suikkanen 2010, Parfit 2011, pp. 296-7, Dunaway 2015, Bader 2017, Schroeder 2018, and Stratton-Lake 2018.

[13] See Streumer 2008, 2017, pp. 9-41, and 2018.

[14] See Scanlon 2014, pp. 36-7, and Rosen 2020, p. 206, and 2021, p. 258.

[15] That is what I will use unqualified occurrences of 'necessarily' to mean throughout this paper.

The first is due to Debbie Roberts.[16] According to Roberts, an object may have a certain normative property, such as the property of being right, partly because this object or other objects satisfy a certain thick concept, such as the concept COURAGEOUS.[17] She thinks these objects may satisfy this thick concept partly because these objects or other objects satisfy another thick concept, such as the concept JUST. And she thinks this can continue indefinitely. She therefore takes it to be possible that

(P1) An object has a certain normative property partly because this object or other objects have certain normative properties, which these objects have partly because these objects or other objects have certain normative properties, and so on.[18]

If so, not all pure normative truths take us from certain objects having descriptive properties X_1, ..., X_n to a certain object having normative property Y. This may mean that there are possible worlds with the same instantiation of descriptive properties but different instantiations of normative properties, if the objects in these worlds do not satisfy the same thick concepts. It may therefore mean that (S) is false.

The second challenge is due to Gideon Rosen.[19] Rosen endorses an essentialist account of metaphysical necessity, according to which metaphysically necessary truths obtain in virtue of the essences of entities.[20] This means that if pure normative truths are metaphysically necessary, they must obtain in virtue of the essences of descriptive properties X_1, ..., X_n or in virtue of the essence of normative property Y. But Rosen thinks non-reductive realists cannot endorse either of these options. He thinks they cannot say that these truths obtain in virtue of the essences of descriptive properties X_1, ..., X_n because if "the essence of some item nontrivially involves a paradigmatically normative property ... that item must itself be reckoned normative".[21] He thinks they cannot say that these truths obtain in virtue of the essence of normative property Y because the essence of this property would then determine descriptive conditions for its instantiation: namely, that certain objects have descriptive properties X_1, ..., X_n. And Rosen takes non-reductive realism to entail that

(P2) The essences of normative properties do not determine descriptive conditions for their instantiation.[22]

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[16] See Roberts 2018. Dancy 1995, pp. 278-9, makes some remarks along similar lines.

[17] Strictly speaking, this object then has the property of being right because this object or other objects *have the property* that the concept COURAGEOUS ascribes. I will leave this implicit in what follows.

[18] As I said in note 3, I classify predicates that express thick concepts as normative. This means that the properties that these predicates ascribe are also normative.

[19] See Rosen 2017, 2020, and 2021. For discussion of Rosen's view, see Väyrynen 2017, pp. 179-82, Lange 2018, Dreier 2019, and Gert 2019.

[20] See Rosen 2017, p. 861, 2020, p. 261-2, 2021, p. 210, and also Fine 1994 and Rosen 2015.

[21] Rosen 2020, p. 211; see also Rosen 2021, p. 262.

[22] As Rosen puts it, using different terminology, "ethical naturalism is the thesis that the natures of the normative properties and relations, taken one at a time, determine naturalistic necessary and sufficient conditions for their application. ... The alternative, ethical non-naturalism, is the view that in at least one case, the essence of a normative property fails to determine naturalistic necessary and sufficient conditions for its instantiation" (2020, p. 212; see also Rosen 2017, pp. 857-8). Of course, non-reductive realists could reject (P2) by rejecting Rosen's essentialist account of metaphysical necessity. See also Väyrynen 2017, p. 180.

