ARE THERE IRREDUCIBLY NORMATIVE PROPERTIES?

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Abstract:

Frank Jackson has argued that, given plausible claims about supervenience, descriptive predicates and property identity, there are no irreducibly normative properties. Philosophers who think that there are such properties have made several objections to this argument. In this paper, I argue that all of these objections fail. I conclude that Jackson's argument shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

ARE THERE IRREDUCIBLY NORMATIVE PROPERTIES?

I. Introduction

Many philosophers think that

(1) There are irreducibly normative properties.[1]

But Frank Jackson has argued that, given plausible claims about supervenience, descriptive predicates and property identity, there are no irreducibly normative properties.[2] Philosophers who think that there are such properties have made several objections to this argument. In this paper, I shall argue that all of these objections fail.

This paper consists of twelve sections. In section II, I distinguish normative properties from descriptive properties. In section III, I present Jackson's argument. In sections IV to X, I argue that all of the objections that philosophers have made to this argument fail. In sections XI and XII, I conclude that Jackson's argument shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties, and I discuss the significance of this conclusion.

II. Normative and descriptive properties

To distinguish normative properties from descriptive properties, we first need to distinguish

[1] See, for example, Moore [1903], Dancy [1993, 2004b], Parfit [1997], Scanlon [1998], and Shafer-Landau [2003]. Moore [1903] makes both a semantic and an ontological claim about the normative predicate 'is good': he claims both that the normative predicate 'is good' does not have the same meaning as any descriptive predicate (or any predicate ascribing a natural property), and that the normative predicate 'is good' ascribes the irreducibly normative (or non-natural) property of goodness. By contrast, (1) is an ontological claim, but not a semantic claim. I shall come back to this in section XI.

normative predicates (such as 'is right', 'is good' and 'is a reason for') from descriptive predicates (such as 'is square', 'is yellow' or 'is larger than').[3] We can then say that

(2) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

(3) A normative property is a property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate,

and

(4) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical to a descriptive property.[4]

All philosophers who are realists about normative properties, including Jackson, think that there are normative properties in (3)'s sense.[5] But these philosophers disagree about whether it is true that

(1) There are irreducibly normative properties.

According to non-reductive realists, there are such properties.[6] But according to reductive

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[2] See Jackson [1998: 122-3], and Jackson [2001: 655]. The argument was first given by Jackson and Pettit [1996: 84-5]. For discussion of the argument, see van Roojen [1996], Williamson [2001], Shafer-Landau [2003: 89-98], Dancy [2004a], and Majors [2005].

[3] I here follow Jackson [1998: 120-121]. It may be objected that we should not define normative and descriptive properties in this way. I shall discuss this objection in section VIII.

[4] It may be objected that some predicates (such as 'is courageous' or 'is just') are both normative and descriptive. If so, we should either say that these predicates contain both a normative and a descriptive component, or that these predicates ascribe normative properties.

[5] Jackson [1998: 119] claims that 'ethical properties are descriptive properties', which can only be true if there are ethical (or normative) properties in (3)'s sense.

[6] Many non-reductive realists about normative properties do not use the phrase 'irreducibly

realists like Jackson,

(5) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties.

Therefore, according to reductive realists, there are normative properties in (3)'s sense, but there are no irreducibly normative properties.[7]

It may be thought that, given (2), it is obvious that there are no irreducibly normative properties. For suppose that, at time *t*, Fred is thinking about the normative property of rightness. In that case, we can denote the normative property of rightness with the descriptive phrase

'the property that Fred is thinking about at time *t*',[8]

and we can then ascribe the normative property of rightness with the descriptive predicate

'has the property that Fred is thinking about at time *t*'.

But, clearly, this does not show that there are no irreducibly normative properties. Instead, it shows that we should revise (2) to:

(2*) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive

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normative properties'. However, since they say that there are normative properties and that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties, they do not merely think that there are normative properties in (3)'s sense, but also that there are irreducibly normative properties.

[7] Other philosophers deny both that there are irreducibly normative properties and that there are normative properties in (3)'s sense. These philosophers are either non-cognitivists, who think that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes or combinations of non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs that ascribe descriptive properties, or error theorists, who think that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties even though there are no such properties. I shall come back to this in section XI.

[8] See Jackson [1998: 119 n. 10].

predicate that does not contain a descriptive phrase which denotes a normative property without ascribing this normative property.[9]

In what follows, I shall ignore this revision, since it does not affect Jackson's argument.

III. Jackson's argument

Inspired by a more general argument given by Jaegwon Kim, Jackson has given the following argument to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.[10] Consider an action A_1 that has a normative property, such as the property of being right.[11] Given that

(6) Necessarily, anything that has normative properties also has descriptive properties,

action A_1 also has descriptive properties, which we can call $P_1, \ldots, P_n$. And the objects $O_1, \ldots, O_n$ that are part of the same possible world as action A_1 also have descriptive properties, which for each object O_x we can call $P_{Ox\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{Ox\text{-}n}$.[12] Action A_1 therefore satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate D_1:

'has descriptive properties $P_1, \ldots, P_n$ and is such that O_1 has descriptive properties $P_{O1\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{O1\text{-}n}, \ldots$, and O_n has descriptive properties $P_{On\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{On\text{-}n}$'.

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[9] I say 'without ascribing this normative property' because a phrase like 'the property that Fred is thinking about at time *t*' denotes a property without ascribing it, whereas a phrase like 'is yellow' or 'is right' both ascribes and denotes a property.

[10] See Kim [1993: 68-71, 149-55]. Jackson [1998] gives the argument only for moral properties, but the argument applies to all normative properties.

[11] The property of being right is, of course, merely an example of a normative property. Jackson's argument also applies to all other normative properties, as will become clear below.

