

Irreducibly Normative Properties

Chris Heathwood

Those who maintain that normative or evaluative properties cannot be reduced to, identified with, or analyzed in terms of natural properties have difficulty explaining what these properties are. Stephen Finlay characterizes the problem in the following passage:

On the nonnaturalists' view, ... reality has 'brute, inexplicable' normativity, which cannot be explained in motivational or other natural terms. This inexplicability is twofold: we cannot explain what normativity is in nonnormative language, and neither can we explain why the fundamental normative truths hold (e.g., why the fact that pain hurts counts in favor of preventing it). (Finlay 2007: 24)

I have argued elsewhere that no metaethical theory – naturalist, non-naturalist, or otherwise – can explain why the fundamental normative truths hold (Heathwood 2012). In this paper, I attempt to address the other “inexplicability problem” for normative non-naturalism: that of explaining what normativity is in non-normative language. I don't claim to be giving a complete characterization of normativity in non-normative terms, such as an identification of normativity with some natural phenomenon. To do that would presumably be to abandon non-naturalism. Instead, I put forward a substantive thesis about normative properties that, if true, goes some way towards elucidating their nature in non-normative terms.

At a first pass, the view is this:

normative properties are those such that, to attribute one to something is, in virtue of the nature of the property attributed, necessarily to commend or condemn that thing.

It characterizes normativity in terms of the natural phenomenon of performing certain familiar speech acts. The idea is that in merely reporting some of the facts of the world, we can't help but get ourselves involved in the further business of evaluating – of commending, recommending, condemning, and so forth – when the facts that we are reporting are among the normative facts of the world. And this is due not to any contingent practices or conventions of ours (beyond whatever is required to make the assertion and attribute the property), but to the nature of the property we have attributed.

In what follows, I further explain the initial problem and provide additional background (§1); I clarify and refine the proposed solution (§2); I address some objections (§3); and I describe further explanatory work that the hypothesis can do, both for the non-naturalist and more generally (§4). Our topic includes normative facts narrowly construed – as when someone ought to do something – as well as evaluative facts – as when some state of affairs would be good in itself. For simplicity, I group both under the label ‘normative’. The thesis is meant to cover both “positive” normative facts, as in the above examples, as well as “negative” cases, such as when someone has a reason against doing something or when some outcome would be intrinsically bad. I’ll often speak only of one or the other of the positive or negative cases, even when what I say applies to both. Since these “thin” normative notions will be enough to occupy us, I set aside discussion of how the theory might be extended to so-called thick evaluatives.

It is not my aim here to be giving positive arguments for the existence and instantiation of irreducibly normative properties. It is rather to be offering a theory about what such properties would be like. The view is supposed to enable non-naturalists to deflect an objection to or complaint about their theory: that the theory posits a class of properties whose natures are mysterious and ineffable. However, as we will see, critics of non-naturalism can accept the account too, even as part of an argument against non-naturalism.

1. A Problem for Normative Non-Naturalism: What Is Normativity or Value?

According to normative *non-reductionism*, there are normative properties and facts – facts such as that people ought to be more kind or that the world would be better if people were – and these facts are *sui generis*: that is, they are not identical to any facts that we can express or adequately understand using terms from some other domain. This view has appeal. For surely there are some normative facts, such as the examples above, and it doesn’t seem, at least *prima facie*, that when we assert some such fact, we are stating a fact that we could just as well state using non-normative language – as when, in stating that the earth is covered in water, we could just as well state that fact in chemical terms, by saying that the earth is covered in H₂O. The fact that people ought to be more kind does not at least appear to be the same fact as any fact expressible in non-normative terms, such as that people would be motivated to be more kind if they had full information, or that people’s being more kind would increase preference satisfaction. Rather, the normative facts about any situation would seem to be further facts about it, and the properties they involve thus irreducibly normative.

Non-naturalists hold, further, that these *sui generis* normative facts are themselves not natural facts about the world. In saying that, they usually mean one or more of the following: that the facts are not causally efficacious, that they are not discoverable wholly empirically, or that they are not the sorts of facts the natural sciences investigate. These claims also seem reasonable. Normative facts don't seem observable with the senses, even indirectly, nor required to causally explain any non-normative events in the world.

I am here just remarking on the initial appearances, not on the ultimate truth of the matter. For these initially plausible views face well-known problems. Non-naturalists, for example, have difficulty explaining how we can come to know normative facts, or even grasp normative properties, if these facts and properties don't interact causally with our brains. And all non-reductionists have difficulty explaining why the normative facts cannot vary independently from the non-normative facts, given their view that the normative facts are further facts about any situation.

Reductive naturalists, who hold that normative facts are identical to certain natural facts with which we are already familiar, appear to have an easier time explaining normative knowledge and supervenience. Reductive naturalists avoid another problem as well: that of saying what normative properties *are*, or of explaining the *nature* of normativity or value. Their reductionism delivers this automatically. To illustrate, according to a simple reductive hedonism, the property of being intrinsically good *just is* the property of being a state of pleasure; and according to a simple Humean theory of reasons, to have a reason to do something *just is* to be motivated to do it. These reductive theses tell us, respectively, what intrinsic value and normative reasons are.¹

Since non-reductionists resist any identification of these phenomena with any natural phenomena, they have difficulty saying what their irreducibly normative properties are, or are like. They can say what they are *not* like: they are not causally efficacious; they are not empirically discoverable. But we'd like to know something by way of positive characterization. For one thing, these negative characterizations don't distinguish irreducibly normative properties from other potentially non-natural properties, such as modal, mathematical, or logical properties.

By way of positive characterization, non-reductionists typically simply repeat the normative notions we were wanting some account of, and concede that no other kind of positive characterization is possible. G.E. Moore writes,

¹ I am not suggesting that reductive naturalism has an easier time giving a *correct* or *satisfying* account here, just that, unlike non-reductionism, it comes with a ready-made answer to our question.

If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it." (1903: §6)²

Derek Parfit is similarly resigned to accepting the inexplicability:

If words like 'reason' and 'ought' neither refer to natural features, nor express our attitudes, what could they possibly mean? Non-reductive realists, as I have conceded, do not give helpful answers to these questions. (2006: 330)

More recently, Parfit acknowledges that this opens his view up to the objection we are considering here:

I admit that, when I say that we have some reason, or that we should or ought to act in a certain way, what I mean cannot be helpfully explained in other terms. ... Williams suggests that the phrase 'has a reason' does not have any such intelligible, irreducibly normative ... sense. When he discusses statements about such ... reasons, Williams calls these statements 'mysterious' and 'obscure', and suggests that they mean nothing. Several other writers make similar claims.³ (2011: 272)

I hope to offer something to blunt the complaint that irreducibly normative properties are wholly mysterious and obscure. Now, I cannot deny that some mystery and obscurity will remain even if my view is correct. And of course other problems, such as concerning knowledge and supervenience, will remain. But I believe the proposal here makes for some measure of progress in explaining the nature of normativity on the non-naturalist view.⁴

2. A Solution: Irreducibly Normative Properties as Essentially Commendatory Properties

We use words to describe reality, but we do many other things with them as well. By uttering certain words in the right context, we can thank someone, make an offer, condemn an act. Speech acts are a familiar, natural phenomenon. Also familiar is that sometimes, in performing a speech act of a certain kind, we thereby perform another speech act. If I say, "I have a car," I have described

² By 'What is good?', Moore surely means, What is *goodness*? He of course has substantive, informative answers to the question, What things are good?