He therefore concludes that non-reductive realists should deny that pure normative truths are metaphysically necessary. Since this means that there are possible worlds with the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world but different instantiations of normative properties, it means that (S) is false.[23]

The third challenge is due to Anandi Hattiangadi.[24] Suppose utilitarianism is a pure normative truth: in other words, suppose it is a pure normative truth that

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

Hattiangadi thinks it is then nevertheless "ideally conceivable" that a different first-order normative view such as Kantianism is a pure normative truth: she thinks that if (1) is in fact true, it "cannot be ruled out a priori even under conditions of ideal, rational reflection" that it is a pure normative truth that

(2) An action is right if and only if it complies with the categorical imperative.[25]

More generally, she thinks that

(P3) If a certain first-order normative view is a pure normative truth, ideal a priori reflection does not enable us to rule out that other first-order normative views that are incompatible with this view are pure normative truths.

Since Hattiangadi takes ideal conceivability to entail metaphysical possibility, at least in the case of normative truths, she takes this to mean that pure normative truths are not metaphysically necessary.[26] As before, this means that (S) is false.[27]

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[23] Rosen does allow that the following weaker claim about supervenience is true: "As a matter of metaphysical necessity, if a thing has a moral property M it has a descriptive property D such that as a matter of normative necessity, whatever is D is M" (2021, p. 265). I will discuss his notion of normative necessity in §3.

[24] See Hattiangadi 2018 and 2019. Rosen 2017, p. 864, and 2021, p. 208, also alludes to this challenge to (S). Hattiangadi 2018 discusses a version of (S) that is restricted to moral properties and that is about natural rather than descriptive properties, but adds that "everything that I say here extends to normative supervenience more generally" (p. 609 n. 1).

[25] See Hattiangadi 2019, p. 701. She also writes that "it is possible for an ideally rational being to maximally fill in the details of a scenario in which [(2)] is true without detecting any logical inconsistency or incoherence with anything knowable a priori" (2018, p. 594).

[26] See Hattiangadi 2018, pp. 603-6.

[27] Hattiangadi rejects (S), but Roberts and Rosen do not go this far: Roberts only takes herself to show that (S) is not a conceptual truth, and Rosen only takes himself to show that (S) "should be more controversial" (2020, p. 207) and that the negation of (S) is "not obviously mistaken" (2021, p. 263). Several other philosophers have expressed doubts about (S): Raz 2000, pp. 54-5, argues that (S) does not explain anything and that there is therefore no reason to endorse it, Sturgeon 2009 argues that there is no uncontroversial version of (S) that everyone accepts, Hills 2009 argues that (S)'s widespread acceptance may merely be due to imaginative resistance, and Harrison 2013 also argues that (S) is not a conceptual truth.

3 | THE INTUITIVE ARGUMENT

Can non-reductive realists resist the reduction argument by appealing to these challenges?[28] I will argue that they cannot, since the negation of (S) has consequences that are much more implausible than the negations of key premises in these challenges. I will give three arguments for this conclusion. The first is what I will call

> *The intuitive argument.* Suppose I told you a lie on Friday 27 August 2022, and suppose my telling you this lie was wrong. If (S) is false, 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 much more implausible than the negations of (P1), (P2), and (P3).[29]

Non-reductive realists who reject (S) will disagree with this plausibility assessment: they will say that it is less implausible than it seems that my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any descriptive change in the entire history, present, and future of the world. They can defend this claim in several ways.

If they endorse Roberts' challenge, they could say that this is less implausible than it seems because my telling you this lie would only have been right rather than wrong if a certain object had failed to satisfy a certain thick concept. For example, suppose my telling you this lie was wrong partly because one of your earlier actions satisfied the concept COURAGEOUS. Non-reductive realists could then say that my telling you this lie would only have been right rather than wrong if your earlier action had failed to satisfy this thick concept. But I do not think this helps. For your earlier action would then have failed to satisfy the concept COURAGEOUS without any descriptive change in the entire history, present, and future of the world. This seems just as implausible as the claim that my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any such descriptive change.

If non-reductive realists endorse Rosen's or Hattiangadi's challenge, they could say that this is less implausible than it seems because my telling you this lie would only have been right rather than wrong if the pure normative truths had been different, and because worlds with different pure normative truths are not what Rosen and Hattiangadi call 'normatively possible'.[30] But I do not think this helps either. For Rosen and Hattiangadi take having the same pure normative truths

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[28] Roberts and Rosen do not present their challenges to (S) as responses to the reduction argument. Hattiangadi 2019, however, does.

