

REALISM AND THE VALUE OF EXPLANATION*

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ABSTRACT

Dasgupta (2018) poses a serious challenge to realism about natural properties. He argues that there is no acceptable explanation of why natural properties deserve the value realists assign to them and are consequently absent of value. In response, this paper defines and defends an alternative non-explanatory account of normativity compatible with realism. Unlike Lewis (1984) and Sider (2023) who believe it is sufficient to defend realism solely on realist terms, I engage with the challenge on unfriendly grounds by revealing a tu quoque. Dasgupta and anti-realists face a similar challenge to that directed against realism; one that not only undermines the objection to realism by legitimising non-explanatory normativity but leaves them facing a significant dilemma.

KEYWORDS

Realism; Anti-realism; Naturalness; Value; Normativity; Explanation; Explanatory Normativity; Primitive Normativity

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1.0 REALISM AND THE ABSENCE OF VALUE

1.1 REALISM AND VALUE

Lewis (1984) and Sider (2011) are realists about natural properties.¹ They assert that natural properties carve the world up in a metaphysically correct way. In turn, when theorising, where theorising is understood as an activity that aims to accurately describe the world, they uphold using natural properties to be better than otherwise. They make the normative claim that natural properties *ought* to feature in theories; that they possess value-theoretic upshots. Dasgupta (2018) poses a serious challenge to this value-theoretic claim by arguing that there is no acceptable account of why natural properties deserve the value realists assign to them.² The objection principally rests on endorsing an explanatory account of normativity and then demonstrating that there is no explanation for why the realist's natural properties deserve value.

1.2 EXPLANATORY NORMATIVITY

To see how Dasgupta's argument works it is important to clarify explanatory normativity before showing how the realist fails to explain. Ironically, as Dasgupta notes (2018: 286), his argument is a normative adaptation of Lewis's 'play fair' argument (Lewis 1994: 484). To play fair one must demonstrate why the property deserves value before asserting that it is valuable. Call this explanatory normativity:

Explanatory Normativity: if a property ought to feature in theories, then there must be an explanation for why it ought to feature in theories.

Explanatory normativity affirms that if a property lacks an explanation for why it has value, the property is not valuable.

¹ Their views differ – Lewis invokes naturalness as a property of properties while Sider uses a generalised structural operator – but both make the relevant objective commitments.

² The challenge applies to realism in general. For example, the valuable properties could be those that feature in objective laws, are ungrounded, or correspond to universals (Dasgupta 2018: 282). Likewise, my arguments are interchangeable with various realist (and anti-realist, see footnote 4) analogues.

After accepting explanatory normativity, Dasgupta argues that there is no explanation for why natural properties deserve value. The realist might appeal to the connections between natural properties and laws, causation, or induction to explain but none of these moves are adequate (Dasgupta provides a detailed discussion on the impermissibility of many potential realist options (Dasgupta 2018: 295–308) and I do not contest these claims). The problem chiefly stems from realists being restricted to ‘unfair’ accounts that reiterate natural properties as aligning with the world’s natural structure or paraphrasing natural properties as being “really” natural but do not in any reasonable capacity explain why they have value. Any claim that natural properties matter because the world has an objective natural structure assumes theories ought to adhere to the world’s metaphysical structure before showing that such a posit deserves to feature in theories. Realists cannot affirm their metaphysical posit to have value until they have shown the metaphysical posit to be something worth valuing: ‘don’t call it “naturalness” until you’ve shown that it is something that should guide our theorizing’ (Dasgupta 2018: 286).

To further substantiate the objection, one could, for comparison, propose that the world actually has an objective *gratural* structure, where *gratural* properties are those altered in a projective manner like *grue*: if observed before time *t* being green, or if not observed before time *t*, being blue (where time *t* is some point in the future). On the assumption that properties are amply cheap, there are many second-order properties (natural, *gratural*, etc.), that range over contrasting first-order properties (green, *grue*, etc.), any of which have equal claim to being valuable if we first posit the world to have a corresponding metaphysical structure.³ If natural properties have value because they accord with the world’s natural structure, then there is just as much reason to think that *gratural* properties have value because they accord with the world’s *gratural* structure. As Dasgupta writes, ‘don’t say that naturalness is itself natural and *graturalness* is not, for we are in the middle of trying to explain why naturalness matters!’ (Dasgupta 2018: 289).

