Realism and Reduction: the Quest for Robustness

Mark Schroeder

Everything is what it is, and not another thing.
—*Bishop Butler*

The problem with… [this], of course, is that even if goodness were a natural property, it would still only be identical with itself, what it is, and not another thing.
—*Nicholas Sturgeon*

1.1 A Comic Example

I recently came across an evangelical comic strip discussing whether evolutionary theory is true. The strip consists of a dialogue between a righteous college student and his arrogant atheist college professor, and the student is on the verge of convincing his professor of the literal truth of the Book of Genesis when he switches tacks. "Protons have positive charge," he points out. "One law of electricity is: LIKE CHARGES REPEL EACH OTHER! Since all the protons in the nucleus are positively charged, they should repel each other and scatter into space." The student argues that we need to believe in God in order to understand what keeps atoms from scattering into space, and in the strip, this is the clincher: his professor hurriedly leaves the classroom and goes to his department chair to explain that he can no longer teach evolutionary theory, since it is false.[1]

But as an argument for the existence of God, this might seem a little bit questionable, or at least not thoroughly compelling. Physicists already believe in the strong nuclear force, after all. It's what holds the nuclei of atoms together. So if we really *need* to posit the existence of God in order to understand why atoms stay together, then God must be none other than the strong nuclear force. But this is a puzzling sort of claim to make. It's one thing to say that among

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[1]Chick Publications: http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0055/0055_01.asp.

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the many things that God does, is holding atoms together. It's quite another to say that God just *is* the strong nuclear force. If I tell you that I believe in the traditional Christian God—because I believe Him to be the strong nuclear force, and I believe in the strong nuclear force—you're warranted in replying, "Oh, so you're an atheist." The strong nuclear force did not create and does not sustain the universe. It has not spoken to us by its prophets. And it does not have a son who became flesh and walked among us and sits at its right hand and will come with glory to judge the living and the dead and whose kingdom will have no end. So it simply can't be the traditional Christian God.

This example is highly instructive. Someone who claims to believe in God—that He is the strong nuclear force—is offering a reductive theory about God. But her claim to really, genuinely believe in the traditional Christian God is hard to credit. If she really thinks that God is the strong nuclear force, then it is very natural to attribute to her no belief in God at all, just a belief in the strong nuclear force. She seems to have claimed that, contrary to Bishop Butler's dictum, God is somehow more or other than what He is: He is another thing. And in consequence her reductive view seems to fail to be realist—at least, about God. It is much more natural to understand it as eliminativist. Insofar as we are interested in the possibility or impossibility of interesting reductive theories which nevertheless count as genuinely realist, therefore, it is worth understanding and appreciating exactly *why* the example seems to be describable in this way, and why the result seems like it would have to generalize to *any* reductive theory about God.

1.2 Plantinga's Challenge

The question, I think, is a pressing one. As Alvin Plantinga has remarked about the project of giving actualist-

respectable reductions of possibilist talk about modality,[2]

> This strikes me a bit like an effort on the part of a genial atheist to offer a 'truth-preserving' translation of theistic discourse into discourse committed only to the sorts of entities acceptable to atheists.

And Plantinga is not the only one to think of at least some reductive views in this light. Many domains of philosophical investigation bear witness to longstanding and sometimes seemingly intractable debates about the possibility of reduction. And like Plantinga,[3] both non-reductive realists and irrealists in many domains typically share the view that it is *obvious* that reductive views are less realistically respectable. They hold that they are somehow *less* realist, or that their realism is less *robust*.[4] As Thomas Nagel puts the charge,[5]

> If values are objective, they must be so in their own right, and not through reducibility to some other kind of objective fact. They have to be objective *values*, not objective anything else.

And Nagel doesn't believe that *any* reductive view about values could possibly meet this criterion.

Derek Parfit joins Nagel in his skepticism about reduction of the normative. He seem to hold of non-reductive normative realism that "[i]t is *amazing* that these truths still need defending".[6] Nagel and Parfit hold that there is some-

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[2] Plantinga [1985], 330-331.
[3] Plantinga, of course, figures as a non-reductive realist in the theological case and an eliminativist in the possibilist case.
[4] "Robust realism" has in fact been used as a name for non-reductive realism about the normative by David Enoch. Enoch [2003].
[5] Nagel [1986], 138.
[6] In his unpublished manuscript, *Rediscovering Reasons.* The remark actually closes Parfit's discussion of the distinction between desire-based and value-based theories of reasons, but context suggests that he intends it to apply to his larger project of defending non-reductive realism.

thing about the normative which makes it *obvious* that no reduction of it could possibly succeed. Like Plantinga, they aren't maintaining that no "truth-preserving translation" of normative talk can be given. They simply maintain that whatever we get from such a translation, it won't be talk about the *normative*. Like the reduction of God to the strong nuclear force, it will only succeed at changing the subject.

In order to evaluate these kinds of claim, we need to know what it is about the theological that renders it so obviously incapable of non-eliminativist reduction. And we need to know whether consciousness, the normative, and so on are like the theological in this respect, or whether they hold out better prospects for admitting of a realist reduction. We need, that is, an answer to what I'll call *Plantinga's Challenge*.

1.3   The Project

Answering Plantinga's Challenge fits into a Larger Project—trying to understand what it is that makes non-reductive realists in various domains of philosophical inquiry so thoroughly resistant to the idea of philosophical reduction. Reductions, after all, are at least in principle supposed to be theoretically fruitful. They can help us to explain supervenience theses and other kinds of metaphysical impossibilities. They are supposed to make smooth the ways of the epistemology of many domains. They give us a grip on how our terms could ever have managed to *refer* to properties or entities in the reduced domain, and what makes us able to have *thoughts* about it. And—certainly not to be discounted in an itemization of what historically has motivated reductive views—they are supposed to make the reduced domain simply less *mysterious*, by telling us a little bit of what it is *about*.

Non-reductivists are understandably uncompelled by

this last kind of consideration. They typically hold that it is only certain kinds of naturalist or physicalist *prejudices* which typically make reductivists think that the reduced domains are philosophically mysterious in the first place. That is understandable. But non-reductivists typically *also* profess to be unmoved by the advantages of reduction in explaining supervenience and other metaphysical impossibilities, and in enabling an adequate epistemology and semantics for the reduced domain. Sometimes, of course, they have other stories about how this epistemology and semantics are possible. But often they are so averse to reduction that they are content to tell us that we *can just tell by intuition* whether something is good, or that phenomenological qualia are simply *transparent* to the mind. And they are even willing to accept metaphysical impossibilities such as those postulated by a supervenience thesis as *brute*.[7] These theorists find reduction so unpalatable that they are typically unmoved by even the legitimate explanatory theoretical aspirations of reductive theorists.

