

Grounding the Normative: A Problem for Structured Non-Naturalism

Introduction

It is wrong for John to kick my cat because it will cause the cat serious pain, but also because it is wrong for people to cause serious pain in certain circumstances. This suggests the following structure: some normative facts hold in virtue of both non-normative facts and normative principles. As I will construe this, it is a claim about the metaphysical grounds of normative facts. Many non-naturalists about the normative want to endorse this view generally—that particular normative facts are often partially grounded in normative principles. In this paper, I argue that non-naturalism is inconsistent with this thesis about partial grounding in principles, due to the nature of normative principles and their grounds. I then consider two ways in which the non-naturalist position could be modified or expanded to solve this problem. No solution, it turns out, is without its problems.

1. Preliminaries

The notion of *ground*, according to its promoters, has been integral to the enterprise of philosophy,¹ and in particular, ethics² for a long time. While it is a primitive idiom, it is fairly intuitive: that one fact obtains in virtue of another, that one is explained by another, that one is grounded in another—these all express the same notion.³ Furthermore, the notion of ground helps

¹ See, most prominently, Rosen (2010), Schaffer (2009), Fine (2012a), and Correia and Schneider (2012).

² See Berker (2018), as well as Dancy (1981).

³ I here treat grounding as a relation between facts—as opposed to, say, a sentential operator—though this is not essential to any of my arguments.

us make sense of many philosophical claims. Some claim that a thing has its dispositions in virtue of its categorical features—the glass is fragile in virtue of the molecules that make it up, as well as the laws of chemistry and physics. Legal positivists claim that the grounds of laws are wholly social, consisting in things like the acts of officials and social practices.⁴ Both claims make sense if they are about grounding relations.

This brief defense of the notion of ground may be unsatisfying to some. I would first direct them to fuller defenses of grounding, especially those in footnote 1. But second, I make the following plea: surely there is *some* broad metaphysical dependence relation that plays an integral role in philosophy, or at least in ethics. How else can we make sense of the Euthyphro dilemma, which challenges us to specify the direction of *dependence* between our moral beliefs and the moral facts? Or the ordinary sense in which pain can *make* someone’s life bad? Or the idea that, for those with non-naturalist leanings, it is simply not enough for normative properties to be distinct from non-normative properties, but that normative properties cannot be *exhaustively constituted* by non-normative properties? We need some broad notion of metaphysical dependence to interpret these claims. Call it “constitution,” or call it “grounding”—my point will hold regardless, though I rely on the notion of ground here.

While the grounding relation in particular is not essential to my point—any broad metaphysical dependence relation will do—I rely on that relation here. Let “ $\Phi < \Psi$ ” represent “ Φ fully grounds Ψ ,” where full ground is the primitive notion above. Let “ $\Phi \prec \Psi$ ” represent “ Φ partially grounds Ψ ,” where that means that Φ , together with some other (possibly empty) set of facts, fully grounds Ψ . Thus, $A, B < A \& B$, whereas $A \prec A \& B$.

⁴ Both examples are from Rosen (2010): 110.

The grounding relation has a fairly complex pure logic.⁵ I need only outline a small part of it.

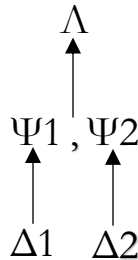
Here are a few valid rules of inference:⁶

Transitivity:
$$\frac{\Delta 1 \prec \Delta 2 \quad \Delta 2 \prec \Delta 3}{\Delta 1 \prec \Delta 3}$$

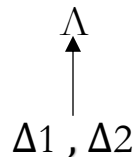
Cut:
$$\frac{\Delta 1 \prec \Psi 1 \quad \Delta 2 \prec \Psi 2 \quad \dots \quad \Psi 1, \Psi 2 \dots \prec \Lambda}{\Delta 1, \Delta 2 \dots \prec \Lambda}$$

Irreflexivity:
$$\frac{\Delta 1 \prec \Delta 1}{\perp}$$

Cut is a chaining principle, according to which if:



Then:



And so on for cases where there are further members of the Ψ -facts grounded in further members of the Δ -facts. Transitivity simply allows us to chain two partial grounding relations to get another.

Irreflexivity states that no fact partially (or, therefore, fully) grounds itself.

⁵ See Fine (2012a) and (2012b), as well as deRosset (2015).

⁶ Of course, as with everything, these have been questioned. Those critical of irreflexivity include Wilson (2014) and Correia (2014). Schaffer (2012) is critical of transitivity. Raven (2013) and Litland (2013) defend these principles.

Finally, a “grounding tree” is what you see above in my diagram elucidating Cut—although those trees are incomplete. A complete grounding tree for a given fact specifies the full grounds for that fact, and the grounds for those grounds, and so on until it “bottoms out” in ungrounded facts.⁷ A fact can have multiple trees, because it can have multiple full grounds (e.g., the fact that “P or Q” can be fully grounded in the fact that P, or the fact that Q). When I use diagrams in this paper to represent grounding trees, I’ll represent full grounding relations with solid arrows and partial grounding relations with dashed arrows. Unless I put an ellipsis to the right of a set of dashed arrows, let the reader assume that the partial grounding relations in question together constitute a full grounding relation.

This much of an outline of the grounding relation will suffice for my purposes here. What I’ve said here conforms to grounding orthodoxy, and furthermore, everything I’ve said here can be plausibly applied to whatever broad metaphysical dependence relation the grounding skeptic chooses to frame metaethical claims in terms of.

2. Structured Non-Naturalism

Non-naturalism is the claim that there are *sui generis* normative entities of some kind.⁸ Where substantive normative facts are just those normative facts that are not principles, I think that non-naturalists are committed to the following claim:

No Full: Some substantive normative facts or principles are not fully metaphysically grounded in non-normative facts.

Ralf Bader argues that on non-naturalism, No Full must be true.⁹ Barry Maguire formulates the autonomy thesis about the ethical in such a way that, insofar as non-naturalists are committed to

⁷ See Rosen (2010): 111-112.

⁸ Shafer-Landau (2003): 55; Smith (2013): 28; McPherson (2012). However, non-naturalism is often defined as the claim that there are irreducibly normative properties/facts--see Parfit (2011): 464; Enoch (2011): 1. See also Ridge (2014) and Cuneo (2007).

⁹ Bader (2017).

autonomy—and they seem to be—they also must accept a thesis that entails No Full.¹⁰ Some non-naturalists even seem sympathetic to the idea that No Full is actually a *definition* of non-naturalism.¹¹ (I do not think that No Full is a definition of non-naturalism—only a commitment of the view. As we’ll see later, there are other conditions failing which would disqualify a position from being non-naturalist.)

My argument is fairly simple: unless non-naturalists accept No Full, they cannot distinguish themselves from non-reductive naturalists like David Brink.¹² Such naturalists deny that normative (in Brink’s case: moral) facts are identical to non-normative ones, yet argue for some sort of full metaphysical dependence of the normative on the non-normative. In Brink’s case, this dependence relation is *constitution*. But surely there is nothing special here about constitution, as opposed to other robust metaphysical dependence relations. The non-reductive naturalist gets to keep her naturalism not because she endorses the constitution relation *in particular*, but because she endorses *some* type of exhaustive metaphysical dependence of the normative on the non-normative. So the non-naturalist, to distinguish herself from the non-reductive naturalist, must deny the full metaphysical dependence of the normative on the non-normative. Since grounding is a type of this dependence, the non-naturalist must accept No Full.