[29] For simplicity I assume that the predicate 'is a lie' is a descriptive predicate. In Streumer 2008, pp. 557-9, I also point out that the negation of (S) has this consequence, and so do Schmitt and Schroeder 2011, pp. 154-5, but neither of us compares the plausibility of this consequence to the plausibility of the negations of (P1), (P2) and (P3). My argument here is comparative: I do not argue that Roberts', Rosen's and Hattiangadi's challenges to (S) fail because the falsity of (S) licences an implausible world, but that these challenges fail because the falsity of (S) licences a world that is much more implausible than the negations of key premises in these challenges, namely (P1), (P2), and (P3).

[30] They can then also say that though (S) is false, a similar claim that uses 'necessarily' to mean normatively necessarily is true (see Rosen 2020, p. 228, and 2021, p. 265, and Hattiangadi 2018, p. 607). This follows from the claim that worlds with different pure normative truths are normatively impossible.

as the actual world to be *what it is* for a world to be normatively possible.[31] Since we already knew that worlds with different pure normative truths have different pure normative truths, the claim that such worlds are not normatively possible does not give us new information that makes it less implausible that my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any descriptive change in the entire history, present, and future of the world.

Non-reductive realists could also say that this is less implausible than it seems because worlds with different pure normative truths are very remote from the actual world. As Rosen puts it, such worlds are

> more remote than worlds in which I win the lottery a thousand times in a row, more remote than worlds in which a replica of the Taj Mahal spontaneously materializes in Central Park, maybe even more remote than worlds in which I build a working perpetual motion machine in my garage.[32]

But I do not think this helps either. For as before, Rosen and Hattiangadi take having different pure normative truths to be part of *what it is* for a possible world to be remote from the actual world.[33] Since we already knew that worlds with different pure normative truths have different pure normative truths, the claim that these worlds are very remote also does not give us new information that makes it less implausible that my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any descriptive change in the entire history, present, and future of the world.

Rosen and Hattiangadi both compare the idea that different possible worlds have different pure normative truths to the idea that the laws of nature are contingent.[34] Since worlds with different laws of nature are standardly classified as nomologically impossible and remote, Rosen and Hattiangadi similarly classify worlds with different pure normative truths as normatively impossible and remote. But this classification of worlds with different laws of nature is not meant to make their existence more plausible: it does not need to, since the idea that the laws of nature are contingent is not implausible to begin with.

Finally, non-reductive realists could compare (S) to the claim that

> (S*) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the instantiation of non-phenomenal properties in W and W* is exactly the same, then the instantiation of phenomenal properties in W and W* is also exactly the same.

Since many philosophers take there to be possible worlds that have the same instantiation of non-phenomenal properties as the actual world but that contain zombies who lack phenomenal properties, rejecting (S*) is a live option. Non-reductive realists could therefore say that rejecting (S) should also be a live option. But zombies are generally agreed to be conceivable: what is controversial is not whether they are conceivable, but whether the sense in which they are conceivable

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[31] See Rosen 2020, pp. 218-9, and 2021, pp. 264-5, and Hattiangadi 2018, p. 606-7; see also Fine 2002. Lange 2018 argues that normative necessity is not a genuine form of necessity. Rosen 2021 replies to Lange.

[32] Rosen 2021, p. 276. He is here talking about worlds in which ordinary concern for one's children makes one a moral monster.

[33] See Rosen 2020, pp. 224-7, and Hattiangadi 2018, p. 607. This is because pure normative truths help to explain the instantiation of normative properties in a world.

[34] See Rosen 2017, p. 862, and Hattiangadi 2018, p. 608.

entails that they are metaphysically possible.[35] By contrast, it is not at all generally agreed to be conceivable that my telling you a lie on Friday 27 August 2022 could have been right rather than wrong without any descriptive change in the entire history, present, and future of the world.[36]

I therefore think that these replies fail to show that it is more plausible than it seems that my telling you this lie could have been right rather than wrong without any such descriptive change. Of course, non-reductive realists who reject (S) could simply insist that it is. But then it is unclear why we should agree with them.