But it is far from clear that the arguments which non-reductivists claim to be their reasons for rejecting reduction are so decisive. So let us focus on the case of ethics, or of the normative more generally, where we understand by "normative" the whole class of subject matters which are of broadly the same kind as those traditionally studied by ethical theory: the *right*, *just*, *good*, *rational*, *correct* and so on. It is still widely maintained[8] that it is some version of Moore's Open Question argument which decisively establishes that no reduction of the normative can be possible.

But this is surprising, given the developments in the philosophy of language during the twentieth century. The Open Question argument, in all of its various forms, places a test of *cognitive significance* on the adequacy of reductions. It

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[7] Most famously, Moore [1903].
[8] For example, it is appealed to by Gibbard [1990], 11.

asks us whether the reductive view is one which would or could be accepted by any speakers competent with the terms involved, or any thinkers in possession of the relevant concepts. Or it asks us whether the question whether the reduction is true is cognitively significant, or whether someone can believe that something is good without believing that it is pleasant (or whatever the good is supposed to reduce to).

But it is *concepts* which are the theoretical entities that are supposed to explain phenomena of cognitive significance. It is *concepts* which are supposed to explain how it is possible to wonder whether Tully was an orator without wondering whether Cicero was an orator, and to believe that the Pacific Ocean is filled with water, without believing that it is filled with H$_2$O. Whereas reductive views—even according to *Moore*[9]—are supposed to be views about *properties*. And this is widely acknowledged to be so. Properties are *not* the kinds of thing to be distinguished by criteria of cognitive significance. So the whole class of Open Question-like arguments which use various criteria associated with cognitive significance, or agreement or disagreement among competent speakers or those who possess the relevant concepts, look like they are not even the right *kind* of thing to evaluate whether a reductive view is true.

True, there have been various attempts to explain, appealing to some substantive theories about what must happen in order for there to be a synthetic necessary truth, why Open Question arguments are still relevant to questions about reduction.[10] But if Open Question arguments are on the face of it not even the right *kind* of thing to be criteria to evaluate reductions, it is hard to see how the Open Question

argument could possibly be the basis on which non-reductivists can find it so *obvious* that the project of reduction is *thoroughly* hopeless, or what leads them to believe that reductive views are less "realist". So I hold that the *best* hypothesis about non-reductivists is that they have *other* reasons for thinking that reductive views are hopeless—ones which upon reflection they find to be the most decisive, or at least which are what *really* move them to think that Open Question and similar arguments are in fact decisive. The Larger Project, then, is to discover what it is that *really* turns philosophers off to reduction—in such a way that reduction can seem obviously hopeless, rather than simply unpromising or misguided.

2.1   A Two-Pronged Diagnosis: Error

My diagnosis of the force of Plantinga's Challenge consists of two prongs. In this part of the paper I develop this diagnosis and explain why it makes things look less bad for reductions of the normative than for reductions of the theological. Then in parts 3 and 4, I consider and develop a response to what I diagnose as a particular *version* of Plantinga's Challenge, which I take to have been posed by Thomas Nagel. I hold that something like Nagel's Worry plays a significant role in a number of non-reductivists' skepticism about reduction, at least in the case of the normative.

My answer to Plantinga's Challenge, as I noted, consists of two prongs. The first prong is the observation of *error*. The things I noted about the purported reduction of God to the strong nuclear force were straightforward. God is supposed to have created the universe. But the strong nuclear force did not create the universe. God is supposed to have spoken to us by His prophets. But the strong nuclear force doesn't speak to anyone. God is supposed to be omnipresent—the strong nuclear force might be that. But God is sup-

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[9]This is disputable, of course (see Regan [2003]), but here is what Moore *says*: "My business is solely with that *object* or *idea*, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word [good] is generally used to *stand for*. What I want to discover is the nature of this object or idea, and about this I am extremely anxious to arrive at an agreement." Moore [2003], 58; italics added.

[10]See, for example, Horgan and Timmons [1991].

posed to be omniscient, and the strong nuclear force is hardly omniscient. God is supposed to sustain the universe—the strong nuclear force might do that—but God is also supposed to care for His creation, and the strong nuclear force can hardly be said to do that. It's because so many things that are supposed to be true of God simply are not true of the strong nuclear force that someone who believes that God is the strong nuclear force does not count as fully believing in God—even if he thinks not only that the sentence "God exists" is "truth-apt", but that it is true.

What goes wrong with the reduction in the theological case, it seems, is that it commits us to enough local error theories about the various phenomena that are supposed to be central to theological discourse that we miss out on a lot of what we were supposed to get by believing in God in the first place. If the whole point of realism about God is to capture the basic theological phenomena—that God is (at least on the traditional Christian view) the creator, omniscient and omnipotent and eternal and loving—then so long as we genuinely respect these phenomena, we won't be happy with the reduction. Moreover, we will find it *obvious* that the reduction has to go, and will be prone to say such things as that "[i]t's amazing that these truths still need defending". If we are realists about some area of discourse in order to capture the phenomena, and reduction forces us to reject these phenomena, then of course we are going to think that reduction is as good as elimination, whether it lets us say that there are "properties" or "truths" in the relevant area or not. Whatever these properties or truths turn out to be, they won't be the ones that we started by wanting to be realists about.[11]

The case of theological discourse is a strong case in part because the phenomena surrounding traditional theological discourse are so rich and demanding. For one thing, whatever God is, He has to be one god but three persons. That's hard enough to explain, no matter what else we say about it. He has to have created the universe. He has to be all-knowing and all-powerful. To capture the central claims of theological discourse, it's *not* enough to make sense of the thesis that God exists by assigning "God" a referent. You have to assign "God" a referent which created the universe and is all-knowing and all-powerful, since these are some of the central claims which theological discourse is supposed to capture. So if you don't really believe that there is a thing such that it created the universe and is all-knowing and all-powerful, then you can't capture the central claims of theological discourse, no matter what referent you assign to "God".[12]

