

## What's Wrong with Relaxing?

Christine Tiefensee

**Abstract** In his new book *Unbelievable Errors*, Bart Streumer argues that there is no way round the result that all metaethical views other than the error theory fail either for the same reasons as metaphysical normative realism or expressivism. In this contribution, I show that this is false: We can avoid this result by ‘relaxing’ about normative truths. Even if Streumer were right about the fate of other metaethical positions, then, relaxed realism remains immune to the problems he raises.

**Keywords** Error theory • Minimalism • Non-metaphysical normative realism • Relaxed realism • Streumer

### 1 Introduction

Discussions between normative error theorists and non-error theorists often risk hitting a brick wall built of metaphysical intuition: Either you happen to agree with the former that irreducibly normative properties would simply be metaphysically too queer to exist, or you concur with the latter that there is nothing odd about such properties. What I very much like about Bart Streumer’s new book *Unbelievable Errors*<sup>1</sup> is that it seeks to navigate its course around this brick wall by developing a systematic inconsistency argument to the effect that normative properties would have to be both identical and non-identical with non-normative properties, and thus cannot exist. What I *dislike* about it, in turn, is its conclusion: I do not want to be an error theorist.

In what follows, I will, therefore, seek to defuse Streumer’s inconsistency argument by ‘relaxing’ about normative truths, i.e. by defending a non-metaphysical form of normative realism—‘relaxed realism’, for short—against Streumer’s objections.<sup>2</sup> This will show that although Streumer’s book provides important new arguments which undisputedly enrich metaethical debate and crucially force us to clarify metaethical views ever more thoroughly, it is not they, but *other* arguments which finally prove decisive for the tenability of metaethical positions such as relaxed realism.

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<sup>1</sup> All references refer to this book unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> For non-metaphysical realism, see Nagel (1986), Parfit (2011), Scanlon (2014, 2017), Kramer (2009) and Dworkin (1996, 2011). The version of relaxed realism that I defend here might not be one with which every relaxed realist agrees. Since I am not interested in text exegesis, but in what I regard as the most plausible version of the relaxed position, that is fine by me.

## 2 Why Streumer Does Not Want to Relax

What is relaxed realism? Borrowing from Thomas Nagel, here is one response that Streumer considers (p.100):

- (1) There are normative truths, but there are no normative properties in the sense of ways objects can be.

Let us assume that whenever Streumer talks of properties ‘in the sense of ways objects can be’, he is alluding to some robust sense of property, whereas some minimalist concept is in play whenever he is talking about properties as the shadows of concepts. If so, relaxed realism undoubtedly amounts to the position that there are both normative truths and minimalist normative properties. Does it also amount to the view that there are no robust normative properties, as (1) states? Yes, but only if we understand this statement correctly—I return to this issue and its intricacies below.

Since (1) is a little too meagre to let us assess Streumer’s case against relaxed realism properly, let me quickly fill in a few more details about how I will understand this position. Here is the bundle of theses which, I believe, form its core:

- (A) Realism: There are normative truths and facts.
- (B) Normative non-reductionism: Normative truths are not reducible to non-normative truths.
- (C) Minimalism: There is no substantive difference between asserting a proposition and calling this proposition true. Facts are true propositions. Properties are shadows of concepts. Some *K* exists iff the application conditions of ‘*K*’ are fulfilled. A claim purportedly represents the world iff it is a truth-apt assertion.
- (D) Discourse-internality: Which application conditions ‘*K*’ possesses is to be determined from within *K*-specific discourse. Given the interdefinability of TRUTH, FACT, PROPERTY and EXISTENCE, this means that all questions pertaining to truth, facts, properties and existence are (at least partially) discourse-internal.

The first two components make relaxed realism a form of non-reductive *realism*; the last two explain in which way this form of realism is *non-metaphysical* or relaxed.

What, then, is allegedly wrong with relaxed realism? After introducing the position along the lines of (1), Streumer quickly goes on to state that:

[relaxed realists] cannot avoid [his] objections by endorsing (1). If normative judgments represent the world, they ascribe normative properties in the sense of a way objects can be. Since (1) denies that there are normative properties in this sense but does say that there are normative truths, (1) can only be true if normative judgments do not represent the world. If [relaxed realists] endorse (1), their view therefore faces the symmetry objection just as much as noncognitivism does. Of course, they could try to avoid this objection by endorsing minimalism about representation. But as we saw in §34, they then run into [his] arguments against realism instead. ... (pp.100, 101)

Let us call this first challenge the ‘collapse dilemma’. Since we have already clarified that relaxed realists are indeed minimalists about representation, I will brush aside its first

horn<sup>3</sup> here and zoom in exclusively on the second. That is: If relaxed realism is taken to fail for the same reasons as metaphysical realism, what are these reasons?