³ Williams asks, "if [an agent] becomes persuaded of this supposedly [irreducibly normative] truth [that he has a reason to do a certain thing], what is it that he has come to believe?" (Williams 1989: 39). And as Finlay notes, "many philosophers remain unsatisfied with the thought that normativity might be brute and inexplicable" (Finlay 2010: 8).

⁴ One might wonder to what extent this problem for non-naturalism is also a problem for other forms of non-reductionism, especially non-reductive naturalism (the view that, while normative properties cannot be analyzed non-normatively, they are themselves natural properties). For reasons that I lack the space to explain, I believe that the complaint does apply to non-reductive naturalism, but less acutely.

reality as being a certain way; I have performed a description. If certain other things are true of the circumstances – for example, if you had just said, “I need a ride to the store” – then, in saying, “I have a car,” I might also be offering you a ride. In simply describing things as being a certain way, I can also make an offer.

Typically, and perhaps even in all other cases, which other speech acts, if any, a person performs in performing a description requires the existence of certain background conditions beyond whatever is required to make the description. The semantic meaning of the assertion is not enough to give rise to other kinds of speech act. But what is interesting about normative properties, I claim, is that if a person attributes one to something, thus performing a description, she can’t help but also be commending or condemning the thing. Normative and evaluative properties, if irreducible, have this special feature: if someone says sincerely that something in the world has one of these properties, she, of necessity, due to the nature of these properties, rather than due to background conventions and other conditions, involves herself in more than mere description of the world. The nature of the property is such that it makes her commend or condemn, praise or criticize, speak positively or negatively, speak for or against. The properties are at once descriptive – as, trivially, any genuine property must be – and evaluative. We can characterize this as the view of normative properties as essentially commendatory properties.

This hypothesis, if true, should go some way towards assuaging critics of non-naturalism who are mystified as to what these irreducibly normative properties are supposed to be. We are all familiar with commending and condemning; we all do it, no matter our metaethical predilections. These irreducibly normative properties are interesting, according to our hypothesis, because they are inherently such as to *make* us do it, whether we want to or not, whenever we merely attribute one to something. That is something substantive and interesting about their nature; it distinguishes them from non-normative properties; and it distinguishes them from other properties whose nature and existence is contested in philosophy, such as modal, mental, mathematical, and logical properties.

To be sure, the claim is not that normative properties are such that if something has one, we *ought* to commend or condemn it. Such a thesis would not be characterizing normativity non-normatively. Nor is the claim that commending – a contingent, interest-relative practice of human beings – itself forms part of the nature of a putatively objective, stance-independent property. The normative properties don’t themselves commend; only people can do that. It is rather that the properties are “commendatory,” which is to say that they have a certain power: the power to make us commend when we merely attribute one to something.

I don't mean 'make' in a causal sense, as when a parent, concerned with politeness, makes his child commend a friend, or when a red object makes us experience a sensation of red. The relationship is rather a constitutive one. In attributing a normative property, we *thereby* commend. To use terminology J. L. Austin (1962) introduced, it is an illocutionary rather than a perlocutionary act. This makes it plausible that this power to commend and condemn gives us some insight into the nature of the underlying normative property. If the relation were merely causal, then, since "anything can cause anything," we couldn't claim that the commending gave us any insight into the property's intrinsic nature. But since the relation is a much stronger relation – indeed, an internal relation – we can plausibly claim this.

Speech act theorists have developed other categories and distinctions to help us understand their object of study. One is the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. In saying, "I have a car," in the earlier example, I was, directly, making a description, and, indirectly, making an offer. Suppose I say, "Martin is a good man." On my view (as well as most others), I am making a description. On my view (as well as most others), I am also thereby making a commendation. But what is the status, on my view, of this commendation? Is it a direct or an indirect speech act?

Typically, and perhaps even in all other cases, whether a person has performed an indirect speech act (in addition to whatever direct speech act she has performed) is not settled by the semantic content of the utterance, or by "what is said." Additional conventions, intentions, and knowledge of these by the parties involved may be required.⁵ I am claiming that no such background conventions, intentions, and knowledge are required to turn a normative assertion into a commendation or criticism. I am suggesting that it *is* settled – with an important possible exception to be accommodated shortly – by the semantic content of the assertion. It is because the speaker is saying that a certain thing has a certain *normative* property that she is now, whether she intends to or not, commending or condemning the thing.

For this reason, perhaps we should say that the act of commending or condemning that a person performs in attributing a normative property is direct rather than indirect. It is certainly "less indirect" than stock cases of indirect

⁵ According to Searle,

In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer. (1979: 31-2)

According to Green,

Whether, in addition to a given speech act, I am also performing an indirect speech act would seem to depend on my intentions. ... What is more, these intentions must be feasibly discernible on the part of one's audience. Even if, in remarking on the fine weather, I intend as well to request that you pass the salt, I have not done so. I need to make that intention manifest in some way. (2009)

speech acts, which involve mediation by the extra-semantic phenomena. On the other hand, the view says that *in* attributing a normative property, we *thereby* commend. The commendation is parasitic on the description, and is explained by it. Thus the commendation is “less direct” than the description.

Does it matter what the answer is here, and, more generally, how well the phenomenon I am postulating fits into accepted speech-act-theoretic categories? I suppose it would be nice if there were recognized cases that behaved like the phenomenon I am postulating, but I’m not sure it matters much. I don’t think it should be much of a surprise if the phenomenon postulated here turns out to be unusual, or even unique. It is invoked to explain something unusual, and indeed unique. And granting that the thesis is controversial and novel, we should not have expected speech act theorists to have used the phenomenon it postulates to guide the construction of their theories. The issue of the oddness of the phenomenon will come up later when it comes to explaining how it can be used to account for the queerness of irreducible normativity.

None of this is to affirm that our phenomenon (of commending due to the content of an assertion) can occur wholly absent any of the contextual features required for ordinary speech acts to occur. For one thing, in order simply for a description to occur certain conditions must obtain (e.g., certain beliefs and intentions may need to be present in the speaker). And of course for our words to have the meanings they do requires all manner of conditions. What is being claimed here is that, once we have whatever is required for a person to be performing the speech act of genuinely describing something as having a normative property, nothing *else* is required for the further speech act of commendation to occur; rather, what explains why the further speech act occurs is the nature of the property attributed.

a. Contrast with motivational judgment internalism

The view of normative properties as necessarily commending properties should not be confused with any form of motivational judgment internalism, the view that normative judgment entails motivational pro-attitudes of some kind on the part of the judger (at least for some class of judgers). It is no part of the view here that when one asserts, say, that one ought to do some act available to one, and thereby, according to the hypothesis, commends one’s doing it, one must have some motivation to do it, or any kind of favorable non-cognitive attitude towards the act at all. A person can commend something even when he has no such attitudes, just as a person can thank someone or apologize to someone even when the person doesn’t feel at all thankful or apologetic.