2.2 Propagating Implications

But I said that my diagnosis consists of two prongs. The second prong arises when we consider how a sophisticated reductivist might try to solve these problems, in order to avoid committing to so many local errors about God. For

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[11]Notice what I have *not* said. I have *not* said that talk about God comes with a set of *a priori* reference-fixing descriptions that are constitutive of the meaning of "God", and that it is when a reductive account fails to capture *these* that it counts as eliminativist. For all that I have said, and I think that this is probably right, the "central claims" of traditional Christian theological discourse probably come with varying degrees of centrality. For example, it is almost certainly more central to this discourse that God created the universe than that He is one god but three persons, and that is almost certainly more central than the claim that He appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush. No matter what view one takes on the role of reference-fixing conditions, the claim that God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush is not plausibly understood as part of an *a priori* reference-fixing description for "God". But it seems to me that if a reductive view was committed to errors about *enough* claims like this, that could warrant skepticism that it is sincerely realist about the traditional Christian God.

[12]Compare standard taxonomies on which to count as a normative realist all that you have to do is to be a cognitivist but not an error-theorist. So this is enough to establish that this condition is really insufficient for realism in any *robust* sense.

there *is* room to wiggle. You may start by assigning an interpretation of "God" in the sentence "God exists" and then notice that the thing you assigned to it—the strong nuclear force, for example—did not actually create the universe, at least in the ordinary sense of "create". But if you're a clever reductive theorist, you have some tricks to pull out of your sleeve. You can provide "created" a special sense in this context. When theists say that God created the universe, you can posit, what they mean is that God is present in creative people. Since the strong nuclear force is present in creative people, "God created the universe" turns out to be true. So in this way, you can capture the central truths of theistic discourse with your reduction.

Or can you? You have a theory on which "God created the universe" comes out to be true, but you haven't got a theory on which it is true that God created the universe. For by hypothesis, you mean something else by "God created the universe" than that God created the universe. Creation, on your account, is not a unified or interesting phenomenon, as people have always believed, but in fact is fundamentally disjunctive. It can be true that *X* created *Y* either if *Y* did not exist and then was made to exist through *X*'s efforts, or else if *X* is the strong nuclear force and is present in creative people. Your account makes the central claims of theological discourse come out sounding true only because it trades on the ambiguity between these two ways of being created. But theists have always wanted the universe to come out created by God in the *same* sense as the half-finished matchstick model of 1879 Hall in my living room comes out created by me.[13] So giving a disjunctive or ambiguous account of "created" won't help you capture the central claims of traditional Christian theism.

You might try to fix this by holding that your reinter-

pretation of "created" is in fact how the word "created" works *all of the time*. This would make it more plausible that you've captured the central claims of theism, for when you say that God created the universe, you mean that he created it in the same sense that I created the half-finished matchstick model of 1879 Hall in my living room. But just as your revisionary account of "God" had to capture the central claims about God in order to count as robustly realist, your revisionary account of creation is going to have to capture the central claims about creation, in order to be plausibly an account of *creation*, as opposed to some other thing. It will have to capture, for example, the claims that creation is an *action*, and that before something is created, it does not exist, while after it is created, it does.[14] If your account can't capture these kinds of truths, then you haven't succeeded in talking about creation. And if you haven't succeeded in talking about creation, you haven't succeeded in giving a reductive account of God.

This is the problem of what I call *propagating implications*, and it is the second prong of my diagnosis of what makes the theological look to be irreducible. Because the central commitments of theological discourse are set out primarily in non-theistic terms, anything we tweak in our account of "creation" or "omniscience" in order to avoid local errors is going to enmesh us in further errors about creation and knowledge in domains that on the face of it have nothing to do with theology. Since the implications of tweaks in our account of the central theological notions *propagate*, it's highly unpromising to think that there could ever be a way to smooth out the carpet—the bulge is always going to end up someplace else, and likely to grow along the way.

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[13] Which it does, embarrassingly enough.

[14] This one by itself might be hard enough for a theist who believes that God created the universe outside of time, rather than at some point in time.

2.3 The Normative

If this is the right diagnosis of what makes it seem like the reductive view about God is hopelessly atheist, then the correct response to Plantinga's Challenge on behalf of the reductive theorist about the normative should be clear: that the normative is not subject to propagating implications in the same way as the theological. It is not hard to see why this is so. For the central commitments of theological discourse are primarily set out in wholly non-theological terms—creation, knowledge, and so on. But many of the central commitments of normative discourse are primarily set out at least in part in terms of other normative notions.

Claims connecting the normative with the non-normative are mostly highly tendentious, until the non-normative side is provided some kind of normative qualification. For example, meta-ethical internalists claim that it is a central commitment of normative discourse that whenever someone makes a normative judgment, she will be motivated to act accordingly. But very few people accept this straightforward version of meta-ethical internalism any more. Almost all proponents of internalism allow that when someone makes a normative judgment, it is only if she is *practically rational* that she will be motivated to act accordingly.[15] The principal work, here, in all such views, seems to be done by the notion of practical rationality. Indeed, since Michael Smith takes meta-ethical internalism to be *the* central commitment about the normative, it is precisely this fact that lets him capture it. He gives a reductive account of practical rationality on which it is essentially the disposition to acquire desires that will motivate one to act in accordance with one's normative judgments. In other words, he gives it precisely the reduction necessary in order to make meta-ethical internalism come out true, no matter what the reduction of the other normative phenomena turns out to be.[16] This kind of tweak in order to avoid error suppresses the error locally, instead of spreading it under another part of the carpet. So it avoids the propagating implications of the reductive account of God, while capturing the important truth (if it is a truth) of meta-ethical judgment internalism.

If meta-ethical internalism is true, however, it is still only one interesting and central claim about the normative that a reduction will have to capture in order not to plausibly count as being eliminative. The only way to see whether any particular reduction succeeds at capturing all of the important phenomena about the normative is to actually carry out the reduction and test it on various normative phenomena in order to see how much sense it can make of them. If I am right that thoughts much along the lines of Plantinga's Challenge are a large part of what makes philosophers skeptical about reductive views about the normative, and right in my diagnosis of the nature of the Challenge, then discussions of reductive realism about morality or the normative have been conducted in entirely the wrong fashion. These discussions nearly always proceed in the abstract, without specifying the details of any particular reduction.[17] But according to my response to Plantinga's Challenge, the fruit of reduction is in the details. Only by looking at the details, can we see whether a reductive view in fact manages to avoid the kinds of local error that would make it seem to fail to be realist about its subject matter. In the absence of a reductive account which *does* demonstrably get the details right, skepticism is warranted about whether any reductive view will work.

