

NORMATIVE ACCOUNTS OF FUNDAMENTALITY

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I. Introduction

I presuppose that there are properties and relations, and an egalitarian distinction between them: only some of them carve the world at its joints. David Lewis (1986) calls those properties and relations that carve the world at its joints *the natural properties*. Lewis's notion of a natural property should not be conflated with the notion of physical property, which for my purposes here I take to be a property that only physical objects can instantiate. To distinguish these notions, I hereby call properties fitting Lewis's conception *joint-carving properties* or *fundamental properties*. The extent to which a property carves at the joints comes in degrees, and I assume here that there are *perfectly natural* properties, i.e., properties that carve at the joints to the highest degree. It is a substantive hypothesis that each maximal joint-carving property is a physical property. It is a hypothesis that I reject.

The notion of joint-carving properties has earned its keep by being useful in informatively characterizing various important philosophical notions, such as the notions of a possible world, of an intrinsic property, of a law of nature, of that which constrains reference, of physicalism, and many others.¹ There are interesting questions about how to finesse the notion of a joint-carving property, but these concern mending rather than ending this notion.

Let us provisionally understand *minimal moral realism* as the view that some moral properties are instantiated. So stated, minimal moral realism seems close to obviously true, and yet there is a serious puzzle about how to fit moral properties in to the non-moral world. Call the view that some moral properties are joint carving *mighty moral realism*. So-called *moral naturalists* are committed to denying mighty moral realism: for them, moral properties do not belong to the ground-floor inventory of the world. The

moral naturalist hopes to explain how moral properties fit in to the non-moral world by either identifying moral properties with complex non-moral properties or by reducing them in some other way to complex non-moral properties. (Perhaps these complex properties “constitute” moral properties; perhaps there are other possible ways to reduce some set of properties to another.) But if mighty moral realism is true, then it looks as though there is no way to “fit” moral properties in to the non-moral world. Perhaps moral properties would still supervene on non-moral properties, but this supervenience would be brute and hence unexplainable. Perhaps this failure to “fit” generates epistemological concerns about our access to moral properties as well.

I will propose a reorientation of the landscape by offering for consideration accounts of joint carving in *normative* terms. On the proposed accounts, there are normative properties that carve closer to the joints than joint carving itself. On the proposed accounts, not only are some normative properties among those on the ground floor, but these very properties are needed to even characterize what it is to be on the ground floor. In a sense, there is no need to “fit” normativity into the natural world since normativity is already needed to even characterize the very joints of the natural world. The problem of how to fit moral properties into the non-moral world is generated by an antecedent inequality about properties that initially seems to favor the physical as fundamental. But, if some normative notion is necessary to even characterize inequality, it seems that the appearance of a problem fades.

Let me be upfront that my primary interest is in whether some normative account of fundamentality is true, not in defending some highly specific account. But it is very hard to evaluate in the abstract whether some normative account or other is plausible. It is easier to assess the strengths and weaknesses of highly specific accounts, and for this reason alone, I offer a specific account for consideration. If this account is inadequate, I will not weep, but I also ask that the reader not set aside the larger project of assessing the other possible normative accounts that remain standing.

A first-pass statement of the specific account I will develop is the following: to be a joint-carving property is to be a property that we *prima facie* ought to theorize in terms of. In order to clearly formulate the proposed account, I’ll need to clarify the notion of theoretical activity as well as the scope of the *prima facie* obligation in question.

I am not wedded to the idea that the appropriate normative property to use when analyzing joint carving is *prima facie* obligation. It is worth considering views in which *correctness* or *reason for* are employed rather than *prima facie* obligation. For example, one might consider the view that to be a fundamental property is to be the correct or fitting content of a concept. Of the normative accounts I’ll mention, this might be the most intrinsically plausible.² Another option is to characterize joint carving in terms of the

concepts that an ideal knower would use. Which one we should choose if more than one such normative account is plausible is an interesting question, especially if the normative accounts are not intensionally equivalent.

We should also consider the view that joint carving is an evaluative property, even if it is irreducible. On this view, joint carving is metaphysical goodness, and the *prima facie* obligations we have to theorize in terms of those properties that are fundamental derive from the independent metaphysical value of those properties. Normativity would not be at the center of the world but a kind of metaphysical value would be. If we think of joint carving as metaphysical goodness, then the proposal I suggest is an instance of more general proposals that account for goodness in terms of some normative feature. For example, Brentano (1969, 1973) understands intrinsic value in terms of correctness; Ewing (1948) in terms of fittingness; and Scanlon (1998) in terms of reasons. Let's call such views *normative reductionist views about value* or *normative reductionist views* for short. Even if joint carving is not a kind of goodness, the analogies between my proposal and these normative reductionist views are worth considering, and some of them will be noted in what follows.