It is worth spelling out this comparison further. We can distinguish different grades of these speech acts. Consider apology. There is fully insincere apology,

as when someone is being sarcastic. No apology occurs there. Among genuine apologies, we can distinguish at least two kinds. There are high-grade apologies, in which the apologizer feels genuine remorse. This is the best kind of apology. But there is a lower-grade variety as well, in which there are no feelings of remorse, but a genuine apology still occurs. Suppose I wrong you. I feel guilty about it initially, but, as happens, these feelings subside. Although I can no longer muster any emotions or disfavorable attitudes about the incident, I still know that what I did was wrong, and this prompts me to say to you, "I apologize for doing that." I have apologized to you, despite lacking the attitudes or feelings that might make it an ideal apology.⁶

Something similar seems true of normative utterance. A person who sincerely attributes a normative property to something – they are not being sarcastic, they really think the thing has this feature – thereby commends or condemns it. If he lacks appropriate motivational states or attitudes towards the thing, this may mean that something less than ideal is going on. Perhaps whenever we genuinely believe, say, that some act was wrong, we *should* have a disfavorable attitude towards it. But if things aren't ideal, and we lack the attitude (perhaps we are callous, or tired, or under heavy sedation), but still believe that the act was wrong, and so describe it as such, a genuine condemnation has still occurred.⁷

Thus the view defended here is no form of motivational judgment internalism.⁸ Later (§4.c), I indicate how the view can get us what motivational judgment internalism has often been relied upon to deliver: an account of the "essential practicality" of normativity.

⁶ Cf. Austin (1962: 10):

It is gratifying to observe ... how excess of profundity, or rather solemnity, at once paves the way for immodality. For one who says 'promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!' is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorists: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space, with all the distinction of a specialist in the *sui generis*. Yet he provides Hippolytus with a let-out, the bigamist with an excuse for his 'I do' and the welsher with a defense for his 'I bet'. Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*.

I'm not sure whether Austin would call the apology described above 'insincere', but it is pretty clear that he would not deny that I have apologized; the apology is not, in his terminology, "void." See Austin 1962: 40.

⁷ Copp (2009: 173-4) affirms a similar view.

⁸ Thomson (2008: 54) similarly dissociates speech acts like commending from the having of positive attitudes:

... it is one thing to perform the speech act of praising a thing and quite another to have any thing that would ordinarily be regarded as a favorable attitude towards the thing praised

b. Comparison with hybrid theories

The idea that making a normative utterance inherently involves an act of commending or condemning is often associated with non-cognitivism. R. M. Hare claims that “the primary function of the word ‘good’ is to commend” (1952: 127). But, as a theory about the nature of normative properties and facts, the view here is not a kind of non-cognitivism. More popular these days than pure non-cognitivist theories, however, may be hybrids of these with cognitivist theories. I arrived at the view here through a problem in normative metaphysics: the problem of the nature of irreducibly normative properties. But the view turns out to have implications concerning whether a “hybrid theory” in metaethics is true. The view is in fact a kind of hybrid theory, though of a less-discussed variety.

To begin, we should distinguish theses about normative thought, or judgment, from theses about normative utterance. The former tell us what kind of mental states normative judgments are; the latter tell us what we are doing when we make normative utterances. According to cognitivist theories of normative judgment, normative judgments are cognitive states – in particular, beliefs. According to non-cognitivist theories, they are non-cognitive states, such as desires. According to hybrid theories of normative judgment, normative judgments are composite states consisting of both.

One way to characterize normative *utterances* is in terms of the mental states they are thought to express. Thus, one kind of hybridism about normative utterance is the view that a declarative normative utterance expresses both a cognitive and a non-cognitive state. But we can also characterize normative utterances behaviorally rather than psychologically – that is, in terms of which kinds of speech act they are instances of rather than according to which kinds of mental state they express. According to one such view, declarative normative utterances are assertions or descriptions, and nothing more. We can call this *descriptivism* about normative utterance. The opposite view, *non-descriptivism*, is the view that grammatically declarative normative utterances are not in the business of describing reality, and instead do something such as prescribe or commend.

The theory defended here about the nature of normative properties attempts to get at their nature by advancing a thesis about what we are doing when we attribute normative properties to things, that is, when we make declarative normative utterances. Thus, while it has no direct implications regarding normative judgment or thought, it does have direct implications regarding normative utterance. The view is a version of a less-discussed form of hybridism about normative utterance: a hybrid of what I have called descriptivism and non-descriptivism. For it holds that declarative normative utterances necessarily do

something descriptive – they attribute normative properties to things – and something non-descriptive – they commend or condemn. Unlike on some other forms of hybridism, the non-descriptive and descriptive elements are necessarily connected on my view, in that making a normative description *entails* making a commendation or condemnation.⁹

Often hybrid theories in metaethics have naturalistic motivations, such as to inject normativity, or something like it, into a naturalistic realist metaethic. But the view defended here is motivated instead by a desire to be able to explain, to some extent, what normativity might be if it is non-natural and irreducible. Thus more common forms of hybridism and my view begin from quite different motivations, even if we end up in similar places.¹⁰

c. Why “commending” and “condemning”?

I state the thesis using the somewhat archaic language of ‘commending’ and ‘condemning’. Why these terms?

One way to put the guiding thought of the theory is that attributions of normative properties involve us in a kind of practice. One way to characterize the practice is as one of *evaluation*. This term, however, can make the theory sound vacuous, as the theory can then be put as the view that evaluative properties are properties the attributions of which are evaluations. And there may be a temptation to hold that evaluations themselves are simply attributions of evaluative properties. I’m not sure the temptation to characterize evaluation in this way is justified, but we can sidestep the issue by choosing a different practice, or at least a different term. Thus, I’m looking for a term that stands for a practice that can occur in contexts other than the attribution of normative properties. In this way it would be a practice that we have some independent familiarity with and grasp of. Since the theory is supposed to shed some light on the nature of normative properties, it is helpful if our understanding of the phenomenon that is acting as the explanans not be wholly parasitic on the phenomenon it is called into service to elucidate.¹¹

⁹ For reasons I lack the space to explain, this enables the theory to avoid some problems faced by other hybrid theories, such as, for example, the one discussed in Schroeder 2009: 268-71.