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[15]See especially Korsgaard [1986] and Smith [1994].

[16]Smith [1994]. The details in Smith's view are somewhat more complicated, but this is essentially the picture.

[17]For example, Boyd [1988] and Jackson [1997].

3.1 Nagel's Worry

So far, the verdict is this: because the central truths about the normative are cashed out at least partly in other normative terms, the normative is a much better candidate than the theological to admit of reduction, since this makes it more likely that the central truths about the normative can be captured while still avoiding propagating implications. But reductivists still owe us many more details, in order to convince us that any reductive view actually *does* manage to capture everything that we begin by thinking is true about the normative. For example, a reductive theorist who tells us that the normative reduces in some essentially consequentialist way is unlikely to convince those of us who hold that agent-centered restrictions and special obligations are at least a very real possibility.[18] The number of things we ought to be able to expect a reductive account to be able to account for may be indefinitely large, and we need to look seriously at the details in order to evaluate whether any reductive account *can* avoid errors about these things.

If this is right, then Plantinga's Challenge, by itself, poses a serious but not insuperable challenge to reductive theorists. Because the plausibility of reductions depends on whether they manage to avoid error, it is reasonable on

purely inductive grounds to doubt whether one will ever be successful. But that doesn't vindicate the strident pessimism of Nagel, Parfit, and others. Still, even without delving into any particular details, some perfectly general kinds of worry remain. We might suspect, for example, that there is some *particular* central truth about the normative which *no* reductive account could possibly hope to avoid error about. And this, in fact, seems to be precisely what has been contended by a number of non-reductive theorists, including Thomas Nagel and Jean Hampton.[19] Here is Nagel again:[20]

> If values are objective, they must be so in their own right, and not through reducibility to some other kind of objective fact. They have to be objective *values*, not objective anything else.

I understand Nagel as claiming that the most obvious thing about the normative is that normative properties and relations—like *reason*, *good*, *just*, *rational*, *correct*, and so on—have to be *normative* (*values*, in his terms). There is some interesting feature which all of the normative has in common—that they are *normative*—and it is this most elementary and obvious of features for which no reductive theory could possibly hope to account.

This idea, I think, makes sense of the peculiar idea that Bishop Butler's dictum bears in any interesting way on the question of reduction. According to Butler, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." But as Nicholas Sturgeon points out in the recent *Ethics* symposium on Moore,[21] "The problem with… [this], of course, is that even if goodness were a natural property, it would still only be identical with itself, what it is, and not another thing." The reductive theorist who says that to be good is to contribute to happiness is

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[18]Perhaps this is, and perhaps it is not, one of the central commitments of moral discourse. I don't want to commit, here, either way. I at least think that it is plausibly a commitment of talk about what someone is *required* to do—even if ethics in general can be profitably pursued without the notion of a requirement. I don't, moreover, see why the "central commitments" have to be uncontroversial—provided that those who reject them do so for theoretically loaded reasons, as do most of those who reject the possibility of agent-centered restrictions. Even such philosophers can agree that the possibility of agent-centered restrictions is a commitment of ordinary talk about morality. If they aspire to be robustly realist about morality, they will presumably simply contest how "central" a commitment this is, in the required sense. The main point I want to make, here, is that the set of candidates for central truths about the normative may be large and extremely diverse—not simply limited to meta-ethical theses like judgment internalism. I see no plausible principled way to significantly narrow down in advance what might count.

[19]Nagel [1986], Hampton [1998].
[20]Nagel [1986], 138.
[21]Sturgeon [2003], 535.

not saying that goodness is not goodness, nor that it is something else. He is not saying that contributing to happiness is not contributing to happiness, nor that it is something else. He is simply saying that goodness *is* goodness—i.e., it is contributing to happiness. The question about reduction is why he shouldn't be able to say *this*. And this is no brainstorm on Sturgeon's part; Arthur Prior and William Frankena both pointed this out more than half a century earlier.[22]

But if my hypothesis about the quotation from Nagel is right, then Nagel isn't merely stomping his foot in insistence that reductive views are false. He is diagnosing a perfectly general feature of normative properties and relations—that they are *normative*—which he thinks is ruled out by any reductive view. This, I think, is an interesting hypothesis about the perennial attractiveness of the idea that Butler's dictum tells in any way against reductive views.

3.2 How Reduction is Easily Misunderstood
It's not hard to see, moreover, what might initially give someone the idea that reductive theorists *are* trying to identify goodness with something else, and in particular, that they are trying to identify it with something that is *not* normative. After all, we start with an intuitive idea that just as there are normative properties and relations like *good*, *reason*, *just*, and so on, there are also non-normative properties and relations like *red*, *left of*, *electron*, *seventeen in number*, and so on. Intuitively, the idea of *reduction* is to use properties and relations like the latter in order to account for the subject matter of the normative. And according to the orthodox conception, reduction is a matter of property *identity*. So it is natural to unreflectively think that reductive theorists are trying to *identify* properties in the first group—*normative* ones—with properties in the second group—*non-normative* ones.

Obviously that is a contradiction! But that is precisely how reduction is often described. For example, in a recent introductory meta-ethics textbook,[23] Alexander Miller describes (synthetic) reductive views by saying that they claim that "moral properties are identical to non-moral properties as a matter of synthetic fact". Obviously, this will never do for reductivism. A property cannot be both moral *and* non-moral. If it is non-moral, then it is *not moral* after all. But confusion over this point is, I think, perfectly common. It is telling that Miller found it so tempting to use such an infelicitous statement of reduction in a book designed as a textbook.

There are actually two ways of stating the essence of reductive theories in such a way that they can comfortably avoid asserting anything so nonsensical. One is relatively standard—it is part of the strategy employed by Frank Jackson in *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. The other, which I prefer, is less orthodox, but I'll explain it in the next section. Since Jackson thinks of reduction as property *identity*, he holds that one set of properties reduces to another set just in case it is a *subset* of the other. So *contra* Miller, he does *not* claim that the normative reduces to the non-normative—it can't be a subset of its complement. Instead, he claims that the normative (the "ethical", in Jackson's terms) reduces to the *descriptive*, and he employs a different method of picking out the set of descriptive properties than by stipulation that it includes all and only properties that are not normative.[24] According to Jackson, they are the ones which can be picked

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[22]Prior [1949], 3; Frankena [1976], 7.