Once the non-naturalist accepts No Full—as I have argued he must—then it is very natural to accept a further claim, namely:

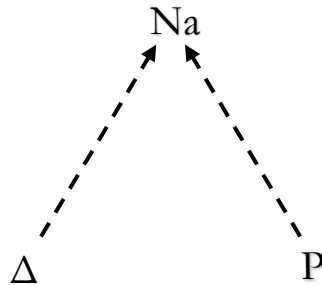
Structure: All substantive normative facts are partially metaphysically grounded in normative principles.

¹⁰ Maguire (2015): 194.

¹¹ See Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014): 401-403, though the authors speak in terms of truth-making, not grounding.

¹² Brink (1989): 6.5 and 7.1. See also FitzPatrick’s (2008) criticism of Shafer-Landau’s (2003: 74-79) view.

I'll work with atomic substantive normative facts, for simplicity. Where “Na” is the fact that a has normative property N, “Δ” is a set of non-normative facts, and “P” is a normative principle, those who believe Structure think that the trees of particular normative facts look like this:



It may seem unclear what the alternative to Structure is, for the proponent of No Full. I want to save a full exposition of some views that can provide such an alternative until the last section of the paper. But generally, these views will have to find some way of pulling principles out of the grounding structure (to deny Structure) and keeping them from being grounded (to retain No Full). In the final section I'll identify two extant views that do this: one has principles “govern” grounding relations, while the other has them grounding the fact that a substantive normative fact is fully grounded in the non-normative.

Many non-naturalists believe Structure. Among them is T.M. Scanlon:

It might be tempting to say that mixed normative claims...are “true in virtue of” non-normative claims...But this would be misleading insofar as it suggested that they are true only in virtue of the truth of these claims, neglecting the role of pure normative claims in determining how this is the case.¹³

Barry Maguire is even more explicit: “particular ethical facts obtain in virtue of more general ethical facts together with pertinent non-ethical facts.”¹⁴ There are other authors who gesture at Structure, as well.¹⁵

¹³ Scanlon (2014): 40.

¹⁴ Maguire (2015): 194.

¹⁵ See Enoch (2011): 144-145; FitzPatrick (2008): 186-192.

And it's easy to see why. First, it seems that normative principles play *some* role in explaining other normative facts. Suppose I'm asked why it was wrong for Woo to destroy the rug. I might answer: "Well, because it caused Jeff a lot of trouble, and it's wrong to cause other people lots of trouble." Abstracting from the question of whether the principle I cite is true, there seems to be nothing odd about my explanation: people give similar explanations all the time. But if principles aren't amongst the grounds of the normative facts being explained, what other explanatory role could they play?

Second, many (such as Maguire) go further than No Full, arguing that normative facts are *never* fully grounded in the non-normative. If that's right, then Structure seems all but inevitable: particular normative facts will never be fully grounded in the non-normative. However, they're also bad candidates for being ungrounded: that John's act was good is explained by something. So on this view, particular normative facts need to be partially grounded in another normative fact—and what better candidate than a principle that links the particular normative fact to its non-normative grounds? Call the conjunction of non-naturalism and Structure "structured non-naturalism." I will spend most of the rest of the paper arguing that structured non-naturalism is incoherent.

3. The Incoherence of Structured Non-Naturalism

Structured non-naturalists claim that substantive normative facts are partially grounded in principles. What will principles look like? I can see three possible answers to this question, and there's trouble in each case. Here's an outline of the argument:

The Master Argument

1. If Structure is true, then principles are either generalizations, grounding-facts, or some sort of ungrounded fact.
2. If principles are generalizations, then grounding is not irreflexive.
3. If principles are grounding-facts, then non-naturalism is false.
4. Principles are not some sort of ungrounded fact.
5. So, if Structure is true, then either grounding is not irreflexive or non-naturalism is false.
6. Grounding is irreflexive.
7. So, if Structure is true, then non-naturalism is false.

I leave (6) as a very plausible assumption (see above). So, I will now argue for (1-4).

3.1 Defense of (1)

Principles are either generalizations, grounding-facts, or some sort of ungrounded fact. Let me emphasize up-front that this is a *simplification*. There are at least a few other ways of understanding normative principles—they could, for example, be hedged generalizations. But I think that any other way of understanding principles will have the same problems as one of the three options here considered.

It is very natural to think of principles as universal generalizations. This is how Russ Shafer-Landau thinks of them, for example.¹⁶ Why is it wrong for you to wantonly destroy Jeff’s rug? Because it caused Jeff lots of trouble (non-normative fact), and all acts in which someone is caused lots of trouble are wrong (principle). This makes it sound like we end up with a generalization:

$$\forall x(Dx \rightarrow Nx)^{17}$$

Furthermore, we might think of this generalization as being preceded by either a “it is a law that” operator, or by a necessity operator of some kind. (Whether moral principles are *normatively* or *metaphysically* necessary is controversial,¹⁸ and won’t matter for my argument here.)

But it is equally natural to read the principle here as claiming: “All acts that are not utility-maximizing are wrong *in virtue of that very fact*.” After all, utilitarians don’t seem to be arguing just for the necessary coincidence of (e.g.) wrongness and failure to maximize utility. That’s compatible with God arbitrarily orchestrating such a coincidence, and this seems out of sync with utilitarianism—the

¹⁶ Shafer-Landau (1997) and (2003): 268, fn. 2.

¹⁷ For a novel way of reading generalizations that differs from this, see Fine (2015) and Fine (2016). I don’t consider this approach simply for reasons of space.

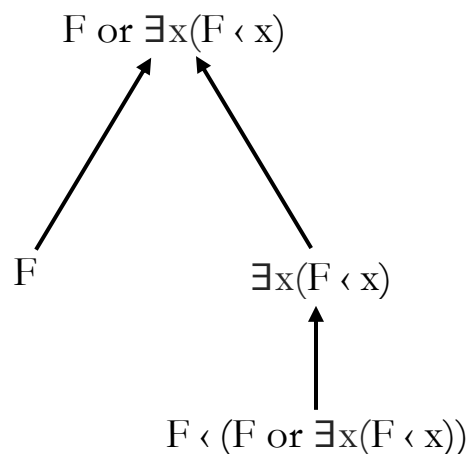
¹⁸ See Fine (2012a): 38 and Rosen (MS).

utility facts *explain* the wrongness facts! So it might be that normative principles are facts about grounding relations.¹⁹ For example, it's ultimately wrong to destroy Jeff's rug because:

$$\forall x(Dx \prec Nx)$$

The grounding here must be partial, since by stipulation—recall Structure—the principle, and thus *this very grounding fact*, partially grounds the wrongness of your act, and therefore the fact that it doesn't maximize utility cannot be a (non-redundant) full ground. (In what follows, I'll refer to generalizations like this one as “grounding-facts” and to instances of such—e.g., $Da \prec Na$ —as “particular grounding facts”.)