Finally, accounts that are partially normative should also be on the table. A partially normative account is, as the name suggests, an account with a normative component. Consider, for example, an account of joint carving in which to be joint carving is to be a property or relation that satisfies a set of theoretical and normative roles. A partial normative account would also suffice for meta-ethical reorientation, provided that (i) the properties mentioned in the account are at least as joint carving as the property analyzed and (ii) this account identifies the property in question rather than merely specifies the roles that the property contingently plays.

In McDaniel (forthcoming: chapter 6), I noted that in contemporary discussions of fundamentality, normative and evaluative proclamations abound. I also discussed antecedents to these proclamations in the history of western philosophy. Given the prevalence of normative or evaluative locutions in discussions of fundamentality, it is worth considering normative or evaluative accounts. Even if these accounts ultimately fail, exploring them will help us get clearer on whether there is any sort of normativity governing fundamentality. Moreover, as suggested earlier, a successful normative account of joint carving would radically reorient meta-ethics and metaphysics, and this fact itself provides a reason to give them serious thought.

Some motivations for the proposed account are ideological and ontological parsimony. Ideological parsimony: if we can give an account of a theoretical entity (such as joint carving) in terms of which we have a better antecedent understanding, then we have a reason to accept this account. There are normative properties that we understand well enough to theorize in terms of them prior to any meta-ethical investigation of them, and among those is *prima facie* obligation. Ontological parsimony: the slightly less than

minimal moral realist already has in her metaphysics the property of being a *prima facie* obligation. Facts about joint carving would not be further facts in addition to facts about *prima facie* obligation. If we are tempted towards some normative account of joint-carving, then in addition to considerations of intrinsic plausibility, we should also consider the extent to which these motivations are satisfied by a given normative account.

Let me be clear that I am investigating an account of the phenomena of fundamentality, not whatever concept of joint carving we may or may not have antecedently to philosophical investigation. I believe that there is an objective ranking of entities, including properties, and that this inchoate expression of this intuition needs to be accommodated in some metaphysically serious way.³ I propose for our consideration a normative account of what constitutes this ranking, but not a definition or conceptual account of our concept of fundamentality.⁴ I want to identify what fundamentality is, rather than identify what we think fundamentality is.

Let's begin.

II. Refining the Proposal

The rough statement of the proposal is that to be a joint-carving property is to be a property in terms of which we *prima facie* ought to theorize. I'd like something less rough. I need to state some assumptions about joint carving and about *prima facie* obligation in order to better formulate the proposal. Each assumption made corresponds to a choice point, and interestingly different normative accounts could be formulated by taking different routes from these choice points.

Joint carving comes in grades: not only are some properties and relations more fundamental than others, but also the *is as fundamental as* relation partitions properties and relations in to more than two disjoint classes. A good theory of joint carving must account for this. Here is our first choice point. Is the target notion absolute joint carving or something relational, such as *carves at the joints at least as much as*? This choice of starting point is not trivial. I suspect a normative account of absolute joint carving will be easier to formulate and motivate, but it is also notoriously tricky how to define a notion of relative fundamentality from an absolute one. I will provide an account of relative joint carving, and will appeal to the fact that *prima facie* obligations can also come in varying strengths when doing so.

Second choice point: does the existence of a property entail its instantiation? If there are uninstantiated but highly natural properties, is there an obligation to theorize in terms of them? Or is the obligation only to theorize in terms of instantiated joint-carving properties? Let us make our lives apparently more difficult, and say that there are uninstantiated

properties and that the *prima facie* obligations are not restricted to instantiated properties.

Now for the third choice point. I assume that the fundamentality of a given property is not something that changes from world to world: the grade of fundamentality of a property is an essential feature of that property. More generally, if *F* is a more fundamental property than *G*, then necessarily *F* is a more fundamental property than *G*. However, there might be worlds in which none of the actually fundamental properties is instantiated, and instead different fundamental properties are instantiated.

In these respects, joint carving is like how many in the “Moorean tradition” conceive of intrinsic value.⁵ If something is intrinsically good, it is essentially intrinsically good. And if one thing is intrinsically better than another, it is necessary that the first is intrinsically better than the second. But which intrinsically valuable properties or relations (or states of affairs) are instantiated (or obtain) can differ across worlds. There might be worlds with beauty but no knowledge, or worlds with pleasure but no beauty, for example.