Streumer's case against metaphysical normative realism takes once more the form of a dilemma and is based on two central arguments. The first, which Streumer calls the "Reduction Argument" (p.9), can be reconstructed as follows:

*The Reduction Argument*

- (P1) As a metaphysical realist you believe that properties are ways an object can be.
- (P2) If you believe that properties are ways an object can be, you are committed to accepting (N) as the correct criterion of property identity:
  - (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they are necessarily coextensive.
- (P3) Normative and descriptive properties are necessarily coextensive.
- (C1) Hence, normative and descriptive properties are identical.

The Reduction Argument thus teaches us that if we want to be metaphysical realists, we must be reductivists. This, though, drives us straight into the arms of Streumer's second argument, which we can name the 'Anti-Reduction Argument':

*The Anti-Reduction Argument*

- (P4) As a reductive realist, you believe that normative and descriptive properties are identical.
- (P5) If normative and descriptive properties are identical, the normative predicate *F* and descriptive predicate *G* must refer to the same descriptive property *D*.
- (P6) If *F* refers to *D*, there must be an explanation of how *F* picks out *D* which is compatible with reductionism.
- (P7) There is no explanation of how *F* picks out *D* which is compatible with reductionism. (→ false guarantee & regress objections)
- (C2) *F* does not refer to *D*.
- (C3) Hence, normative and descriptive properties are not identical.

The details of (P7) need not concern us until later. The important insight to take away for now is, rather, that according to the Anti-Reduction Argument, if we want to be metaphysical realists, we must be non-reductivists.

Combining the Reduction and the Anti-Reduction Arguments thus leads to the sobering result that there is no convincing form of metaphysical normative realism available: Since normative properties would have to be both identical and non-identical to descriptive properties, the very idea of a normative property is inconsistent. Given as much, let us call this argument the 'inconsistency dilemma' (see Fig. 1).

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<sup>3</sup> I praised Streumer for developing a clear inconsistency argument against normative realism which avoids appeal to intuitions. Regrettably the same does not hold for his symmetry objection against expressivism: In chapter VI, Streumer mentions at numerous points that "it is hard not to feel that something ... is missing" in the expressivist explanation, without specifying what this 'something' amounts to. Since I, for one, do not share this feeling, the debate is once more hitting a brick wall of intuitions which chapters I-V admirably avoid.

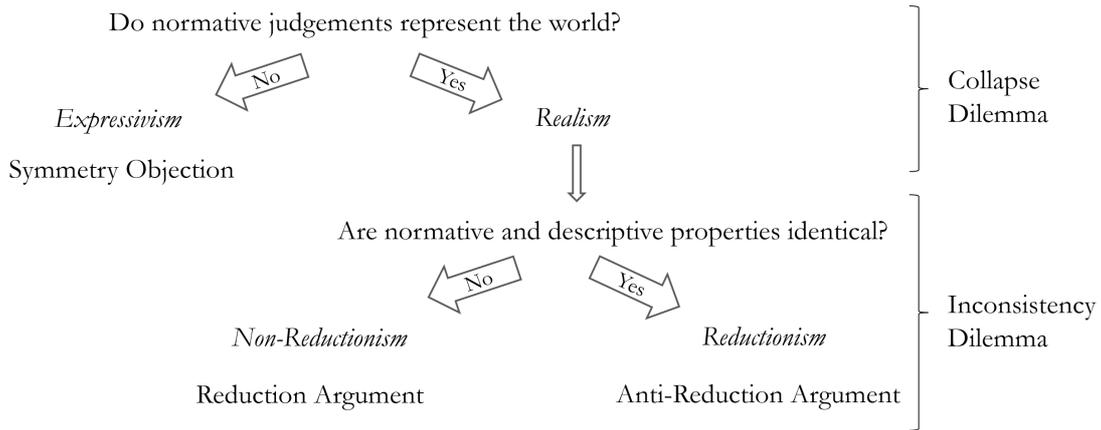


Fig. 1: The collapse and inconsistency dilemmas

Hence, if Streumer is right in claiming that relaxed realism’s downfall is caused by the same reasons as metaphysical normative realism’s, relaxed realists must also be impaled on the horns of the inconsistency dilemma. But are they?

