

What is Moorean Non-naturalism?

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(Draft: November 2018)

In *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore (1903) argued that *goodness* is a *non-natural* property and thereby sparked the so-called “naturalism vs. non-naturalism” debate in metaethics. This debate is still live, but a bit *unwell*, today because, while much ink has been spilt defending both sides of the debate, there is an alarming lack of consensus amongst parties to the debate (even within their own camps) about what exactly it would mean for normative properties to be non-natural in the first place. In fact, most parties to the debate simply stipulate what they take “non-naturalism” to mean, rather than get bogged down in the seemingly trivial taxonomical question of how we *should* use that term. For example, Jackson (2000), Parfit (2011), and Shafer-Landau (2003) stipulate that they take non-naturalism to be the view that some normative properties are *not identical* to descriptive properties, while Chang (2013), Dunaway (2016), Scanlon (2014), and Schroeder (2007) seem to take non-naturalism to be the view that some normative facts are *not fully grounded in* – i.e. metaphysically explained by – non-normative facts.

But these competing stipulative definitions of “non-naturalism” have created a very confusing literature in which parties to the debate often seem to be talking past one another. For example, Shafer-Landau (2003) defends non-naturalism by arguing that, although normative properties are not identical to non-normative, descriptive properties, they are nonetheless fully *constituted by* such properties, just as a statue is not identical to, but fully constituted by, a lump of clay. But while this view is non-naturalist in Shafer-Landau’s sense, it’s not non-naturalist in Chang (2013) and Dunaway’s (2016) sense, because presumably if normative properties are fully constituted by non-normative, descriptive properties, the normative facts are thereby grounded in the non-normative, descriptive facts. So, Shafer-Landau’s defense of non-naturalism simply talks past those self-identifying naturalists who think of non-naturalism in terms of grounding, rather than in terms of identity.

In order to avoid talking past one another in this debate, then, we need to meet the taxonomical question of what Moorean non-naturalism really amounts to head on, rather than just indulge in stipulations. That is the task of this paper. First, in §1, I identify what I take to be the two core pre-theoretical commitments that self-identifying non-naturalists endorse. Then, in §2 and §3, I argue that we cannot specify these pre-theoretical commitments in terms of mere identity or grounding. Instead, I argue (in §4), these pre-theoretical commitments are better specified in terms of

the *essences* of normative properties. And, importantly, showing that we need to appeal to essence to capture what the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate amounts to is significant because it provides justification for adopting the ideology of essence in the first place. This shows that the taxonomical question at hand is not just a trivial question about how to use the terms “naturalism” and “non-naturalism”. What’s at stake here is what sort of ideology we should accept for metaphysical theorizing, in general.

1. Pre-theoretical commitments of non-naturalism

In order to determine what non-naturalism amounts to in more precise metaphysical terms, we first need to identify what the core pre-theoretical claims that self-identifying non-naturalists endorse and take to be at stake in the debate with their opponents. The central pre-theoretical claim that originated with Moore and is echoed by his followers is that normative properties are *sui generis* – i.e. that they are *entirely of their own kind*. For example, Shafer-Landau writes:

It appears that moral values are something very different in kind from anything else that we are familiar with. Faced with this appearance, we have three basic choices. We could take it at face value, and introduce into our ontology a *sui generis* category of values. Or we could seek to discredit the appearances...we might retain a belief in the evaluative realm, but eliminate the mystery by denying its distinctness. On this line – that of *ethical naturalism* – moral facts are a species of scientific facts, discoverable in all the ordinary ways, as motivating and as normative (or not) as ordinary facts. I am in the first camp. I think that moral facts are different in kind from any other.¹

And Enoch (2011) characterizes naturalism as the view that what there is in the world “is pretty much the kind of stuff our best science says (or will shortly say) that there is in the world,” which suggests that he takes non-naturalism to amount to the claim that the normative is a distinct “kind of stuff” than that which our best science says exists.² Similarly, Parfit and Scanlon both claim that normative truths are “irreducibly normative”, which suggests that they, like Moore, take normative truths to be entirely unlike any other kinds of truths.³

So, while the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate is often characterized as a dispute regarding the question of whether normative properties are *natural* properties, this is not the whole issue that

¹ Shafer-Landau (2003) p. 55.

² Enoch (2011) p. 134.