A consequence of the essentiality of fundamentality is that properties are not fundamental only relative to us, our conceptual schemes, or evaluative stances. If -1 charge is fundamental, it is fundamental even in worlds in which we do not exist. Similarly, the intrinsic value of something is not had relatively, and there might be intrinsically valuable states that are independent of consciousness, such as states consisting of objects that instantiate beauty.

A reductionist about either joint carving or intrinsic value needs to account for these modal facts. There’s a whole bucket of worms here. This is our fourth choice point: for which worm to plump? Let’s examine them.

Suppose *F* is fundamental and is instantiated in a world in which we do not exist. Is it true in that world that we have a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of *F* even though we do not exist in that world? Similarly, suppose that facts in which an object enjoys beauty are intrinsically good. Consider a world filled with beauty but no consciousness. Is it true in that world that we have a *prima facie* obligation (or a reason) to favor these facts even though we do not exist in that world? In general, can we have a *prima facie* obligations in worlds in which we do not exist?

The answer is not obviously “no”. There are so-called “non-serious actualists” who believe that we can exemplify properties in worlds in which we do not exist (and hence are not in the domain of that world).⁶ Some philosophers distinguish existence in the logical sense from being concrete, and claim that we exist in every world, although we fail to be concrete in many of them.⁷ And there are ‘neo-Meinongians’ who think that in every world there is an object identical with me although I might not exist in every world.⁸ Perhaps certain fundamental obligations can be had even by things that do not fall within the domain of that world, or by things that exist but are not concrete at that world, or by things that are within the domain of

that world but do not exist at it. Each of these metaphysical views could be used to solve the problem generated by the essentiality of fundamentality.

But suppose we set all these metaphysical views aside. These worms might be wiggling far too weirdly for one to want to grab any one of them. What are the other options?

One might be tempted to “go conditional”. Instead of accounting for intrinsic value or joint carving in terms of our obligations, we might account for them in terms of necessitated conditionals. An example: x is fundamental to degree n if and only if necessarily, if x exists, then all persons have a *prima facie* obligation of strength n to theorize in terms of x . But these sorts of accounts can be problematic. Suppose y is a property that can’t be instantiated in a world with persons. Probably there is a property like this. If so, then the consequent of the right-hand side of our account is vacuously true, in which case the right-hand side of the bi-conditional is vacuously true, and in which case all such properties of this sort are fundamental to degree n . That’s no good!

One last possibility, which I will opt for here. We sometimes speak of obligations, reasons, and requirements impersonally. Some examples: it is *prima facie* wrong to murder; there is a reason to consider the interests of other conscious beings; the contemplation of beauty requires favoring beauty; it is fitting to love knowledge. Each of these claims implies a corresponding necessary universal conditional, e.g., necessarily, for all persons p , it is *prima facie* wrong for p to murder. But necessary universal conditionals about the obligations of all people do not imply the corresponding impersonal statement of obligation, for the same reason given in the previous paragraph. Similarly for impersonal talk of reasons, requirements, and what is fitting. It is one option to claim that some impersonal statements of *prima facie* obligation, reason, and so forth are necessarily true, or at least are true at worlds in which there is no one around to have the obligation. I’m not convinced that this is the best worm to swallow, but for my purposes here it will do.

Let’s assume that there are impersonal obligations of the sort just described. Given this assumption, we can formulate a second statement of the proposal: for x to be fundamental is for there to be a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of x . This second pass appeals to impersonal *prima facie* obligation.

We want a more general account that recognizes grades of fundamentality. If we help ourselves to the simplifying assumption that both joint carving and *prima facie* obligatoriness come in degrees, we can state the following: for x to be fundamental to degree n is for there to be a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of x whose strength is proportionate to n . If we abandon this simplifying assumption, we will need to talk in terms of a rank ordering of the *prima facie* obligations in question. Things will get very messy very quickly! This messiness supports my suspicion that taking absolute

fundamentality as the target notion would yield a more straightforward account, since for each absolutely fundamental property, the strength of the obligation to theorize in terms of it will be exactly the same as for every other. But the straightforwardness achieved might be trumped by other considerations; I encourage the development of such an account in order to assess this.

Note that, if properties are not necessarily existing beings and so some of the fundamental properties exist at some worlds rather than others, then which rock-bottom *prima facie* obligations there are will also change from world to world. Would this be problematic? Note that on one kind of normative reductionist view of intrinsic value, a similar consequence might obtain. If an essentially intrinsically valuable entity is nonetheless a contingent existent, which rock-bottom *prima facie* obligations to favor items (for example) changes from world to world as well. I'm going to assume that properties are necessarily existing entities in what follows.