[12] I use the term 'object' to cover anything that has properties, and I here use the term 'property' to cover both properties and relations.

Given that

(7) A predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself a descriptive predicate,

predicate D_1 is a descriptive predicate.

Suppose next that actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds. Just as action A_1 satisfies the descriptive predicate D_1, actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ satisfy similarly constructed descriptive predicates $D_1, \ldots, D_n$. And since action A_1 satisfies predicate D_1, it also satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate D*:

'satisfies either the descriptive predicate $D_1, \ldots,$ or the descriptive predicate D_n'.

Again, given (7), predicate D* is a descriptive predicate.

Now consider the following claim about supervenience:

(8) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of descriptive properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.[13]

If (8) is true, then for any X, the claim that

(9) X satisfies the descriptive predicate D*

[13] It may be thought that particularists such as Dancy [1993, 2004b] deny that (8) is true, since they think that two actions can have the same descriptive properties but different normative properties. However, since (8) is only about the distributions of descriptive and normative properties at complete possible worlds (or about weak global supervenience), (8) does not entail that two actions that have the same descriptive properties must also have the same normative properties. Particularists can therefore accept (8), and Dancy does in fact accept (8). It may also be thought that, instead of accepting (8), we should accept a more restricted claim about supervenience. I shall come back to this in section X.

entails the claim that

(10) X satisfies the normative predicate ‘is right’.

For if (9) did not entail (10), there would be two possible worlds W and W* that have exactly the same distribution of descriptive properties but that do not have the same distribution of normative properties, which would contradict (8).

And for any X, the claim that

(10) X satisfies the normative predicate ‘is right’

also entails the claim that

(9) X satisfies the descriptive predicate D*.

For actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds, and these actions satisfy the predicates $D_1, \ldots, D_n$. Therefore, any action that satisfies the predicate ‘is right’ also satisfies one of the predicates $D_1, \ldots, D_n$. And any action that satisfies one of the predicates $D_1, \ldots, D_n$ also satisfies predicate D*.

Since (9) both entails and is entailed by (10), the normative predicate ‘is right’ is necessarily co-extensive with the descriptive predicate D*. Therefore, given that

(11) Necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe the same property,

these predicates ascribe the same property. And therefore, given that

(2) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate

and that

(4) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical

to a descriptive property,

the normative predicate 'is right' does not ascribe an irreducibly normative property.

Besides applying to the property of being right, Jackson's argument also applies to all other normative properties. Therefore, given (6), (7), (8) and (11), the argument shows that

(~1) There are no irreducibly normative properties.

In other words, given plausible claims about supervenience, descriptive predicates and property identity, Jackson's argument shows that non-reductive realism is false.

IV. Do necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe the same property?

However, non-reductive realists have made several objections to Jackson's argument. One objection that many of them have made to it is:

> *The objection from necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribing different properties*. Necessarily co-extensive predicates can ascribe different properties. Therefore, (11) is false. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the normative predicate 'is right' is identical to the property that is ascribed by the descriptive predicate D*.[14]

To support this objection, non-reductive realists need to give some examples of necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties. Clearly, they cannot give examples like the following:

[14] See Shafer-Landau [2003: 90-92], and Majors [2005: 487-8]. This is also the most popular objection that I have heard in discussion. For Jackson's response to this objection, see Jackson [1998: 15-17, 125-8, and 2003: 573]. For general discussion of whether necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe the same property, see Sober [1982] and Lewis [1986: 55-9].

(12) The predicate ‘is right’ and predicate D* are necessarily co-extensive, but these predicates ascribe different properties.

For this would beg the question against Jackson’s argument. Instead, they need to give some other examples of such predicates.

Since triangles have both three sides and three angles, they could give the following example:

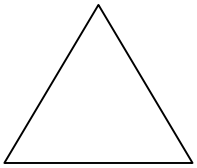
(13) The predicates ‘has three sides’ and ‘has three angles’ are necessarily co-extensive, but these predicates ascribe different properties.

This example may seem convincing, since the predicates ‘has three sides’ and ‘has three angles’ clearly ascribe different properties. However, these predicates are not necessarily co-extensive. Consider the following figure:

This figure has three sides, but only two angles. The example should therefore be revised to:

(13') The predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ are necessarily co-extensive, but these predicates ascribe different properties.

This revised example may also seem convincing, since the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ are clearly necessarily co-extensive. However, these predicates do not ascribe different properties. Instead, they both ascribe the property of being a figure with the following shape:



For suppose that these predicates did ascribe two different properties. Figures with this shape also satisfy the predicate

‘is a triangle’.

If the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ ascribed two different properties, there would be no reason why the predicate ‘is a triangle’ would not ascribe a third property. But, surely, these predicates do not ascribe three different properties. Therefore, the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ do not ascribe two different properties either.

Moreover, suppose that these predicates did ascribe three different properties. And suppose that we invented a new name for figures with this shape: suppose that we started to call these figures ‘△s’ (which we pronounced as ‘deltas’). These figures would then also satisfy the predicate

‘is a △’.

If the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’, ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ and ‘is a triangle’ ascribed three different properties, there would be no reason why the predicate ‘is a △’ would not ascribe a fourth property. But, surely, these predicates do not ascribe four different properties. Therefore, the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ do not ascribe two different properties either.

Finally, suppose that these predicates did ascribe four different properties. And suppose that we started to call one half of a side a ‘half-side’ and one half of an angle a ‘half-angle’. These figures would then also satisfy the predicate

‘is a closed figure that has six half-sides and six half-angles’.