It may seem that understanding principles in this way is doomed from the start. After all, the structure we end up with here is that $(A \prec B) \prec B$, and one might think that a fact cannot be even partially grounded in the fact that this very fact is partially grounded in another. But I believe that we are independently committed to this type of grounding structure. Consider the following fact: F or $\exists x(F \prec x)$. (Let F be some fact that obtains necessarily, like that $0 = 0$.) This fact is grounded in the following way:



¹⁹ See Berker (2018), §4.

Notice, however, that on the righthand side, by transitivity, we get that $(F \prec (F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))) \prec (F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$. And this exhibits the disputed pattern: $(A \prec B) \prec B$.

Here's why the fact that $F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x)$ is grounded in the way I propose. Because we know that F obtains (it does so necessarily, by stipulation), we know that the left branch obtains, assuming that whenever A obtains, $A \prec (A \text{ or } B)$.²⁰ But because F fully grounds $(F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$, we know that F fully grounds *something* (and therefore partially grounds something). So, we know that $\exists x(F \prec x)$, and again, because it's the righthand disjunct, this fact fully grounds that $(F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$. Finally, in the bottom right, we know that $F \prec (F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$, since this is entailed by the lefthand branch. Furthermore, this fact fully grounds that $\exists x(F \prec x)$: that F grounds a *particular* fact—namely, that $(F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$ —itself grounds *something*.²¹ But now I've shown that each component of the picture above obtains, and by transitivity, this gives us $(F \prec (F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))) \prec (F \text{ or } \exists x(F \prec x))$. So I think that we ought to take seriously the suggestion that principles are grounding facts: it is possible that $(A \prec B) \prec B$.

But perhaps all this is wrong-headed. Perhaps normative principles are of a kind that need not be grounded at all. Such has been suggested by some of the same authors who have endorsed Structure. Maguire says that his view commits him to the claim that “there will be ethical facts of some kind (presumably ethical principles) that ground other facts but that are not themselves grounded”.²² Scanlon and Enoch also suggest such a view.²³ Tim Maudlin develops a parallel view, on which laws of nature are fundamental.²⁴ After all, one might think, *something* has to be

²⁰ Fine (2010) has shown that this is not generally true, but Litland (2015) shows how it can be properly restricted, and the restricted version would still work for my purposes here.

²¹ I rely on the principle that when Φa obtains, $\Phi a \prec \exists x\Phi x$, which Kramer (2013) presents a problem for. But the problem cases involve self-grounding, which my case doesn't.

²² Maguire (2015): 195.

²³ Enoch (2011): 148; Scanlon (2014): 2, 40-41.

²⁴ Maudlin (2007): 17-18.

fundamental, and necessary laws seem like good candidates. And, if Maudlin is right, we have a precedent: there are other arenas in which laws are fundamental. Regardless, what normative principles would have to *be* in order to be ungrounded will not concern me here, since my objection to this view will not turn on that issue.

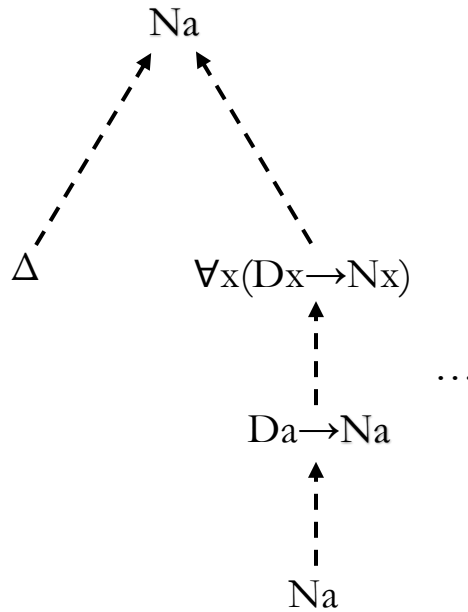
Now, there's not much more that I can say in defense of (1), except for the following informal reflection. Whatever principles are, they've got to be the kind of thing that "takes in" non-normative facts and "spits out" normative facts. This is so because, on structured non-naturalism, the function of the principles is to bridge the gap between the non-normative and the normative—after all, as non-naturalists, structured non-naturalists believe that the normative cannot be fully grounded in the non-normative. So, it's natural to think of them as universally quantifying over a conditional, with the non-normative as the antecedent and the normative as the consequent, or as grounding-facts like the above. Such structures bridge the gap between the non-normative and the normative, and it's hard to see what else could, without falling prey to one of the problems I mention below.

3.2 *Defense of (2)*

If normative principles are generalizations, then partial grounding is not irreflexive. That is, if principles are generalizations, then some facts partially ground themselves. The reason why is fairly simple. A universal generalization is at least partially grounded in its instances, such that each instance partially grounds the generalization.²⁵ So the fact that $\forall x(Dx \rightarrow Nx)$ will be partially grounded in the fact that $Da \rightarrow Na$ (where "Da" is a member of Δ). But the fact that $Da \rightarrow Na$ will be partially grounded in the fact that Na (though conditionals are often grounded in false antecedent and consequents, it cannot be so here: it is the fact that Na that is being grounded, so it must

²⁵ For all I've said, Rosen (channeling Russell) might be right that generalizations can't be *fully* grounded in their instances (Rosen 2010: 118). Even so, it will turn out that proponents of Structure will be committed to a violation of irreflexivity.

obtain). So by Transitivity, the fact that Na will partially ground the fact that Na. Here's the tree for the fact that Na:



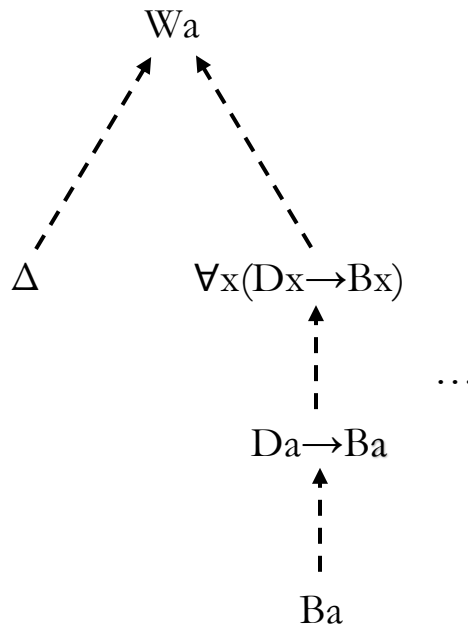
Thus, if principles are generalizations, then partial grounding is not irreflexive: facts can partially ground themselves.

Putting a necessity operator—of whatever strength—in front of the generalization won't help, either. This new fact may require further grounds in addition to its instances—as Rosen suggests, maybe laws of essence²⁶—but its instances are still part of the explanation. (If not, and the essence is the full ground, then the structured non-naturalist will have the problem I've already mentioned: that such essentialist facts seem distinctively naturalistic.) Likewise with the “it is a law that” operator: depending on one's view of laws, the law will either be at least partially grounded in its instances or be fundamental (in which case, see section 3.4).