4 | THE ARGUMENT FROM LIMITED VARIATION

My next argument is what I will call

> *The argument from limited variation.* If there is unlimited variation in what the pure norma-
> tive truths are across different possible worlds, then there are worlds that have the same
> instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world but in which torturing children
> for fun is morally permissible. That is much more implausible than the negations of (P1),
> (P2), and (P3). To avoid this implausible result, non-reductive realists who reject (S) could
> say that there is only limited variation in what the pure normative truths are across dif-
> ferent possible worlds. But they can only say this if they can explain why this variation is
> limited in a way that is compatible with their rejection of (S).

It seems safe to assume that non-reductive realists who reject (S) will want to deny that there are worlds that have the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world but in which torturing children for fun is morally permissible.[37] How can they explain this in a way that is compatible with their rejection of (S)?[38]

If they endorse Rosen's challenge, they could try to explain it by appealing to the essences of normative properties: they could say that there are no worlds in which torturing children for fun is morally permissible because the essence of the property of being wrong entails that torturing children for fun is wrong.[39] But if the essence of the property of being wrong entails this, why would it not also entail that other actions are wrong of which torturing children for fun is an instance? For example, why would it not also entail that torturing children for any purpose is wrong, or that torturing people of any age is wrong, or that torturing sentient beings is wrong? This explanation only works if non-reductive realists can draw a non-arbitrary line between the pure normative truths that hold in virtue of the essences of normative properties and those that

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[35] See Kirk 2021 for an overview of this debate. Of course, it can be denied that zombies are genuinely conceivable.

[36] See also Jackson 1998, pp. 11-13, 119, and Streumer 2017, pp. 39-40.

[37] They may want to deny that there are worlds in which torturing children for fun is permissible whether or not these worlds have the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world. I limit this argument to worlds that have the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world in order to avoid complications about, for example, worlds in which people enjoy being tortured.

[38] Though they do not explicitly say that this variation is limited, Rosen and Hattiangadi both suggest that their chal-
lenges to (S) do not require unlimited variation: see Rosen 2020, p. 228-30, and 2021, pp. 269-70 n. 15 and p. 274 n. 20, and
Hattiangadi 2018, p. 595.

[39] As Rosen writes, those who reject (S) "can allow that the essences of the moral properties are thick enough to exclude certain superficially consistent principles" (2021, pp. 269-70 n. 15).

do not hold in virtue of these essences. But the differences between pure normative truths seem too gradual to draw such a line.

Similar claims apply to Hattiangadi's challenge. If non-reductive realists endorse this challenge, they could try to explain why there are no worlds in which torturing children for fun is morally permissible by saying that ideal a priori reflection enables us to rule this out. But as before, if ideal a priori reflection enables us to rule this out, why would it not also enable us to rule out that other actions are permissible of which torturing children for fun is an instance? For example, why would it not also enable us to rule out that torturing children for any purpose is permissible, or that torturing people of any age is permissible, or that torturing sentient beings is permissible? This explanation only works if non-reductive realists can draw a non-arbitrary line between the pure normative claims ideal a priori reflection enables us to rule out and those it does not enable us to rule out. But as before, the differences between pure normative truths seem too gradual to draw such a line.

Non-reductive realists could try to draw a non-arbitrary line at conceptual truths: they could say, for example, that ideal a priori reflection enables us to rule out that

(1) Torturing children for fun is morally permissible

because the negation of (1) is a conceptual truth, but that it does not enable us to rule out that

(2) Torturing children for any purpose is morally permissible

because even though the negation of (2) is true, it is not a conceptual truth. But the difference between (1) and (2) seems too small for this to be a non-arbitrary line. Moreover, if non-reductive realists are right that the negation of (1) is a conceptual truth, this is presumably because MORALLY PERMISSIBLE is a moral concept and because a first-order view that entails (1) is immoral.[40] But then they will have to admit that the negation of the claim that

(3) We are rationally required to torture children for fun

is not a conceptual truth, since RATIONALLY REQUIRED is not a moral concept. If so, there are worlds with the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world but in which we are rationally required to torture children for fun. This is just as implausible as the existence of worlds in which it is morally permissible to torture children for fun.