### 3 Why Relaxing Defuses the Inconsistency Dilemma

There are at least two ways for relaxed realists to defuse Streumer’s inconsistency dilemma. The first uses minimalism about properties to reject (N) as the correct criterion of property identity and thus pulls the rug from under Streumer’s Reduction Argument. Since this riposte could not be more straightforward, let us call it the ‘direct response’. The second, more complex reply remains agnostic about the correct criterion of property identity, yet seeks to show that even if relaxed realists accepted the identity of normative and non-normative properties, their position would remain immune to the problems Streumer identifies. Given as much, let us call this the ‘immunity response’. I look at these in turn.

#### 3.1 The direct response to the Reduction Argument

The direct response pursues the most straightforward path to reject Streumer’s Reduction Argument by pointing out that relaxed realists do not share its premises (see Fig. 2).

To elaborate, we have already stated that relaxed realists are minimalists: They endorse a minimalist rather than a robust conception of properties. As Streumer himself explains, though, which criterion of property identity is appropriate depends on what we take properties to be (pp.11-12). If properties are understood robustly in the sense of ‘ways an object can be’, (N) is the right criterion—or so he takes great pains to argue. However, if properties are understood in a minimalist way as the shadows of concepts, Streumer suggests that (N) must be replaced with a criterion along the lines of (2) (p.12):

- (2) Two predicates ascribe the same property if and only if they express the same concept.

*The Reduction Argument*

- (P1) As a metaphysical realist you believe that properties are ways an object can be.
- (P2) If you believe that properties are ways an object can be, you are committed to (N) as the correct criterion of property identity:
- (N) Two predicates ascribe the same property iff they are necessarily coextensive.
- (P3) Normative and descriptive properties are necessarily coextensive.
- (C1) Hence, normative and descriptive properties are identical.

*The Direct Response*

- (P1\*) As a relaxed realist you believe that properties are the shadows of concepts.
- (P2\*) If you believe that properties are shadows of concepts, you are committed to (2) as the correct criterion of property identity:
- (2) Two predicates ascribe the same property iff they express the same concept.
- (P3\*) Normative and descriptive predicates do not express the same concepts.
- (C1\*) Hence, normative and descriptive properties are not identical.

*Fig. 2: The direct response to the Reduction Argument*

Given that relaxed realists are minimalists about properties, then, they are not committed to (N), but to (2), say. (2), though, does not tie property identity to necessary co-extensiveness, but to the expression of concepts. Consequently, since normative predicates and descriptive predicates express different concepts, relaxed realists can accept the necessary co-extensiveness of normative and descriptive properties *without* thereby having to admit that these properties are also identical.

So, even if Streumer were right in arguing that *metaphysical* normative realists cannot be non-reductivists because their commitment to (P1) and (N) together with the necessary co-extensiveness of normative and descriptive properties entails the reduction of the former to the latter, *non-metaphysical*, relaxed realists need not lose any sleep over Streumer's Reduction Argument: If they want to defend the non-identity of normative and descriptive properties, nothing that Streumer has said so far stops them from doing so.

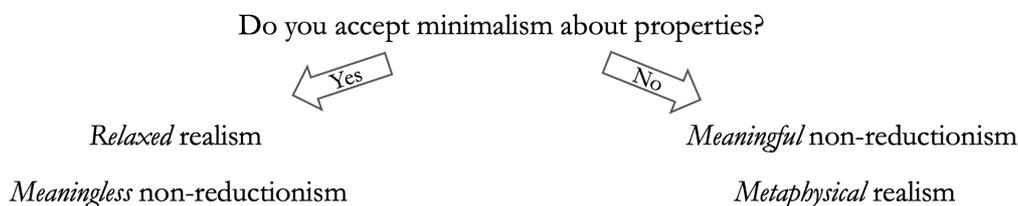
Now, given that this direct response is not only extremely straightforward, but also foreshadowed in Streumer's own text, you might think that there must be something wrong with it. For instance, it might be thought that the minimalist conception of properties on which the direct response relies is not plausible in the first place. However, if this were Streumer's position, it would be one that would have to be developed not only far more thoroughly, but also *independently* from the dilemmas he presents. Alternatively, Streumer might believe that relaxed realists' combination of minimalism about properties and representationalism is a non-starter, for instance when declaring that if "normative judgements represent the world, they ascribe normative properties in the sense of a way objects can be" (p.100). As Streumer will certainly agree, though, this cannot be right if we take minimalism seriously. After all, minimalism is supposed to apply *tout court*: That is, it is to include minimalism about truth, fact, reference, representation, belief, etc. in order to prevent the re-inflation of semantic notions through recursive definitions (see Price 1997). As such, relaxed realists will combine their minimalism about representation with the claim that *all* properties—be they normative or non-normative—must be understood minimally. Hence, when relaxed realists accept (1) as the correct definition of their position, they will do so not because they would reject the existence of robust normative properties since they believe that only *descriptive* properties are robust, but because there *are no* robust properties—full stop. Note that this does not amount to tarring all properties with the same brush. For, just as minimalism about truth does not entail that all truths are of the same kind, minimalism about