³ This degree of property cheapness is assumed by Dasgupta (2018: 289). Compare Armstrong’s view whereby properties are cheap but only some of them correspond to universals and therefore, objective explanation should involve universals. The view is still subject to the objection that nothing explains why we should theorise with properties that correspond to universals.

In summary, explaining the value of properties is a requirement for a property to have value, realists do not satisfy this demand and therefore, ‘realism is absent of value’. In turn, Dasgupta goes on to argue for anti-realism, whereby natural properties are just those we *prefer* (Dasgupta 2018: 308–9).⁴ The preferences of theorists explain why certain properties ought to feature in theories and no objectively correct set of properties possesses value-theoretic upshots.

1.3 TWO CRITIQUES

With the problem and some of its implications stated I will now work towards responding. However, first, a crucial distinction needs clarifying. Dasgupta notes that his objection could be that realists lack an objective explanation for why natural properties are valuable or it could be that realists lack an explanation, relative to our preferences, for why natural properties are valuable (Dasgupta 2018: 312). The argument runs differently depending on what assumptions are made and which notion of explanation is in play. On the one hand, if realism is assumed and explanation construed in distinctly realist terms, where the explanation must appeal to objective facts, then the objection to realism is a *reductio*:

1. Assume realism.
2. Assume explanatory normativity.
3. From 1 and 2, there must be an explanation that meets the realist’s objective standards for why only natural properties have value.
4. There is no explanation for why only natural properties have value.
5. Realism is false (and this contradicts the first premise assuming realism).

Call this argument, where realism is assumed, the internal criticism. On the other hand, if anti-realism is assumed and explanation construed in distinctly anti-realist terms, where the explanation can appeal to the subjective preferences of theorists, then the objection to realism runs as follows:

⁴ Various anti-realist positions could be interchanged here. For example, the valuable properties could be those that feature in our linguistic history (Goodman 1955) or play more central classificatory roles (Taylor 1993).

1. Assume anti-realism.
2. Assume explanatory normativity.
3. From 1 and 2, there must be an explanation that meets the anti-realist's non-objective standards for why natural properties have value.
4. Anti-realists explain the value of natural properties in virtue of our preferences.⁵
5. Theorisers with contrasting preferences confer value to contrasting properties (natural, gratural, etc.).
6. 5, contradicts the realist claim that only natural properties have value.
7. Realism is false.

Call this argument, where anti-realism is assumed, the external criticism. The external criticism is that without making assumptions only a realist would agree to, the realist is ineffective at convincing the anti-realist (or even a fence-sitter) that their view is correct. The internal criticism makes the stronger claim that realism is indefensible on its terms. As I state at the end of the next section, responding to both is important to exonerate realism.

2.0 EXPLANATION AND VALUE

2.1 THE INTERNAL CRITICISM

To begin, when assuming realism, the demand to explain why natural properties are valuable might well be a fair one, but it is not a request a realist needs to acquiesce to. By not assuming explanatory normativity and denying premise two of the internal criticism, no *reductio* obtains. In place, an alternative principle, affirming that some properties ought to feature in theories without explanation, is needed:

Primitive Normativity: if a property ought to feature in theories, there does not need to be an explanation for why it ought to feature in theories.

⁵ I doubt a realist would accept explanations relative to us and therefore, there is no explanation, and the argument then continues as in the internal criticism.

