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The Supervenience of the Normative and the Autonomy of Essence

Lessons from Leary's Hybrid Gambit

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1 Introduction

A striking feature of ethics—as well as other domains dealing with normative issues, such as epistemology, political philosophy, and aesthetics—is that (at least prima facie) it seems that there can't be a normative difference between two things (actions, institutions, beliefs, etc.) without there also being some other difference between them. In other words, it appears that the normative *supervenes*. Moreover, this supervenience relation seems to hold as a matter of metaphysical necessity. In much recent metaethical discussion, this sort of metaphysical supervenience relation has been taken to be a datum that metaethical theories should seek to accommodate—and, ideally, explain. This status is well illustrated by Gideon Rosen, who labels it "the least controversial thesis in metaethics", in a paper dedicated to undermining that status.[1]

Many have thought that the task of accommodating and explaining normative supervenience is a particularly acute challenge for those who embrace metanormative *non-naturalistic realism*. Put roughly, this is for the following reason. According to non-naturalistic realism, normative facts and properties (of the relevant kind that are of central concern in ethics) are metaphysically *sui generis*. In short, this means that they are fundamentally different in kind from—and thus in some deep sense *metaphysically discontinuous* with—all other kinds of facts. However, if the normative indeed supervenes as a matter of metaphysical necessity, it seems there is an extremely tight metaphysical connection between normative properties and non-normative properties. It's not at all clear how the non-naturalist can accommodate and explain this connection without either (a) compromising the core, distinctive metaphysical commitment of non-naturalistic realism or (b) positing mysterious metaphysical connections of a sort we should generally be skeptical of.

[1] Rosen (2020).

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Stephanie Leary has recently proposed a novel response to this challenge on behalf of the non-naturalist, which draws on work about essence and metaphysical explanation from Kit Fine, Shamik Dasgupta, and Gideon Rosen.[2] Leary's proposal has already attracted important critical attention.[3] However, in our view, philosophers have not yet fully appreciated the important lessons that can be drawn from evaluating her view. We are ultimately unconvinced by Leary's proposal, for reasons that we explain in §4. However, we go on to argue that getting clear on why Leary's proposal is unpromising is valuable in several ways. Doing so, we suggest, helps advance our understanding of the supervenience challenge, of the nature and prospects of non-naturalism, of "Humean" principles in metaphysical methodology, of the essentialist framework in metaphysics, and, more generally, of the epistemology of metaphysical theorizing.

Our plan is as follows. We begin in §2 by setting out what we take to be the most pressing version of the supervenience challenge to non-naturalism. In §3, we then explain the outline of Leary's response, with an eye toward highlighting its distinctive virtues. In §4, we evaluate Leary's proposal. In so doing, we explain how reflecting on Leary's account helps us understand how best to formulate "Humean" principles in the methodology of metaphysics, and how such principles should operate within an essentialist framework. Finally, we explore the broader lessons that we can draw from our evaluation (§5).

2 The supervenience challenge for non-naturalistic metanormative realism

As we emphasized above, many philosophers have found it to be extremely plausible that the normative *supervenes* as a matter of metaphysical necessity. The question of exactly how to state the relevant supervenience thesis is, however, a delicate one.[4] For simplicity, in this chapter we will focus on the following formulation:

Supervenience If two metaphysically possible entities (e.g., actions, states of affairs, persons . . .) are alike in all non-normative respects, they are alike in all normative respects.

[2] Leary (2017), drawing on Rosen (2010), Fine (2012), and Dasgupta (2014).

[3] Notably, Faraci (2017) and Toppinen (2018).

[4] For example, some naturalists might make a plausible case for rejecting the idea that the normative supervenes on the *non-normative* (see, e.g., Sturgeon 2009). In short, this is because some naturalists might take normative properties to be naturalistic properties that don't supervene on other, naturalistic properties. Because of this, we are ultimately most sympathetic to the more ecumenical formulations discussed in McPherson (2012, 2019). (See also Ridge 2007 for a related formulation.) However, since we are considering a supervenience-based argument against non-naturalism, and *non-naturalists* should be happy with the formulation of the supervenience base, we set this issue aside in the text.

Intuitively, Supervenience says that, across the space of metaphysically possible worlds, there can be no normative difference without there also being some non-normative difference. It thus claims that it is metaphysically impossible for normative features to vary independently of non-normative features. We begin by unpacking this thesis and explaining why it is credible.

First, how one draws the division between the "normative" and "non-normative" is no straightforward matter. One important set of issues concerns whether the division, at the most basic explanatory level, is drawn at the level of thought and talk (e.g., in terms of different concepts employed) or else at the object level (e.g., in terms of different kinds of properties involved).[5] For our purposes here, we can largely sidestep this issue, since all that is needed to orient our discussion is that there are normative features, whatever fundamentally explains their status as "normative". Another set of issues concerns the variety of different things people classify as "normative" in some sense, ranging from the rules of board games to moral norms. In general, non-naturalism is a thesis about what agents *really and truly* should do, think, or feel; what is sometimes called "robust" or "authoritative" normativity, in contrast to merely "generic" or "formal" normativity.[6] In Supervenience and elsewhere in this chapter, we use the term "normative" to discuss the "authoritative" sort of normativity, as opposed to the sort of merely "generic" normativity characteristic of (e.g.) the rules of a board game.

Second, Supervenience makes reference to "respects". If one accepts a plenitudinous account of properties and relations, one could restate the idea of being alike in all non-normative respects as: bearing all and only the same non-normative properties and standing in all and only the same non-normative relations. The (purported) plenitudinous nature of properties and relations is very important to the interpretation of this thesis. For example, suppose that two worlds are qualitatively identical in their complete histories up until a point a millennium after Al presses a button. But at that point, life as we know it ends in the first possible world, while it continues in the second. For the purposes of Supervenience, this means that there is a non-normative difference between Al's button-pressing in the two worlds. That being said, to make Supervenience interesting, we do need to slightly restrict the scope of the "respects" it ranges over, to exclude identity-imputing respects. This is because, if we allow "respects" like "being identical to x", then Supervenience would be trivialized.[7]

Why accept Supervenience? Here, we closely follow the argumentative strategy recently proposed by one of us (McPherson), which has two parts.[8]

[5] For discussion of some of the issues involved here, see Eklund (2017: chs. 4–5).

[6] For one discussion of how to understand such "authoritative" (or "robust") normativity, and how it contrasts with "generic" (or "formal") normativity, see McPherson (2018a).

[7] For a careful discussion of related issues, see Atiq (2020).

[8] The following four paragraphs lightly adapt text from McPherson (2019: §2).