Some *prima facie* obligations are rock-bottom and some are derivative. The *prima facie* obligation in question is a rock-bottom one. One might worry that the distinction between rock-bottom and derivative obligations must be cashed out in terms of some notion of fundamentality, and that this will render the proposal unacceptably circular. It's not clear to me that this is right: rock-bottom *prima facie* obligations are *more general* than derivative ones, and so the distinction perhaps can be cashed out logically; a derived *prima facie* obligation is the logical consequence of an underived one conjoined with a purely descriptive report of the relevant circumstance.

Let's turn now to discussing the content of the impersonal *prima facie* obligation. The impersonal *prima facie* obligations are each to theorize in terms of an entity. Let's now get clearer on what it is to theorize in terms of something. We face another choice point. There are (at least) two different ways to construe the content of the *prima facie* obligation: a broad way that is less demanding and a narrow way that is more demanding.

I'll start with the broad way. There is a general stance towards propositions that I will call *theoretical comportment*. One adopts this stance when engaging in inquiry: theoretical comportment is not a bare contemplation of a proposition but rather an active considering. Note that there are two thin senses of "contemplate a proposition", one of which is merely having the proposition in mind without taking any further stance in it, the other of which the determinable attitude one has whenever one has a propositional attitude towards that proposition. Neither of these is what I have in mind by "theoretical comportment": one theoretically comports oneself towards a proposition when one is actively considering whether to believe it, when one assumes it for the purpose of an argument, when one considers reasons against it, and when one believes, rejects, or maintains a studied neutrality towards the proposition. To theorize in terms of a property in the broad sense is to theoretically comport oneself towards propositions in which that

property is a constituent. On this way of understanding the relevant *prima facie* obligation, there are certain propositions which *prima facie* demand theoretical comportment.

The narrower way to understanding the duty is as the duty to form true beliefs about the properties and relations in question. This way is narrower because believing is one of many modes of theoretical comportment, and true belief is a species of belief. I'm going to plump for the narrower way here. Not because I think this is the best version of the view—once again, I'm not sure—but rather because it is hard to get clear on too many things at once, and I want to get at least one relatively developed version of a normative account of fundamentality on the table. (An even more narrow way is to understand the duty as the duty to *know* propositions about the properties and relations in question, but I will focus on true belief rather than knowledge in what follows.)

Call this narrower construal *the duty to theorize*. We can now consider a third pass statement of the proposal: For F to be fundamental to degree *n* is for there to be a *prima facie* duty of strength *n* to form true beliefs about F.

But even this narrower construal of the duty immediately invites complicating questions. First, is the following true: for any true P such that joint-carving property F is a constituent of P, is there a *prima facie* obligation to believe P? If the duty is not comprehensive in this way, there is a tricky question of which propositions are exempted. Perhaps, if F is an uninstantiated property, propositions about it are not governed by this duty.

But this is not obviously right. Even if it is not easy to see how we could have a duty to theorize in terms of uninstantiated properties, there might nonetheless be such an impersonal duty. Additionally, in some cases it is plausible that we do have a duty to theorize about some uninstantiated properties. Perhaps there are determinables governed by fundamental laws such that the determinates of these determinables are all fundamental but not all of them are instantiated. Given that these uninstantiated determinates stand in nomological relations with instantiated determinates, perhaps they must be theorized about as well, even though they are uninstantiated.

But what if the fundamental properties of our world are ungraspable by us? (If there are uninstantiated properties, it is highly probable that we have no acquaintance with most of them.) What if there are properties graspable only by certain people with specialized skills, training, and so on? How can we have a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of what we can't grasp?

However, I deny that *prima facie obligation* implies *can*. Probably *all-things-considered obligation* implies *can*, but I do not claim that we have all-things-considered duties to theorize in terms of the fundamental. A *prima facie* obligation cannot induce an all-things-considered obligation when the action it mandates cannot be performed. Moreover, even if *S is prima facie obligated to do A* implies that *S can do A*, perhaps there still is a *prima facie* obligation to do A even if no actual person can do A. (If we say this, we

will need to be more careful about how impersonal statements of prima facie obligation yield universal conditionals about the prima facie obligations all agents have.)

Let's take the duty to be completely unrestricted.