If the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’, ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’, ‘is a triangle’ and ‘is a △’ ascribed four different properties, there would be no reason why the predicate ‘is a closed figure that has six half-sides and six half-angles’ would not ascribe a fifth property. But, surely, these predicates do not ascribe five different properties. Therefore, the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ do not ascribe two different properties either.

Non-reductive realists could reply that these predicates ascribe two different properties because

(14) The predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ do not have the same meaning.

However, two predicates can ascribe the same property without having the same meaning. For example, the predicates ‘is water’ and ‘is H_2O’ ascribe the same property, but these predicates do not have the same meaning.

Non-reductive realists could say that, on a conception of properties that identifies properties with meanings of predicates, predicates that do not have the same meaning do not ascribe the same property. However, Jackson and almost all other reductive realists would admit that normative predicates do not have the same meaning as any descriptive predicate. The disagreement between reductive and non-reductive realists is not about whether normative predicates have the same meaning as certain descriptive predicates, but is instead about whether sentences that contain normative predicates have the same truthmakers as certain sentences that contain only descriptive predicates. Therefore, non-reductive realists cannot defend (1) by appealing to a conception of properties that identifies properties with meanings of predicates.

Non-reductive realists could also reply that these predicates ascribe different properties because

(15) The predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ ascribe properties that consist of different parts: the first

consists of being a closed figure and having three sides, and the second consists of being a closed figure and having three angles.

However, even if properties can consist of parts, the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’ and ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’ could both ascribe a single property that consists of the same three parts: being a closed figure, having three sides, and having three angles. If non-reductive realists deny this, they seem to assume that we can read off the composition of a property from the composition of a predicate that ascribes this property. If this were the case, the predicates ‘is a closed figure that has three sides’, ‘is a closed figure that has three angles’, ‘is a triangle’, ‘is a △’ and ‘is a closed figure that has six half-sides and six half-angles’ would ascribe five different properties. And, surely, these predicates do not ascribe five different properties.

Non-reductive realists could also try to give other examples of necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties. One other example they could give is:

(16) The predicates ‘has a shape’ and ‘has a size’ are necessarily co-extensive, but these predicates ascribe different properties.

However, again, either these predicates are not necessarily co-extensive, or they do not ascribe different properties. If we take the predicates ‘has a shape’ and ‘has a size’ to ascribe the property of having a particular shape and the property of having a particular size, these predicates are not necessarily co-extensive, since an object can combine having any particular shape with having almost any particular size. And if we take the predicates ‘has a shape’ and ‘has a size’ to ascribe the property of having some shape or other and the property having some size or other, these predicates both ascribe the property of being extended in two- or three-dimensional space.

Another example they could give is:

(17) The predicates ‘is two’ and ‘is the positive square root of four’ are necessarily

co-extensive, but these predicates ascribe different properties.[15]

However, the phrases ‘is two’ and ‘is the positive square root of four’ do not normally seem to function as predicates. For example, the sentence

‘Two is the positive square root of four’

does not seem to ascribe a property to the number two. Instead, this sentence seems to be an identity statement that says that the number two is identical to the positive square root of four. For we can reformulate it as ‘two is the same as the positive square root of four’ or as ‘the positive square root of four is two’, and we would normally formalize it as ‘ $2 = \sqrt{4}$ ’. Moreover, even if this sentence could be interpreted as ascribing a property to the number two, it can surely also be interpreted as an identity statement. This makes it hard to see how the phrases ‘is two’ and ‘is the positive square root of four’ could ascribe different properties: instead, if these phrases were predicates, they would both ascribe the property of being the single object that the identity statement ‘two is the positive square root of four’ is about.

Of course, non-reductive realists could keep trying to find other examples of necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties. But I do not know of any examples of such predicates that are convincing. And if there are no convincing examples of such predicates, this objection to Jackson’s argument fails.[16]

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[15] Derek Parfit drew my attention to such examples, though his preferred example is that the predicates ‘is the positive square root of four’ and ‘is the only even prime number’ are necessarily co-extensive but ascribe different properties. However, if these phrases are necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties, the phrases ‘is two’ and ‘is the positive square root of four’ should also be necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties.

[16] Shafer-Landau [2003: 91], makes two further objections to (11). First, he says that if necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribed the same property, the two-place predicates ‘is identical to’ and ‘is necessarily co-extensive with’ would ascribe the same relational property. However, these predicates are not necessarily co-extensive, since ‘is identical to’ applies to properties and ‘is necessarily co-extensive with’ applies to predicates. Second, he says that ‘if being triangular and trilateral were identical properties, then presumably being biangular and bilateral would be identical, and so too would being angular and lateral’. However, this is simply false, since biangular figures have three

V. Does predicate D* ascribe a property?

Another objection that many non-reductive realists make to Jackson's argument is:

> *The objection from the non-existence of disjunctive properties*. There are no disjunctive properties. Therefore, predicate D* does not ascribe a property. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.[17]

However, if Jackson's argument is sound, the non-disjunctive predicate 'is right' and the disjunctive predicate D* both ascribe the same property. This property is neither disjunctive nor non-disjunctive. Instead, the terms 'disjunctive' and 'non-disjunctive' only apply to the predicates that ascribe this property.[18]

Non-reductive realists should therefore revise this objection to:

> *The objection from disjunctive predicates not ascribing properties*. Disjunctive predicates do not ascribe properties. Therefore, predicate D* does not ascribe a property. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.

However, disjunctive predicates can ascribe properties. This is clearest when these properties can also be ascribed by a non-disjunctive predicate. For example, consider the non-disjunctive predicate

> 'is an additive primary colour'.

This predicate seems to ascribe a property. But if this predicate ascribes a property, the very

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sides, figures that have one angle have two sides, and figures that have one side have no angles.

[17] This is another objection that I have often heard in discussion.