[23]Miller [2003], 139. Never mind that strictly speaking, it should be sentences or propositions that can be analytic or synthetic, rather than facts. Unless we think for some reason that facts are infused with concepts or modes of presentation, there is no difference between the fact that water is water and the fact that water is H_2O, on the usual assumption about this thesis as a claim about property identity. But the fact that water is water is surely not "synthetic", even if the proposition that water is H_2O is.

[24]Jackson [1997], 117-125.

out by uncontroversially descriptive *predicates*, and so Jackson's reductive thesis amounts to the claim that normative properties can be picked out by uncontroversially descriptive predicates. *This* is a perfectly coherent view.[25]

For our purposes, however, one of the other things that Jackson does can be understood as contributing to the *perception* that there is something deep to Nagel's Worry. In *addition* to picking out the set of descriptive properties linguistically, by means of descriptive predicates, he *also* chooses to designate the class of normative properties as those properties which can be picked out with an uncontroversially *normative* predicate. This isn't necessary in order to state the view in a coherent way. But it does lend weight to the concern that no matter what properties Jackson may claim to have picked out in this way, they aren't the *normative* ones. After all, Nagel's Worry is that there *is* something interesting and distinctive about the class of normative properties, and for all that Jackson has *said*, they are simply ones that we *talk* about in a certain way. Of course, for Jackson's purposes, all that he needs is that this is *one* way of picking out the class of normative properties—not that it is the one which captures *everything* interesting about them. But if I'm a non-reductivist reading Jackson, I'm unsatisfied. I can see that he believes in a class of properties *picked out by* normative *predicates*, but I'm not convinced that these are *normative* properties. He hasn't said anything to convince me that they are.

3.3 *How* to *Understand Reduction*
Although I think that for most purposes we can get by with Jackson's approach, there is another perfectly good way of

stating reductive accounts which I think is simpler, and takes better account of the intuitive idea that we start with two distinct sets of properties and try to reduce one to the other. This makes it less prone to the confusion that makes Miller state reductive views in a contradictory way. It is also more appropriate, I think, insofar as it treats reduction as a *metaphysical* issue, rather than one in the philosophy of language.[26]

The thesis that reduction is property *identity* is what yields the consequence that one set of properties reduces to another only if it is a subset of it. But we could, instead, think of reduction as a matter of property *analysis*. For example, instead of saying that *good* reduces to *contributing to overall happiness*, we could say that it reduces to the constitutive *parts* of the property of *contributing to overall happiness*—namely, *contributing to*, *overall*, and *happiness*. If reduction is property *analysis* like this, then one set of properties can reduce to another without being one of its subsets. If we think about reduction in this way, then we *can* say that the set of normative properties reduces to the set of non-normative properties, and stipulate that by "non-normative properties", we mean every property that is not normative.

Jackson's approach tries to explain why there is something wrong with the non-reductivist's intuitive idea that reduction is a relation between disjoint sets of properties. According to Jackson's approach, it is simply a relation between sets of properties which people have *believed* to be disjoint. But if we think of reduction as property *analysis* rather than property *identity*, then we can accept the intuitive idea that reduction is a relation between disjoint sets of properties. And this lets us state the reductive view in a

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[25]Although not, perhaps, ideal. Consider: are names for possible worlds uncontroversially descriptive predicates? If they are, that makes the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive trivial, and hence, by Jackson's view that supervenience entails reduction, trivializes reduction. But other than this bad result, what could make a name count as non-descriptive?

[26]Suppose that being good was just contributing to overall happiness, but that no one had ever coined the word "happiness", and so there was no descriptive predicate, "contributing to overall happiness" to express the property of *goodness*. Would it follow that the property of *goodness* was irreducible?

simple and straightforward way, without requiring the kinds of subtleties that led Miller to infelicitously state the thesis of reduction in an explicitly contradictory way.

Moreover, there are good independent reasons to prefer the characterization of reduction as something analysis-like. Even if the identity claim that being a triangle *just is* being a three-sided plane figure counts as *stating* a reductive view about triangles, when we try to characterize reductive theses at the level of *sets* of properties, as we need to do in order to know whether the *set* of all normative properties reduces to the *set* of all descriptive or non-normative properties, it is worth knowing whether the things that *triangle* got reduced to are just *three-sided plane figure*, or whether they are *three*, *sided*, and *plane figure*. That is, we need to know whether the *relata* of the reduction are the *same* as those things flanking the identity, or something else but related. If we take the former view, then *three-sided plane figure* had better be in the reducing class of properties. But if we take the latter view, then even though *three*, *sided*, and *plane figure* have to be in this class, *three-sided plane figure* doesn't, and the reduction can still be true.

So consider the case of two-dimensional shape properties. Plausibly, these can all be accounted for in a satisfactory reductive manner by means of zero and one-dimensional shape properties, distance, and arithmetical and set-theoretical properties and relations. A circle is just a set of points equidistant from a fixed point; an ellipse is the set whose summed distance from two fixed points is the same; and so on. This has all of the flavor of a reductive view about two-dimensional shape properties. But obviously no two-dimensional shape property is a zero or one-dimensional shape property, a distance property, or an arithmetical or set-theoretical property or relation.

So there is an intuitive reduction between completely disjoint sets of properties. The best way of allowing for this seems to be that the two-dimensional shape properties are *analyzed* in terms of the others. Or, put another way, they are *identical* not with *these* properties, but with properties in some kind of *closure* of this set. Either way, this is all that is required for reduction. So there is no deep puzzle about how *any* reduction could hold between disjoint sets of properties. Any characterization of reduction which claimed to rule out even reductive views about triangles would surely show too much.