Now, it might seem as if a quick fix is at hand. The problem came about because a certain property instantiation is grounded in a principle whose consequent ascribes that very same property.

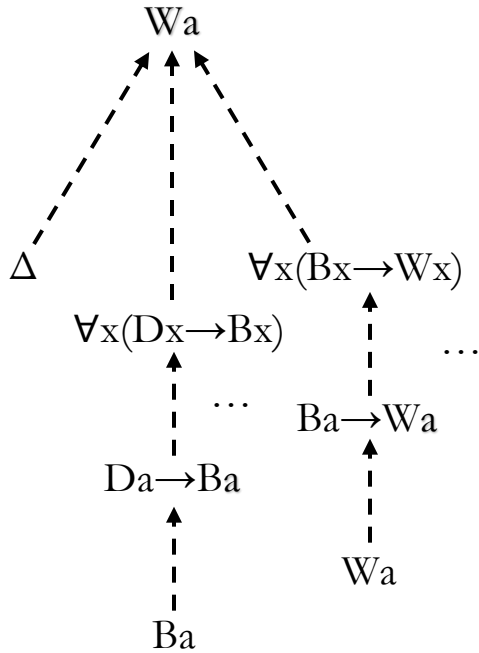
²⁶ Rosen (2010): 119.

But why not think that a fact about wrongness could be grounded in a principle of, say, badness? So we would end up with something like this:



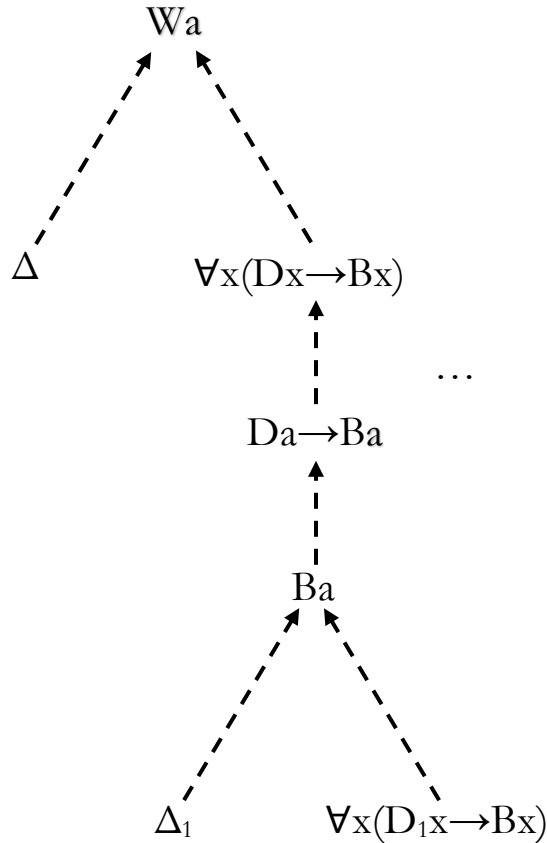
Not only is this consistent with the irreflexivity of ground, but it can seem to make sense of the intuition that wrongness obtains in virtue of facts about badness.

But the problem remains. First, the structured non-naturalist will see an explanatory gap in this picture. Have I fully explained the fact that my act is *wrong* if I tell you that it has some non-normative features, and that if it has those features, it's *bad*? No—I've yet to tell you why the act is *wrong*. We seem to need another principle connecting badness and wrongness, such that:



And then, on the righthand branch, we get the same result: grounding is not irreflexive.

Perhaps we don't need this extra principle on the righthand side. Even still, the problem persists. The fact that my act is bad, after all, does not seem like it could be fundamental (i.e., ungrounded): something must explain why it is bad, since particular instantiations of normative properties are not fundamental. And just like before, some non-normative features seem relevant to my act's badness: it was bad because it caused pain, for example. But that can't be the only ground for my act's badness, for the non-naturalist—then that my act was wrong would be fully grounded in non-normative facts. So, there will need to be another normative principle in play here:



Of course the problem here is that grounding will again fail to be irreflexive. For now our new principle (“ $\forall x(D_1x \rightarrow Bx)$ ”) will be partially grounded in its instances, and my act’s badness will be partially grounded in my act’s badness. Now of course, someone could object in the same way as in the first case—that my act’s badness could be grounded in a principle concerning some other normative property than badness. But the problem will reiterate, and (because particular instantiations of normative properties are generally not brute and there are no infinite grounding chains with infinitely many simple normative properties) will continue to do so until a property-instantiation is grounded in a principle that involves that same property.

3.3 *Defense of (3)*

If normative principles are grounding-facts, then non-naturalism is false. For the most part—with a proviso to be mentioned shortly—this is because if principles are grounding-facts, then

No Full is false. The argument in support of this is fairly complex, so here's a rough outline: grounding-facts must be grounded. Section 3.2 shows that they must be grounded in particular grounding facts. There are three basic ways these particular grounding facts could be grounded, but on two of these ways, all substantive normative facts and principles will be fully grounded in non-normative facts. A third entails that non-naturalism is false in a unique way. So, if principles are grounding-facts, then non-naturalism is false.

There is very good reason to think that particular grounding facts cannot be fundamental. First, particular grounding facts relate the fundamental to the non-fundamental, so they necessarily have non-fundamental components. Yet, on a plausible principle which I'll defend in section 3.4, an entity is fundamental iff it is a constituent of a fundamental fact. Thus, particular grounding facts cannot be fundamental. Second, as Karen Bennett points out, the fundamental entities—whatever they are—are open to free modal recombination.²⁷ If particular grounding-facts are among those entities, then there is a possible world just like this one, but in which *no* grounding relations obtain. In such a world, the actually grounded entities either don't exist or are fundamental. Neither option is plausible.

Denying the metaphysical necessity of normative principles, in favor of normative necessity, may help with Bennett's objection (assuming—as some deny²⁸—that normative necessity is weaker than metaphysical necessity).²⁹ On this option, we should *expect* (normative) particular grounding-facts to fail to obtain in some metaphysically (but not normatively) possible world. Yet it is one thing to deny that principles (understood as grounding-facts) can change across metaphysically possible worlds—as a modest reading of the normative necessity view predicts—and another thing to say that there are some metaphysically possible worlds where *no* principles obtain, and thus where

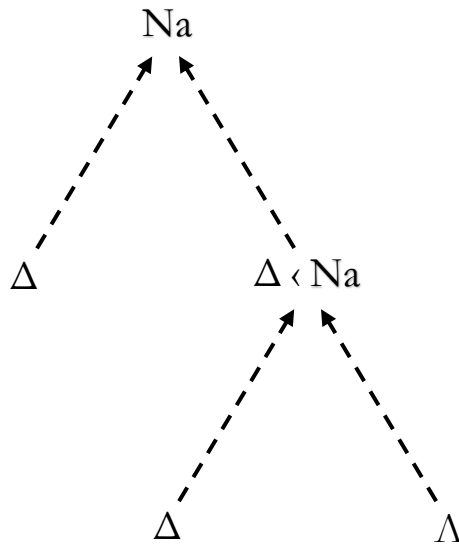
²⁷ See Bennett (2011). The basis for this argument is in Schaffer (2010): 40.