[18] Oddie [2005: 151] makes a similar point.

same property can surely also be ascribed by the disjunctive predicate ‘is green or red or blue’.

Or consider the non-disjunctive predicate

‘is a noble gas’.

This predicate also seems to ascribe a property. But if this predicate ascribes a property, the very same property can surely also be ascribed by the disjunctive predicate ‘is Helium or Neon or Argon or Krypton or Xenon or Radon’.

Finally, consider the non-disjunctive German predicate

‘ist ein Rind’.

Again, this predicate seems to ascribe a property. But since the term ‘Rind’ covers both cows and bulls, if the predicate ‘ist ein Rind’ ascribes a property, the very same property can surely also be ascribed by the disjunctive English predicate ‘is a cow or a bull’.[19] Therefore, if the non-disjunctive predicate ‘is right’ ascribes a property, the fact that predicate D* is disjunctive does not stop this predicate from ascribing the very same property. And therefore, this objection fails.[20]

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[19] A similar example is given by Antony [2003: 9-10], though she uses the term ‘Kuh’.

[20] According to Oddie [2005: 153-5], a predicate ascribes a property only if this predicate carves out a convex region of conceptual space, where a region R of conceptual space is convex if and only if any region between two sub-regions of region R is itself also in region R. For example, suppose that we divide a range of temperatures into the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive sub-ranges cold, warm and hot. In that case, according to Oddie, the predicates ‘is cold’, ‘is warm’, ‘is hot’, ‘is cold or warm’ and ‘is warm or hot’ each carve out a convex region of conceptual space, and these predicates therefore ascribe properties. But the predicate ‘is cold or hot’ does not carve out a convex region of conceptual space, since the region carved out by ‘is warm’ is between two sub-regions of the region carved out by ‘is cold or hot’, and this predicate therefore does not ascribe a property. If Oddie is right about this, non-reductive realists could claim that predicate D* does not carve out a convex region of conceptual space, and therefore does not ascribe a property. However, it is not entirely clear what a ‘region of conceptual space’ is, and what it is for a region of conceptual space to be ‘between’ two

A related objection that some non-reductive realists make to Jackson's argument is:

> *The objection from infinitely disjunctive predicates not ascribing properties*. Infinitely disjunctive predicates do not ascribe properties. Therefore, predicate D* does not ascribe a property. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.[21]

However, infinitely disjunctive predicates can ascribe properties. This is again clearest when these properties can also be ascribed by a non-disjunctive predicate. For example, consider the non-disjunctive predicate

> 'is coloured'.

This predicate seems to ascribe a property. But if this predicate ascribes a property, and if we refer to all determinate shades of colour as '$C_1, \ldots, C_n$', the very same property can surely also be ascribed by the infinitely disjunctive predicate 'is either $C_1, \ldots,$ or C_n'.[22] Therefore, if the non-disjunctive predicate 'is right' ascribes a property, the fact that predicate D* is infinitely disjunctive does not stop this predicate from ascribing the very same property. And therefore, this objection fails as well.

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other regions. Therefore, though it may seem clear that the predicate 'is cold or hot' does not carve out a convex region of conceptual space, it is much less clear whether or not predicate D* carves out a convex region of conceptual space. Moreover, there seem to be counterexamples to Oddie's view, since it seems possible for two predicates to ascribe the same property even though one of these predicates carves out a convex region of conceptual space and the other does not. For example, the predicate 'is an additive primary colour' seems to carve out a convex region of conceptual space, and this predicate seems to ascribe a property. But, as I have said, if the predicate 'is an additive primary colour' ascribes a property, the very same property can surely also be ascribed by the predicate 'is green or red or blue'. And the predicate 'is green or red or blue' does not seem to carve out a convex region of conceptual space, since the regions carved out by the predicates 'is yellow', 'is magenta' and 'is cyan' seem to be between sub-regions of the region carved out by 'is green or red or blue'.

[21] Majors [2005: 481] mentions this objection, though he does not endorse it.

[22] This example is given by Clapp [2001: 125-6].

Another related objection that some non-reductive realists make to the argument is:

> *The objection from the non-existence of infinitely disjunctive predicates*. There are no infinitely disjunctive predicates. Therefore, predicate D* does not exist. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.

However, infinitely disjunctive predicates do exist. We can formulate such predicates in a natural language by using the ellipsis sign '. . .', as I did when I formulated predicate D*. And Jackson's argument does not require that predicate D* is part of a natural language. It merely requires that there could be a language that contains such a predicate, which could be a partly 'Lagadonian' language in which many objects or properties are their own names.[23] Therefore, this objection fails too.[24]

VI. Does predicate D* ascribe a descriptive property?

Another objection that some non-reductive realists make to Jackson's argument is:

> *The objection from presupposing the existence of normative properties*. Given how predicate D* is defined, which property this predicate ascribes depends on which actions have the normative property of being right. Therefore, the property that

[23] For the idea of a Lagadonian language, see Lewis [1986: 145-6].

[24] Moreover, the objections that I have discussed in this section would only show that Jackson's argument fails if it is impossible to construct a non-disjunctive predicate that is necessarily co-extensive with a normative predicate like 'is right'. Though this is impossible on some first-order normative views, such as the particularism defended by Dancy [1993, 2004b], it is not impossible on many other first-order normative views, such as various versions of utilitarianism. Therefore, if one of these objections were the only good objection to Jackson's argument, this would have the peculiar consequence that whether normative properties are identical to descriptive properties depends on which first-order normative view is true.

predicate D* ascribes is not descriptive. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the normative predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.[25]

However, though which property predicate D* ascribes depends on which actions have the normative property of being right, this does not show that the property that predicate D* ascribes is not descriptive. Since predicate D* wholly consists of descriptive predicates, given that

(7) A predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself a descriptive predicate,

predicate D* is a descriptive predicate. And therefore, given that

(2) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

the property that predicate D* ascribes is a descriptive property.[26]

Of course, the descriptive property that predicate D* ascribes can also be ascribed with the normative predicate 'is right'. Therefore, given that

(3) A normative property is a property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate,

the property that predicate D* ascribes is not only a descriptive property, but is also a

[25] See Majors [2005: 482].