The surprising thing, if this reductive thesis about the two-dimensional shape properties is true, is not that being a circle is really having a one or zero-dimensional shape property, or that it is simply having an arithmetical, distance, or set-theoretical property. The surprise is that when you put the latter kinds of property *together* to get the property of *being a set of points equidistant from a fixed point*, this *is* a two-dimensional shape property. It is the property of being a circle. Similarly, if the reductive normative theory is true, the surprise is not that being good is not, after all, having some normative or evaluative character. The surprise is that when you put together properties which have no evaluative or normative character such as *contributing to*, *overall*, and *happiness*, to get *contributing to overall happiness*, this *does* have an evaluative or normative character. For according to the theory, it is simply being *good*.[27]

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[27]Though this is not the place to adequately evaluate this matter, the conception of reduction as property analysis does require an idea that not all philosophers (prominently including Jackson [1997]) are comfortable with—that properties can be the sort of thing to have a kind of *structure*. Jackson finds this puzzling because he insists on thinking of properties only in terms of "ways things might be". But surely the primary theoretical role of properties is to serve as being or in some other way exemplifying what things have *in common*. When we think about them in this way, I think that it is easy to see how they might be structured. Consider shapes A-D:

A) ■ B) □ C) ● D) ■

There is something that A and B have in common—namely, being square—and they share this with D as well. Similarly, there is something that A and C have in common—namely, being shaded—and they share this with D as well. And finally, there is something that A and D have in common that is shared by neither B nor C—namely, being shaded squares. But though being a

This, I think, explains some of the initial force of the Nagel's Worry, but it doesn't address the Worry itself. I've diagnosed this initial force as largely stemming from the intuitive idea that we start with two disjoint sets of properties, and that reduction requires one to be a *subset* of the other, because to reduce one property to some others requires that it be *identical* with one of them. I gave two ways out of this worry. First, we can find a way of specifying what the reducing set of properties is that *doesn't* presuppose that it is disjoint from the set of reduced properties. And second, we can adopt a more relaxed conception of reduction, on which one set of properties can reduce to another *without* being one of its subsets—in favor of which I offered the shape case.

Either way, however, the important claim is about what the reductive theorist should be *understood* to be claiming. She has been *mis*understood as claiming that since being good is, for example, contributing to overall happiness, *good* is not a normative property after all. But she should be un-

derstood as claiming instead that *contributing to overall happiness* is a normative property. So much for how she should be understood. We still need to know what can *earn her the right* to say this, and to be understood as meaning it.[28] And for that, we need to know *what it is* for something to be normative.

4.1 What it Takes to be Normative

So what does it take to be normative? Surely for dialectical purposes we can do no better than to look for the *hardest case* for reduction. And for that, I turn to Jean Hampton, who claims to have diagnosed exactly this: precisely what the feature of normative claims is, which could not possibly be acceptable to any reductive theorist. It is that reductive claims involve claims about *reasons*:[29]

> At last we have in hand the 'queer' element in the objectivists' moral theory that precludes its scientific acceptability… It is the claim that there are moral norms that are 'objectively authoritative' *in the sense that they give us normatively necessary reasons* for various human activities.

The distinctively queer thing about the normative, according to Hampton, is that normative claims commit us to the existence of *reasons*.

Of course, there is a long and troubled tradition of trying to characterize what is distinctive of the normative by means of the *entailments* of normative claims.[30] To cite just one relevant issue, there is intuitively an important distinction between what I call normatively *relevant* claims and claims

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shaded square is neither simply being a square nor simply being shaded, there is not really anything to it over and above these other two properties. After all, A and D are shaded squares *by* being shaded and being squares. So it seems to me that just as "shaded square" is a complex, structured predicate, the property it picks out is also structured.

The structure of the property *shaded square*, moreover, is actually of great explanatory virtue. It explains why it is impossible for anything to be a shaded square but not shaded, or a shaded square but not a square. This is because things are shaded squares *by* being shaded and *by* being squares. And we capture this idea by saying that *square* and *shaded* are *constituents* of *shaded square*, or part of its *analysis*. Things are similar, I think, even if somewhat more complicated, for complex properties like *contributing to overall happiness*, where the mode of composition is not simply conjunction.

If the normative supervenes on the non-normative, a great many ways of recombining normative and non-normative properties must be impossible. If facts about the structure of properties are so well suited to explain metaphysical impossibilities, therefore, and reduction is a thesis about the structure of normative properties, then the reduction of the normative looks like an excellent explanatory hypothesis, since it would explain the widely accepted supervenience of the normative on the non-normative.

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[28]Rather than meaning some other thing, as with the "reductive theist".

[29]Hampton [1998], 115 (italics added for emphasis). But we don't have to settle for Hampton's opinion of the matter. Compare Joseph Raz on the same subject: "The normativity of all that is normative consists in the way that it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons" (Raz [1999b], 67). Raz is no more friendly to reduction than Hampton is.

[30]See, for example, Prior [1960].

which are actually normatively *contentful*. But both of these categories entail the existence of reasons. So, for example, consider the fact that by pulling the trigger of the gun while it is pointed at one's skull, one will ensure one's own death. Plausibly, this truth has as a necessary consequence that there is a reason for one not to pull the trigger of the gun while it is pointed at one's own skull. But that doesn't mean that we should therefore think that facts about guns and death count as normative. These facts are, one might have thought, paradigmatically *non*-normative, even if they might have obvious normative consequences. I call such facts normatively *relevant*, even though they are not normatively *contentful*.

Though this is terminology of art, of course, it is not implausible to think that it strikes near enough to describing what the relevant difference is between the claim that pulling the trigger will result in your death and the claim that it is better not to pull the trigger. Though the first claim may have a claim about reasons as a *consequence*, it is intuitively not itself *about* reasons, in the way that the second one may be. So on this view, if Hampton's thesis is right, we have to further understand her as saying not merely that normative claims *entail* the existence of reasons but that they themselves *involve* claims about the existence of reasons.

Now there may be more than one way to understand this talk of a normative claim's already being *about* reasons, or already *involving* claims about reasons. But on a natural view, it is the thesis that normative properties and relations have to be partly *analyzed* in terms of reasons. The normative is all about reasons. And I think that this is a broadly attractive thesis about what is distinctive of the normative, something like which is currently accepted or at least found attractive by moral philosophers of extremely different bents. Any view that looks broadly attractive to Jean Hampton,

Michael Smith, Derek Parfit, T.M. Scanlon, and Joseph Raz has to be one with some kind of very broad appeal.[31]

This way of characterizing the normative has a very impressive lineage; for centuries moral philosophers have characterized their subject matter as being everything which ultimately involved claims about what was *good*, or as everything which ultimately involved claims about what was *right*, or as everything which ultimately involved claims about what someone *ought* to do. All of these views claim that what it is for a property or concept to be normative is for it to be ultimately analyzable in terms of some *basic* normative property or relation or concept. They merely disagree about what this basic property or concept *is*.