properties does not entail that all properties are of the same kind: Recent responses to the related problem of ‘creeping minimalism’ (Dreier 2004) have gone a long way to show how this diversity of discourses can be preserved despite their unity regarding the adoption of minimalism.<sup>4</sup>

However, there might still be a more indirect argument that Streumer could field against the direct response. This does not target minimalism’s combination with representationalism, but with *non-reductionism*. He explains:

What should non-reductive realists take properties to be? Their disagreement with reductive realists is not about whether normative and descriptive predicates express different *concepts*. Both sides agree that they do. Instead, this disagreement is about whether sentences that contain normative predicates have the same *truthmakers* as sentences that contain only descriptive predicates. Reductive realists think they do, and non-reductive realists think they do not. Non-reductive realists therefore cannot take properties to be shadows of concepts. They must instead take them to be ways objects can be. (pp.12-13)

In a nutshell, then, Streumer argues that for the debate between reductionism and non-reductionism to be significant at all, it must concern properties in the sense of ways objects can be, not in the sense of being shadows of concepts. If successful, this would thus confront relaxed realists with yet another dilemma: Either, they choose to hold on to minimalism about properties, but have to admit that their non-reductionism is empty. Or they choose to defend a meaningful form of non-reductionism, but have to reject minimalism about properties. Given as much, let us call this the ‘meaningfulness dilemma’ (see Fig. 3).



*Fig. 3: The meaningfulness dilemma*

Now, Streumer’s quote can be read as suggesting that relaxed realists begrudgingly have to pick the second horn of this dilemma. However, I believe that they should quite happily grasp the first.

To see why, remember that the debate between reductionists and non-reductionists has traditionally acquired its explosiveness through the metaphysical worry of how to place normative properties within a naturalistic world. By reducing normative properties to non-normative properties, metaphysical reductionists have a straightforward response at hand; metaphysical non-reductionists, conversely, find themselves in deeper water when trying to explain how to understand normative properties and their relation to non-normative properties. Relaxed realists, though, do not share the metaphysical worry that underlies this debate. Rather, they think that the query ‘How

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<sup>4</sup> To quote but two examples of this attempt to preserve and explain the “diverse unity” of propositions, see Price (2013: 47) and Williams (2013).

can we place normative properties within a natural world?’ is the wrong question to ask in the first place. Instead, they repeatedly tell us that when thinking about the existence of normative facts and properties, we must not draw on general metaphysical principles—say with regard to causal efficacy, metaphysical reducibility, deliberative indispensability or explanatory potency—, nor worry about how demands of the natural domain could be applied to the normative. Rather, to ask whether or not there are normative properties is to ask whether or not anything is good, bad, rational, justified, just or unjust, say. The additional question ‘How do these properties fit into a natural world?’ has no place within this enquiry.

Consequently, insofar as the traditional distinction between metaphysical non-reductionism and reductionism is supposed to respond to this very question, relaxed realists should lose no sleep over Streumer’s observation that this dispute would be rendered meaningless if we understood properties minimally. After all, if the question itself is no longer relevant, then neither is the preservation of different responses to it.