The first part of the strategy defends Supervenience as a plausible generalization from particular cases. Consider the following example. Suppose that a bank manager wrongfully embezzles their client's money. Suppose we hold fixed all the non-normative features of this case, including how much the bank manager stole, and how; the trust their customers placed in them; what they did with the money; all of the consequences of their actions; and so on. If so, it seems that there could not be a second action that perfectly resembled this embezzlement in all of the non-normative respects, but which was right rather than wrong. Cases like this one seem to show a *necessary* connection: they suggest that the normative character of the bank manager's act cannot vary without some other facts varying as well. This is what we can call a *specific supervenience fact*.[9]

Next, notice that there is nothing special in this respect about the bank manager case: we can identify specific supervenience facts about anything from genocide to insulting your neighbor's hat. Each such fact is constituted by a necessary connection between normative properties and some non-normative properties. It is theoretically unattractive to be satisfied with a long list of such necessary connections. Instead, we should look for a single thesis that unifies all of these specific connections into a single pattern. This pattern can be captured by a general normative supervenience thesis such as Supervenience.[10]

The second part of the strategy emphasizes the independent credibility of a *general* supervenience thesis such as Supervenience. This takes inspiration from a comment by Henry Sidgwick:

> In the variety of coexistent physical facts we find an accidental or arbitrary element in which we have to acquiesce . . . But within the range of our cognitions of right and wrong, it will be generally agreed that we cannot admit a similar unexplained variation.[11]

It is plausible to interpret Sidgwick as suggesting that although we seek explanatory power when we develop our account of the physical world, we need to be prepared to admit brute contingency. That is: he seems to think that there is a real possibility that our best theories or explanations include claims like "and these just happened to be the initial conditions", or (to be anachronistic) "it is a brute fact that the quantum wave function collapsed this way". By contrast, he does not think we can admit the analogous idea that it is a brute contingent fact that a certain ethical property just happens to covary with base properties that are instantiated. Because of their modal scope, ethical supervenience theses reflect this ban on brute ethical contingency.[12]

[9] Our terminology here is a slight adaptation of terminology from Horgan and Timmons (1992: 226).
[10] Compare to McPherson (2012: 211).
[11] Sidgwick (1874/1981: 209).
[12] Compare also to Shafer-Landau (2003: 78) and Smith (2004: 225).

The two parts of the strategy complement each other. The first part defends Supervenience as an elegant unification of highly plausible specific supervenience facts. Such unification is a familiar and domain-general theoretical virtue. The second part of the strategy suggests that we have further reasons to accept such a general thesis; reasons that stem from a feature of our understanding of the normative domain as a whole.

Several philosophers have recently argued against the thesis that the normative supervenes on the non-normative, or against the thesis that this supervenience relation holds as a matter of *metaphysical necessity*.[13] We do not engage with their important arguments here. Nor do we engage with other arguments that have been put forward against Supervenience, or closely related variants of the thesis.[14] Instead, in this chapter, we suppose that we know Supervenience to be true, and then explore its implications for the plausibility of metanormative non-naturalism. It is worth noting that, going forward, our use of modal terms should be read as concerning metaphysical modality, unless explicitly stated.

It's long been thought that the non-naturalist faces a significant challenge in light of the supervenience of the normative. Consider a recent statement of the core challenge recently put forward by one of us (McPherson).[15] Lightly adapted, this challenge combines Supervenience with two further claims:

Brute Connection The non-naturalist must take the supervenience of the normative properties on the non-normative properties to involve a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties.

Modest Humean Commitment to brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties counts significantly against a view.

Together, Brute Connection and Modest Humean entail that the truth of Supervenience counts significantly against the non-naturalist's view.

We now briefly unpack these two claims, beginning with Brute Connection.

First, Brute Connection mentions *discontinuous* properties. We take this to capture one of the non-naturalist's core commitments regarding normativity: that normative properties and non-normative properties are metaphysically radically different sorts of properties.[16] This idea is prominently reflected in non-naturalists'

[13] For example, see Hattiangadi (2018), Roberts (2018), and Rosen (2020).

[14] For some examples of such arguments, see Hills (2009), Dancy (1995), and Raz (2000). See McPherson (2019) for discussion of these arguments, and further references to other arguments against the kind of supervenience thesis we are discussing.

[15] McPherson (2012). For closely connected ways of putting forward the challenge (both of which draw on McPherson 2012), see Dreier (2015) and Väyrynen (2017).

[16] For an argument that this is the best way to capture the non-naturalist's core commitment about the metaphysics of normativity, see McPherson (2015) and McPherson and Plunkett (2022).

insistence that normative properties are "just too different" from (e.g.) natural properties for normative naturalism to be true.[17]

Second, Brute Connection talks of *brute* necessary connections. As we understand it, a brute connection is a connection for which a demand for explanation is appropriate, but which nonetheless lacks an adequate explanation. Brute connections contrast with two other kinds of connection: on the one hand, a connection that is adequately explained, and, on the other, a connection for which the request for further explanation is inappropriate. (This latter kind of connection is at the core of Leary's strategy, and will thus loom large in what follows.)

Now consider Modest Humean.[18] This is an epistemological cousin of a metaphysical thesis that is sometimes called "Hume's dictum": the claim that there are no metaphysically necessary connections between distinct entities. Hume's dictum is a common, if controversial, player in contemporary metaphysical debates. It is usually motivated by appeal to intuitive claims: for example, via the claim that the relevant connections are "unintelligible".[19]

Despite its intuitive pull, there are several reasonable bases for suspicion about Hume's dictum, of which we will mention two. First, one might worry about our ability to distinguish entities as "distinct" in a relevant way that makes the dictum both true and interesting. After all, a variety of seemingly non-identical properties are necessarily connected. For example, a surface's being scarlet is not identical to its being red, and yet seems to necessitate it. Second, one might, on quite general methodological grounds, be suspicious of the idea that we could be entitled to rule out a metaphysical theory on the basis of our intuitions. After all, we do not know that our intuitions track actual metaphysical structure. Therefore, we don't seem entitled to rule out metaphysical theories based solely (or even just chiefly) on such intuitions. Put another way: do we know that no theoretical package could come along that seemed so attractive on overall theoretical grounds (explanatory power, theoretical unification, etc.) that we would give up on Hume's dictum?

Modest Humean is formulated to address these two bases for concern about Hume's dictum. It includes two elements that address the first concern. First, its scope is restricted to *discontinuous* properties. We do not think that red and scarlet, for example, are deeply metaphysically discontinuous. Second, it allows that if we can adequately metaphysically explain a necessary connection between discontinuous properties, Modest Humean does not count against accepting that connection: it only counts against accepting *brute* connections. Finally, in response to the second concern, it states only that commitment to brute connections *counts significantly* against a view, rather than ruling the view out entirely. While Hume's

[17] See Enoch (2011) on the "just too different intuition".
[18] The following three paragraphs closely follow McPherson (2012: 218).
[19] See, e.g., Lewis (1983: 366).

dictum is a metaphysical thesis about what sorts of connections there are, Modest Humean is an epistemological thesis about the epistemic credibility of views that embrace certain connections. This epistemological status entails that the other features of an overall theoretical package could (at least in principle) entitle one to believe in a theory that posits such brute connections.

With these principles unpacked, we are now in a position to appreciate why Supervenience is an important challenge for non-naturalistic realism in particular. Every view about the nature of normative properties is, in some sense, on the hook for explaining Supervenience in a way that is responsive to Modest Humean. Or, somewhat more modestly: being able to do so counts significantly in favor of such a view, and not being able to counts against it. This is as true for naturalistic accounts of normative properties as it is non-naturalistic ones. However, naturalist views entail nothing analogous to Brute Connection, in contrast to non-naturalist views. This is what makes it particularly hard to see how non-naturalist views can explain Supervenience in a way that is responsive to Modest Humean.