¹⁰ What about normative thought? One view that fits naturally is that whenever we believe that something has a normative property, we engage in something like a private mental act of commendation (if there are such things). Other intriguing ideas that I wish I could explore here are (i) that of explaining why having a normative belief entails making a commendation by appeal to the idea that a belief *counts* as a normative belief only if it is also a commendation; (ii) a related thesis about concept mastery that a person qualifies as grasping some normative concept only if he is capable of engaging in these mental commendings; and (iii) to what extent this can help non-naturalism explain normative concept acquisition.

¹¹ I return to this in §3.b.

I would also like to find terms that can cover all the different kinds of (thin) normative properties that we attribute: a term that covers evaluative properties, as in “It’s good to be loved,” along with narrowly normative properties, as in, “You ought to go”; a term that covers attributions to objects in different ontological categories, such as actions, states of affairs, propositions, and people; a term that covers mild as well as severe normative strengths; and a term that covers non-verdictive – that is, *prima facie* or *pro tanto* – normative judgments.

‘Commend’ and ‘condemn’ do this reasonably well, though perhaps not perfectly. ‘Commend’ is quite natural for evaluative statements. As Hare notes, the *OED* characterizes ‘good’ as ‘the most general adjective of commendation’ (1952: 79). ‘Commend’ is less natural for narrowly normative statements. If I say, “you ought to go,” it would be more natural to say that I am *recommending* that you go rather than that I am commending your going. But I think that if we think about it, we will agree that we are commending something whenever we are recommending it. We are praising it, applauding it, taking our hat off to it, giving it a thumbs up.

‘Condemn’ brings with it an additional complication. It may not be quite the opposite of ‘commend’, since it may imply a certain severity of criticism.¹² It is also not clear that it can correspond to non-verdictive judgments. I therefore choose ‘condemn’ with the conditional proviso that *if* in fact ‘condemn’ does not properly apply to the attribution of milder normative properties (such as in, “He has some reason not to want that”), then I stipulate a wider sense for it, for the purposes of the theory, a sense that makes ‘condemn’ the literal opposite of ‘commend’.¹³

Although ‘commending’ and ‘condemning’ seem to me to do a well enough job at filling these bills, I am not wedded to them. What I am wedded to is explaining the nature of normative facts by appeal to the speech acts, beyond description, that asserting these facts necessarily involves us in. If it turns out that ‘commending’ and ‘condemning’ are not adequate, I’m hopeful either that some other terms are better, or that we can understand the phenomenon I have in mind well enough – especially in light of the present discussion – even if no term of English happens to be just right for it.

¹² Thanks to Guy Fletcher here.

¹³ Thomson (2008: 54, 77) uses the unfamiliar term ‘dispraise’ to describe what we are doing when we call something bad. This term might, for my purposes, work just as well as ‘condemn’.

d. Refining the thesis

So far we have been working with the “basic idea” of the theory. We can put that as follows, giving it a name now:

NP1: normative properties are those such that, to attribute one to something is, due to the nature of the property, necessarily to commend or condemn that thing.

Note that this amounts to a necessary and sufficient condition – being essentially commendatory is both necessary and sufficient for being a normative property (some earlier formulations may have suggested only the necessary condition). This basic idea faces some potential counterexamples.

i. Unknowing attributions of normative properties

Suppose your favorite property is, appropriately enough, intrinsic goodness, although I don’t know this. You tell me that a certain thing has your favorite property. I report this to a third party, though, again, I don’t know what property I am attributing. In reporting this to the third party, have I attributed intrinsic goodness to the thing? It would seem so. Have I commended this thing? Not obviously so.

Since perhaps it is also not obvious that I have *not* commended the thing (there is independent reason to think that we can commend without knowing it), consider another example. Suppose there is a race of rational creatures spying on us from another planet. They become interested in a certain use of our word ‘good’ (when it is used to attribute intrinsic goodness to things). They have no idea what the word means or what phenomenon it signifies, but they are able to see that it is a predicate, and thus suspect that it stands for some property. A whimsical member of their community proposes that they incorporate this meaning of ‘good’ into their language, with the stipulation that whenever one of them applies it to something, one attributes to this thing the same property, whatever it is, that we humans are attributing when we apply it to something.¹⁴ Next, suppose that after some time, certain confused members of this alien race begin to believe that they have some insight into the nature of the property this word expresses, and so begin genuinely to believe, of certain things, that these things have this property. When they say that certain things have the property, they would seem to be attributing intrinsic goodness to it. But when they do this, are they thereby commending these things? The pull to answer “No” in this case of community-wide ignorance may be made even stronger if we stipulate that these aliens themselves have no conception of value and, further, have no

¹⁴ This example is similar to a case in Eklund 2013: §3.

practice of commending or condemning (although some may wonder whether these additional stipulations make for a genuinely possible case).

This example might refute NP1. But I don't believe it calls for wholesale abandonment of its general idea. Rather, we can use the insight the example provides to devise a better formulation of the general idea. Consider

NP2: normative properties are those such that, to attribute one knowingly to something is, due to the nature of the property knowingly attributed, necessarily to commend or criticize that thing.

In order to attribute a property knowingly to something, one has to know which property one is attributing. This requires some degree of grasp of the property. If you don't "get" normative reasons or intrinsic value, you can still attribute them to things, by using words learned from others who do get it. One can "latch onto" these properties without understanding them, as the aliens did in the example above, but one cannot attribute them knowingly to things without understanding them. I set aside the question of just what level of understanding of the property is required, other than to say that we probably don't want to require *perfect* grasp – perhaps that never happens – and likewise don't want the requirement to be so lax that the attributors in the cases above count as grasping.

NP2 is very much of a piece with NP1. The basic idea of my view is that normative properties get us into the business of performing certain speech acts. But of course they don't do this completely on their own. We need to meet them partway, by getting ourselves into a certain relation with them. NP1 had it that all we have to do is attribute the properties. But attribution is cheap, and the examples above suggest that more is required. We have to know what we're attributing in order for the properties to be able to turn our attribution into a commendation or condemnation.¹⁵

ii. Disjunctive and comparative properties

A second kind of counterexample is based on problems concerning certain kinds of normative properties – in particular, disjunctive normative properties and comparative normative relations.¹⁶ I group them together because they may admit of a single solution.

¹⁵ An alternative possible way to deal with such cases – though perhaps it amounts to the same view in the end – is to require that the property be attributed *directly*, as discussed in Roberts (2013). The problem cases above would be cases of indirect property attribution.

¹⁶ The problem concerning disjunctive normative properties was brought to my attention by Matt Chrisman. Several audience members, including Noah Lemos, have raised the worry about comparative judgments.

Consider this remark: “This is either good or bad, though I don’t know which.” Maybe no attribution of a normative property takes place here; perhaps that happens only when the speaker takes a stand as to which it is, good or bad. If so, then there is no counterexample. But it’s also possible that there are disjunctive properties, and, further, that a disjunctive property each of whose disjuncts is a normative property is itself a normative property. If so, then the speaker of this remark does knowingly attribute a normative property, the property of being either good or bad. But it doesn’t seem that the speaker is either commending or condemning anything.