But if attractive views about what is distinctive of the normative so often take this *structural* form, then the result that *good* and *right* and *just* and *reason* and so on are truly *normative* properties is one that it is actually incredibly *easy* for a reductive theorist to get right. Since being normative is a matter of a *structural* relation to some basic normative property like that of being a *reason*, the reductive theorist can accept this characterization of the normative. Then she can accept whatever analyses of each *non*-basic normative property in terms of the basic property are accepted by the nonreductive theorists who share this conception of what is distinctive of the normative. And finally, she gives her reductive theory as an analysis of the basic normative property or relation.

4.2 Nagel's Worry as a Version of Plantinga's Challenge
In this way, a reductive theorist about the normative who thinks that reasons are basic can get the solution to Nagel's Worry *for free*. Her whole view is that the normative reduces to the non-normative by *first* reducing to reasons, and then

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[31]See Hampton [1998], Smith [1994], Parfit [unpublished manuscript], Scanlon [1998], and Raz [1999b].

reasons reducing to the non-normative. Since she already believes that *all and only* normative properties and relations can be analyzed in terms of *reasons*, she can easily agree with non-reductivists like Hampton and Raz that this is precisely what makes them normative. The only thing she disagrees with Hampton and Raz about is whether there is more to say about what reasons are, or whether everything stops there.

And this is, in any case, the kind of thing that a reductive theorist about the normative should want to say. That is, there are strong *independent* reasons for a reductive theorist to want to proceed by first reducing all normative properties and relations to reasons, and then only have to analyze one normative relation directly in non-normative terms. One such reason is simply that it is *hard* to find plausible reductions of any particular normative property or relation in non-normative terms, but much *easier* to account for them in terms of one another. Even *non-reductivists* agree that most or all normative properties and relations can be understood in terms of other normative properties and relations. So reductive theorists have strong independent motivation to accept exactly the kind of view which automatically provides the solution to Nagel's Worry.[32]

Earlier I diagnosed Nagel's Worry as a particular version of the problem raised by Plantinga's Challenge. I said that it is the attempt to isolate a perfectly general single truth about the normative about which *any* reductive view would be forced into error. So if my diagnosis of the force of Plantinga's Challenge was on track, then it should be able to shed light on my response to Nagel's Worry. Indeed, I think that it can. My diagnosis of why the normative differs from the theological when it comes to the admissibility of reduction is that since most of the central commitments of normative discourse are ultimately cashed out at least partly in other nor-

mative terms, it will be considerably easier for a reductive account to avoid propagating implications, in attempting to avoid error. And that is precisely the observation on which my answer to Nagel's Worry has turned. I have argued that even on the characterization of the normative which is supposed to make things *hardest* for reductive views, the characterization of the normative *is* given at least partly in other normative terms—in terms of *reasons*. And that is precisely what I argued made the solution to Nagel's Worry so easy for a reductive theorist to come by.

4.3 Reasons and Reduction

Finally, it is worth saying something about the scope of my assertion that the central truths about the normative are so often cashed out at least partly in other normative terms, and making an observation about how this is connected with the idea that it might be *reasons*, rather than some other normative property or relation, such as *good*, that are basic. Though many interesting claims about the normative *do* seem to be cashed out at least partly in other normative terms, I certainly take it that there are many obvious normative truths that are not.

For example, I take it that it is relatively obvious that it is wrong to torture innocent children for pleasure. Moreover, I take it that this is considerably more obvious than that all normative claims can be analyzed in terms of reasons, and that any reductive theorist who claimed to be happy with a view that falsified this claim could intelligibly be held to apparently be talking about something else altogether. But on a plausible reading, this thesis—or at least one much like it really *does* connect some normative property—*wrongness*—with entirely non-normative properties. So it is certainly not the case that *all* central obvious truths about the normative are ultimately cashed out at least partly in non-

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[32]I offer an explanation in section 4.3 of why reductive theorists have independent reason to prefer the *reason* relation to be the basic normative relation.

normative terms. One central exception is the case of obvious or intuitively obvious claims about what falls under the *extension* of the normative properties—which things are *wrong*, *good*, *just*, and so on.

A reductive view about reasons, I hold, is going to have an easier time avoiding error about *these* kinds of claim. For it is highly plausible that around the edges, our intuitive judgments about when there is or is not a reason for someone to do something are bound to be systematically misleading. This can be predicted on purely general pragmatic grounds. For some reasons are better than others, and some worse. The better ones are worth taking more seriously in our deliberations, and the worse less seriously. Indeed, given constraints on deliberation, some reasons won't be good enough to bother with. If God made a list of *all* of the pros and cons of some course of action, it might be infinitely long. But you can't possibly take *everything* into account—only the reasons near the top of the list.

Since we talk about reasons mostly for the purposes of knowing how to deliberate, it is plausible that there is a strong pragmatic presumption that when someone says that there is a reason to do something, she means that it is a relatively good one—one figuring relatively high in the list. And this presumption is predictably reinforced if she doesn't tell us what the reason *is*, but only that *there is* one. For saying that *there is* a reason to do something is less informative than saying *what* it is, and the more not-very-good reasons there are, the more actions there will be in favor of which there is at least *some* reason, even if none is very good. So Grice's maxim of quantity[33] predicts that saying only that there is a reason to do something should reinforce the presumption that it is a relatively good one that she has in mind—this would make her conversational contribution more informative.

Together, this yields two easily testable predictions. If there is some action in favor of which the only reasons are not very good, and I tell you that there is a reason to do it, you will find what I say to be very unintuitive. If I tell you what the reason is, that should cancel the effect of the maxim of quantity and make this unintuitiveness go down. And if I go on to tell you that I don't mean to imply that it is a very *good* reason—that in fact I think it is not very good at all—then the unintuitiveness of what I say should go down yet again. So let us test these predictions. I think that there is a reason for you to eat your car. That sounds crazy. But now let me tell you what I think it is. It is the fact that your car contains the recommended daily allowance of iron. Now what I say sounds *less* crazy (although still false, to be sure). That is the right sort of thing *to be* a reason for you to eat your car, if anything is. But let me set the record straight. Although I do think it reasonably probable that there is a reason for you to eat your car, I certainly don't think that it is anything like a good reason. Indeed, I think it is as poor as normative reasons could possibly come, and not only that you should not place very much weight on it in deliberating about whether to eat your car, but that something would already be going seriously wrong if you even deliberated about whether to eat your car in the first place. This makes my original assertion's unintuitiveness go down yet again (even if it doesn't go away entirely). And this confirms our predictions.