In this chapter, we will focus on the prospects for rebutting the supervenience argument against metanormative non-naturalism by appeal to certain *metaphysical* explanations of supervenience. Given our focus on Leary, we should note that this task is explicitly the one that Leary herself aims to undertake.[20]

Before introducing Leary's proposal, we will consider a relatively simple attempt to offer the relevant metaphysical explanation, whose failure helps to motivate Leary's proposal. One of the most influential contemporary ways of regimenting discussion of "metaphysical explanation" appeals to the idea of *grounding*.[21] Put roughly, grounding relations are an allegedly unified class of asymmetric metaphysical determination relations, where those relations are constitutive, rather than causal.[22] To illustrate, consider the fact that Roberto is smiling. A (partial) causal explanation of this fact might be that he just heard a joke that he found

[20] We should also note, however, that there are a few differences between our understanding of the supervenience challenge to non-naturalism and Leary's understanding of it, which in turn structure her understanding of what such a metaphysical explanation would need to consist in. One such difference concerns the formulation of non-naturalism, which we will briefly return to later in this chapter. Second, in her presentation of the relevant supervenience challenge, Leary stresses the general idea that (other things being equal) it counts in favor of a theory if it can explain relevant phenomena, and counts against it if it cannot. She doesn't stress the idea that there are particular reasons to want to explain necessary connections between (at least seemingly) distinct properties, and thus doesn't put weight on a version of the supervenience challenge that involves Modest Humean (or something in its vicinity). We take our formulation of the challenge to reflect a better understanding of the core relevant challenge, so we stick with it in what follows. However, if one prefers Leary's version of the challenge, it won't significantly alter our main line of argument in what follows.

[21] There are a range of controversies about grounding in the contemporary literature. See Bliss and Trogdon (2016) for a helpful overview.

[22] It is controversial whether grounding facts are themselves explanatory, or whether they underlie metaphysical explanations. See Bliss and Trogdon (2016: §4). For our purposes here, we will go with the former way of thinking about grounding. However, you can rephrase everything we are doing in terms of the latter and it won't matter for our core arguments about Leary's response to the supervenience challenge.

funny. By contrast, a grounding explanation of the same fact might be that his face is spatially configured in a certain way. We can distinguish *full* from *partial* grounding. For example, consider the fact that Zoe is a human philosopher. This is partially grounded in the fact that Zoe is human, but fully grounded in the following collection of facts: (Zoe is human; Zoe is a philosopher). In this chapter we will typically use "ground" and its cognates to mean *fully ground*.

It is generally assumed that grounding relations entail necessary connections. For example, if the spatial configuration of Roberto's face (fully) grounds the fact that he is smiling, then it is metaphysically necessary that: *if his face is thus configured, then he is smiling*.[23] Because of this necessity-entailment assumption, grounding relations appear well placed to *explain* modal relations, such as relations of supervenience. One might thus propose the following:

Grounding Every normative fact is (fully) grounded in some set of non-normative facts.

If it is true, Grounding promises to explain Supervenience. We can illustrate the explanation by considering what it would be for supervenience to fail. It would be for there to be a possible entity x which has a normative property N, while another entity y (in a different possible world), was perfectly non-normatively similar to x but failed to have N. If Grounding is true, then there is some non-normative condition NNx such that the fact that NNx grounds the normative fact that Nx. But y is perfectly non-normatively similar to x, so NNy will also be a fact. Two further assumptions are needed to ensure that supervenience failure is impossible. First, we need to assume that the facts which ground normative facts are not *haecceistic*: that is, the facts that ground Nx cannot advert crucially to x's non-qualitative identity. Second, we need the necessity-entailment assumption mentioned just above. With these assumptions in hand, if NNx grounds Nx, then NNy will ground Ny, so it will not be possible for y to fail to have N.[24]

So: if it is true, Grounding promises to explain Supervenience. However, we can now ask about the status of Grounding. The problem is that Grounding itself calls out for explanation. But if Grounding is itself a brute fact, we face a version of what one of us (McPherson) has dubbed "bruteness revenge".[25] Although strictly speaking supervenience has been explained, if the explanation itself appeals to something objectionably brute, then the explanation has merely moved the bump in the carpet, as it were.[26]

[23] We adapt this gloss on grounding, and the example, from McPherson (forthcoming).
[24] For closely related reasoning, see Leary (2017: 88).
[25] See (McPherson (2012: 222–3).
[26] Note that Leary agrees with this point. See Leary (2017: 89).

This helps to set the stage for Leary's reply. For her aim is precisely to provide an explanation of Supervenience that does more than move the bump in the carpet. She aims to show that we can offer an explanation of Supervenience that appeals to facts for which calls for explanation are inappropriate. We now turn to Leary's account.

3 Leary's hybrid essentialist response to the supervenience challenge

Leary's response to the supervenience challenge for non-naturalism appeals to three main ideas: (1) that there are certain facts (which, drawing on Dasgupta, she calls "autonomous facts") that neither have nor require any further metaphysical explanation, (2) that facts about essence (of the relevant kind) are autonomous facts, and (3) that there are what Leary dubs "hybrid" normative properties. We take each idea in turn. We then explain how Leary draws on the combination of these ideas to provide a novel response to the supervenience challenge for non-naturalism.

Start with the idea of "autonomous" facts. As Leary puts it, there are some facts that "are neither grounded nor fundamental, but simply not the sorts of facts that can, in principle, have a metaphysical explanation".[27] In other words, autonomous facts contrast *both* with facts that are grounded in further facts (such as the fact that Roberto is smiling) as well as with metaphysically fundamental facts that have no further ground (such as perhaps certain facts about fundamental physics). They are, instead, the kinds of facts for which demanding a metaphysical explanation is a kind of category mistake. Leary illustrates this idea with an analogy to causal explanation: "the fact that 2 + 2 = 4 has no cause, not in the sense that the Big Bang has no cause (as the initial state of the universe), but in the sense that it is not the sort of thing that can, in principle, be caused".[28]

Now consider a transparently unsatisfying attempt to use the idea of "autonomous" facts to respond to the supervenience challenge. This would be to claim that the metaphysically necessary connection between the normative and non-normative facts is itself an autonomous fact. The problem is that this claim appears ad hoc: modal connections quite generally appear very much eligible for metaphysical explanation.

In contrast, Leary appeals to a thesis about which facts are autonomous that others have argued for on independent theoretical grounds: namely, the thesis that facts about essence are autonomous facts. More specifically, Leary's claim here is on facts about what Fine calls "constitutive immediate essences" (which,

[27] Leary (2017: 95).
[28] Leary (2017: 95).

unless otherwise stated, will be the kinds of essences we will be talking about in what follows).[29] Put roughly, these are facts about what something is in its most core respects. The idea here—which Leary again borrows from Dasgupta—is that facts about constitutive immediate essences play a role in metaphysical explanation akin to the "scaffolding" of a building.[30] Such facts provide the basic structure which makes metaphysical explanation possible. But, Leary claims (drawing on Dasgupta), they are not themselves the kinds of things for which there could be further metaphysical explanation. Return to our example of a grounding claim: the claim that if the spatial configuration of Roberto's face fully grounds the fact that he is smiling. On the essentialist picture, a natural candidate to explain this grounding claim is this: it is part of the essence of smiling that if one's face is spatially configured in such-and-such a way, then one is smiling; that is, this configuration is just *what it is* to be smiling. The plausible thought offered by Dasgupta and Leary is that essentialist facts, like *such-and-such is just what it is to be smiling*, are not the sort of facts for which we can sensibly ask for further explanation.