Being built up out of other normative properties, disjunctive normative properties are non-basic. The simplest solution is thus to restrict the thesis to one about *basic* normative properties, as follows:

NP3: basic normative properties are those such that, to attribute one knowingly to something is, due to the nature of the property knowingly attributed, necessarily to commend or condemn that thing.

Since *being either good or bad* is not a basic normative property, NP3 avoids the implication that saying, “This is either good or bad, though I don’t know which,” is to commend or condemn something. Nor does NP3 leave the nature of these non-basic normative properties mysterious, since non-basic normative properties are, by definition, analyzable in terms of the basic normative properties, properties whose nature NP3 elucidates.

Next consider comparative normative judgments, such as that it’s better to suffer a paper cut than a migraine. To state this fact may not be to attribute a normative property to something, but surely the normative relation attributed is something that the general approach here should want to shed light on. One plausible way for the theory to do this is to assimilate the case of these comparative normative assertions to the disjunctive case above, and hold that comparative normative relations – such as in our example above – are non-basic, and reducible to absolute, non-comparative, normative properties. This approach requires no revision to NP3.

To illustrate, we might say that ‘x is intrinsically better than y’ means that x has a certain intrinsic value, n; y has a certain intrinsic value, m; and n is greater than m (where ‘n’ and ‘m’ range over real numbers). Claims such as that x has an intrinsic value of n will correspond to commendations when n is positive and condemnations when n is negative. (When n is zero – that is, when we say that something has no intrinsic value – no normative property is attributed.)

Another promising strategy is to hold that such utterances involve speech acts that are the comparative analogs to commending and condemning. Thus, to

say that it's better to suffer a paper cut than a migraine is to commend paper cuts *relative to migraines* (it may also be to condemn migraines relative to paper cuts). Judith Thomson accepts a view like this about betterness relations. She holds that when we say, "Smith is a better chess player than Jones," we praise Smith "relative to Jones" (2008: 61).¹⁷

3. Three Objections

a. Commending the bad

Having presented and refined the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory properties, I would now like to address three important objections. The first is similar to a familiar concern for both non-cognitivism and motivational judgment internalism. Imagine a cadre of devils interested in discovering what would we be bad *precisely to do it*. One devil says to another, "I recommend that you do this, since it would be very bad indeed." My theory commits me to saying that, in attributing badness to this act, the devil is condemning it.¹⁸ But in fact he is attributing badness to it precisely to *commend* it.

A familiar response to this kind of case maintains that the devil isn't really saying that the act would be bad to do, but is instead using an "inverted commas" or "scare quotes" sense of 'bad' (Hare 1952: 124-5; Smith 1994: §§3.3-3.4). According to this idea, the devil doesn't really judge that the act in question would be bad – he's recommending it after all. What he is really saying is something like this: "I recommend that you do this, since it would be what most people call 'very bad'." Since such a remark does not involve the devil in attributing actual badness to anything, if this is what his original remark really means, it would be no counterexample to the theory.

The "inverted commas reply" is an interesting strategy for non-cognitivists and motivational judgment internalists, but it is a non-starter for normative

¹⁷ Another potentially problematic case is that of rights claims (thanks to Daniel Wodak for raising this point). The claim that fetuses have a right to life is surely a normative claim. Are we commending fetuses when we say this? Maybe. Note that, instead of saying that fetuses have rights, some people mean to convey more or less the same idea by saying that fetuses have intrinsic value, and this claim seems commendatory. Note also that we seem to be positively evaluating fetuses if we claim that they have rights, and so we are engaging in the kind of speech act I am ultimately after here (even if 'commending' isn't a perfect word for it (see §2c above)). A final point here is that rights claims may be equivalent to certain claims about obligations. If so, then the fact that some being has a certain right just is the fact that it is wrong to treat this being in certain ways; and wrongness is straightforwardly covered by the theory.

¹⁸ The theory as formulated (NP3 above) doesn't strictly speaking imply this. To generate the implication, we need to make explicit what was surely already implicit: that to attribute *positive* normative properties is to commend and to attribute *negative* normative properties is to condemn.

realists who want to accept the view of normative properties as essentially commendatory. Non-cognitivists don't believe in normative properties.¹⁹ Their account of normativity locates it in our language and thought rather than in the world. But my theory is for those who believe in properties that are themselves normative. If these properties are real, they are there for the devil to learn about, and knowingly attribute to things. And that is just what he has done in the example.

Nonetheless, I don't believe that the objection ultimately succeeds. A plausible case can be made for the view that the devil is in fact condemning the action he knows is bad. We can begin by noting that any assertion, whether in language naturalistic or normative, can be used to perform almost any kind of speech act, given the right conventions and context. In particular, if you know that your audience is interested in finding something with a certain feature, you can commend or recommend to them something simply by pointing out that it has this feature. This holds even if the feature is *badness*. But the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory is compatible with this. The theory describes *one* way that we can commend or condemn, but allows for all manner of other ways that this can occur, such as the way just described. Thus, while it is obvious that, in pointing out that the act is bad, the devil is thereby recommending it, this fact is in no tension the theory. What is incompatible with the theory is the claim that, in pointing out that the act is bad, the devil is not also thereby condemning it. The objection may be implicitly assuming that if one is commending something by describing it in a certain way, one cannot also be condemning it by describing it in that way. But such an inference has not been justified.

So instead of deriving as a lemma the claim that the devil is not condemning the act by pointing out that it is bad, the objection must just assert this as a premise. Against this, the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory must maintain that the devil involves himself in a kind of conflict of speech acts. On the one hand, he is recommending the act in calling it bad, since his audience is interested in finding an act that would be bad to do. On the other hand, he is also condemning the act, since he has said sincerely that it would be bad to do.

My defense of the idea that the devil is in fact condemning the act has two parts, one negative, one positive. The negative part exposes a poor reason for thinking that the devil is not condemning the act. According to this thought, the devil must not be condemning the act in question because the devil has no disfavorable attitudes towards it. But, as discussed earlier, a person can genuinely commend or condemn without having the corresponding attitudes,

¹⁹ I cannot discuss the alleged possibility that non-cognitivists might believe in normative properties and facts.

just as a person can genuinely apologize even if he's unable to feel remorse. Sympathy for the devil objection may be rooted in this mistaken view of commending and condemning.

More positively, there are reasons to think that the devil is in fact condemning the act in pointing out that it would be bad to do. Here is a simple argument for this. To say that an act would be bad to do is to say something bad about it. To say something bad about an act is to (verbally) evaluate it negatively. To (verbally) evaluate an act negatively is to condemn it.²⁰ These intuitively plausible principles imply that the devil has indeed condemned the act that he has said would be bad to do. Note that this argument does not presuppose my theory. Those who reject the theory of normative properties as essentially commending properties can accept the argument. Consider, for example, the view that it is nothing about the property of badness itself that makes attributions of it condemnations, but something about our mode of representing or expressing this property that makes attributions of it condemnations (the common analogy with slurs is helpful here). This naturalist-friendly theory can agree with the plausible idea that to say that an act would be bad to do is to say something bad about it, to evaluate it negatively, and to condemn it.