Primitive normativity affirms that some properties should feature in theories as a brute fact. Realists who accept primitive normativity take it as a basic commitment of their view that natural properties have value-theoretic upshots. Initially, this might seem to be just as much of a concession as it is a reply. Dasgupta argues that realists lack an explanation for the value of natural properties and my suggestion is to accept natural properties as possessing unexplained value. However, remember this is a defence of realism from the internal criticism. It is an argument against the charge that realism cannot defend itself on its terms. Realists assert that the world does exhibit objective structure and therefore, natural properties are valuable because theories are about that world! This contravenes explanatory normativity, but it does not unavoidably falsify realism. There is an obvious out in accepting a different – realist-friendly – conception of normativity.

To clarify the normative proposal, the value resulting from accepting primitive normativity is best understood as a kind of intrinsic value (understood equivalently to non-instrumental value). Generally, intrinsically valuable properties are valuable in and of themselves with nothing outside of the properties determining why they have value. This kind of value is not instrumental, ethical, or prudential but instead is a kind of epistemic value. As the normative proposal is primitive, analysis of it is going to have its limits. However, I have provided a functional account by stating what role the value plays and how it relates to other comparable conceptions of value. Any further analysis of how intrinsic value pertains to natural properties, stating precisely how science identifies the valuable properties, is beyond the scope of this proposal. Ultimately, it is better to theorise with natural properties and this value is derived from their intrinsic value.⁶

Importantly, as the normative proposal is primitive, it entails accepting a certain degree of epistemic humility. Primitive normativity constitutes a concession to the idea that theorising about reality might not be co-extensive with reality and that there may be features of reality whose value we are never able to explain but are no less significant, and these features arise in cases alike the value of natural properties. The key difference is that Dasgupta seems motivated by the idea that we only ought to attach normative significance to that which we can explain, while the realist should accept no such

⁶ For a similar proposal see Forrest (1991) who defines a normative connection that holds solely on the stipulation that the valuable thing is valuable.

assumption. Compare Devitt's response to Putnam's model-theoretic argument when he argues that realists ought to freely accept every proposition we think is true might be false simply as a consequence of believing the world is altogether independent of theorising (Devitt 1983: 298). Analogously, realists about natural properties should accept that every property we think is natural might be unnatural as a consequence of believing nature's joints exist entirely independently of theorising.

However, adopting primitive normativity does lead to a further challenge as outlined by Dreier (2015: 179) for moral realism whereby even if the realist takes it as a brute fact that some facts are normative, this is not in itself a good reason to think that no explanation is required. Just because one adopts the stance that some normative fact is unexplained does not support the affirmation that no explanation is needed. In other words, there should be a second-order explanation that explains why no explanation is correct. For realists, no first-order explanation is the correct approach because intrinsic value cannot be explained in a way that satisfies the standards of explanatory normativity.⁷ If the value of natural properties is inherent to natural properties, then the only viable first-order explanation for why they have such value must appeal to natural properties and their innate value! In turn, this explains the absence of explanation.

This defence of realism shares some structural similarities with Sider's (2023) reply to Dasgupta. However, there are some substantial differences. First, I explicitly concede to an unproblematic explanatory deficit while Sider is not so conciliatory. Second, I employ intrinsic value and use this to answer the second-order challenge while Sider employs an externalist conception of value in his argument. Thirdly, Sider believes 'joint-carving' to also be instrumentally valuable (Sider 2011: 61), while I make no such claim.⁸ Lastly and most significantly, *pace* Sider and Lewis, I do not believe that responding to the internal criticism is alone sufficient to defuse Dasgupta's detonation. Putnam decried Lewis's response to his model-theoretic arguments as 'just more theory' (Putnam 1985:

⁷ Dorr notes that 'it is unclear whether any claim of [intrinsic] value could be explained in a way that would satisfy Dasgupta's criteria for adequate explanation' (Dorr 2019).

⁸ Avoiding criticism about the instrumental value of theorising being fully captured 'without positing extra metaphysical facts about 'structure', without invoking epistemic difficulties about how we could know such facts, or about why such metaphysical facts should be theory-guiding' (Thomasson 2020: 451).