Non-reductive realists could also say that just as there may be a vague boundary between objects, such as between a mountain and a valley, there may be a vague boundary between the pure normative truths that are necessary and the pure normative truths that are contingent. But it is much easier to conceive of a vague boundary between a mountain and a valley than between truths that are necessary and truths that are contingent. Moreover, pure normative truths lie on a continuum that does not give us any indication of where the boundary between the necessary and the contingent pure normative truths is supposed to be, even if this boundary is vague rather than sharp. Locating this boundary is not like drawing a vague line between a mountain and a valley. It is more like drawing a vague line somewhere on a slope that keeps going down at the same rate, without having even a rough idea of where to draw it.

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[40] See Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014 for an argument along these lines, and Evers and Streumer 2016 for discussion of the form that such conceptual truths would need to have.

I therefore think that rejecting (S) makes non-reductive realists face an explanatory problem that is hard to solve. Of course, they could simply insist that there are no worlds in which torturing children for fun is morally permissible. But then it is unclear why this is compatible with their rejection of (S).

5 | THE ARGUMENT FROM KNOWLEDGE

My third and final argument is what I will call

> *The argument from knowledge.* Suppose that (S) is false because different possible worlds have different pure normative truths. Can we then discover what the pure normative truths are in the actual world? If we cannot discover this, that is much more implausible than the negations of (P1), (P2), and (P3). But if we can discover this, those who reject (S) need to explain how we can discover it in a way that is compatible with their rejection of (S).[41]

It seems safe to assume that non-reductive realists who reject (S) will want to say that we can discover what the pure normative truths are in the actual world. How can they explain this in a way that is compatible with their rejection of (S)?

Non-reductive realists normally take pure normative truths to be self-evident, by which they mean that understanding these truths and being acquainted with what they are about gives us sufficient reason to believe them. Non-reductive realists therefore often say that we can discover a priori what these truths are.[42] But they clearly cannot say this if they endorse Hattiangadi's challenge, since she denies that ideal a priori reflection enables us to discover which first-order normative view is true. And they also cannot say it if they endorse Rosen's challenge. For suppose different possible worlds have different pure normative truths, and consider two worlds with the same instantiation of descriptive properties: a world in which it is true that

> (1) An action is right if and only if it maximises happiness

and a world in which (1) is false and in which it is instead true that

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

What we understand when we understand (1) is the same in both worlds: (1) has the same meaning in both worlds and conditionally ascribes the same properties in both worlds. And what we are acquainted with when we are acquainted with what (1) is about is also the same in both worlds: rightness is the same property in both worlds and maximising happiness is also the same property in both worlds. Since a truth is self-evident if and only if understanding it and being acquainted

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[41] This argument is related to Jamie Dreier's claim that if (S) is false, he is merely "lucky that the care and love with which I have raised my sons is morally creditable rather than morally criminal" 2019, p. 1407). To explain why this is not merely lucky, non-reductive realists who reject (S) need to explain how we can know what the pure normative truths are in the actual world. It is also related to the argument from knowledge that Gasparri forthcoming gives for semantic supervenience, to which I will return below.

[42] See, for example, Ross 1930, Shafer-Landau 2003, and Audi 2004 and 2019. For discussion, see, among many others, Väyrynen 2008 and Cowan 2017.

with what it is about gives us sufficient reason to believe it, this leaves it completely unclear how (1) can be self-evident in the first world but not in the second world. There seems to be nothing for this supposed difference in self-evidence to latch onto.