Leary's third idea is a novel one, which goes beyond anything from Fine, Dasgupta, or others working within a broadly essentialist framework. This is the idea that there are two importantly different types of normative properties, which she calls *pure* and *hybrid* normative properties. Non-naturalists characteristically take normative properties to be "sui generis". Leary offers the following gloss on this idea: *pure* normative properties are such that (i) their essences cannot be fully specified in non-normative terms, and (ii) their essences do not specify non-normative metaphysically sufficient conditions for their instantiations. Leary claims that, in contrast, *hybrid* normative properties have essences with two different features: (i) their essences encode non-normative metaphysically sufficient conditions for their instantiation, and (ii) their essences specify that their instantiation is a metaphysically sufficient condition for the instantiation of a pure normative property.[31]

Consider an illustrative example. Suppose that the property of *being good to some extent* is a pure normative property. Suppose next that the essence of the property of *being courageous* includes the following conditions: (a) that a certain non-normative condition is metaphysically sufficient for a person's being courageous, and (b) that a person's *being courageous* is metaphysically sufficient for that person being *good to some extent*. On this account, *being courageous* is a hybrid normative property.[32] On an essentialist account of grounding, these essence facts

[29] Fine (1994).
[30] See Dasgupta (2014).
[31] Leary (2017: 77).
[32] On this illustration, hybrid normative properties might turn out to be quite generally equivalent to what are often called "thick" normative properties (cf. Roberts 2017). However, this assumption is not crucial to the general structure of Leary's strategy. Note that here we are *illustrating* Leary's theory, not endorsing the idea that *being courageous* has the structure we discuss in the text.

explain grounding facts. Thus, if it is part of the essence of courage that having N is sufficient for being courageous, then this is what explains why, if x has N, the fact that x has N grounds the fact that x is courageous. On this account, hybrid properties, thanks to their unusual essences, "act as a doublesided tape that sticks the [pure] normative onto the natural".[33] Further, facts about the essences of such hybrid properties provide *autonomous* explanations of the grounding of some normative facts by some non-normative facts.

Crucially, this structure would allow us to provide an autonomous explanation of the supervenience of the pure normative properties on the non-normative properties, provided that every possible instantiation of a pure normative property were fully grounded in the instantiation of some hybrid normative property.[34]

To see this, focus for simplicity on the property of *being good to some extent*. Suppose then that every possible instantiation of this property were fully grounded in the instantiation of some hybrid normative property (one example being courageousness, on the theory of it that we are working with, for the sake of illustration). Then, the collected facts about the essences of those hybrid properties will autonomously explain the instantiation of *being good to some extent*. Further, each of the hybrid property instantiations will be fully grounded in the instantiation of some non-normative property, where this again will be autonomously explained by the essences of those hybrid properties. Because full grounding is transitive, this means that every possible instantiation of *being good to some extent* will be fully grounded in the instantiation of some non-normative property. By the reasoning offered at the end of the last section, this means in turn that the supervenience of *being good to some extent* on the non-normative will be fully explained. Further, none of the grounding relations involved will be brute because (by our hypothesis) they all follow from the essence of one of the relevant hybrid normative properties.

Suppose that such essentially explained grounding is true of every metaphysically possible instantiation of a pure normative property. Then the supervenience of the normative on the natural will also be fully metaphysically explained, by the conjunction of all of the hybrid essence facts that together explain the grounding conditions for each possible pure normative property.

Crucially, Leary's account seems to avoid the problem of "bruteness revenge". This is because Leary's explanatory story terminates in a collection of facts about essences.

[33] Leary (2017: 99).

[34] Faraci (2017) argues that Leary's response to the supervenience challenge fails because (in effect) this assumption itself cries out for explanation: why is it impossible for there to be pure normative properties whose instantiation is not grounded in hybrid properties? Leary anticipates a related worry, and in effect replies as follows: on her essentialist framework, all necessities are explained by essentialist facts. (We take this to be the upshot of her claim that "the question of what metaphysically explains . . . *amounts to* the questions of why it is not essential of any F that . . ". (Leary 2017: 102; emphasis added).) So, on Leary's framework, the sort of impossibility fact that Faraci brings up will itself be explained by some collection of essentialist facts, potentially including facts about the *absence* of certain essences. While we think that Faraci's challenge is important, our challenge in this chapter is distinct, and does not rely upon targeting this aspect of Leary's framework.

As we have seen, on Leary's essentialist framework, such facts are autonomous. Hence an explanation that adverts to them as ultimate explainers seems ideally suited to avoid complaints about "bruteness revenge". The contrast with taking the grounding facts themselves to be explanatorily fundamental is striking. This is because, as we have discussed in the previous section, grounding facts often "call out" for explanation.

4 Evaluating Leary's proposal

In this section, we evaluate Leary's proposal in three steps. We begin by introducing two intuitive concerns about the proposal. We then revisit Modest Humean. Although we think that Leary's proposal satisfies this principle as stated, we argue that reflection on her account shows that the previous statement of this principle does not adequately capture the methodological ideas that motivate it. We develop a generalized version of Modest Humean that reflects this insight and apply it to essentialist metaphysical accounts. Finally, we apply the revised principle to Leary's account, and argue that this principle helps to clarify, deepen, and unify the two initial concerns we raise in this section.

Initial concerns

There are a number of concerns one might have about Leary's proposal. Here we flag two, which help to frame the critique of Leary's proposal that follows.

The first sort of concern questions whether we should embrace ontological commitment to the sort of "hybrid" properties that Leary proposes.[35] On this front, one might be worried, for example, that we don't have compelling examples of properties that people pre-theoretically take to be hybrid ones, in a way that arguably contrasts with, for example, some of the intuitive pull many feel to take normative properties to be "non-naturalistic". Nor do we have compelling general theoretical arguments for the existence of hybrid properties from other parts of philosophy. Put bluntly, besides their use in Leary's proposal to aid the non-naturalist, we arguably have no evidence that there are any hybrid properties. If we have no reason to accept that there are the sorts of hybrid properties that Leary mentions, then we seem to have no epistemic grounds to accept her solution to the supervenience challenge. There is a deeper epistemic worry here as well. Suppose that we grant that there are "hybrid" properties. For Leary's proposal to work, there also need to be just the right number of "hybrid" properties. That is, there need to be enough hybrid properties to explain the supervenience of *all* the "pure" normative properties. But there must also not be too many hybrid properties. For example, there

[35] For an argument that there are no hybrid properties, see Toppinen (2018).

can't be properties that underwrite the instantiation of something like "counter-normative" properties, which directly conflict with the normative ones.

These worries can be grouped together as a general kind of concern about the *epistemic credibility* of positing the existence of the kind and number of hybrid normative properties needed to answer the supervenience challenge. To make the concern vivid, consider an analogy. Famously, *occasionalists* have appealed to ubiquitous divine intervention to enable mind/body dualists to explain the striking correlation between the instantiation of mental properties and the material nature of our brains and environments. However, if we assume for the moment that we have no independent reason to accept the sort of robust theism presupposed by occasionalism, it is hard to see how the occasionalist hypothesis helps the dualist discharge their explanatory burden.

The second initial concern questions whether Leary's proposed view really counts as the sort of non-naturalist metanormative view targeted by the supervenience challenge. The core worry is that it's not clear that we can preserve the non-naturalist's animating idea (that normative properties are relevantly metaphysically *discontinuous* with non-normative properties) while also accepting the idea that metaphysically necessary connections between normative and non-normative properties flow from the very essences of (the hybrid) normative properties. Call this the *taxonomic target* concern.[36]

We think that properly evaluating Leary's purported solution to the supervenience challenge requires us to address both of these concerns. In what follows, we introduce a further challenge, which we think helps to clarify and illuminate these two concerns, and the relationship between them.