Does this mean that relaxed realism’s non-reductionism becomes nothing more than an empty phrase, as the first horn of the meaningfulness dilemma suggests? Not necessarily. For, even though Streumer is right in pointing out that nobody disputes the claim that normative and non-normative predicates express different concepts, it is still an important insight that normative discourse cannot be reduced to any non-normative domain. Rather, it has its own discourse-specific rules governing how to find out about normative truths, what normative justification requires, what its link to action and rationality involves, in which way normative properties supervene on descriptive ones and so on. It is *this* kind of irreducibility that relaxed realists are keen to defend when talking about the irreducibility of the normative, and not some dispute about metaphysical reducibility which they themselves brand as misguided. The meaningfulness dilemma, therefore, does not threaten relaxed realism.

To sum up, then, no possible retort to the direct response that we could extract from Streumer’s text is convincing. Rather, these replies beg the question against minimalism, or would need to be developed in far greater detail, or rely on a misunderstanding of what kind of irreducibility relaxed realists aim to defend. As such, the direct response stands: Relaxed realists can simply pull the plug on the Reduction Argument by rejecting its premises. As a first interim result, then, we can record that even if metaphysical realists found themselves impaled on the horns of Streumer’s inconsistency dilemma, relaxed realists can remain non-reductionists without running into any inconsistencies.

### *3.2 The Immunity Response to the Anti-Reduction Argument*

Assume, though, that relaxed realists were not to pursue the direct response. How would they fare if they accepted the identity of normative and non-normative properties? Would this entail the re-inflation of relaxed realism? Would it imply its inconsistency by impaling relaxed realists on the horn of the Anti-Reduction Argument? The ‘immunity response’ aims to answer both questions negatively.

Before developing this response, though, let me first clear a different question out of the way, namely: Are relaxed realists committed to taking a stance on property identity at all? Streumer appears to think so: If relaxed realists “say that [normative] judgements represent the world”, he explains, “they must tell us whether the properties that these judgements ascribe are identical to descriptive properties” (p.101). Now, if this were what Streumer’s challenge to relaxed realists really encompassed, note that it

would be much weaker than the previous claim that anyone accepting normative representation must also accept the identity of normative and descriptive properties. After all, it requests only that *something* about their identity or non-identity must be said, not *what* must be said.

Yet, why should relaxed realists accept even this weaker challenge? As I have explained above, according to them nothing hangs on this question, as it neither affects normative properties' existence nor our ability to find out about them. Queerness, remember, is no longer their worry. Instead, of central concern are *normative* questions such as 'Are only actions that maximise utility right?', 'Does justice consist in the equal distribution of resources?' or 'Do only desires give me reason to perform an action?'. If we can answer normative questions such as these as participants of normative discourse, we have all the relevant responses we require. It is thus by no means clear why relaxed realists should feel the need to say anything about metaphysically interpreted identity-relations between utility maximisation and rightness, say, or justice and equality of resources.

But assume that we were not quite as 'maximally relaxed' as this response presupposes. Instead, imagine that relaxed realists took up the following position: Firstly, they steadfastly hold on to their non-reductionism about normative discourse and concepts, maintaining that these concepts and discourse-specific rules cannot be reduced to or overridden by non-normative concepts and discourse-specific rules. Secondly, following roughly the thoughts that Streumer develops in §12, they explain that there is a normative constraint on normative theories, such that these theories can be true only if they identify descriptive properties with which normative properties are necessarily coextensive. That is, normative theories must be of the form: 'Necessarily, an action that maximises utility is right', 'Necessarily, an initial distribution of resources that is equal is just', etc. Put differently, then, if normative views are correct, non-normative and descriptive properties are necessarily coextensive (p.31). Since relaxed realists do, of course, hold that some such normative theory is indeed correct, they are thus committed to defending the necessary co-extensiveness of these properties *as a matter of normative fact*. What does this imply for their identity? Assume that, as hinted in the 'maximally relaxed' response, relaxed realists are not particularly interested in this question and thus do not have a preconceived stance on it. However, let us imagine, thirdly, that since this question is of no importance to them, they simply follow Streumer in accepting (N) as the correct criterion of property identity. As a result, their endorsement of the (normatively grounded) necessary co-extensiveness of normative and descriptive properties also commits them to their identity—just as is claimed by the Reduction Argument. Given this background, then, relaxed realists remain to be non-reductionists about normative discourse and concepts, yet become reductionists about normative properties. What follows for relaxed realism?