²⁸ Bader (2017).

²⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this objection.

substantive normative facts are fundamental. The latter is not predicted by the normative necessity view alone, and as I argue above in section 3.2 and below in section 4, such a prediction seems a damning one. Yet Bennett thinks it follows from grounding facts being fundamental.

The question of *how* particular grounding-facts are grounded has been answered in a number of ways. According to both Karen Bennett and Louis deRosset, when $A < B$, this fact is fully grounded in A .³⁰ However, we need to know what grounds the fact that $A < B$. Presumably it will still be A —but assume, for the sake of argument, that A only *partially* grounds the fact that $A < B$. In our case, that means that $\Delta < (\Delta < Na)$. Still, whatever else is necessary to *fully* ground the fact that $\Delta < Na$ will also be non-normative: Na certainly can't enter into the grounds, on pain of violating Irreflexivity. More generally, if normative facts enter into the grounds, then on this picture, we'll just end up with an infinite chain of normative ground. So, we get the following tree for the fact that Na , on the Bennett/deRosset picture:³¹



³⁰ See Bennett (2011) and deRosset (2013).

³¹ Because of the lessons of 3.2, I speak here and in diagrams in shorthand, assuming that grounding-facts would have to be grounded in particular grounding-facts.

Λ here is a set—possibly empty, if the fact that A fully grounds that $A \prec B$ —of non-normative facts, which together with Δ , fully grounds the fact that $\Delta \prec Na$.

On this picture, substantive normative facts and principles will all be fully grounded in non-normative facts, violating No Full. Δ is non-normative by stipulation. Call “ Γ ” whatever the full grounds of Δ are. It is clear that Γ will be wholly non-normative here: for example, the fact that an act fails to maximize utility (Δ) will just be grounded in facts about particular pleasures and pains. But we established above that the facts in Λ are all non-normative as well. But given this, we can prove the following via Cut:

1. $\Gamma \prec \Delta$
2. $\Delta, \Lambda \prec (\Delta \prec Na)$
3. $\Delta, (\Delta \prec Na) \prec Na$
4. Therefore, $\Gamma, \Delta, \Lambda \prec Na$.

Since Γ , Δ , and Λ are all sets of non-normative facts, if a particular partial grounding-fact is even partially grounded in its first relatum, then on the Bennett/deRosset view, substantive normative facts and principles are all fully grounded in non-normative facts. In that case, No Full, and thus non-naturalism, is false.

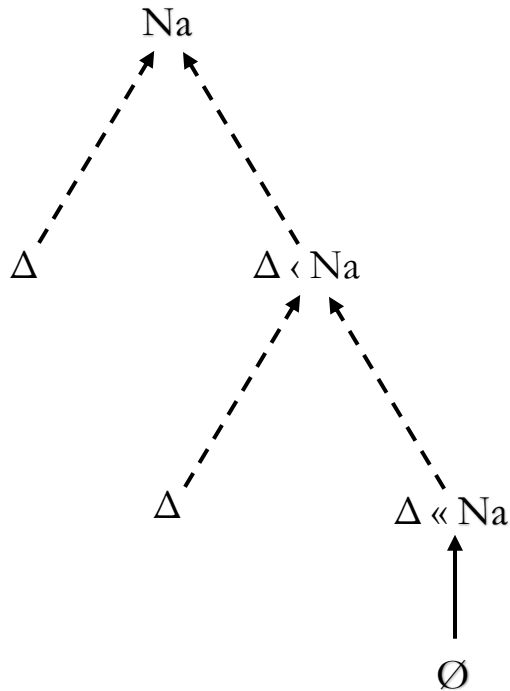
So, the structured non-naturalist might turn to Jon Litland’s recent proposal for how to ground ground.³² Litland, following Fine,³³ distinguishes between factive and non-factive ground. Factive ground is the kind I have been relying on: when A factively grounds B , A and B both obtain. When A non-factively grounds B , neither need obtain. Litland argues that when A factively grounds B , this fact is grounded in the fact that A non-factively grounds B , together with the fact that A . That A non-factively grounds B is itself zero-grounded—i.e., grounded in the members of the null set (i.e., none).³⁴

³² Litland (2017). Litland treats the term “ground” as an operator connecting sentences. I adapt the account here, simply to fit my approach.

³³ Fine (2012a): 48-50.

³⁴ See Fine (2012a): 47-48.

Things get complicated when we ask how this account is supposed to extend to partial grounding. The most natural way to extend the theory is to distinguish *partial* non-factive grounding from *full* non-factive grounding—although I know of no one explicitly doing so in the literature. Litland’s view can then be extended to say that particular *full* factive grounding-facts are grounded in *full* non-factive grounding facts (together with the ground), whereas particular *partial* factive grounding-facts are grounded in particular *partial* non-factive grounding-facts (together with the ground). Let “A « B” stand for “A partially non-factively grounds B.” On structured non-naturalism this gives us the following tree for a grounded normative fact:

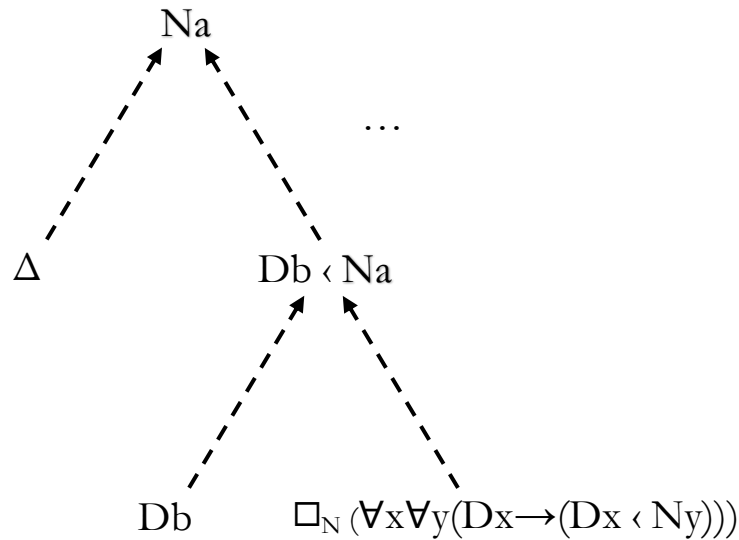


But again, using Cut, we can prove that on this picture, substantive normative facts and principles are always fully grounded in non-normative facts. Again, let Γ be the set of non-normative facts that ground Δ :

1. $\Gamma < \Delta$
2. $\emptyset < (\Delta \ll \text{Na})$
3. $\Delta, (\Delta \ll \text{Na}) < (\Delta \prec \text{Na})$
4. So, $\Gamma, \emptyset < (\Delta \prec \text{Na})$
5. $\Delta, (\Delta \prec \text{Na}) < \text{Na}$
6. Therefore, $\Gamma, \Gamma, \emptyset < \text{Na}$.