So it is at least highly plausible that around the fringes, our intuitions about what there is *not* a reason to do may be systematically misleading. And this seems like it ought to make it much easier to give a reductive account of reasons which seems to get the extensionally right results, than for any other normative property or relation.[34] Since even non-reductive theorists are sympathetic to the idea that what

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[33]"Make your contribution as informative as is required" Grice [1967], 26.

[34]*Contra* Dancy: "it seems to me that the reasons-relation is going to be a lot harder to naturalize… than were such supposed monadic normative properties as goodness and rightness" ([2004], 29).

makes things normative is their relation to reasons, therefore, it seems that a reductive account of reasons looks to be in particularly good shape to be able to yield a successful reductive account of the normative.

5 Conclusion

My response to Plantinga's Challenge had two prongs: first, that reductive accounts are liable to yield widespread errors about the central commitments of theological discourse; and second, that because the central commitments of theological discourse are almost entirely cashed out in non-theological terms, any attempt to avoid these errors would have propagating implications. The fact that many of the central commitments of normative discourse are cashed out at least partly in other normative terms doesn't prove that a reduction of the normative is possible, but it does explain why we should be able to expect it to be a better *candidate* for reduction than the theological.

Ultimately, I argued, the only way to see whether a reduction really *can* avoid committing to errors is to find one which *does*. But in the absence of such details, a perfectly general objection still remained—Nagel's Worry that the properties assigned to normative vocabulary by a reductive theorist must not be *normative*, simply because the view counts as "reductive". In section 3 I tried to explain where this impression might come from, and I set those reasons aside. Then in section 4, I used my diagnosis of the force of Plantinga's Challenge to diffuse Nagel's Worry. I showed that the most popular characterization of what *is* distinctive of the normative can actually be quite *easily* captured by a reductive view, so long as that view takes reasons to be basic. And I marshaled a variety of other considerations in support of thinking that a reduction of reasons is probably the best candidate for a reductive view about the normative, in any case.

Put together, I think that this yields an attractive diagno-sis of the source of the force of Plantinga's Challenge and Nagel's Worry, without damaging in any way the prospects for a reduction of the normative. True, I have argued that reductive theorists owe us a *detailed* view, in order to show that it does not yield any such errors. And I've allowed that inductive pessimism may be warranted, until someone produces such a view.[35] But inductive pessimism is very different from the typical attitude of normative non-reductivists that they are the only *true* realists about normativity, or that reduction is *obviously* hopeless. Yet I think that together or separately, Plantinga's Challenge and Nagel's Worry do play a significant role in underwriting this skepticism. So in treating these objections, I think that I have made some small progress in the Larger Project of discovering what it is that *really* bothers non-reductive theorists, in order better to assess whether reduction is or is not a reasonable project.

I don't think, however, that Plantinga's Challenge and Nagel's Worry can, even together, be the whole story. I have a couple of ideas about other things philosophers often legitimately worry about when it comes to reduction. One is the puzzling willingness of reductive theorists to accept accounts which seem to be fundamentally or massively *disjunctive*.[36] This makes it sound like being good is a bit like

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[35]I happen to favor a reductive version of the Humean Theory of Reasons, which is ultimately supposed to avoid these kinds of error—even about things commonly (and falsely) supposed to be strictly entailed by the Humean Theory. I set out and defend this view in an unpublished book manuscript.

[36]See, for example, Frank Jackson's arguments for the reduction of the ethical in *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Jackson [1997]). In this typical argument from supervenience to reduction, Jackson shows that every ethical truth can be expressed by a sentence composed wholly of descriptive terms—but such sentences must be allowed to have uncountably many disjuncts. Or compare Michael Smith's accounts of various kinds of rationality. Smith offers separate reductive accounts of instrumental rationality, theoretical rationality, practical rationality, and full rationality (Smith [2004], [1995], [1994], and [1997]). But though each of Smith's accounts of rationality has something to do with coherence, broadly speaking, they aren't even the same *kind* of thing. Each of the first three is a kind of *disposition* toward one or another kind of coherence, but for Smith full rationality is not a disposition. One might hope for a more unified approach.

being a piece of jade. But intelligibly there *isn't* anything interesting that it is to be jade—there is only being *jadeite* and being *nephrite*. So disjunctive accounts can be intelligibly discouraging. Another large part of what I think makes some philosophers think that reduction is hopeless is an argument favored by the British rationalists[37] and recently revived by Christine Korsgaard and, as I read her, Jean Hampton.[38] This argument looks like it might be able to show that no reductive view could be possible, and as I have shown elsewhere it *does* show that—*if* we grant it an assumption that reductive theorists reject.[39]

Plausibly, there may be even more strands to the reasons why non-reductivists find it so obvious that reduction of the normative is hopeless, and these reasons and their force will vary between the different philosophical domains in which reductions have been proposed. But the important thing is that reductivists *do* need to understand non-reductivists' qualms better, if they hope to ever successfully soothe them.[40]

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[37]Cudworth [1731] is the original source of the argument, which is generalized in Price [1948]. Cudworth offers it as an argument against any view he understands as *voluntarist*.

[38]I believe that the first few pages of Korsgaard [1997] may be best interpreted as presupposing something like this argument, but she offers it explicitly against one out of the four possible ways she sees of answering the "normative question" in Korsgaard [1996], and as far as I can see, if reductive views fit anywhere into her classificatory scheme, they must fit under this rubric. The argument also looks to play an important role in Hampton [1998], although I'm less certain.

[39]In my unpublished paper, "Cudworth and Normative Explanations."

[40]Special thanks to Colin Klein, Gideon Rosen, Kieran Setiya, David Enoch, Karen Bennett, Adam Elga, Mike McGlone, an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophers' Imprint*, and an audience at Princeton University for helpful discussion of this or related topics.

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