Finally, it may be helpful to note that similar speech act conflicts occur in other contexts. Judith Thomson, who defends views about attributions of goodness that are in some ways similar to mine, gives the following example:

We have to grant in any case that it is possible to both praise and dispraise a person in saying some words about him. If I am a professor of mathematics, and my letter of recommendation for my graduate student for a teaching position at Greatorex University consisted entirely of the words "He is good at doing arithmetic," then I have both praised and dispraised the student. I have praised him, since writing "He is good at doing arithmetic" *is* praising him. But the context in which I wrote those words makes it the case that I also dispraised him. (Thomson 2008: 56)

Similarly, the devil has both praised and dispraised the act. The devil dispraised it, since saying, "It would be very bad" *is* dispraising it. But the context in which he said those words makes it the case that he also praised it.

b. An unhelpful tautology

According to another objection, the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory sheds no light on normativity, as it is supposed to do, because it is covertly tautologous. It is covertly tautologous because the best account of what it is to commend something is that it is to attribute a positive

²⁰ I include the term 'verbally' because it is possible to negatively evaluate an act just in thought, and it's not clear whether this is a kind of condemnation. See §2.c above.

normative property to it. My view would thus ultimately be saying no more than that the normative properties are those such that when you attribute one to something, you can't help but be attributing a normative property to it.

But the account of commending on which this objection relies is doubtful. For we often commend without attributing normative or evaluative properties to things. I might commend a bicycle simply by pointing out that it is made of carbon, but being made of carbon is not a normative property. And we can commend without attributing a property at all. When someone says, "I commend you for your efforts," they are, as Austin would say, not reporting on a commendation, but indulging in one (Austin 1962: 5). We can also commend by giving a thumbs-up or a high-five. A ballplayer might commend his teammate out of habit by giving him a high-five without having come to the view that the teammate did anything good.

These cases might be dealt with by understanding or formulating the target theory of commendation in a less restrictive way. The account could hold that to commend is to attribute a normative property *either explicitly or implicitly*.²¹ Perhaps all the cases I cite above are cases of implicit normative property attribution. I have doubts about that, but I don't think it matters, since another case shows pretty clearly that one can commend without even implicitly attributing a normative property. This is the case of the committed normative nihilist. We can imagine such a person engaging in the business of commending while simultaneously making her nihilism conspicuous. Upon receiving a request for advice, she might say this:

"As you know, I'm a normative nihilist: I don't believe that anything has any normative properties. And so in particular, I don't believe that there is anything that you ought to do. Nonetheless, I'm happy to give you some advice: I recommend that you donate \$20."

The nihilist is commending a certain course of action, but she appears to have succeeded in refraining from attributing any normative properties to it, even implicitly.

c. Might some natural property be essentially commendatory?

Our final objection targets the sufficiency claim of the theory. NP3 says that being essentially commendatory is both necessary and sufficient for being a basic, irreducibly normative property. But might some natural, non-normative property also be essentially commendatory, in conflict with NP3?

²¹ I am grateful to Gunnar Björnsson here.

It of course won't do to find some property that plays this role contingently, as many natural properties do on account of our interests or conventions. But might some natural property, presumably one that is intimately related to the very phenomenon of commendation itself, be *essentially* such as to play this role? I have claimed, and indeed relied upon the fact, that commendation is a natural phenomenon. So let 'N' stand for a natural property – perhaps a rather complex one – the instantiation of which is sufficient for a commendation to occur. Might this property be what we are looking for: one such that, to attribute it to something is, due to the property's nature, necessarily to commend that thing?²²

No, for there is a difference between a property (i) being such that if it obtains, a commendation has occurred, and (ii) being such that if someone attributes it to something, a commendation has occurred. (i) is true of N, but the objection requires a property of which (ii) is true. To illustrate, the state of affairs involving the nihilist saying, "I recommend that you donate \$20," is sufficient for a commendation to occur. But my reporting this natural fact – my saying, "The nihilist said, 'I recommend that you donate \$20,'" – is not itself to commend or recommend anything. Whatever natural property I attribute in stating this natural fact, while it is a natural property the instantiation of which is sufficient for a commendation to occur, is not a natural property such that, to attribute it to something is itself to make a commendation.

The objector here is looking for a natural fact such that merely stating this fact is sufficient for a commendation to occur. What about the nihilist's utterance itself: "I recommend that you donate \$20"? Making such utterances is sufficient for making a commendation. However, these "performatives" are not the reportings of facts; they are not true or false (Austin 1962: 6). Since no property is attributed, *a fortiori* no essentially commendatory natural property attributed.

But perhaps some variation on the canonical performative form will provide an example of a kind of utterance that is at once descriptive and essentially commendatory. If I say, "I commend you for your efforts," or simply,

(C1) "I commend you,"

I have not described my commending you; I have done it. This is like the nihilist's performative. But suppose I say,

(C2) "You are hereby commended."

(C2) is certainly a commendation, at least ordinarily, just as an utterance of, "You are hereby warned not to come closer," is a warning. But is (C2) also a

²² For ease of presentation in what follows, I omit the qualification that the attribution must be *knowing*.

description, and hence a property attribution, where the property in question is the property of being commended?

I find this hard to decide. (C2) may be just another way of saying (C1), in which case it, too, would not be true or false. On the other hand, its grammatical form seems rather descriptive, for it is identical in form to the following:

(S2) "You are hereby spoken to."

This remark, however, is grammatically odd – it sounds like a funny hybrid of a performative and a description. We may therefore not want to draw any conclusions from it. We can repair it, however, as follows:

(S3) "You are hereby being spoken to."

(S3) is perfectly grammatical, and, when uttered to someone, is always true. It is thus a description. So let's consider its potentially-commendatory cousin:

(C3) "You are hereby being commended."

(C3) is as clear a case of a description as (S3). But is (C3) true, whenever it is sincerely spoken to someone? That is, must a sincere utterance of (C3) be a commendation, just as a sincere utterance of (C1) is always a commendation? I think this is also hard to decide. Must we be thanking someone anytime we sincerely tell him, "You are hereby being thanked"? Is that even ever a thanking? How would you feel if that was the "thanking" you got?