Here we have two applications of Cut, with the odd but harmless result that “ Γ ” appears twice in the grounds of Na . I’ve already established that Γ will contain only non-normative facts; \emptyset is also a non-normative fact. So on Litland’s view, we again get the result that if normative principles are grounding-facts, then all normative facts are always fully grounded in non-normative facts.

On an alternate picture advocated by Gideon Rosen, a particular grounding-fact is grounded in its first relatum, *as well as some facts about essences*.³⁵ We can thus get something like the following tree for a normative fact:



(“ Db ” is one member of Δ , but there it is possible that there are others—hence the ellipsis.) “ $\Box_N (\forall x \forall y (Dx \rightarrow (Dx \prec Ny)))$ ” is the claim that it is in the nature of the normative property N that when such-and-such non-normative facts obtain, those facts ground such-and-such normative facts.

³⁵ Rosen (2010). See also Dasgupta (2014), which endorses a broader sort of view, and explores some of the consequences of Rosen’s particular version of it.

The problem is, the structured non-naturalist cannot take this route: as Rosen has pointed out in another paper, and as I briefly outline above, to claim that it is in the nature of the normative that some non-normative facts ground some normative facts is a distinctly naturalistic claim.³⁶ (This is true even if the essentialist claim is a normative one, such that No Full is true: recall that No Full is only one commitment of non-naturalism.) After all, it is normative *naturalists* who claim that (e.g.) the wrongness of an action *by its nature* has something to do with the fact that that action fails to maximize utility, that that's *what it is* for an action to be wrong.³⁷ So, on Rosen's picture, even though normative facts are not fully grounded in non-normative facts, non-naturalism is still false.

My defense of (3) has been long and somewhat complex. But the moral of the story is simple: on any of the main views of what grounds grounding facts, if normative principles are grounding-facts, then non-naturalism is false. On the Bennett/deRosset view, as well as Litland's view, I've proven that normative facts will be fully grounded in non-normative facts. On Rosen's view, this won't be the case, but the structured non-naturalist cannot appeal to such a view, since it entails normative naturalism. Certainly we could imagine other ways of grounding grounding-facts. But (i) I've shown that non-naturalism is false on all those views currently thought plausible, and (ii) any new view might have problems of its own for the non-naturalist.³⁸

3.4 *Defense of (4)*

The final option for the structured non-naturalist is to claim that principles are some kind of ungrounded fact. Call this the view that principles are fundamental facts. But I think this can't be true: while there are some familiar problems with this view,³⁹ my objection is that normative

³⁶ Rosen (MS).

³⁷ Leary's (2017) view introduces some nuance into the essence-facts, but since her view is committed to such essence-facts standing outside the grounding order, I return to it in the final section of the paper.

³⁸ If, for example, we thought that the fact that $A < B$ was grounded in both A and B , then the structured non-naturalist would again be committed to denying irreflexivity.

³⁹ See McPherson (2012) for a Humean sort of worry that would apply here.

principles are just not the right sort of thing to be fundamental. Metaphysics has as at least one of its primary concerns figuring out which facts are fundamental. Metaphysicians not only want to know what there is—they want to know what’s at the bottom of it all, so to speak. The metaphysical grounding relation gives us an excellent way of going about this: the fundamental facts are the ungrounded ones.

But we don’t want to know just which *facts* are fundamental, but also which objects and properties are fundamental. Theists would like to know if God is a fundamental object. Physicalists would like to know if mental properties are fundamental. Where grounding is a relation between *facts*, it’s not as straightforward how we would answer such questions. But I suggest the following principle:

Fundamentality: An entity (e.g., fact, property, object, etc.) is fundamental if and only if it is a constituent of a fundamental fact.⁴⁰

This seems plausible to me: if mental properties are mentioned in the fundamental facts, then those physicalists who think mental properties aren’t fundamental will not be happy. If God is mentioned in the fundamental facts, then theists who think God is a fundamental object will feel vindicated.

Here’s an argument for Fundamentality: facts, we’ve said, are fundamental just when they’re ungrounded. But when are other entities fundamental? Assuming that there *are* necessary and sufficient conditions for the fundamentality of non-fact entities, I submit: such entities are fundamental just when we can’t describe the fundamental layer of reality without them. Suppose that facts about chairs are fully grounded in facts about sub-atomic particles: we can describe the fundamental layer of reality without ever mentioning chairs. Chairs are, in Michael Raven’s sense, *eliminable* in the grounding order.⁴¹ It’s natural to say, then, that chairs are not fundamental objects. Suppose, however, that facts about the sub-atomic particles that ground chairs are ungrounded—

⁴⁰ See Litland (2017); Sider (2011): §7.2, 8.2.1; deRosset (2013): 3; Bennett (2011): 27.

⁴¹ Raven (2016).

then we can't describe the fundamental layer of reality without mentioning those particles. It is equally natural to then say that such particles are fundamental.

Consider, on the other hand, an alternative account of (non-fact) entity-fundamentality:

Alternative: An entity E is fundamental iff the fact that E exists is ungrounded.

Alternative, as opposed to Fundamentality, seems to allow that some entities that partially constitute fundamental facts may yet be non-fundamental. Set aside that Alternative has controversial consequences. (Material simples—plausibly fundamental—exist iff they are spatially located. But it might be that their being spatially located at least partially explains their existence, rather than the other way around.) The main problem here is not that Alternative is false—it's that it entails Fundamentality, on two plausible assumptions. Consider the following argument from Alternative to Fundamentality:

1. An entity E is fundamental iff the fact that E exists is ungrounded. (Alternative)
2. If the fact that E exists is ungrounded, then E is a constituent of an ungrounded fact. (First Plausible Assumption)
3. If E is a constituent of an ungrounded fact, then the fact that E exists is ungrounded. (Second Plausible Assumption)
4. So, the fact that E exists is ungrounded iff E is a constituent of an ungrounded fact. (From 2 and 3)
5. Therefore, E is fundamental iff it is a constituent of a fundamental fact. (From 1 and 4)

(2) is plausible because E is a constituent of the fact that E exists. (3) is plausible since it seems counterintuitive that there should be constituents of ungrounded facts whose existence is grounded. Consider the contrapositive of (3): in cases where the fact that E exists is ungrounded, can E be a constituent of an ungrounded fact? Let's take a clear case where the antecedent is true: material composites. The chair's existence is grounded in the existence of its parts. Precisely because of this, it seems like chairs won't show up in the fundamental layer of reality (the ungrounded facts). While this is not a knock-down argument for (3), I think it does highlight its plausibility.

So I think we should accept Fundamentality. But now assume, as we must if we deny (4) of the Master Argument, that normative principles are fundamental. What are some candidate (fundamental) normative principles? Here are a few:

- An act is wrong iff it doesn't maximize happiness.
- Belief that P is rational iff all the available evidence favors P over not-P.
- The only thing good without qualification is the good will.
- It is in one's best interest to avoid painful experiences.

If we assume that some principles are fundamental, surely at least one of these is a good candidate. But then the problem is clear: happiness and painfulness turn out to be fundamental properties, and beliefs and wills turn out to be fundamental objects. But that seems, at the very least, radically controversial.