Modest Humean revisited

Recall Modest Humean:

Modest Humean Commitment to brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties counts significantly against a view.

Leary's view arguably respects this principle because Leary doesn't posit brute necessary connections. The necessary connections she posits are explained by grounding relations, and these in turn by essence facts, which are assumed to be autonomous rather than brute.[37] As we now explain, we think that reflecting on

[36] In Leary (2017) and Leary (2021), Leary provides formulations of non-naturalism that she takes to be consistent with her solution. However, on other leading taxonomies, such as that in Rosen (2017), Leary's view turns out *not* be a form of non-naturalism but rather a form of naturalism.

[37] The claim that Leary is not committed to any brute necessary connections is unclear in light of Faraci (2017)'s challenge, mentioned above in note 34. Here we assume that Faraci's challenge can be answered.

Leary's strategy helps to show that Modest Humean is not, in fact, the best statement of the core epistemological principle in the vicinity.

To see the issue, we need to get clearer on the underlying motivation for accepting Modest Humean. In §2, we motivated this thesis by starting with Hume's dictum, and then suggesting reasons for modifying that principle. But we think that there is a core underlying idea about the relationship between metaphysical modality and metaphysical discontinuity that provides a deeper motivation for Modest Humean. Put roughly, the idea is this: if a pair of properties are metaphysically discontinuous, then it should be metaphysically possible for them to recombine in all sorts of ways across different possible worlds. Consider the following example. Suppose (as seems plausible) that *being red* and *being square* are discontinuous sorts of properties. Absent some clear explanation of why not, we should expect every possible combination of their presence and absence to be instantiated in some metaphysically possible world. By contrast, *being red* and *being scarlet* are (very plausibly) not metaphysically discontinuous. This is part of why it is not surprising that we cannot have a scarlet object that is not red. In a slogan: when we consider the full extent of metaphysical possibilities, we should expect *free recombination* of discontinuous properties.[38] This is a general idea in the epistemology of metaphysics. We think it is on the right track and, indeed, part of the epistemological structure that helps to make metaphysical inquiry intelligible.

We recognize that not everyone in metaphysics is going to be sympathetic to this claim. One important way to push back on it is to reject the general idea that it makes sense to use the categories of "continuous" and "discontinuous" properties when engaging in metaphysical theorizing. We think that everyone engaged in the debate over naturalism and non-naturalism in metaethics, or metanormative inquiry more generally, should *not* reject that idea. If they do, it will undercut their ability to make sense of their core debate.[39] However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully motivate this claim, let alone defend the broader idea that these categories make good sense to use in metaphysical theorizing. So, put somewhat more carefully, our claim here is this. *Insofar as* one is going to be discussing "continuous" and "discontinuous" properties (as we take it everyone engaged in the debate over non-naturalism should do), then one should accept the idea we just put forward above: namely, that when we consider the full extent of metaphysical possibilities, we should expect *free recombination* of discontinuous properties.

Modest Humean can be understood as an application of this general idea to the particular metaphysical framework operating in the paper in which it was

[38] A key inspiration here is David Lewis' (metaphysical, not epistemological) principle of recombination in Lewis (1986: 87–8). Note that this idea is also briefly suggested in Faraci (2017: 317) in the context of evaluating Leary's proposal.

[39] For extended defense of this claim, see McPherson (2015). For further discussion, see McPherson and Plunkett (2022).

introduced.[40] That was a framework which (i) focused on modal relations (and not (e.g.) notions like grounding and essence) and (ii) did not distinguish between brute and autonomous facts. One of the important insights of Leary's paper is that this framework is too limited to allow us to evaluate some contemporary attempts to address the supervenience challenge to non-naturalism, precisely because some of these attempts depart from that framework in both of the two ways just mentioned.

To evaluate attempts like these, we need to clearly formulate the general idea underlying Modest Humean. Specifically, we need to amend the formulation of this principle in two ways. First, instead of being formulated in terms of necessary connections, a generalized principle should instead target theses which rule out free recombination of discontinuous properties. It may seem less clear how to address the contrast between brute and autonomous facts. We argue that Modest Humean should be generalized to apply to *unexplained* facts, where this category encompasses both brute and autonomous facts. Generalizing in these two ways leads to the following principle:

Generalized Modest Humean It counts significantly against a theory if it posits an unexplained fact that rules out the free recombination of discontinuous properties across the space of metaphysically possible worlds.[41]

The first proposed generalization (the shift to targeting theories that rule out free recombination) is attractive for the reasons just given: it seems to better track the most compelling underlying motivation for Humean metaphysical theses. To illustrate this appeal, consider the idea, mentioned above, that we could explain Supervenience by appealing to Grounding (which, recall, is the thesis that every normative fact is fully grounded in some collection of non-normative facts). If Grounding is itself an unexplained fact, Generalized Modest Humean properly diagnoses this explanatory strategy as prima facie objectionable for just the same reason that simply asserting the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative and ending the explanation there is prima facie objectionable.

The second generalization—from brute facts to *unexplained* facts—should seem more controversial. After all, one might think that the whole point of the idea of autonomous facts is that positing such facts is not objectionable in the way that positing brute facts is. Autonomous facts, after all, are understood as facts for which demands for further explanation are inappropriate. However, this objection

[40] McPherson (2012).

[41] To make the parallel with the original Modest Humean more obvious, we can also state Generalized Modest Humean this way: it counts significantly against a theory if it posits an unexplained fact that entails a necessary connection between discontinuous properties.

depends upon failing to sharply distinguish metaphysical from epistemological questions.

To see this, consider an intuitively preposterous essentialist claim: that it is part of George's essence that George hates broccoli. To begin to see the relevant contrast, we can screen off epistemological issues by stipulating that we have learned this claim from an oracle who we know to be infallible. In this case, we should accept that this fact does not call out for further explanation, despite its still seeming mysterious: as an essentialist fact, it is on the explanatory ground floor of metaphysics, so to speak. Next set aside the oracle stipulation, and imagine instead that we are simply looking for a good metaphysical explanation of the fact that George hates broccoli. While the essentialist claim mentioned above would fully and autonomously explain this fact, this gives us no significant reason to accept this essentialist claim because we have no reasons to think that the essences of persons include idiosyncratic gustatory tastes.

Generalized Modest Humean, like Modest Humean itself, is a thesis in the epistemology of metaphysics. It concerns what counts against accepting a theory, not what follows if that theory is in fact true. Put another way: Generalized Modest Humean does not deny that there *are* autonomous facts that have the properties that Dasgupta-style essentialists think they have. Rather, it serves as an epistemological constraint on which such facts we should accept as part of a plausible metaphysical theory. To make the import of this contrast clearer, consider an application of Generalized Modest Humean, tailored to a Fine–Rosen-style essentialist framework:

Modest Humean-Essentialist It counts significantly against a theory if it posits an unexplained essential connection among discontinuous properties.