18), and a similar challenge applies as the realist's value claims are just more unexplained value. Lewis responded by reiterating a strong commitment to realism: 'If I am looking in the right place for a saving constraint, then realism needs realism' (Lewis 1984: 228). Similarly, Sider adopts a defensive stance: 'for it is no part of the mission to convince Dasgupta, or even a fence-sitter, that the outlook is correct' (Sider 2023: 10).

Critically, addressing only the internal criticism raises a serious dialectical worry as there is no case for accepting realism unless one is already a realist. This leads to philosophical stalemate and debate over metaphysical realism has already arrived at such an impasse.⁹ The realist claims their objectors are caricaturing their position if it is not understood through the lens of suitable realist assumptions and their objectors claim that making such assumptions is dogmatic. We may well spend our time transporting sand to the beach if we concern ourselves solely with those who already accept our views. To provide any useful development to the dialectic, one cannot maintain a defensive stance. Accordingly, I will now advance a defence of realism on unfriendly grounds.

2.2 THE EXTERNAL CRITICISM

Forgo realist assumptions for minimal anti-realist ones. On the anti-realist model, many different groups of properties are preferred by theorists e.g. natural properties, gratural properties, etc. Theorists may prefer different properties, but a ubiquitous feature of properties with value-theoretic upshots is that they are preferred; only properties that are preferred possess value. The value-theoretic demarcation occurs neither between the natural and unnatural properties nor between the gratural and ungratural properties but instead between the preferred and unpreferred properties. Therefore, call the anti-realist's valuable properties – those that have their explained in virtue of preferences – *prefatural* (and recall that properties are cheap). Since anti-realism entails that prefatural properties ought to feature in theories, explanatory normativity applies: if prefatural properties ought to feature in theories, then there must be an explanation for why they ought to feature in theories.

⁹ See (Khleutzos 2016) for a summary of the stalemate.

The challenge I pose here is to explain why, when theorising, we should care about what properties are and are not preferred; to explain why preferred properties matter. Simply reiterating or paraphrasing that a set of properties is preferred goes no way in explaining. However, as the anti-realist establishes valuable properties to be those that are preferred, it appears they are restricted to appealing to some feature or other of preferences to explain. Yet, this only works when one assumes that theories *ought* to utilise properties we prefer. Simply *being* preferred tells us nothing as to why these properties are the only ones that ought to feature in theories unless one assumes that the only properties that ought to feature in theories are those that are preferred. After all, just being preferred does not make a property valuable, any more than calling someone ‘Goodman’ makes them virtuous. Be my guest – posit a set of properties that you prefer if you want. But play fair. Do not call it “preferred” until you have shown it to be something that should guide theorising.¹⁰ Just like realism requires the value of natural properties to fall freely from an ‘unfair’ posit about structure, anti-realism requires the value of prefatural properties to fall freely from an ‘unfair’ posit about preferences.

I suspect there will be resistance to the claim that preferences are all that matter and in fact, when asked to explain why prefatural properties matter, the answer is because preferences *explain* why those properties have value. Yet, this simply pushes the burden from preferences to explanation. In this case, a ubiquitous feature exhibited by all valuable properties is not that they are preferred but that they have their value explained. Call these properties *explatural*: the valuable properties are those that have their value explained. From here explanatory normativity once more applies: if explatural properties ought to feature in theories, then there must be an explanation for why they ought to feature in theories. And again, the value of explatural properties is required to fall freely from the fact that they are explained. Properties with their value explained being valuable because they are (putatively) explained is no more acceptable than the realist claiming that properties that follow the world’s structure are valuable because they follow the world’s structure.

¹⁰ This paraphrases Lewis (1994: 484) and subsequently Dasgupta (2018: 286).

From this *tu quoque*, the combination of anti-realism and explanatory normativity leads to the following *reductio*:

1. Assume anti-realism.
2. Assume explanatory normativity.
3. From 1 and 2, there must be an explanation that meets the anti-realist's non-objective standards for why preferential or explanatory properties have value.
4. There is no explanation for why preferential or explanatory properties have value.
5. Anti-realism is false (and this contradicts the first premise assuming anti-realism).