Most intuitively, we might think that this spells the end for the relaxed position: After all, if relaxed realists agreed that normative and descriptive properties are identical, they would simply become metaphysical realists! Whether or not this is true, though, obviously depends on what we understand by 'relaxed' and 'metaphysical'. On one reading, we could suggest that to be a relaxed realist is to believe (roughly) that normative properties are not located within the natural world. If so, accepting the identity of normative and natural properties would indeed lead to the death of relaxed realism. However, this is not the understanding that we should accept—indeed, nothing said so far has in any way relied on such a metaphysical definition of relaxed realism. Rather, what I have emphasised throughout is that to be a relaxed realist is to believe

that no general metaphysical criteria are relevant for the existence of and enquiry into normative truths and properties. Consequently, it is this methodological definition, rather than some metaphysical thesis, that demarcates relaxed from metaphysical realism. On this methodological definition, though, accepting the identity of normative and descriptive properties does not undermine relaxed realism. For, it is not whether or not these properties are identical which is important, but whether or not the former can be said to exist only if they were deliberately indispensable, featured in explanations, were causally efficacious or reducible to descriptive properties, say. Relaxed realists' response to this question remains a clear 'No', no matter what their stance on property-identity might be.

Yet, even if this first worry can be assuaged by adopting the methodological interpretation of relaxed realism, a second follows hot on its heels. For, if relaxed realists now agree that normative and descriptive properties are identical, they obviously face Streumer's Anti-Reduction Argument just as much as metaphysical reductionists do!<sup>5</sup> As such, they now owe us a reductionism-friendly account of how it comes about that normative predicates refer to descriptive properties. As indicated by the Anti-Reduction Argument, though, Streumer thinks that no such account is forthcoming. As a result, relaxed realists end up just as impaled on the horns of the inconsistency dilemma as their metaphysical counterparts: They too are committed to holding normative and descriptive properties as both identical and non-identical.

There are two ways in which relaxed realists can react to the Anti-Reduction Argument. The first once more takes up a maximally relaxed stance and bluntly denies that relaxed realists need to explain the meaning and reference of normative concepts: Once we relax, they could submit, questions of semantics and metasemantics no longer require any explaining. I find this stance utterly unconvincing. After all, relaxing about normative truths renders a question such as 'How come that 'right', rather than 'blue', means what it does?' neither trivial nor irrelevant—there clearly must be something said in response to this question. Consequently, relaxed realist cannot withdraw to the implausible position of treating matters of meaning as matters of brute fact. Instead, they should *accept* Streumer's metasemantic challenge, but seek to show that his Anti-Reduction Argument *fails*. Let us develop this second reaction to the Anti-Reduction Argument in greater detail.

To do so would obviously require a properly worked-out metasemantics for relaxed realism—which, objectionably, relaxed realists do not have. I will return to this problem shortly. However, given its defining feature of discourse-internality and semantic non-reductionism, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that whatever relaxed realism's metasemantic view comes to, it will not amount to a descriptivist view which seeks to determine the reference of normative predicates by appeal to fully descriptively specified conditions.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it will fall either into the second or the third category of responses to the Anti-Reduction Argument that Streumer considers:

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<sup>5</sup> A related worry might be that if relaxed realists accepted the identity of normative and natural properties, say, they would also inherit all the other problems which generally inflict metaphysical reductionists. Since this would lead us too far afield, I will bracket this concern here.

<sup>6</sup> According to Streumer, descriptivist accounts face the so-called 'false guarantee objection' (§20). Note that the success of this objection is far from guaranteed. Besides it being unclear in which way this objection differs from twin earth arguments or the thesis that normative terms are semantically irreducible, once we take into account the meaning-truth platitude 'If word *w* means *F*, then  $(x) (w \text{ is true of } x \text{ iff } Fx)$ ', it is hard to see how the 'guarantee' that *w* is true of everything that is *F* should be false, provided that *w* really means *F*.

- (P2) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that, in certain *normatively* specified conditions, users of this predicate would apply it to objects that have this property. (p.43)
- (P3) What makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property is that the correct first-order normative view applies this predicate to objects that have this property. (p.44)

What, according to Streumer, is wrong with (P2)? Well, since (P2) refers to normatively specified conditions, it uses further normative predicates—such as ‘rational’, ‘justifiable’, or ‘in line with the moral point of view’—in order to fix the reference of normative terms. This, in turn, raises the question of these further normative terms’ reference, which must again be determined on grounds of the normatively specified conditions mentioned in (P2), which again raises questions about the reference of these terms, ... and so on *ad infinitum*.