Modest Humean-Essentialist is, if anything, considerably *more* compelling than a modal thesis like Modest Humean. Here is why. Modest Humean was motivated by the thought that there is something puzzling about modal connections between metaphysically discontinuous properties. Some will find the idea that there could be full grounding relations among discontinuous properties even more puzzling. But essence is an especially intimate relation: an entity's essence is *what that thing's nature is*. So it is perhaps even more puzzling still that there could be a thing that is of a radically different metaphysical kind from the very constituents of its nature.

We can drive home the consilience of Modest Humean-Essentialist with the broadly Finean essentialist framework that Leary is working with by noting that, in the central cases that proponents use to motivate this kind of framework, essentialist facts link properties that are metaphysically continuous. Indeed, in these cases the essentialist account is very naturally read as a way of illuminating that continuity. We illustrate this point with two contrasting intuitive examples and a theoretical application.

First, a natural hypothesis is that the essence of the kind *water molecule* consists of being composed of hydrogen and oxygen ions fused in a characteristic way. This account of the essence of water intuitively integrates the kind *water molecule* into a physicalist theory of reality. Because this is what water essentially is, it is especially plausible, given this account, that water is "nothing over and above" the mentioned characteristic fusion of hydrogen and oxygen ions. Orthodox essentialist explanations like this one thus help to illuminate metaphysical continuities, rather than to (allegedly) explain how there can be necessary connections between discontinuous kinds or properties. This, we submit, is part of what makes it plausible that the relevant essence facts are autonomous. If we accept that this is *what it is* to be a water molecule, there seems to be nothing left to explain.

Next, consider a case of two metaphysically discontinuous properties. Consider the hypothesis that part of the essence of *being pink* is being such that 2+2=4. Now, since it is necessarily true that 2+2=4, this hypothesis is "modally adequate"; that is, no counterexamples to this hypothesis will be forthcoming. Still, it is absurd to posit that the fact that 2+2=4 is part of the essence of *being pink*. The most natural explanation for this absurdity is that the relevant color and mathematical properties are, intuitively, metaphysically discontinuous.

We can further illustrate the relationship between essence and metaphysical continuity by considering a theoretical application by one of the central proponents of the contemporary essentialist approach. In his paper "The Possibility of Physicalism", Dasgupta defends a grounding-based formulation of physicalism.[42] Physicalism is a continuity thesis *par excellence*. Why is a grounding-based formulation of physicalism attractive? The essentialist framework Dasgupta works with in this paper suggests an answer: on this essentialist framework, all grounding relations are backed by autonomous essentialist facts. If we assume that the essential connections sufficient for grounding arise only among metaphysically continuous properties, then a grounding formulation of physicalism can be expected to illuminate the idea that all instantiated properties are "nothing over and above" the physical.

The lesson is this: we can grant the plausibility of an account of metaphysics with autonomous essences at its foundation. However, doing so is not an epistemological license to simply posit such essences whenever we have a metaphysical connection to explain. Rather, essentialist explanations, to be credible, must appeal to plausible claims about essences. We claim that plausible essentialist hypotheses are constrained by Modest Humean-Essentialist.

[42] See Dasgupta (2014).

Evaluating Leary's proposal

We are now in a position to evaluate Leary's proposed solution to the supervenience challenge to non-naturalism. We begin by directly applying Modest Humean-Essentialist to Leary's account. We then explain how this application illuminates and deepens the two intuitive challenges we introduced earlier in this section: the epistemic credibility concern and the taxonomic target concern.

On Leary's proposal, essence facts are supposed to explain grounding connections between putatively discontinuous properties. To return to our example, consider the hypothesis that the essence of the property *being courageous* includes the following conditions: (a) that a certain non-normative condition is metaphysically sufficient for a person's being courageous and (b) that a person's *being courageous* is metaphysically sufficient for that person being *good to some extent*. And stipulate further (in line with our orienting gloss on non-naturalism) that the relevant non-normative condition and the property of being good to some extent are metaphysically discontinuous.

Notice the contrast with the aforementioned example of the essence of water. Unlike in that case, there intuitively *is* something that calls out for explanation in the link between *being good* and the supposedly discontinuous property that grounds its instantiation. What calls out for explanation is this: given their discontinuous natures, these properties ought to be able to freely combine across modal space. But somehow, the property of *being courageous* is supposed to function as metaphysical "double-sided tape" that tethers together instantiations of these discontinuous properties across modal space. Leary's hypothesis about the essence of hybrid properties, like *being courageous* (on the theory of it we are working with here, for sake of illustration), is thus explanatorily puzzling in a way that the above hypothesis about the essence of *being water* is not. We submit that Modest Humean-Essentialist correctly concludes that this sort of puzzling character counts significantly against accepting the existence of (e.g.) hybrid properties.

We can reinforce this point by returning to the contrast we emphasized in the previous section, between pure assessment of metaphysical demands for explanation on the one hand, and the epistemology of metaphysical posits on the other. In short, (granting for the moment the essentialist framework) if we knew that every possible pure normative property instantiation was explained by the essence of some hybrid property (such as *being courageous*), this would give us reason to accept that the supervenience challenge has been solved. But Modest Humean-Essentialist plausibly suggests that the very nature of this hypothesis is a reason for us not to believe it.

We now explain how our diagnosis helps to illuminate and deepen the two preliminary concerns about Leary's proposal that we identified at the beginning of this section. First, consider the *epistemic credibility* concern. This concern is about what basis we have for accepting that there are hybrid normative properties.

Modest Humean-Essentialist exacerbates this concern: clarifying that we should not only be surprised by the hybrid hypothesis, but suspicious of it. This is because it is a hypothesis on which essences can serve to ban the free recombination of discontinuous properties across metaphysical modal space.

Next, consider the *taxonomic target* concern. This concern is that there are seemingly credible taxonomies on which, given Leary's hypothesis about the essences of pure and hybrid normative properties, such normative properties will be classified as "natural" rather than "non-natural". Modest Humean-Essentialist helps to show why such taxonomies are well motivated in this respect. Suppose that we hold fixed Leary's hybrid hypothesis about the essences of normative properties. In this case, Modest Humean-Essentialist suggests reason to believe that normative properties are metaphysically continuous with the properties whose instantiation grounds their instantiation. And this continuity in turn gives us reason to believe that normative properties are not deeply discontinuous with these grounding properties, as the core intuitive idea of non-naturalism requires.

It is worth emphasizing that the taxonomic target concern is not primarily a point about the word "non-naturalism". Rather, it's a point about whether Leary's strategy is a defense of the sort of metanormative view that is most clearly targeted by the supervenience challenge in the first place, and which many "non-naturalists" want to defend.

5 Lessons for metaethics and metaphysics from Leary's hybrid gambit

In this section, we draw some general lessons from our discussion of Leary's proposal on behalf of metanormative non-naturalism. We begin by considering what would be needed to make a version of Leary's response to the supervenience challenge more promising, given our discussion in this chapter. While we express doubts about the prospects for her sort of approach, we think it is too soon to dismiss it outright. We then step back from Leary's proposal and draw some more general lessons for evaluating non-naturalism in light of the supervenience challenge. Finally, we consider some broader lessons for metaphysicians working within an essentialist framework.

Prospects for developing Leary's response

If what we argued in the previous section is correct, Leary's strategy for meeting the supervenience challenge is inadequate as it stands. The discussion of the previous section suggests that, if it is to be made adequate, such a strategy must be augmented in three ways.

First, one of the lessons of our argument is that the supervenience challenge interacts with another vexed philosophical question about non-naturalism: how to formulate the thesis of non-naturalism in a way that captures the intuitive commitments that motivate non-naturalists' sympathy for the view, in a way that is metaphysically informative.