[26] Majors [2005: 483] objects to (7) that 'this looks very much like the fallacy of composition'. However, given that a sentence (or part of a sentence) is normative if and only if it contains one or more normative words or phrases (that are embedded in certain ways), and that a sentence is descriptive if and only if it contains only descriptive words and phrases, I do not see why (7) commits this fallacy.

normative property. But this is no objection to Jackson's argument, since the conclusion of the argument is not that there are no normative properties in (3)'s sense, but only that there are no irreducibly normative properties. Therefore, this objection fails.

A related objection that some non-reductive realists seem to make to the argument is:

> *The objection from non-disjunctive predicates trumping disjunctive predicates*. If a non-disjunctive predicate of kind X and a disjunctive predicate of kind Y both ascribe the same property, this property is of kind X and not of kind Y. Therefore, even though the non-disjunctive normative predicate 'is right' and the disjunctive descriptive predicate D* both ascribe the same property, this property is normative and not descriptive. In other words, this property is irreducibly normative. And therefore, Jackson's argument does not show that the property that is ascribed by the normative predicate 'is right' is identical to a descriptive property.[27]

If disjunctive predicates did not ascribe properties, it could have been true that

(18) If an object satisfies both a non-disjunctive predicate of kind X and a disjunctive predicate of kind Y, this object has a property of kind X but not a property of kind Y.

However, I have already argued that disjunctive predicates can ascribe properties. Given that disjunctive predicates can ascribe properties, there is no reason to think that

(18') If a non-disjunctive predicate of kind X and a disjunctive predicate of kind Y both ascribe the same property, this property is of kind X and not of kind Y.

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[27] Something like this objection is made by Majors [2005: 485], who writes that 'if a property is of kind K, then the members of its extension must have something in common which is visible from level K'. However, since it is not entirely clear to me what Majors means by 'having something in common that is visible from level K', it is not entirely clear to me whether this is the objection he intends to make. Oddie [2005] can also be interpreted as making a version of this objection (see note 20).

And given that there is no reason to think that (18') is true, there is no reason to think that the property that is ascribed by the disjunctive predicate D* is normative and not descriptive. Therefore, this objection fails as well.

VII. Does the argument lead to rampant reductionism?

Another objection that some non-reductive realists make to Jackson's argument is:

> *The objection from rampant reductionism.* If Jackson's argument is sound, it shows that whenever properties of kind X supervene on properties of kind Y, properties of kind X are identical to certain properties of kind Y. In other words, if the argument is sound, it leads to rampant reductionism about all supervening properties. Since such reductionism is very implausible, there must be something wrong with the argument.[28]

However, Jackson's argument only shows that properties of kind X are identical to properties of kind Y if it is true that

(6*) Necessarily, anything that has properties of kind X also has properties of kind Y

and that

(8*) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of properties of kind Y at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of properties of kind X at W and W* is also exactly alike.

[28] This is another objection that I have heard repeatedly in discussion. A version of this objection is also discussed by Majors [2005: 487].

Though these claims are true of normative and descriptive properties, they do not seem to be true of many other properties that supervene on other properties. For example, it does not seem to be true that

(6**) Necessarily, anything that has mental properties also has physical properties,

or that

(8**) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of physical properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of mental properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

For there seem to be possible worlds that contain disembodied spirits that have mental properties but no physical properties, and there seem to be possible worlds at which some objects have additional mental properties without these objects or any other object having additional physical properties.[29]

Therefore, rather than endorsing (8**), many materialists would instead say that

(8***) For all possible worlds W and W* that do not contain fundamental properties that are alien to the actual world, if the distribution of physical properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of mental properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.[30]

If mental properties only supervene on physical properties in this restricted sense, Jackson's argument does not support reductionism about these properties. The same applies to all other supervening properties of which (6*) and (8*) are not true. Therefore, this objection fails.[31]

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[29] See Jackson [1998: 11-12, 119].

[30] See Lewis [1994: 293] and Jackson [1998: 14].

[31] Moreover, even if Jackson's argument did show that mental properties are identical to certain physical properties, non-reductive realists would still need to identify a flaw in the argument that

VIII. Does the argument depend on implausible definitions?

Yet another objection that non-reductive realists sometimes make to Jackson's argument is:

> *The objection from implausible definitions*. Jackson's argument depends on definitions of normative and descriptive properties in terms of the predicates that we use to ascribe these properties. However, such definitions are implausible. If we defined normative and descriptive properties in some other way, Jackson's argument would not show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.[32]

However, Jackson's argument does not depend on these definitions. The argument is compatible with any definition of normative and descriptive properties that does not entail that one or more of the following claims is false:

(6) Necessarily, anything that has normative properties also has descriptive properties.

(8) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of descriptive properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

(19) If predicate D* ascribes a property, this property is a descriptive property.

It is hard to see how a plausible definition of normative and descriptive properties could entail that one or more of these claims is false. Therefore, on any plausible definition of normative and descriptive properties, Jackson's argument shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Of course, non-reductive realists could give a definition of normative properties that

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stops it from showing this.