Here is a more pressing question: is there a distinct general prima facie duty to believe true propositions? Call this alleged duty *the duty to the truth*: For each P , S prima facie ought to believe P if and only if P is true. If there are two distinct duties – the duty to the truth and the duty to theorize – how can we identify the right source of the prima facie obligation in order to provide the appropriate account? There is a worry that a property's level of fundamentality will be misidentified for the “wrong reason”.

Here's a version of the so-called *wrong kind of reasons problem* directed towards a normative reductionist view about intrinsic value.⁹ Suppose there is an object that lacks positive intrinsic value. Suppose we are entertaining a normative reductionist view according to which an object has positive intrinsic value just in case there is a non-derivative prima facie obligation to respond favorably to the object. Now suppose the nefarious evil demon appears. He says to you that if you don't respond favorably to the object, then he will torture everyone in the universe for millions and millions of years. It sure seems that what you must do is respond favorably to that object. But your having this obligation shouldn't imply that the object is actually intrinsically good. For the reason you have to favor it is the wrong sort of reason.

Fortunately, given the reductionist view I stated above, it doesn't follow that the object in question is intrinsically valuable. For when the demon threatens the world in this way, he doesn't create a nonderivative impersonal obligation to favor the object in question. Instead, he creates a derivative personal obligation, one that *you* have in virtue of your circumstances conjoined with a more general prima facie obligation to not let terrible harms befall other people.

For the wrong kind of reasons worry to arise in this context, there must be two nonderivative impersonal obligations directed towards the same object. This is why I am concerned about the duty to the truth. If the duty to the truth is a nonderivative impersonal obligation, then it could generate a wrong kind of reasons problem. There might be an impersonal obligation to believe P because it is true; this obligation might have strength m . There might be a distinct impersonal obligation to believe P “because” it contains a highly natural property F , and this obligation's strength is n rather than m .¹⁰ Do we look to m or n when our normative reductionist account determines how fundamental F is?

I will resolve this worry by denying that there is an independent duty to the truth.

Let's explore this a bit further. First, consider that one objection to the general prima facie duty to believe the truth is that there are truths that

are not worth knowing. Consider the true proposition that the number of blades of grass on my front lawn is 124,623. It would be an incredibly stupid use of one's time to try to find this out, which is why I am so ashamed of myself right now. So how can we have a *prima facie* obligation to believe this proposition? One response to this objection is that the obligation to believe this proposition is very weak and so easily trumped—and this is why we clearly have no all-things-considered obligation to believe this proposition. But it's not the case that for any truth *P*, our *prima facie* obligation to believe *P* is equally weak, but rather some true propositions are more important to believe than others. For example, unlike blades of grass on the lawn, trying to figure out the number of protons in the universe is not obviously a waste of time. There might be a manifold of respects in which one true proposition matters more than another, but the fundamentality of what the proposition is about is one of those respects. The key thing for the normative account is to isolate this dimension from the others.

Perhaps this can be done. Consider two true propositions, *P* and *Q*, such that there is a near one-one correspondence between their constituents: the sole difference is that property *F* is a constituent of one while property *G* is a constituent of the other. The intuitive idea is that propositions have a structure of slots or nodes in which constituents can be placed, and we are to consider two propositions that differ only with respect to whether *F* or *G* occupies a given slot or slots. Given this view of propositions, we could say that the difference in strength between the *prima facie* obligation to believe *P* and the *prima facie* obligation to believe *Q* is proportionate to the difference in how joint-carving *F* and *G* are. On the normative account under consideration, for *F* to be more joint-carving than *G* just is for near indiscernible true propositions of this sort to uniformly differ in the extent to which there is a *prima facie* obligation to believe them.

Interestingly, given two assumptions, the bare claim that for all true propositions *P* there is a *prima facie* obligation to believe *P* follows from the claim that there is a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of joint-carving properties, construed as above. These two assumptions are (i) that every property is joint-carving to some degree, i.e., no property scores a 0 on the naturalness scale, and (ii) every true proposition contains a property as a constituent. It follows then that any property *F* is such that for every true proposition *P* that contains *F* as a constituent, there is a *prima facie* obligation to believe *P*; and since every proposition contains some property as a constituent, for every true proposition, there is a *prima facie* obligation to believe that proposition. I do not, however, see how to derive the varying strengths of these *prima facie* obligations to believe truths in any straight-forward way. (Note that this argument goes through only if the duty to theorize governs uninstantiated properties, and this provides another reason to carefully track the various choice points we have faced.)