Even if we decide that any sincere utterance of (C3) must be a commendation, the objection to NP3 faces another problem, this one more decisive. The objection aims to show that a certain natural property, the one attributed in (C3), is essentially commendatory. What property is this? One natural thought is that it is a certain relation, the relation that obtains between an utterer, an utterance, and an utterer just in case the utterer is commending the utterer by means of the utterance. Call this relation 'C'. The problem is this: not all attributions of C are commendations, and thus C is not essentially commendatory. That not all attributions of C are commendations is shown by the fact that one can attribute C to someone else, as in, "Look over there: Mable is commending Abel by means of the utterance she is making."²³

A natural rejoinder to this reply is to hold that the indexical elements in (C3) are essential to its being a commendation. The objector could thus hold that whenever I say to someone,

²³ Strictly speaking, I should say that one can attribute C, not to someone else, but to a certain set of things, perhaps an ordered triple, consisting of utterer, utterance, and utterer.

(C3) “You are hereby being commended,”

I am *self-attributing* C, and it is self-attributions of C that are essentially commendatory. That might be true, but this doesn’t refute NP3, which says nothing about self-attributions. To *self-attribute* natural property C may necessarily be to make a commendation, but refuting NP3 requires finding a property such that merely *attributing* it is necessarily to make a commendation.²⁴

When I was first thinking about this problem for NP3,²⁵ I suspected that we very well might find a case of an essentially commendatory natural property. I was thinking that the theory would then need to be weakened to a mere necessary condition. A weakened theory would still, I believe, reveal an interesting and substantive facet of the essence of irreducible normativity – even if a certain natural property shared this facet, too. Such a theory would also still distinguish normative properties from other putatively non-natural properties – such as modal, mathematical, and logical properties – since none of these is a candidate for being essentially commendatory. It would have had the drawback that some of the claims in the next section, about further work the theory can do, would have to be qualified. But, in the final analysis, no such qualifications seem necessary. It seems that no natural property is such that, to attribute it to something is, due to the nature of the property, necessarily to commend or condemn that thing.²⁶

²⁴ To avoid testing the reader’s patience, I have spoken somewhat loosely here. In uttering (C3), I am not strictly speaking *self-attributing* C, but rather putting myself in the “utterer slot” of C, my listener in the “uteree slot,” and (C3) itself in the “utterance slot.” This isn’t *self-attribution* because the relation is attributed to a group – perhaps an ordered triple – of people and things, of which I am a member. We might call this ‘*us-attribution*’. But whatever we call it, the problem remains: we may have succeeded in finding a natural property such that anyone who “*us-attributes*” it to a certain ordered triple thereby commends a certain member of that triple, but this is no counterexample to NP3, which says nothing about *us-attribution*.

²⁵ Versions of which have been suggested by Justin D’Arms, Brian Tackett, and Mark Heller.

²⁶ Two final points. First, if non-reductive naturalism is true, there very well might be natural properties that are essentially commendatory, namely, the normative properties (which, on this view, are natural properties). (I say ‘might’ because it isn’t certain: it may require that these properties be *essentially* inexpressible in non-normative terms, something that in fact strikes me as doubtful.) But I believe this possibility is dialectically irrelevant. My project is (mainly) to assume non-naturalism, and then defend an account of the nature of irreducible normativity. So I am taking it for granted in this section that non-reductive naturalism is false. (And note, for what it’s worth, that even if non-reductive naturalism is true, there is still an apparently true thesis that corresponds to my thesis in this section, namely, that no *non-normative* property is essentially commendatory.)

Second, and relatedly, one might be tempted by the thought that if reductive naturalism is true, then there will be a natural property that is necessarily commendatory, namely, the natural property that, according to the true form of reductive naturalism, is identical to a certain basic normative property. In reply to this, I repeat the point about dialectical irrelevance. But I also note that it doesn’t even seem true. If we attribute this property under its naturalistic guise, or using naturalistic vocabulary, it is not plausible to think that such attributions must always be

4. Further work the hypothesis can do

The view of normative properties as essentially commendatory not only helps non-naturalists explain the nature of these properties, it does further interesting work as well: (a) it provides for an account of the “queerness” of normative properties, one superior to other accounts; (b) it explains why reductionism fails, in a way friendly to non-naturalism (as opposed to non-cognitivism); and (c) it can help deflect arguments against non-naturalism from the “action-guidingness” or “essential practicality” of normativity.

a. Characterizing queerness

The theory of irreducibly normative properties as essentially commendatory makes for an alternative, and I believe superior, characterization of the sense in which irreducibly normative properties are unusual. J.L. Mackie famously declares normative properties to be unacceptably “queer” (1977: 38-42). One central aspect of this queerness, Mackie suggests, is their power to motivate anyone acquainted with them (1977: 40). Mackie is here implying that non-naturalists about value may be committed to some kind of motivational judgment internalism. But, as many point out, this isn’t so. Non-naturalists can, and many do, plausibly reject motivational judgment internalism.²⁷

Nonetheless, irreducibly normative properties, if they exist, do seem to have some kind of “oomph” lacked by ordinary properties. In my view, it is not their ability to make us comply with the facts in which they figure, or to motivate us even slightly to do so. It is instead their ability to make anyone who merely attributes one knowingly to something thereby to be engaging in a practice that goes beyond mere description – the practice of commending or condemning. It does this whether the attributor wants to be doing so or not. It can indeed seem rather odd that simply reporting, as disinterested scientists do, that some object in the world has some property, can force one into the business of making an evaluation, but this, according to the view here, is what normative properties do. And this is a reasonable sense in which they are queer.

What is queer is not the notion that using normative *language* involves one in making recommendations, commendations, etc. I’m not sure any metaethical view would deny that normative language can do this. What is queer is that, when it comes to irreducibly normative *properties* or *facts*, one can’t help but get oneself involved in the business of making a recommendation *simply by stating a*

commendations. Even if pleasantness is identical to goodness and we all know this, I still don’t believe that to describe something as pleasant must always be to make a commendation.

²⁷ See, e.g., Shafer-Landau 2003: ch. 6.

fact.²⁸ It is that these properties are *simultaneously descriptive and evaluative*: the facts involving them simultaneously describe and evaluate the world, so to speak, and thus get us to engage in acts of evaluation merely by describing things. This account of normativity's queerness supports Mackie's contention that these properties or facts "would be entities ... of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (Mackie 1977: 38).

It is not our business here to investigate whether irreducible normativity's queerness is enough, or even any, reason to doubt its existence. I am not here arguing for non-naturalism but addressing an objection to it, the objection that non-naturalism has no plausible account of what these non-natural, irreducibly normative properties are supposed to be. As this section illustrates, the account offered is an account that even those who would reject non-naturalism can accept, and may even welcome, as it helps underwrite an argument against non-naturalism: the argument from queerness. Mackie's argument from queerness (or the strand of it we are focusing on here) seems to many to fail, because it falsely encumbers non-naturalism with something like motivational judgment internalism. If the account of queerness provided by my view is correct, however, opponents of non-naturalism have an argument from queerness that avoids at least this defect. The theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory may thus be something of a double-edged sword for non-naturalists, helping them to shed light on the nature of their unseen postulates, but in so doing, revealing something suspect about them. I don't believe this is any reason to think that the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory is mistaken, though it does admittedly pull against its original motivations.²⁹

b. Explaining why reductionism fails

Non-naturalists believe that attempts to reduce the normative to the natural are bound to fail. That is, they believe that no identification of normative properties or facts with properties or facts that we can express in naturalistic language (or any non-normative language, for that matter) can succeed. Why should that be?