[32] This is another objection that I have heard in discussion.

entails that

(~5) Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

But such a definition of normative properties would clearly beg the question against reductive realists like Jackson. Moreover, if there are no other objections to Jackson's argument, non-reductive realists cannot escape the conclusion of the argument merely by endorsing such a definition of normative properties. For given that

(4) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical to a descriptive property,

a definition of normative properties that entails (~5) equates normative properties with irreducibly normative properties. Therefore, if there are no other objections to Jackson's argument, the argument not only shows that

(~1) There are no irreducibly normative properties,

but also shows that

(20) On a definition of normative properties that entails that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties, there are no normative properties.

And therefore, this objection fails.

A related objection that some non-reductive realists make to Jackson's argument is:

The objection from irreducibility to natural properties. Even if Jackson's argument shows that normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, it does not show that normative properties are identical to natural properties. Therefore, if we define irreducibly normative properties as normative properties that are not identical to natural properties, the argument does not show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

To support this objection, non-reductive realists could say that

(21) A natural property is a property of which we can discover empirically that an object has it.

They could then say that there are possible worlds that have the same distribution of natural properties as the actual world, but that contain a God who does not exist in the actual world and whose supernatural properties make certain actions right that are not right in the actual world.[33] Therefore, they could say, it is false that

(8†) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of natural properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

And therefore, they could claim, if we say that

(4*) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical to a natural property,

then Jackson's argument does not show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

However, philosophers who deny that normative properties are identical to natural properties normally also deny that normative properties are identical to supernatural properties.[34] Instead, these philosophers normally say that normative properties are non-natural properties.[35]

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[33] This God may, for example, make these actions right by commanding that human beings perform these actions.

[34] As is noted by Brink [1989: 22-3]. For example, Moore [1903: §25] claims that the view that goodness is identical to a natural property and the view that goodness is identical to a property that exists in 'supersensible reality' both commit the naturalistic fallacy.

[35] They may say this because they think that normative properties cannot be identical to descriptive properties, whether or not we can discover empirically that an object has these descriptive properties.

Now consider the following claim about supervenience:

(8††) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of natural and supernatural properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

This claim is not shown to be false by existence of possible worlds that contain a God who does not exist in the actual world and whose supernatural properties make certain actions right that are not right in the actual world. If Jackson's argument appealed to (8††) rather than to (8), predicate D* would ascribe a partly natural and partly supernatural property. And given that philosophers who deny that normative properties are identical to natural properties normally also deny that normative properties are identical to supernatural properties, they cannot plausibly admit that normative properties are identical to partly natural and partly supernatural properties. Therefore, this objection fails as well.

IX. Does the argument apply to normative relations?

Some non-reductive realists admit that Jackson's argument shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties, but make the following objection to a broader application of the argument:

The objection from normative relations. Even if Jackson's argument shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties, it does not show that there are no irreducibly normative relations. Therefore, even if the argument shows that the property that is ascribed by a one-place normative predicate such as 'is right' is not irreducibly normative, it fails to show that the relation that is ascribed by a two-place normative

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But, of course, if this is why they say this, their view is really that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

predicate such as 'is a reason for' is not irreducibly normative.[36]

However, given what we have said about normative and descriptive properties, we can say that

(2') A descriptive relation is a relation that can be ascribed with a descriptive two-place predicate,

(3') A normative relation is a relation that can ascribed with a normative two-place predicate,

and

(4') An irreducibly normative relation is a normative relation that is not identical to a descriptive relation.

And given (2'), (3') and (4'), Jackson's argument does show that that there are no irreducibly normative relations.

Consider a fact F_1 that is a reason for an action A_1. In other words, consider a fact F_1 that stands in the normative relation of being-a-reason-for to an action A_1.[37] Given that

(6') Necessarily, any two things that stand in a normative relation also have descriptive properties,[38]

fact F_1 also has descriptive properties, which we can call $P_{F1\text{-}1}$, . . . , $P_{F1\text{-}n}$, and action A_1 also

[36] See Dancy [2004a, 2004b: 63-7]. Dancy mainly discusses what he calls 'the right-making relation', but he also suggests that 'Jackson [is] unable to capture the notion of a reason' [2004a: 233].

[37] The relation of being-a-reason-for is, of course, merely an example of a normative relation. Jackson's argument also applies to all other normative relations, as will become clear below.

[38] I here include descriptive relations among these descriptive properties.

has descriptive properties, which we can call $P_{A1\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{A1\text{-}n}$. And the objects $O_1, \ldots, O_n$ that are part of the same possible world as fact F_1 and action A_1 also have descriptive properties, which for each thing O_x we can call $P_{Ox\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{Ox\text{-}n}$.[39] Fact F_1 and action A_1 therefore satisfy the following two-place predicate, which we can call predicate R_1:

> '___ has descriptive properties $P_{F1\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{F1\text{-}n}$, and ___ has descriptive properties $P_{A1\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{A1\text{-}n}$, and both are such that O_1 has descriptive properties $P_{O1\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{O1\text{-}n}$, . . . , and O_n has descriptive properties $P_{On\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{On\text{-}n}$'.

Given that

> (7) A predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself a descriptive predicate,

predicate R_1 is a descriptive predicate.

Suppose next that facts $F_1, \ldots, F_n$ are all the facts that are reasons for action in all possible worlds, and that actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ are all the actions that these facts are reasons for (with fact F_1 being a reason for action A_1, . . . , and fact F_n being a reason for action A_n).[40] Just as fact F_1 and action A_1 satisfy the descriptive two-place predicate R_1, facts $F_1, \ldots, F_n$ and actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ satisfy similarly constructed descriptive two-place predicates $R_1, \ldots, R_n$. And since fact F_1 and action A_1 satisfy predicate R_1, they also satisfy the following two-place predicate, which we can call predicate R*:

> '___ and ___ satisfy either the descriptive two-place predicate R_1, . . . , or the descriptive two-place predicate R_n'.