Anti-realists face the same dilemma as realists. One solution for committed anti-realists is to simply join realists in rejecting explanatory normativity in favour of primitive normativity and the unexplained – intrinsic – value of preferences. In doing so they legitimise primitive normativity and dissolve any concerns about my reply to the internal criticism being problematically defensive. Perhaps this view is palatable for some, but if the sole motivation for anti-realism is that it meets the demands of explanatory normativity, anti-realists now lack a positive reason to be anti-realists.

2.3 THE VALUE OF EXPLANATION

Alternatively, those inclined to retain explanatory normativity, and reject both realism and anti-realism, face bigger issues. For one, on the assumption that the only viable means of construing explanation are realist or anti-realist, there is now no plausible conception of explanation available to formulate explanatory normativity. This aside, the most significant problem for explanatory normativity stems from the fact that it rests on implicitly assuming the only valuable properties are those with an explanation for why they are valuable. As Dasgupta writes ‘there must be some explanation’ (Dasgupta 2018: 289); without an explanation, those properties are not valuable. However, it is reasonable to ask why explanation matters. Earlier in the paper, I highlighted Dreier’s second-order explanatory demand applying to primitive normativity and a similar second-order demand also applies to explanatory normativity. Just because one adopts the stance that normative facts are explained does not support the affirmation that there ‘must be some explanation’.

Dasgupta assumes that explanation is a prerequisite for normativity and my complaint is that there is no good reason for this assumption.

This challenge is met on the provision of an explanation for why there must be an explanation. Recall that realists meet this challenge by adopting an intrinsic conception of value to explain why primitive normativity is correct. A similar move is needed in defence of explanatory normativity, adopting a conception of value that explains why explanatory normativity is correct. Contra the intrinsic value suggested for realism, instrumental value is the likely candidate to allow for the claim: properties with their value explained are valuable because the kind of value they possess only obtains when an explanation is provided. Though, if explanatory normativity is concerned exclusively with this kind of value, it does not serve as a universal criterion for determining what properties do and do not have value and therefore, poses no threat to the realist position I have outlined (nor primitive normative in general).

Additionally, it is worth noting that my argument is an iteration of the following question: if something is explained, is it explained that it is explained?¹¹ Dasgupta remarks that this kind of question stems from a general worry resulting from doing metaphysics in terms of explanation, and not anything about normativity nor anti-realism specifically (Dasgupta 2017: 317(footnote 21)).¹² This line of reasoning does not offer any respite as the challenge can be reformulated for those who approach metaphysics in terms of explanation: if metaphysics ought to be done in terms of explanation, there ought to be some explanation for why we should approach metaphysics in terms of explanation. For which there is no good answer. Similarly, the challenge is not resolved by embracing something akin to Schaffer's (2016) proposed solution to the inference problem: it is the role of explanation to evaluate. Such a move rests upon merely stipulating a connection between explanation and value and not explaining it (which if acceptable allows the realist to solve the problem by stipulating a connection between objective structure and value).

¹¹ This is akin to Sider's *Purity Principle*: 'fundamental truths involve only fundamental notions' (Sider 2011: 106).

¹² I have replaced naturalism with anti-realism as the relevant counterpart.

Overall, the most succinct way to summarise this argument is that just calling some property explained does not make it valuable any more than calling someone ‘Moore’ makes them multiply.¹³ Be my guest – posit that explanation determines what is and is not valuable if you want. But play fair when playing fair. Do not interweave explanation with value until you have shown explanation to be the deciding factor for what is and is not valuable. Everyone here is permitted their respective primitives. The realist is free to assume, without further explanation, that the valuable properties are those that align with objective structure and Dasgupta is free to assume, without further explanation, that the valuable properties are those that have their value explained. It cannot be objectionable for value to inexplicably arise from natural properties if one is also assuming value inexplicably arises from being explained.

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¹³ As Dasgupta observes (Dasgupta 2018: 294–5), there are parallels between Moore’s meta-ethics and primitive normativity.

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