My argument doesn't require the particular examples to be true fundamental principles. If premise (4) of the Master Argument is false, then there will be *some* true fundamental principle(s). And given what I said above—that the function of principles is to “take in” non-normative facts and “spit out” normative ones—such principles will have some non-normative object/property as a constituent. Now, it's possible that that non-normative entity will be fundamental—the fundamental normative principles could say something like “When the fundamental particles are arranged thus-and-so, then one ought to Φ ”. But it would be outrageous to hold our normative metaphysics hostage to such principles. That's just not what the fundamental normative principles look like, on any plausible normative theory.

Of course there are ways of replying to my argument here. One is to take issue with Fundamentality. “What this shows,” one might object, “is that Fundamentality is false—it commits us to the claim that principles can't be fundamental. But this is more implausible than the denial of Fundamentality.” But this isn't right. I have shown that Fundamentality is inconsistent with the view that *normative* principles are ungrounded *facts*. First, this may not apply to other kinds of principles:

fundamental principles in physics may only have fundamental constituents. Second, Fundamentality is only a problem for the view that normative principles are fundamental *on the assumption of Structure*. Structure presupposes that principles are amongst the grounds of particular normative facts. Because grounding is factive, this entails that normative principles are facts. If such facts are ungrounded, Fundamentality gives rise to the problem I note. But if one thinks that principles are *not* amongst the grounds of other normative facts, but instead (as on Bader’s view) stand outside the grounding relation and “govern” it, one is free to deny that principles are facts. And then, since Fundamentality only entails that an entity is fundamental when it is a constituent of a fundamental *fact*, one can endorse both Fundamentality and the view that principles are ungrounded. Fundamentality only causes problems for the proponent of Structure.

A second type of reply is to accept Fundamentality, but to claim that normative principles are primitive—that they have no internal structure—as Maudlin claims of laws of nature.⁴² But this view of principles makes most sense on views that *don’t* place principles amongst the grounds of particular facts. I here treat grounding as a relation between facts, and facts have internal structure (so do truths and sentences, so my point here doesn’t depend on any controversial assumption about grounding). Since the structured non-naturalist assumes that principles are amongst the grounds of normative facts, she cannot appeal to a view like Maudlin’s.

It also seems out of place for the structured non-naturalist to appeal to Shamik Dasgupta’s notion of *autonomous* facts.⁴³ An autonomous fact, according to Dasgupta, is one that is not *apt* for grounding. That a material simple is located at some particular place might be ungrounded—but it is still *apt* for grounding. The question “Why is the particle there?” isn’t out of place, even if there’s no answer to it. That it is essential to water that it is composed of H₂O is also ungrounded, but it also

⁴² See Maudlin (2007): 17-18. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

⁴³ Dasgupta (2014), Dasgupta (2016).

seems like it would be out of place to ask for its grounds. The first fact is merely ungrounded; the second is autonomous.

Yet even if we grant the distinction, it won't help: autonomous facts are still fundamental, in my sense.⁴⁴ So even if normative principles are autonomous, this doesn't alleviate the problem with Fundamentality: principles will still be ungrounded facts, such that any entity that partially constitutes one is fundamental. We thus shouldn't expect them to be made up of any non-fundamental entities. Yet normative principles involve apparently non-fundamental entities. Furthermore, plausible normative principles just aren't good candidates for autonomous facts: it seems to make sense to ask why it is that an act is wrong iff it doesn't maximize happiness, or why the good will is the only thing good without qualification. True, there may be no answer, just as there may be no answer as to why the material simple is located at a certain position. But as in all these cases, the questions seem to be in principle *answerable*.

Perhaps, after all this, the Master Argument is open to the reply that I haven't considered this or that way of understanding principles, and that such an understanding holds the key for structured non-naturalism. On the one hand, one can never give a completely satisfactory reply to this sort of objection: there is always some new, problem-solving theory that can be proposed. I have given all the major options I know of. On the other hand, I think that many of my arguments here will apply to other ways of understanding principles. For example, as I noted, doesn't depend on any particular understanding of principles. And the argument against the principles-as-universal-generalizations option will apply to views on which principles are, for example, hedged generalizations: such hedged facts will still be partially grounded in their instances. So I think that the Master Argument represents a very strong case against structured non-naturalism.

⁴⁴ Dasgupta defines fundamentality differently, but this is irrelevant here.

4. Options for the Non-Naturalist

I see two ways that the non-naturalist could avoid the problem I've outlined here while still retaining at least something *like* Structure. Since neither is without its problems, I will simply outline them here, noting the problems with each. The first solution is to deny Structure, replacing it with a closely related thesis. Some philosophers—most notably Fine⁴⁵—think that there is a distinct kind of grounding in the normative domain. Call it *normative grounding*, and let “ $A <_N B$ ” mean that A fully normatively grounds B, and “ $A \llcorner_N B$ ” mean that A partially normatively grounds B. The main distinguishing mark of normative grounding is that when $A <_N B$, A does not metaphysically entail B, but only *normatively* entails B; whereas, when $A < B$, A metaphysically entails B.⁴⁶ When A normatively grounds B, A still explains B, but this is a normative, and not a metaphysical explanation.

With this new notion in hand, the non-naturalist can endorse the following:

Structure_N: All substantive normative facts are partially *normatively* grounded in normative principles.

Structure_N will not be in conflict with non-naturalism, as Structure is. And yet it may save the intuitions behind Structure.

This solution has a problem. It's a truism (or as close as philosophy can get to one) that the normative supervenes on the non-normative. But if normative facts are only fully *normatively* grounded in non-normative facts, then at best the non-naturalist can derive the following global supervenience claim:

Supervenience_N: For any two *normatively* possible worlds W_1 and W_2 , if W_1 and W_2 are identical in all non-normative respects, then W_1 and W_2 are identical in all normative respects.

⁴⁵ See Fine (2012a): 37-40. See also Rosen (MS).

⁴⁶ Some question such entailment, such as Skiles (2015). I put such worries aside here, since without any such entailment, it becomes unclear how normative and metaphysical grounding are distinct, which would undermine the whole response here.

But the non-naturalist won't be able to explain a stronger supervenience claim:

Supervenience_M: For any two *metaphysically* possible worlds W_1 and W_2 , if W_1 and W_2 are identical in all non-normative respects, then W_1 and W_2 are identical in all normative respects.⁴⁷

This is because, if $A <_N B$, then B obtains in all the *normatively* possible worlds in which A obtains; but for all that, there may be a *metaphysically* possible world where A obtains but B doesn't. (In fact, where $A <_N B$, this seems to *require* that A not metaphysically entail B —that normative grounding involves a weaker entailment is part of how Fine defines the relation, and it is difficult to see how we would distinguish it from metaphysical grounding without this difference.⁴⁸) The problem is, it is commonly thought that Supervenience_M is true, and for good reason: if it is false, then even though it is wrong for me to kick the cat, there could be a possible world where it is ok for me to do so, even though all the non-normative features of the situation are the same. There could be worlds where the Rwandan genocide was permissible, though those worlds are just like this one in all non-normative respects.⁴⁹ So there is a widely-accepted and deeply intuitive claim that the non-naturalist won't be able to explain, if she resorts to normative grounding.