Interestingly, Streumer believes that non-reductivists do not face this infinite regress, which makes them free to endorse (P2) (p.52). However, I cannot see why reductivists should fare any worse. To elaborate, remember that the version of reductionism that the Anti-Reduction Argument seeks to undermine is of a *metaphysical* kind, i.e. one that concerns the identity of normative and descriptive *properties*. This, though, must be kept strictly separate from a *semantic* reductionism, which seeks to reduce the meaning of normative *concepts* to that of fully descriptive terms. Since (P2), denying that a descriptive specification of normative vocabulary can be given, is an instance of semantic *non-reductionism*, (P2) would indeed be out of the question if relaxed realists (and other metaphysical reductivists) were also semantic reductivists. However, as stated above, relaxed realists defend semantic *non-reductionism*. Consequently, since semantic non-reductionism does not entail metaphysical non-reductionism, it is by no means inconsistent to maintain both that normative and descriptive *properties* are identical and that we cannot help but employ normative terms so as to specify the meaning and reference of normative *concepts*. Consequently, even if relaxed realists let themselves be roped into an identity-claim about normative and descriptive properties, I cannot see why this should ban them from defending (P2).

What, according to Streumer, is wrong with (P3)? Besides indicating that (P3) might collapse into (P2), the main worry that Streumer appears to harbour about (P3) is what we can call the circularity objection. For, briefly after introducing (P3), he asks:

But what makes a first-order normative view correct? Non-reductive realists would say that

- (1) What makes a first-order normative view correct is that the objects to which this view ascribes normative properties really have these properties.

But reductive realists cannot say this: if reductive realism is true, what makes it the case that an object really has a normative property is that one of its descriptive properties can be ascribed with a normative predicate. This means that if reductive realists endorsed (1), this would return them to the question we started with: what makes it the case that a certain normative predicate ascribes a certain descriptive property? (p.59)

I find this quote puzzling. For, should not anybody be able to endorse (1)? After all, it appears totally deflationary. Compare: ‘What makes it the case that hedonism, claiming that only pleasure is good, is the correct moral view? Well, what makes this theory cor-

rect is that pleasure, and only pleasure, really is good! Since (1) seems to be little more than a variation of the T-schema, any metaethicist should easily be able to endorse it.

Alternatively, Streumer could intend this quote to be read as implying that in order to speak of truth at all, we need to speak of robust truth-makers. However, since this reading simply begs the question against relaxed realism and its adoption of minimalism, this cannot be the right interpretation either. As I have argued above, if Streumer really wanted to oppose minimalism, we do not find the reasons for this rejection in his book—rather further arguments that are independent from his dilemmas would need to be presented to back up this rebuttal.

Finally, Streumer's quote might implicitly presuppose not a robust conception of truth as such, but rather a certain order of explanation which envisages that in order to decide which normative theory is true, we need to fix the reference of moral terms first. That is, first we need to determine to which descriptive property 'good' refers. Once we have found out that 'good' refers to being pleasurable, say, we can then define truth recursively by declaring that if  $X$  is pleasurable, ' $X$  is good' is true. But if so, Streumer could conclude, the truth of a normative theory such as hedonism cannot stand at the beginning of our metasemantic enquiry, but can only ever form its conclusion.

However, why should relaxed realists accept this 'building-block theory', as Davidson (1980: 135) called it, which tries to analyse the basic reference of singular names and simple predicates first and then takes this to form the foundation for its characterisation of complex terms' reference and, finally, truth? Why should they not follow Davidson (1980, 1984) and others (McDowell 1977, 1980; Brandom 1994) by proceeding in exactly the opposite direction, namely by explaining that first, we must fix meaning holistically—which must include appeal to normative theories!—and then we abstract reference assignments so as to make sentences come out as true? After all, it is this direction of explanation which dovetails best with the general thrust of the relaxed position. For, relaxed realists would never want to say that a moral theory about goodness, say, is true because the descriptive property that it identifies as the ground of goodness can be ascribed with the predicate 'good'. Since this presupposes that reference can be determined without consulting normative theories and normative discourse, nothing could be further from the relaxed mindset and its focus on discourse-internality. In contrast, the holistic approach, according to which reference has "no life of its own, independent of the truth of sentences" (Williams 1999: 559) fully honours the relaxed focus on normative theories and discourse. Consequently, contrary to what Streumer appears to suggest in his text, relaxed realists will insist that we cannot help but start with the truth of sentences in which normative predicates feature and only then determine the reference of normative predicates. As long as Streumer has not shown that this holistic approach to meaning and reference must be rejected, then, there is no reason why relaxed realists should not endorse (P3).