I'm sure that there are a number of ways in which the details need more refinement. But I'm going to turn to some objections to the general idea of the proposal now, since if these objections succeed, there is no point in trying to develop this particular proposal further. Fortunately, we'll see further ways to develop normative accounts of fundamentality by considering these objections.

III. Objections

Objection 1: we do not have the *prima facie* obligations the proposed account requires us to have in order to succeed.

Let me start by saying that this objection might be right. It might be that an alternative normative account would be more plausible, and, as I said in section I, I am open to this. It's not clear to me that the appropriate locution when evaluating the success or failure of our cognitive endeavors is that we have done what we are obligated to do. Fitness or correctness might be the more plausible terms of evaluation, both with respect to the truth of our beliefs and the fundamentality of the concepts used in those beliefs. There might not be a *prima facie* obligation to theorize in terms of fundamental properties even though they are the most fitting contents of concepts. Similarly, there might not be a *prima facie* obligation to believe the truth, even though a belief is correct when true, and even though belief requires truth.

Objection 2: We do not have a positive duty to believe truths.¹¹ We have only the negative duty to refrain from believing falsehoods. If we have a duty to theorize in terms of joint-carving properties, then we have a positive duty to believe truths (at least given the assumptions made in the previous section).

Response: The fan of an "ought"-centric normative account could retreat a bit. Rather than characterizing fundamentality in terms of a positive duty, she could say that instead we have a *prima facie* obligation not to theorize in terms of non-joint-carving properties, the strength of which is proportional to how non-fundamental the properties in question are. I like this view less, since it seems strange that there are so many true propositions for which there is a *prima facie* duty not to believe them. However, I do not see a straight-forward way to derive the duty to believe truths from this proposal, and hence it would avoid objection 2.

Another possible way to avoid objection 2 is to say that there is a *prima facie* duty to refrain from forming false beliefs about F, and that the strength of this duty is proportionate to (because identical with) the fundamentality of F. It seems to me that, given that every proposition contains a property or relation and that there is no minimal quantity of fundamentality, the duty to refrain from believing falsehoods can be derived. This is important, because otherwise a "wrong kind of reasons" problem could arise again.

Objection 3: Really, this proposal demands that we basically just do physics, since the maximally joint-carving properties of the world are all and only the fundamental physical properties.

Response: No. For one thing, on this proposal some normative properties are among the fundamental properties, but no normative property is studied by physics. And, in general, I am much more ecumenical: there are joint-carving mathematical and logical properties, and chemical, biological, and psychological properties as well.¹² I'll grant though that the plausibility of the proposed normative account partially depends on antecedent views about which properties are joint-carving.

Objection 4: Sometimes we positively ought to theorize in terms of non-joint-carving properties, contrary to the proposal under consideration. For example, race is plausibly a non-joint-carving property, but there is no way to have a good understanding of racism, racial injustice, and so on, without using the concept of race in one's theorizing. In general, theorizing about "socially constructed", and hence non-joint-carving, categories is one of our central cognitive obligations given the social situations we find ourselves in.

Response: First, it's not obvious to me that to theorize about racism, we have to theorize about race. I find "eliminativism about race" to be an attractive position.¹³ And, just as one can theorize about people's thoughts about witches without theorizing about witches, plausibly one can theorize about peoples' thoughts about race without theorizing about race.

But this response doesn't get to the heart of the concern. I respond to the heart of the concern by noting that we have all sorts of *prima facie* obligations that stem from a variety of sources. In the actual world, the *prima facie* obligation to theorize about, e.g., race, is a derived and contingent obligation. The obligation to theorize about race is plausibly a consequence (given actual circumstances) of the more general duties to be just and to make reparations for wrong doing.

Perhaps there could be races in a completely egalitarian non-racist possible world—a highly contentious claim about the nature of race.¹⁴ But, even granting this, in such a world, there would be no special reason to theorize in terms of race. Moreover, the general obligation to theorize about race would be as weak as any other general obligation to theorize about a property that carves at the joints equally as badly.

Objection 5: The sense of "obligation" employed in the proposed account is "theoretical" rather than "practical", and hence the account fails to undercut the threat to normativity.

Response: I doubt that there are two senses of "obligation", a theoretical and a practical sense. I assume that, if there are such senses, the "theoretical" one is such that as a matter of its meaning it applies only to cognitive states (such as beliefs) while the other "practical" sense applies to actions (and perhaps more broadly to cognitive states as well). But even if there is just one sense of "obligation", nonetheless there might be different ways of being

obligatory appropriately thought of as theoretical or practical, and perhaps this suffices to generate a problem for the proposed account. Accordingly, I'll focus on the latter way of construing the objection.