Of course, Supervenience_M is certainly not beyond question. Gideon Rosen and Kit Fine have separately argued that it may be false, proposing instead that the normative only *normatively* supervenes on the non-normative.⁵⁰ However, my argument purports to show that we must abandon either Structure_N, No Full, or Supervenience_M. And since I'm assuming No Full in order to see where the non-naturalist is left in all this, the relevant question is whether Structure_N or Supervenience_M is more plausible. To those—like Rosen and Fine—who think that Supervenience_M

⁴⁷ See, e.g., McPherson (2012); Dreier (1992); Ridge (2007); Scanlon (2014): 3; Enoch (2011): ch. 6; Shafer-Landau (2003): 76-77. I don't claim that all these authors endorse the specific formulation of supervenience given here, only that some form of supervenience across all *metaphysically possible* worlds is agreed on.

⁴⁸ Fine (2012a): section 1.

⁴⁹ See McPherson (2012), as well as Bader (2017) for discussion.

⁵⁰ Rosen (MS) and Fine (2002).

perhaps ought to be abandoned, what I've said will have no force as an argument against Structure_N. Appealing to Structure_N, and thus retaining a very close relative of structured non-naturalism, is a legitimate option for them. But to those of us still strongly committed to Supervenience_M, appealing to Structure_N in order to save (something like) structured non-naturalism will do no good.

A second solution is for the non-naturalist to appeal to what might be described as a variety of particularism. On this reply, principles play no robust explanatory role. There are just the substantive normative facts, where some of these may partially ground others (in the simplest case, conjunctive normative facts will be partially grounded in particular normative facts). That some normative facts partially ground others might be thought to save some of the spirit, if not the letter, of Structure.

Yet this kind of particularism has trouble accounting for No Full. Without principles in play, No Full requires of the particularist that some substantive normative facts will have to be ungrounded. Presumably these will be particular normative facts, such as that Woo's destruction of the rug was wrong. But such facts are horrible candidates for fundamentality—not only do they encounter similar problems with Fundamentality as normative principles did earlier—are acts of destruction fundamental entities?—but they just seem like they must be at least partially grounded in non-normative facts. That Woo's act was wrong is partially grounded in the fact that he caused Jeff a lot of trouble. The particularist must claim that there are some such particular normative facts that are completely ungrounded. That seems like a high price to me.

In my view, in light of the tendentious nature of these replies on the behalf of structured non-naturalism, the non-naturalist ought to deny Structure. Principles do not help ground substantive normative facts; instead, substantive normative facts are fully grounded in the non-normative. However, there are some kind of normative facts, broadly construed, that are not fully grounded in the non-normative. But how could this be?

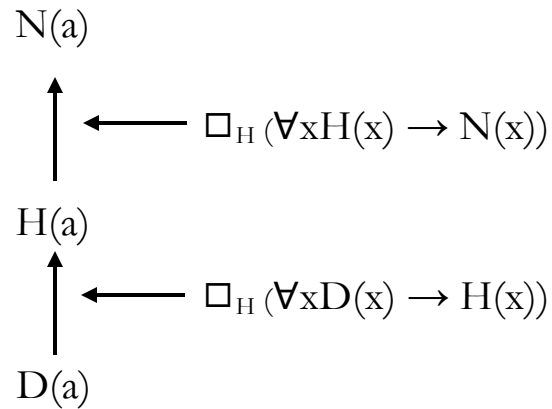
There are at least two views on offer here. I do not maintain that they are the only plausible views. I offer them here just to point in the direction of some ways the non-naturalist might plausibly deny Structure. Ralf Bader argues that normative principles are not amongst the grounds of substantive normative facts, but rather “govern” the (full) grounding of those facts in the non-normative.⁵¹ Causal laws do not help cause an effect, but rather govern the causation relation; similarly, inference rules do not enter a syllogism as premises, but rather govern the inference from premises to conclusion. Normative principles work on analogy with such cases, and, just as causal laws are not the kind of thing that could be caused and inference rules are not the sort of thing to be inferred from, normative principles are not the sort of thing to be grounded.. Thus Bader retains No Full while denying Structure.

Stephanie Leary offers a different way of accomplishing this feat.⁵² Leary also denies Structure: typical substantive normative facts are fully grounded in the non-normative. Yet she proposes a unique role for what she calls “hybrid” normative facts: non-hybrid normative facts are fully grounded in hybrid ones, and hybrid facts are fully grounded in the non-normative. Furthermore, it is facts about the essences of such hybrid properties that ground these very grounding facts. So, for example, perhaps *being in pain* is a hybrid normative property, and it is in the nature of being in pain that (a) if one’s C-fibers are firing, then one is in pain, and (b) if x is a painful experience, then x is bad. While (a) grounds the lower-level particular grounding-facts like “That I’m in pain is grounded in the fact that such-and-such C-fibers are firing”, (b) grounds the upper-level grounding facts like “That x is bad is grounded in the fact x is painful”.

⁵¹ Bader (2017). Bader thinks non-naturalists are committed to normative facts being *normatively* grounded in the non-normative, which would raise the same problems that Structure_N does. But I take this feature of his view to be independent of the one I propose here.

⁵² Leary (2017).

This all gives us the following sort of view (where here, “H(a)” is a hybrid fact, and the horizontal arrows represent full grounding of the particular grounding-facts pointed to):



So, on Leary’s view, there are normative facts—particularly, facts about the essences of hybrid normative properties—that do not help ground substantive normative facts like “x is bad”, but rather ground the fact that it is grounded in some other, hybrid facts (and similarly for the lower-level grounding facts). These essence-facts, however, are not in need of grounding: just as it makes no sense to ask what grounds the fact that water is H₂O, so also it makes no sense to ask what grounds the fact that it is essential to pain that painful things are bad. Such essence facts are thus autonomous, in Dasgupta’s sense, and that is why Leary ends up able to endorse No Full. I do not claim that Leary’s view, or Bader’s, is without problems. But I think they are promising options to the non-naturalist who wants—as she should, given my argument—to deny Structure.

Conclusion

Non-naturalists want to rule out the *full* metaphysical dependence of some substantive normative facts or principles on non-normative facts. Many of them also hold the view that there is some structure to the normative: that substantive normative facts are partially grounded in principles. I’ve tried to show here that these two commitments are incompatible. I’ve also tried to show that the hopes of saving something like structured non-naturalism by endorsing something

close to but not identical to Structure seem dim. So, it seems to me that, unless we can defend the idea that the normative only normatively supervenes on the non-normative, non-naturalists need to abandon Structure. They could instead endorse some view on which normative principles govern the grounding of substantive normative facts in the non-normative, or a view on which facts about the essences of certain kinds of normative properties ground the very grounding of the normative in the non-normative. While these may not be the only options, they are a good start, and at any rate we can now see that the non-naturalist ought to feel comfortable accepting the full grounding of substantive normative facts in the non-normative.

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