Let us sum up. I have stated that even if relaxed realists accepted the identity of normative and descriptive properties—an issue which, I have argued, bears no significance for their account—their position remains immune to Streumer's arguments: Since relaxed realists are keen to defend the irreducibility of normative concepts and discourse, and not some metaphysical (ir)reducibility thesis, accepting the identity of normative and descriptive properties does not undermine the relaxed stance. Since, in turn, this non-reductionism about normative concepts can be combined with a reductionism about properties, there is no reason why they should not explain the reference of normative concepts in terms of (P2). And since they are most likely to adopt a holistic approach to meaning and reference, the circularity objection that Streumer seems to

raise against (P3) also appears misplaced unless further arguments are presented. If so, the Anti-Reduction Argument need not worry relaxed realists.

#### 4 A new collapse dilemma?

Where do we stand? I have argued that by adopting the direct response, relaxed realists can straightforwardly counter Streumer's Reduction Argument and defend the non-identity of normative and non-normative properties. By pursuing the immunity response, in turn, they can show that even if they accepted reductionism about normative properties, Streumer's Anti-Reduction Argument does no harm to them. Either way, then, Streumer's inconsistency dilemma is defused: Even if it left metaphysical realists in trouble, relaxed realists can defend the existence of normative truths and properties without becoming entangled in inconsistency.

Why, then, is Streumer so sceptical about relaxed realism? My hunch is that the reason is two-fold. Firstly, it remains undoubtedly the case that relaxed realism is not (as yet) a fully worked-out position: Many of its details remain objectionably unclear. These comprise issues such as the relaxed understanding of domains, discourse-specific norms 'settling' normative truths, concerns of ontological promiscuity etc. Importantly, this lack of clarity also pertains to the key question of which metasemantic view relaxed realists wish to defend.

Secondly, Streumer might think that it is with regard to this metasemantic question that his collapse dilemma resurfaces, albeit in different form. For, once we press relaxed realists on their metasemantic view, some argue that it becomes clear that their position either collapses into a form of expressivism or metaphysical realism. That is, if they try to provide an account which is recognisably realist, their position will amount to metaphysical normative realism. If, in turn, they seek to provide an account which is non-metaphysical, it will collapse into expressivism. Since either way, relaxed realism would fail to amount to a distinctive, independent metaethical position, it could not function as a metaethical competitor to the error theory and thus need not be taken seriously by Streumer. Let us call this the 'new collapse dilemma' (Fig. 4).

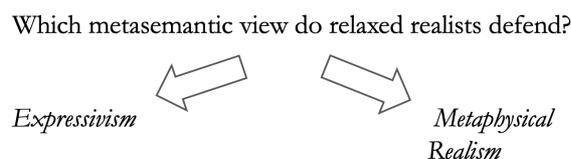


Fig. 4: *The new collapse dilemma*

Now, whilst this new challenge to relaxed realism is indeed dangerous, let me emphasise two points. Firstly, we should note that in regard to this new collapse dilemma, the jury is still out: So far, no relaxed realist has made a serious attempt to spell out a metasemantic view that would be both realist and relaxed. No doubt, doing so will be no easy feat, and this paper is certainly not the place to embark on such a project. However, we should also note, secondly, that the new collapse dilemma has nothing to do with the error-theoretic arguments developed by Streumer. Hence, if this new argument were indeed the main reason for Streumer's resistance to relaxing about normative truths, we do not find it in his book. Accordingly, far more would need to be said

to shore up relaxed realism's alleged collapse. As has been explained here, mere appeal to the adoption of minimalism about representation will not do the trick.

## 5 Conclusion

Streumer believes that there is “no way around” the result that non-error-theoretic views fail either for the same reasons as metaphysical normative realism or expressivism (p.101). I have shown here that there *is* a way around this: We can relax about normative truths. At the same time, I have admitted that being the ‘new kid on the block’ that it is, relaxed realism still leaves many questions unanswered. Now, Streumer's dilemmas certainly and quite rightly press us to clarify what exactly this relaxed position involves. However, insofar as there are reasons to reject the relaxed approach, we do not discover them in Streumer's book. Until we find these reasons elsewhere, my suggestion thus is: Let's relax.

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