In important forthcoming work, Leary proposed a novel essentialist way to formulate non-naturalism.[43] The details of this formulation are complex, so we will focus here on a central ingredient of her account, which is her recursive essentialist account of what it is to be a *natural* property:

Essentialist natural
For F to be a natural property is for any one (or more) of the following conditions to hold:

(a) F is a paradigmatic scientific property,
(b) The essence of F involves only paradigmatic scientific properties,
(c) The essence of F involves paradigmatic scientific sufficient conditions for being F, or
(d) The essence of F involves only natural properties or natural sufficient conditions for being F.[44]

Conditions (a), (b), and (c) give us basic ways to be a natural property, based on relation to paradigmatic scientific properties. Condition (d) is a *recursive* step, giving us ways to identify new natural properties, based on the properties identified as natural at step (a)–(c) and previous iterations of (d).

We think Leary's formulation cannot be used to adequately capture the non-naturalist's intuitive discontinuity idea, as we now explain. We take it that, as Leary uses the term, a "paradigmatic" scientific property is one that (the relevant) people *generally agree* to be a scientific property.[45] Given this, it is natural to think that there could be *non-paradigmatic* scientific properties: namely, scientific properties whose "scientific" status is controversial (among the relevant group of people). Any natural property that is not paradigmatic fails to meet condition (a). Conditions (b), (c), and (d) insist that to count as natural, such a property must have an essence that mentions other natural properties. But it is deeply unclear that the essence of a fundamental natural property need mention *any* other property. If not,

[43] She also offers a formulation of non-naturalism in our target paper Leary (2017: 97–8). For related criticism of that formulation, see McPherson and Plunkett (2022). Since Leary herself has chosen to move on from that formulation, we focus or critical discussion here on her currently preferred formulation.

[44] Leary (2021: 24). We have slightly altered Leary's wording for ease of presentation.

[45] We infer this because this is roughly the idea suggested in Jackson (1998: 120), and Leary (2021) cites Jackson (1998) as her orienting example.

then Leary's account will misclassify any fundamental and non-paradigmatic natural property.

Consider an example. Suppose that contemporary property dualists are correct about the phenomenal property of *painfulness*.[46] The scientific credentials of phenomenal properties are a matter of debate, so this is not a paradigmatic scientific property. But it might turn out to be a natural property nonetheless. For example, the epistemology of phenomenal properties is experiential, such properties can be causally efficacious, and property dualism is compatible with the potential for developing a natural science investigating the nomic relations linking phenomenal and (e.g.) neurological properties.[47] Further, it is natural on property dualist accounts to treat painfulness as a fundamental property. And if it is, it is hard to see why its essence would need to mention and (other) natural properties.

What has gone wrong here? Consider the three facts that we mentioned in support of the possibility that phenomenal painfulness is a natural property: that it is causally efficacious; has an experiential epistemology; and is amenable to study by a natural science. These are each salient respects in which this property is *similar* to paradigmatic natural properties. (Indeed, variations of these dimensions of similarity constitute some of the leading accounts of what it is to be a "natural" property, within contemporary metaethics.)[48] But nothing in Leary's account guarantees that a "natural" property will share such similarities, or that a "non-natural" property will fail to. This suggests a general diagnosis of why Leary's formulations of naturalism and non-naturalism fail. Nothing in these formulations is guaranteed to secure the key intuitive idea that non-naturalism is a thesis that the normative is *metaphysically discontinuous* with the natural.

In other work, we have developed a formulation of non-naturalism that we think does promise to capture the core commitments of the view. This is:

Similarity Non-Naturalism There are instantiated normative properties and the class of normative properties is a *sui generis objective similarity class*.[49]

Two key components of this account are the ideas of an "objective similarity class" and the idea of such a class being "*sui generis*". We unpack these notions in turn.

[46] See, e.g., Chalmers (1996).

[47] See Chalmers (1996: ch. 6) for defense of this final claim.

[48] For example, in their respective accounts of what it is to be a "natural" property, Gibbard (1990) emphasizes causal efficacy, Copp (2003) emphasizes experiential epistemology, and Boyd (1988/1997) and Dowell (2013/2019) emphasize being amenable to study by a natural science.

[49] We motivate this formulation and discuss it in slightly more detail in McPherson and Plunkett (2022). Our account there draws heavily from the distinct (but closely related) formulation given by (McPherson (2015: 139). See McPherson (2015) for defense of a broader approach to the taxonomy of the metaphysics of ethics that emphasizes the theoretical appeal of using notions that entail objective similarity.

First, start with the idea of an "objective similarity class". We take it that, by definition, when a collection of properties form such a class they do so because (i) their essences are similar and (ii) this similarity is an objective one (rather than merely a way that people happen to group properties together). For example, it is plausible that *things with negative charge* is an objective similarity class (if anything is). And, by contrast, *riding the subway or being an elephant* is not an objective similarity class. The idea here in Similarity Non-Naturalism, then, is that (i) the essences of normative properties are all similar in *being normative*, and (ii) this is an objective similarity.

Second, take the idea of a *sui generis* objective similarity class. We take this idea to presuppose that there is a unified kind of metaphysical question that is being asked when we think about classifications like "natural", "physical", "biological", "phenomenal", "mathematical", "supernatural", and so on, which is different from the sort of metaphysical question being asked when we (e.g.) distinguish properties from objects. Our proposal is that for a class of properties to be "*sui generis*" (in the relevant sense) is for it to belong on a classificatory list that cuts "reality at its joints" (along with classifications such as, perhaps, "natural", "physical", etc.), and for it not to be a subclass of another class of properties that belongs on that list.

We think that Similarity Non-Naturalism is a helpful way to capture the idea of discontinuity at the heart of non-naturalism. In short, it is a way of making clear the non-naturalist's insistence that the way in which normative properties are different from natural properties involves a more radical difference than (for example) the difference between chemical and biological properties. To bring that out, consider that even if the classification of "chemical" belongs on the relevant metaphysically privileged classificatory list, it's hard to see how chemical properties wouldn't also be a subset of some of the other classifications on this list (e.g., "the natural"). So even if the "chemical" properties are importantly different from some of the other properties on our classificatory list, it's implausible to think they are *sui generis*.

For our purposes here, here's a crucial dialectical point: Similarity Non-Naturalism does not by itself count against Leary's hybrid gambit. This might suggest reason for optimism about meeting the taxonomic target concern that we introduced in §4.

The remaining barrier to the plausibility of Leary's gambit is Modest Humean-Essentialist. And this thesis is in turn motivated by the intuitive idea that it is hard to understand how there could be a thing that is of a radically different metaphysical kind from the very constituents of its nature. This idea, we think, clarifies what the non-naturalist would have to do to have a hope of developing Leary's strategy into a promising response to the challenge. First, they would need to find antecedently plausible examples of properties that appear to be of radically different ontological kind from their essential constituents. Second, they would need to show that it is not merely conceivable, but *plausible* that the essences of all normative properties are like this. We think this is the right way of understanding where

the dialectic stands for a Leary-style response to the supervenience challenge. We cannot rule out that this could be done, but we think deep skepticism about the prospects of this strategy is warranted.