Rosen acknowledges that our normative judgements in worlds with different pure normative truths "are systematically false, and would remain false no matter how carefully we thought things through", and that this shows that "our beliefs about pure moral [truths] are not sensitive to the pure moral facts".[43] But he does not take this to be a problem: he thinks that such worlds

> are to moral epistemology what evil demon worlds and the like are to the epistemology of perception. Their existence shows that our methods are fallible and nothing more.[44]

But this underestimates the problem. As I have said, if there are two worlds with the same instantiation of descriptive properties but in one of which (1) is true and in one of which (1) is false, there seems to be nothing for the supposed difference between (1)'s self-evidence in the first world and its lack of self-evidence in the second world to latch onto. This does not merely show that our methods are fallible. Instead, it leaves it completely unclear what our method to discover whether (1) is true is supposed to be in the first place. Such worlds are therefore a much more fundamental problem for normative epistemology than evil demon worlds are for the epistemology of perception.[45]

Non-reductive realists could also appeal to the epistemology of perception in a different way: they could say that we can perceive which objects have which normative properties and that this enables us to infer what the pure normative truths are in the actual world.[46] But as David Faraci has argued, our perception of normative properties is reliable only if it is sensitive to what the pure normative truths are, since if our perception of these properties was not sensitive to what these truths are it would not reliably track which objects have which normative properties. Non-reductive realists cannot explain this sensitivity by appealing to further perception of normative properties, since such further perception would itself also have to be sensitive to what the pure normative truths are. It seems that they instead need to appeal to a non-perceptual ability, such as an ability to respond to these truths' self-evidence.[47] And as we have just seen, that is precisely what they cannot do if they endorse Rosen's or Hattiangadi's challenges to (S).

As I have said, Rosen and Hattiangadi both compare the idea that different possible worlds have different pure normative truths to the idea that the laws of nature are contingent.[48] But we can arguably find out what the actual world's laws of nature are by investigating its distribution

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[43] Rosen 2017, p. 872, and 2020, p. 230.

[44] Rosen 2020, p. 230. For the so-called 'new evil demon problem' see Cohen 1984, and for an overview of ways to deal with this problem see Littlejohn 2009.

[45] Non-reductive realists also cannot deal with the problem by rejecting a general sensitivity constraint on knowledge or justified belief (as Rosen 2020, pp. 230-1, suggests). Though Rosen is right that "the sensitivity challenge does not just arise for my view, but also for what I take to be its closest competitor, the sort of non-reductive normative realism that embraces supervenience" (2020, p. 231), those who hold the latter version of non-reductive realism can appeal to self-evidence in a way non-reductive realists who reject (S) cannot.

[46] For discussion of the idea that we can perceive normative properties, see, for example, Cullison 2010, Cowan 2015, Werner 2016, and Väyrynen 2018.

[47] See Faraci 2015 and 2019. Cowan 2015, pp. 187-92, and Väyrynen 2018, pp. 127-8, also raise doubts along these lines. For discussion of Faraci's argument, see Werner 2018.

[48] See Rosen 2017, p. 862, and Hattiangadi 2018, p. 608.

of descriptive properties. If (S) is false, we cannot find out what the actual world's pure normative truths are in this way, since two worlds with the same distribution of descriptive properties may have different pure normative truths. If Faraci is right, we also cannot find out what these truths are by perceiving which objects have which normative properties. And it is unclear how else we could find this out.[49]

Luca Gasparri gives a similar argument from knowledge for the claim that

> (S**) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the instantiation of non-semantic properties in W and W* is exactly the same, then the instantiation of semantic properties in W and W* is also exactly the same.[50]

Gasparri argues that if (S**) is false, knowledge of the distribution non-semantic properties does not enable us to infer the distribution of semantic properties, which leads to "a radical form of skepticism about our ability to reliably track the distribution of semantic properties instantiated at the actual world".[51] In the same way, if (S) is false, knowledge of the distribution descriptive properties does not enable us to infer the distribution of normative properties. But non-reductive realists do not think we can infer this. My argument therefore goes further than Gasparri's: I have argued that if (S) is false, non-reductive realists cannot even appeal to self-evidence or to perception of normative properties to explain how we can discover what the pure normative truths are in the actual world.[52]

I therefore think that rejecting (S) also makes non-reductive realists face a second explanatory problem that is hard to solve. Of course, they could simply insist that we can discover what the pure normative truths are in the actual world. But then it is unclear why this is compatible with their rejection of (S).