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[39] I use the term 'object' to cover anything that has properties or stands in relations. I include the descriptive relations that these objects stand in to each other (and to F_1 and A_1) among $P_{Ox\text{-}1}, \ldots, P_{Ox\text{-}n}$.

[40] Of course, many facts stand in the relation of being-a-reason-for to more than one action, and many actions are such that there is more than one fact that stands in the relation of being-a-reason-for to them. These facts and these actions are included more than once in $F_1, \ldots, F_n$ and in $A_1, \ldots, A_n$.

Again, given (7), predicate R* is a descriptive predicate.

Now consider the following claim about supervenience:

(8') For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of descriptive properties and relations at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties and relations at W and W* is also exactly alike.

If (8') is true, then for any X and any Y, the claim that

(9') X and Y satisfy the descriptive two-place predicate R*

entails the claim that

(10') X and Y satisfy the normative two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’.

For if (9') did not entail (10'), there would be two possible worlds W and W* that have exactly the same distribution of descriptive properties and relations but that do not have the same distribution of normative relations, which would contradict (8').

And for any X and any Y, the claim that

(10') X and Y satisfy the normative two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’

also entails the claim that

(9') X and Y satisfy the descriptive two-place predicate R*.

For facts $F_1, \ldots, F_n$ and actions $A_1, \ldots, A_n$ are all the facts that are reasons for action in all possible worlds and all the actions that these facts are reasons for, and these facts and these actions satisfy the two-place predicates $R_1, \ldots, R_n$. Therefore, any fact and any action that satisfy the two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’ also satisfy one of the two-place predicates $R_1, \ldots, R_n$. And any a fact and any action that satisfy one of the two-place predicates $R_1, \ldots, R_n$ also satisfy the two-place predicate R*.

Since (9') both entails and is entailed by (10'), the normative two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’ and the descriptive two-place predicate R* are necessarily co-extensive. Therefore, given that

(11') Necessarily co-extensive two-place predicates ascribe the same relation,

these predicates ascribe the same relation. And therefore, given that

(2') A descriptive relation is a relation that can be ascribed with a descriptive two-place predicate,

and that

(4') An irreducibly normative relation is a normative relation that is not identical to a descriptive relation,

the predicate ‘is a reason for’ does not ascribe an irreducibly normative relation.

Besides applying to the relation of being-a-reason-for, Jackson’s argument also applies to all other normative relations. Therefore, given (6'), (7), (8') and (11'), the argument shows that

(~1') There are no irreducibly normative relations.

In other words, given plausible claims about supervenience, descriptive predicates and property identity, Jackson’ argument shows that non-reductive realism is false even when it is restricted to normative relations.

Non-reductive realists could reply that, whereas the two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’ ascribes a relation,

(24) The two-place predicate R* does not ascribe a relation.

It is true that predicate R* is so complicated that if we did not realize that it is necessarily co-

extensive with the predicate ‘is a reason for’, we almost certainly would not realize that it ascribes a relation. However, given that predicate R* is necessarily co-extensive with the predicate ‘is a reason for’, and given that the predicate ‘is a reason for’ ascribes a relation, predicate R* must also ascribe a relation.

Non-reductive realists could also reply that, whereas the two-place predicate ‘is a reason for’ ascribes an asymmetric relation,

(25) The two-place predicate R* does not ascribe an asymmetric relation.[41]

Again, it is true that predicate R* is so complicated that if we did not realize that it is necessarily co-extensive with the predicate ‘is a reason for’, we almost certainly would not realize that it ascribes an asymmetric relation. However, a relation is asymmetric if and only if

(26) For all actual and possible objects X and Y, if X stands in this relation to Y, then Y does not stand in this relation to X.

In other words, a relation is asymmetric if and only if

(26') For all actual and possible objects X and Y, if the ordered pair (X, Y) satisfies a predicate that ascribes this relation, then the ordered pair (Y, X) does not satisfy this predicate.

Since predicate R* is necessarily co-extensive with the predicate ‘is a reason for’, these predicates are satisfied by exactly the same ordered pairs (F_x, A_x). Therefore, given that the predicate ‘is a reason for’ ascribes an asymmetric relation, predicate R* must also ascribe an asymmetric relation. And therefore, non-reductive realists’ objection to this broader application of Jackson’s argument fails.

[41] See Dancy [2004b: 65].

X. Biting the bullet

Given that all of these objections to Jackson's argument fail, non-reductive realists may be tempted to respond to the argument by biting the bullet. If so, there are three different bullets they could try to bite.

First, they could say that

(27) Normative and descriptive predicates are the only necessarily co-extensive predicates that ascribe different properties.

Though this begs the question against Jackson's argument, non-reductive realists may not mind begging this question. However, if they want to endorse (27), they will have to explain why normative and descriptive predicates ascribe different properties in a way that is compatible with the fact that no other necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe different properties. It is hard to see how they could explain this. And if they cannot explain this, (27) is very implausible. It is certainly much more implausible than the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Second, non-reductive realists could deny that

(6) Necessarily, anything that has normative properties also has descriptive properties.

However, if non-reductive realists denied (6), they would have to say that it is possible for an object to have normative properties without having any descriptive properties at all. It is hard to see how this could be possible. For example, it is hard to see how it could be possible for an action to have the normative property of being right without having any descriptive properties at all. The claim that this is possible is so implausible that it simply seems to be a conceptual mistake. And even if it is not a conceptual mistake, it is certainly much more implausible than the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Third, non-reductive realists could deny that

(8) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of descriptive properties

at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

However, if non-reductive realists denied (8), they would have to say that it is possible for an object to gain an additional normative property without this object or any other object gaining any additional descriptive properties. Again, it is hard to see how this could be possible. For example, it is hard to see how it could be possible for an action to gain the additional property of being right without this action or any other object gaining any additional descriptive property that makes this action right. Again, the claim that this is possible is so implausible that it simply seems to be a conceptual mistake. And even if it is not a conceptual mistake, it is certainly much more implausible than the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Non-reductive realists could try to make their denial of (8) seem less implausible by endorsing a restricted version of (8) instead. For example, they could say that (8) only holds with nomological necessity, and endorse the following version of (8):

(8") For all possible worlds W and W* that have the same laws of nature as the actual world, if the distribution of descriptive properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.