Let's suppose that there are different ways of being obligatory, and that the obligation invoked by the putatively normative account is theoretical rather practical. Question: suppose you were to learn that one kind of deontic notion, such as theoretical obligation, is metaphysically basic. Would learning this remove or weaken intellectual barriers to thinking that some other kind might be as well? It might, depending on how we understand the relation between the two kinds of obligation. Here's one picture. Suppose you practically ought to X but theoretically ought to Y, and X and Y are not jointly achievable. Ought you to X or to Y? This question makes use of an all-things-considered ought that incorporates both. I think a necessary condition for the question "what must I all things considered do?" to be significant is that the all-things-considered obligation can't simply be some weird gerrymandered conglomeration somehow constructed out of the specific kinds of obligation, but rather must be at least as natural as the more specific obligations that it encompasses. On this way of thinking, if theoretical obligation is joint-carving, then all-things-considered obligation is as well. And that would be a significant result and sufficient for meta-ethical re-orientation.

Objection 6: The notion of joint carving cannot do the work it is called to do in metaphysics unless joint carving itself carves at the joints. But on the normative proposal under consideration, being a joint carving property is less joint carving than the properties with which it is analyzed. Let me quote Sider (2011: 141), whose preferred locutions for fundamentality are "structure" and "is structural": "The reason for thinking that structure cannot be merely somewhat structural is its first-order heterogeneity—if structure is not perfectly structural then it is disjunctive and therefore highly nonstructural".

Sider is concerned with what he calls first-order heterogeneity. The various fundamentally joint-carving properties don't seem to have anything in common with each other besides that they are each joint carving. What else does charge have in common with set membership? So the only plausible reductive account of structure would be a highly disjunctive account: to be structural is to be charge or to be set membership or to be But if structure/joint-carving/fundamentality do not self-exemplify—if they are merely gerrymandered or disjunctive features—then metaphysicians should be no more interested in structure/joint-carving/fundamentality than they are in any other gerrymandered or disjunctive feature.

Response: The comparison between the normative account I proposed and other normative reductionist views about intrinsic value is once again useful to consider. Consider the various items that have intrinsic value. Among them are innocent pleasures, friendship, knowledge, love, justice, and beauty. Perhaps this list is not as heterogeneous as the list of structural

features, but it is still very heterogeneous. Does this mean that any account of intrinsic value must necessarily be highly disjunctive? Not obviously. Various versions of normative reductionism about value give non-disjunctive, non-gerrymandered accounts of intrinsic value despite the heterogeneity of what is intrinsically valuable. In both cases, what the items have in common is that there are obligations concerning them. (Or that there are reasons to X them, or that doing Y with them is fitting or correct, and so-on.) Sider's argument that structure must be structural is sound only if the parallel argument against these versions of normative reductive reductionism about intrinsic value is sound. Both arguments move too quickly.

A more worrisome complaint is that the elements of the proposed normative reduction might themselves be non-fundamental. The key elements are belief, obligation, and (maybe) truth. (I think truth is dispensable, since instead of talking about true propositions, we can talk about propositions *P* such that *P*.) It might be that the proposed account commits us to the fundamentality of a psychological property. Since I am broad-minded about which properties might be joint-carving, this fact doesn't induce in me panic, though I want to be upfront that there is this second place that needs defending. Question: in general, is it plausible that any normative property carves at the joints even if no property of agents carves at the joints?

Objection 7: This account makes joint-carving unacceptably anthropocentric. What properties carve at the joints is supposed to be an objective matter having nothing to do with us. The proposed account takes us dangerously close to idealism.

Response: I deny that the view is anthropocentric. First, it is definitely not human-centric: just as all cognitive agents (not merely human beings) can have a duty to believe the truth (when appropriately situated towards it), all cognitive agents have a duty to theorize in terms of joint-carving properties (when appropriately situated towards them. But this universal conditional about the duties of all cognitive agents rests on the fact that there is a duty to theorize in terms of joint-carving properties. And this impersonal statement of duty is true in worlds in which no cognitive agents exist. In this sense, that there is such a duty is an objective matter having nothing to do with us.

No doubt more objections will be forthcoming. But I will close this paper by sketching two further developments of the view that are worth contemplating.

IV. Further Developments

There are two interesting directions one could take the sort of project I have been discussing.

The first direction concerns what I'll call *thick metaphysical concepts*. Thick metaphysical concepts are analogues of what are called *thick ethical concepts*. A thick ethical concept has both a normative and a descriptive aspect, but neither aspect can be cleanly decomposed into separate concepts.¹⁵ Putative examples of thick concepts include the concepts of courage, rudeness, lewdness, and generosity.