Broader lessons: the supervenience challenge to non-naturalism

We can step back and review a version of the supervenience argument that we glossed at the start of this chapter, which was drawn from past work done by one of us (McPherson). In particular, we can now amend that argument in light of the revision to Modest Humean argued for in §4. Here's roughly how we think it should go.

Supervenience If two metaphysically possible entities (e.g., actions, states of affairs, persons . . .) are alike in all non-normative respects, they are alike in all normative respects.

Unexplained Connection The non-naturalist must take the supervenience of the normative properties on the non-normative properties to either be, or to be explained by, an unexplained fact that rules out the free recombination of discontinuous properties across the space of metaphysical possibilities.

Generalized Modest Humean It counts significantly against a theory if it posits an unexplained fact that rules out the free recombination of discontinuous properties across the space of metaphysical possibilities.

In effect, at the conclusion of the previous section, we were canvassing a strategy that seeks to rebut this argument by finding independently plausible cases that cast doubt on Generalized Modest Humean. As part of this discussion, we explained why we are pessimistic about the prospects of developing this strategy in a way that fits with a Leary-style account. However, we don't think these reasons for pessimism are *local* to that account, which (for reasons explained in §3) is a framework we think is otherwise about as promising as the non-naturalist could hope for. We also think that the revised formulation of Unexplained Connection makes this premise of the argument even harder to deny than the original Brute Connection thesis. And we think this helps to vindicate what is otherwise a very surprising development in the contemporary metaphysics of ethics. Despite the fact that Supervenience was until recently a good candidate to be—in Rosen's apt phrase— "the least controversial thesis in metaethics",[50] some non-naturalists are increasingly finding that rejecting Supervenience is their preferred way out of the challenge.[51] We find the sort of case for Supervenience we sketched in §2 extremely compelling. Thus, we don't think rejecting Supervenience is an attractive option,

[50] Rosen (2020).
[51] This is most explicit in Rosen (2020). See also Hattiangadi (2018).

and have significant reservations about recent proposals (such as Rosen's) that seek to "soften the blow" of such a rejection. But arguably the deepest lesson of the apparent failure of Leary's insightful attempt to answer the supervenience challenge is that the non-naturalist lacks tolerable alternatives to this extreme way of meeting the challenge.[52]

Broader lessons for metaphysical methodology

In §3, we emphasized the importance of distinguishing the pure metaphysical issues arising from explanatory questions from the epistemological question of what metaphysical hypotheses we should find credible. We think this chapter illustrates the crucial importance of distinguishing these sorts of issues. Here we want to emphasize the significance of a related methodological issue: what *goals* one has in a given instance of metaphysical theorizing.

In distinguishing metaphysical from epistemological issues in this chapter, we have implicitly presupposed the epistemic goal of showing that some hypothesis is credible, at least relative to salient competitors.[53] Thus, the punchline of the supervenience argument that we treated as Leary's foil was that Supervenience counts significantly against accepting non-naturalism. That is: Supervenience renders non-naturalism comparatively *in*credible. However, in some cases, it may be extremely illuminating for metaphysical purposes to demonstrate that some non-obvious metaphysical hypotheses have some epistemic property that is weaker than credibility: for example, that they are consistent, or that we cannot rule them out decisively, or that they are epistemically possible.

So far in this chapter, we have read Leary as if she has something very like the credibility standard in mind. However, when we come to the discussion of a version of the "bruteness revenge" challenge at the end of her paper, a weaker standard (roughly something closer to a standard of consistency) becomes salient. Leary says: "The Essentially Grounded Non-Naturalist [i.e., the proponent of her strategy] must ultimately *assume*, however, that only some hybrid properties exist".[54] And then in a crucial footnote she says the following:

[52] In arguing for this, we can be understood as giving a complementary argument to that of Rosen (2020). However, our argument is more general. This is because, unlike Rosen's argument, our argument is not wedded to the Finean essentialist framework, or indeed to an essentialist framework at all. In this chapter, we accept (for the purposes of argument) elements of the relevant essentialist framework. But the core underlying ideas we defend about the epistemology of metaphysics do not rest on accepting those elements. This is reflected in the formulations of Generalized Modest Humean and Unexplained Connection above.

[53] For discussion of the importance of contrasting goals in normative and metanormative theorizing, see McPherson (2018b) and McPherson (2020: §5.2).

[54] Leary (2017: 102, emphasis ours).

> One may legitimately ask the Essentially Grounded Non-Naturalist to explain why we should *believe* that there are certain hybrid properties and not others. But this is an epistemic question that she can answer (by doing substantive first-order normative ethics).[55]

Suppose that the Essentially Grounded Non-Naturalist *could* (in some epistemic sense of "could") show that just the right collection of hybrid properties needed to explain the supervenience of the normative exists. It is striking that Leary does not attempt this work anywhere in her paper. But this means that it's unclear how Leary's proposal can really help the non-naturalist address the supervenience challenge. For, if we are right, that challenge concerns the *credibility* of non-naturalism, not its mere possibility.

Put another way, we can sum up the core lesson here as follows. Leary might well show us that there is a collection of metaphysical hypotheses, which are coherent and which we cannot rule out decisively, whose truth would together serve to answer the supervenience challenge to metanormative non-naturalism. We think that providing this kind of "possibility proof" is a valuable contribution to the dialectic in its own right, and that providing that kind of possibility proof might well be the core aim of Leary's argument.[56] But we shouldn't mistake such a possibility proof for a defense of the epistemic credibility of endorsing the package of views at hand. The question of Leary's epistemic goals is important because given the possibility proof standard, we think it is a success, while given the credibility goal, we have suggested that it faces deep difficulties.

6 Conclusion

In our view, Leary has provided one of the two most important and philosophically rich recent replies to the supervenience challenge facing non-naturalism. Our aim in this chapter has been to evaluate her illuminating discussion and to clarify the resulting dialectic. Thinking through her argument has prompted us to revise a central principle in the epistemology of metaphysics—namely, "Modest Humean" —that one of us (McPherson) used in previous work to regiment the supervenience challenge to metanormative non-naturalism. With this revision in hand, we are in a position to more clearly understand the current dialectic surrounding the supervenience challenge. We have argued that the revised principle

[55] Leary (2017: 102, n. 53, emphasis in the original text). This is irrelevant to our main point, but we doubt that the relevant kind of question here is in fact best answered simply by doing "substantive first-order normative ethics". Consider, for example, that existential commitment to a hybrid property requires considering evidence for distinctively metaphysical *essentialist* hypotheses, and this plausibly requires (at least) integrating our normative reflection with our best metaphysical evidence.

[56] Leary has endorsed this reading of her main argument in Leary (2017) in personal communication.

allows us to see why we ought to be skeptical of Leary's strategy (as a way of defending the *credibility* of non-naturalism). We have also argued that clarifying this dialectic has a host of important broader payoffs. For example, it allows us to spell out what the non-naturalist would need to do in order to develop a more promising version of Leary's strategy. It allows us to better understand how intimately connected the supervenience challenge is to the task of offering a metaphysically illuminating formulation of the non-naturalist's view—a task whose importance we think many non-naturalists underestimate.[57] It allows us to see why it makes sense that contemporary non-naturalists are increasingly rejecting the supervenience thesis that generates the challenge in the first place. And, finally, it allows us to clearly see why it is of paramount importance that we are clear and explicit about the epistemic goals of our metaphysical theorizing.[58]

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[57] For further discussion on this point, see McPherson and Plunkett (2022) and McPherson (2015).

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