However, if non-reductive realists endorsed (8") and denied (8), they would have to say that, if the laws of nature were different, it would be possible for an object to gain an additional normative property without this object or any other object gaining any additional descriptive properties. Again, it is hard to see how this could be possible. Though the laws of nature govern the distribution of normative properties by governing the distribution of the descriptive properties that give rise to these normative properties, it is hard to see how they could govern the distribution of normative properties independently of governing the distribution of descriptive properties.

Non-reductive realists could reply that, in addition to the laws of nature, there are normative laws that govern the distribution of normative properties without governing the distribution of descriptive properties. And they could then endorse the following version of

(8):

(8''') For all possible worlds W and W* that have the same normative laws as the actual world, if the distribution of descriptive properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W* is also exactly alike.[42]

However, if there are normative laws that govern the distribution of normative properties without governing the distribution of descriptive properties, (8) is equivalent to the claim that

(8***) For all possible worlds W and W*, if the distribution of descriptive properties at W and W* is exactly alike, then the normative laws at W and W* are also exactly alike.

Therefore, if non-reductive realists endorsed (8''') but denied (8), they would have to say that not all possible worlds that have the same distribution of descriptive properties have the same normative laws. And they would then again have to say that it is possible for an object to gain an additional normative property without this object or any other object gaining any additional descriptive properties. As I have said, the claim that this is possible is so implausible that it simply seems to be a conceptual mistake. And even if it is not a conceptual mistake, it is certainly much more implausible than the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

[42] Non-reductive realists could also try to formulate a version of (8) that appeals to Fine's notion of normative necessity [Fine 2003]. However, though Fine claims that 'the moral supervenes on the natural' with normative necessity [2003: 267], he denies that normative necessity can be defined as a restricted version of metaphysical necessity [2003: 255-6]. Instead, he seems to take normative necessity to be a relation between an object's normative properties and its descriptive properties, which seems to be similar to the relation that Dancy calls 'resultance' [Dancy 1993: 73-7, 2004b: 85-9]. Dancy distinguishes resultance from supervenience, and he accepts that (8) is true about supervenience. I think that non-reductive realists who want to appeal to Fine's notion of normative necessity should do the same.

XI. What is the significance of the conclusion of Jackson's argument?

If Jackson's argument is sound, it shows that

(~1) There are no irreducibly normative properties.

We may wonder what the significance of this conclusion is. Clearly, its significance is not that it shows that

(28) We can find out whether an object has a normative property by finding out which descriptive properties this object and other objects have.

For, as we saw in section VI, in order to know which property the descriptive predicate D* ascribes, we need to know which actions satisfy the normative predicate 'is right'. In other words, we need to know which actions have the normative property of being right. And rather than telling us which objects have normative properties such as the property of being right, Jackson's argument simply assumes that certain objects have these properties.

Neither is the significance of the conclusion of the argument that it shows that

(29) Normative predicates have the same meaning as certain descriptive predicates.

For, as we saw in section IV, different predicates can ascribe the same property without having the same meaning. For example, the predicates 'is water' and 'is H_20' do not have the same meaning, but these predicates do ascribe the same property. And the predicates 'is a closed figure with three angles' and 'is a closed figures that has three sides' also do not have the same meaning, but these predicates do ascribe the same property.[43]

[43] Therefore, even though (~1) is incompatible with Moore's ontological claim that the normative predicate 'is good' ascribes the irreducibly normative (or non-natural) property of goodness, (~1) is compatible with Moore's semantic claim that the normative predicate 'is good' does not have the same meaning as any descriptive predicate (or any predicate ascribing a natural property).

Finally, neither is the significance of the conclusion of the argument that it shows that reductive realism about normative properties is true. For (~1) is not only compatible with reductive realism, but is also compatible with two forms of irrealism about normative properties: non-cognitivism, which says that normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes or combinations of non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs that ascribe descriptive properties, and the error theory, which says that normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties even though there are no such properties.

Instead, the significance of the conclusion of Jackson's argument is that it shows that non-reductive realism about normative properties is false. Given that many philosophers think that non-reductive realism about such properties is true, this conclusion is very significant.[44] Moreover, reductive realists, non-cognitivists and error theorists can all make use of this conclusion to defend their views. If reductive realists can give an argument that shows that

(30) There are normative properties,

then they can combine this argument with Jackson's argument to establish that reductive realism is true, and that non-cognitivism and the error theory are false. And if non-cognitivists and error theorists can give an argument that shows that

(~5) Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties,

then they can combine this argument with Jackson's argument to establish that reductive realism is false, and that either non-cognitivism or the error theory is true.

[44] As I said in note 1, defenders of non-reductive realism about normative properties include Moore [1903], Dancy [1993, 2004b], Parfit [1997], Scanlon [1998], and Shafer-Landau [2003].

XII. Conclusion

I have argued that all the objections that non-reductive realists have made to Jackson's argument fail. Therefore, I conclude that the argument shows that

(~1) There are no irreducibly normative properties.

In other words, I conclude that Jackson's argument shows that non-reductive realism about normative properties is false. The truth about normative properties and judgements must therefore be either reductive realism, or non-cognitivism, or the error theory.[45]

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