6 | THE WIDER COMMITMENTS BEHIND THESE CHALLENGES TO (S)

Non-reductive realists may now object that my focus on (P1), (P2), and (P3) is misguided: they may say that these claims are merely intermediate premises in Roberts', Rosen's, and Hattiangadi's challenges to (S). What really matters, they may say, are the wider commitments behind these challenges.

But the connection between Roberts', Rosen's and Hattiangadi's wider commitments and their challenges to (S) is looser than it may seem. Consider first Roberts, who takes it to be possible that

> (P1) An object has a certain normative property partly because this object or other objects have certain normative properties, which these objects have partly because these objects or other objects have certain normative properties, and so on.

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[49] Hattiangadi 2018 claims that our knowledge of pure normative truths is part of what she calls a "grey area between a priori and a posteriori knowledge" (p. 608), but it is unclear how this is supposed to work.

[50] See Gasparri forthcoming, who not only responds to arguments against (S**) given by Kearns and Magidor 2012, but also gives three positive arguments for (S**).

[51] Gasparri forthcoming, pp. 22-3.

[52] This does not matter to Gasparri's argument, since no one thinks that there are self-evident pure semantic truths or that we can perceive which objects have which semantic properties.

(P1) only conflicts with (S) if there are possible worlds that have the same instantiation of descriptive properties as the actual world but in which certain objects do not satisfy the same thick concepts as in the actual world. Roberts' view on thick concepts is compatible with the existence of such worlds, but does not require or entail that there are such worlds. Her wider commitments are therefore compatible with (S).

Consider next Rosen, who takes non-reductive realism to entail that

> (P2) The essences of normative properties do not determine descriptive conditions for their instantiation.

(P2) does seem to conflict with (S). But the widespread thought that (S) is true may itself reveal something about the essences of normative properties: the essences of these properties may make it the case *that there are* descriptive conditions for their instantiation without determining *what these conditions are*. If so, the essences of normative properties do not entail any particular pure normative truth: for example, they do not entail that

> (1) An action is right if and only if it maximises happiness

or that

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

But the essences of these properties then *do* rule out its being the case that

> (3) Whereas (1) is a pure normative truth in some possible worlds, (2) is a pure normative truth in other possible worlds.

This is compatible both with Rosen's essentialist account of metaphysical necessity and with the plausible claim that we cannot find out what the correct first-order normative view is merely by finding out which objects have which descriptive properties. If we interpret (P2) as saying only that the essences of normative properties do not determine what the descriptive conditions for their instantiation are, Rosen's wider commitments are therefore also compatible with (S).

Finally, consider Hattiangadi, who thinks that

> (P3) If a certain first-order normative view is a pure normative truth, ideal a priori reflection does not enable us to rule out that other first-order normative views that are incompatible with this view are pure normative truths.

(P3) also seems to conflict with (S). But suppose Hattiangadi is right that if (1) is a pure normative truth, it is nevertheless ideally conceivable that (2) is a pure normative truth. This does not entail that it is *also* ideally conceivable that

> (3) Whereas (1) is a pure normative truth in some possible worlds, (2) is a pure normative truth in other possible worlds.

For just as the widespread thought that (S) is true may reveal that the essences of normative properties make it the case that there are descriptive conditions for their instantiation without

determining what these conditions are, ideal a priori reflection may reveal that (1) and (2) cannot *both* be pure normative truths without thereby revealing *which* of these claims is a pure normative truth. Since this is compatible both with Hattiangadi's view on conceivability and possibility and with her denial that ideal a priori reflection enables us to find out what the correct first-order normative view is, her wider commitments are also compatible with (S). I therefore think that non-reductive realists cannot resist my arguments by appealing to the wider commitments behind Roberts', Rosen's and Hattiangadi's challenges.

7 | CONCLUSION

I have argued that the negation of (S) has consequences that are much more implausible than the negations of key premises in Roberts', Rosen's, and Hattiangadi's challenges to (S). I have also argued that the connection between Roberts', Rosen's and Hattiangadi's wider commitments and their challenges to (S) is looser than it may seem. I therefore conclude that these challenges do not undermine the reduction argument.

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