Some explanations for why reductive naturalism is bound to fail do not fit comfortably with non-naturalism. In the context of explaining why they believe that the open-question argument against reductive naturalism is compelling,

²⁸ The 'irreducible' here is important. If reductive naturalism is true, one can attribute normative properties without evaluating, by attributing them under their naturalistic guise.

²⁹ Michael Pendlebury rejects realism on the following grounds, and in terms that strike me as suggestive of the view here: "One reason why I am inclined toward normative expressivism is that I do not understand how a factual proposition could have the property that anyone who is committed to it thereby takes a normative stance" (2010: 185). Pendlebury may be rejecting realism because it is committed to a kind of queerness not unlike the sort I am describing here.

Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton offer one such explanation. They claim that any naturalistic reduction will seem implausible due to (i) the fact that “Attributions of goodness appear to have a conceptual link with the guidance of action,” combined with (ii) “our seeming ability to imagine, for any naturalistic property *R*, clear-headed beings who would fail to find appropriate reason or motive to action in the mere fact that *R* obtains (or is seen to be in the offing)” (1992: 117). In other words, reductive naturalist theories are bound to fail because, while normative properties are essentially action-guiding, no natural properties are essentially action-guiding, where a property is essentially action-guiding just in case attributions of it (or, more plausibly, certain special attributions of it) necessarily imply some motivation to act on the part of the attributor.

This explanation, which essentially appeals to motivational judgment internalism, should make non-naturalists uneasy. “For,” as Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton point out, “it appears no easier to see how an appropriate link to motivation or action could be logically secured if we were to substitute ... ‘*sui generis*, simple, nonnatural property *Q*’ for ‘naturalistic property *R*’” (1992: 118). Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton conclude that non-cognitivism, which can straightforwardly accommodate the action-guidingness they posit, is “the real historical beneficiary of the open question argument,” or of the untenability of reductive naturalism (1992: 119).

But if non-naturalists adopt the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory properties, they can provide an alternative explanation for why reductive naturalism is implausible, one that is friendlier to non-naturalism. Whereas Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton explain the untenability of reductive naturalist theories by appeal to the alleged essential action-guidingness of normative properties, non-naturalists can do so by appealing to the essential “commendatoriness” of normative properties, a feature that, I have been arguing, they have reason to believe in anyway. The reason – or at least a reason – that normative properties can never be identified with any natural property is that, whereas normative properties are essentially commendatory, no natural property is. No natural property is such that any possible attribution of it to something is also a commendation.³⁰

c. An account of the “essential practicality” of normativity

In a more recent paper, Stephen Finlay describes another common complaint against non-naturalism: “Other objections to *sui generis* normative facts and

³⁰ This is one of the remarks that would need qualification if I am wrong that no natural property is essentially commendatory (see §3.c above). The qualification would be that the *recherché* natural property, attribution of which is sufficient for a commendation – the property I called ‘*C*’ above – has no promise at all as a reduction base for normative properties. Some other claims in this section could be similarly qualified.

properties proceed from the thought that there is something essentially practical about normativity” (2010: 336). This objection is implicit in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton’s remark about how a property’s being non-natural and *sui generis* makes it no more essentially action-guiding than any ordinary natural property. To indulge in some serious metaphor, here may be one way to put the idea of essential practicality: normative claims are not simply inert, sterile descriptions of reality, as naturalistic claims are; normative facts have a kind of “oomph” about them, or perhaps a kind of “glow.” As Mackie puts it, they have a “to-be-doneness” built into them (Mackie 1977: 40). Just what is this essential practicality?

As Finlay notes (2010: 336), it “has often been understood in motivational terms,” and is thus often taken to require the doctrine of motivational judgment internalism, a doctrine not especially friendly to non-naturalism. This is why the essential practicality of normative facts looks hard to accommodate on non-naturalism, and on realism more generally.

But if the theory of normative properties as essentially commendatory is true, non-naturalists have an alternative way to account for the essential practicality of normativity, or to deliver what motivational judgment internalism is often relied upon to deliver. The essential practicality of normative properties lies in the fact that they make those who attribute them knowingly to involve themselves in speech acts beyond mere attribution. Normative properties’ “oomph” consists, at least in part, in the fact that we can’t help but commend or condemn, just by attributing them. Normative facts get us to *do* certain things – not to want to comply with them if we merely believe them, but to commend or condemn if we merely state them.

What’s more, explaining the essential practicality of normativity in terms of the speech acts that normative assertions involve us in rather than in motivational terms has independent advantages – not just for non-naturalists but for other realists as well. Motivational judgment internalism is quite controversial; irrespective of its implications for metaethics and considered on its own merits, it strikes many as empirically dubious. My explanans is, on its own merits, less doubtful. It is more plausible that, in making a normative assertion, we must be commending or condemning, than it is that, in making a normative judgment, we must have some motivation.³¹

³¹ Judith Thomson, who is no friend of non-naturalism, agrees. She puts the point in terms of favorable attitudes more generally rather than motivation in particular (Thomson 2008: 54). For an overview of the controversy surrounding motivational judgment internalism, see Björklund et al (2012).

5. Conclusion

My purpose has been to show that non-naturalists can answer the complaint that they cannot tell us what the properties they posit are like, other than either negatively or simply by repeating the normative notions. I have claimed that a certain thesis is available to them that enables them to characterize irreducible normativity positively and substantively in non-normative language. I have tried to clarify and refine the thesis, and to defend it against objections. I have also outlined some of the other work I believe it can do. I hope all of this gives non-naturalists good reason to accept the thesis.

A certain kind of worry might be lingering: How could there be a property that is like this? How could there be a property such that, due to its special nature, knowingly attributing it to something necessarily constitutes commending that thing? First, note that if my view is right, this question really amounts to the question, How could there be normative properties? That's a good question! Although normative facts are among the most familiar of facts, it is not hard to get into a frame of mind in which they seem astonishing, or impossible. So perhaps it is no surprise if my account of the nature of irreducible normativity preserves its strangeness, as indeed I emphasized earlier (§4.a). Second, although I might not be able to explain how there could be essentially commendatory properties, it may help reduce our perplexity if we are persuaded that the thesis might actually be true (on the assumption that non-naturalism is true). If one is persuaded that the view has no clear counterexamples, then one agrees that anytime anyone is knowingly attributing an irreducibly normative property, that is sufficient for him to be making a commendation. Since the making of the commendation doesn't depend on additional contingencies of context or convention, it must simply be a result of what one is saying about the thing one is talking about: that is, it must be something about this property. To review all this isn't to explain *how* the view could be true, but appreciating that the view does indeed seem true (if non-naturalism is true) may help reduce one's bafflement.³²

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