If fundamentality is to be accounted for in terms of normativity, then we should assess whether there are thick metaphysical concepts as well. Some philosophers think that the most useful notion of fundamentality is not a "thin" notion like relative fundamentality, but rather a more "thick" notion, such as grounding or building.¹⁶ On this view, although necessarily, whenever *x* grounds *y* or *y* is built up of *x*, it is true that *x* is more fundamental than *y*, grounding or building is not a composite relation decomposable into relative fundamentality plus something else.¹⁷ If this is correct, as grounding/building stand to relative fundamentality, courage stands to a kind of goodness. Hence the aptness of calling the concepts of grounding and building "thick metaphysical concepts". If some sort of normative account of fundamentality is right, these are thick metaphysical *and* ethical concepts.

The second interesting direction concerns non-cognitivism. I'm not going to contort myself into a pretzel when stating what non-cognitivism about a particular area of discourse is. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the central components of non-cognitivism about a discourse are (i) that the function of sincere utterances of sentences in that discourse is not to state truths about the worlds but rather to express facts about the utterers of those sentences and (ii) even if there are truths that can be believed corresponding to these sincere utterances, we do not sincerely express these truths *because* we are responding to those truths.

The most popular version of non-cognitivism concerns normative discourse. But more recently, some philosophers have championed non-cognitivism about modal discourse as well.¹⁸ If you are already attracted to a view in which modal discourse is the result of our painting modality on the world rather than our sensitivity to modal properties, non-cognitivism about fundamentality would be a natural view to hold as well. And if non-cognitivism about normative discourse is correct, and a normative reductive account of fundamentality is correct, non-cognitivism about fundamentality is an immediate consequence.

I am a serious realist about both normativity and fundamentality. But if you are suspicious of both, you should be excited that I have provided you with a straightforward recipe for how to be a noncognitivist about fundamentality.¹⁹

Notes

1. See Lewis (1983; 1984; 1986).
2. In McDaniel (forthcoming, chapter 6), I discuss purported connections between fundamentality and normativity, and defend the view that concepts are correct only if they correspond to fundamental properties. Fundamental properties are there taken to be those such that no other properties have more being than them.
3. In McDaniel (forthcoming: chapter 7), I account for this ranking of entities in terms of *degree of being*. On this view, the more fundamental a property is, the more being it enjoys. Here, I provisionally remain neutral on this sort of view, although I admit that I am curious about whether the medieval doctrine that being and goodness are interchangeable could be defended via what is argued here.
4. Compare with Väyrynen (2011: 187-188).
5. See, for example, Bradley (2002), Feldman (1998; 2000), and McDaniel (2014) for contemporary proponents of the Moorean tradition.
6. For critical discussion of this view, see Creswell (1990: 174), Hudson (1997), and Plantinga (2003).
7. See Priest (2016: 13-15).
8. See Linksy and Zalta (1994).
9. See Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) for a discussion of this problem.
10. The scare-quotes are here because, given the normative reductionist account under consideration, it is the obligation that explains the fundamentality of the property, rather than the converse. I trust my meaning here is clear though.
11. There is an interesting question about whether the unrestricted claim that we have a duty to believe the truth is true. What about propositions such that, although true, if we were to believe them, they would not be true? There will be a parallel puzzle about theorizing in terms of natural properties. I suspect that both rules will need to be restricted together. See Olinder (2012) for a fascinating discussion.
12. See Schaffer (2004) for a defense of a more “abundant” view of fundamental properties.
13. See Appiah (1985) and Zack (2002) for defenses of this sort of view.
14. Compare with Haslanger (2012).
15. See Williams (1985: 129-130). A more recent discussion of thick concepts can be found in Väyrynen (2013).
16. See Bennett (2011) for a discussion of building.
17. I argue otherwise in McDaniel (2013; forthcoming: chapter 7).
18. See Blackburn (1993) and Thomasson (2007).
19. I thank Rebecca Chan, John Hawthorne, Michaela McSweeney, Nick Stang, Jonathan Schaffer, Ted Sider, and audiences at the Arizona Metaphysics Conference (2017), the University of Notre Dame, Denison University, Fundamental Truthmakers: a Metaphysical Festival, CUNY Graduate Center, the University of Calgary, Metaphysics Conference at Ovronnaz in Switzerland (2015), the University of Las Vegas, and the Rocky Mountain Ethics Conference (2014).

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