³ Parfit (2011: vol 2, part 6) and Scanlon (2014: ch 2).

concerns Moore and his followers. They do not just think that normative properties are different in kind from scientific properties, but that they are different in kind from *any* other kinds of properties there might be. Moorean non-naturalists thus also oppose *supernaturalist non-naturalist* views like the Divine Command Theory, according to which all normative properties like *goodness* or *badness* are reducible to supernatural properties such as *being approved of (or disapproved of) by God*. So, the central issue that concerns Moorean non-naturalists is, more broadly, whether normative properties are different in kind from all other kinds of properties.⁴

This claim is a bit mysterious, though, because it's not clear what kind-talk for properties amounts to in the first place. One might think that two properties are different in kind if they do not share any second-order properties. But any two properties always share some arbitrary property. For example, *being good* and *being an electron* share the second order property of *being a property* and *being normative or physical*. So, a better suggestion is that two properties are of the same kind only if they share an *elite* second-order property. That is, Lewis (1983) suggests that some properties are more *elite* than others in the sense that they make for more objective similarity and play a relatively important explanatory role – in Lewis's words, these properties are the “joints of nature”.⁵ Consequently, for Lewis, there are some ways of carving up reality with our concepts and terms that better carve reality at its joints than others. The notion of elite properties thus allows us to distinguish between more metaphysically significant and comparatively arbitrary similarities. And so, one might take the pre-theoretical issue of whether normative properties are different in kind from any other properties to be the question of whether there is some elite second-order property that normative properties share, which other properties lack.⁶

But presumably when the naturalist claims that normative properties are *natural* properties, she means that they are *of the same kind* as paradigmatic scientific properties. So, if what it is for properties to be of the same kind is for them to share an elite property, all natural properties must share some elite property. But naturalists and non-naturalists alike take a quite diverse array of properties to be *natural* properties: for example, *having negative charge*, *being in pain*, *being a toaster*, and *being a city*, to name a few. And it's highly implausible that there is some second-order property that all of these properties

⁴ McPherson (2012) makes this point of individuating Moore's view from supernaturalist non-naturalist views. In what follows, I will use the term “non-naturalism” to refer to Moorean non-naturalism, unless otherwise specified.

⁵ Lewis calls such properties *natural* properties, but to avoid confusion in this context, I use the term ‘elite’.

⁶ The suggestion that second-order properties may be elite, however, is a bit bizarre and requires quite a large departure from Lewis (1983), since Lewis took the elite properties to be the properties of fundamental physics. It also may require a departure from even more permissive views of elite properties like Schaffer's (2004), according to which some higher-level scientific properties may be elite.

share, which makes for much objective similarity or enters into causal explanations. So, the relevant sense of *sameness* or *difference in kind* that is operative in the debate is not that of sharing elite properties.

I thus take an important task for any specification of Moorean non-naturalism to be to offer a precise metaphysical account of what it is for a property to be “different in kind” or “of the same kind” as some set of properties, in order to de-mystify the non-naturalist’s core pre-theoretical claim.

The second, but related, pre-theoretical claim that Moorean non-naturalists seem committed to (which aligns them with supernaturalist non-naturalists), is that countenancing normative properties is incompatible with an entirely scientific view of reality. Of course, some non-naturalists like Enoch (2011) and Scanlon (2014) point out that the non-naturalist’s claim that there are non-natural normative properties is logically consistent with our best scientific theories, since these theories do not claim that there are no non-natural properties, since they do not contain an “and that’s all there is” clause.⁷ But so long as these non-naturalists take normative properties to be deeply different in kind from all the “stuff of science”, they presumably are committed to a view according to which there is some sense in which the sciences cannot provide a full account of reality.⁸ A good specification of Moorean non-naturalism should thus also illuminate in what sense the sciences fail to provide such an account.⁹

The task of the rest of the paper, then, is to identify what metaphysical ideology we need to capture and illuminate the non-naturalist’s core claims that (a) normative properties and facts are *sui generis* and (b) countenancing normative properties and facts is incompatible with a purely scientific view of reality, in more precise metaphysical terms. In the following section, I explain why we need to appeal to some ideology beyond just numerical identity, before turning to the more recent trend of using grounding to specify what non-naturalism amounts to.

⁷ Enoch (2011) p. 135.

⁸ Even Parfit’s (2011) quietist non-naturalist view seems to be committed to this claim, so long as we take reality to encompass everything that exists in what Parfit calls the “wide sense” of ‘exists’.

⁹ Some people also take non-naturalists to be committed to the claims that normative properties are not causally efficacious, and that they are not knowable a posteriori. As McPherson (2012) points out, though, it seems compatible with the claim that normative properties are different in kind from natural properties that they nonetheless be causally efficacious and knowable a posteriori. After all, supernaturalist non-naturalists may take God, an entity quite different in kind from anything natural, to have created the universe and to be known through divine revelation and testimony. So, a Moorean non-naturalist, too, should be able to claim that although normative properties are *sui generis*, they can nonetheless be causally efficacious and knowable a posteriori.

2. Non-naturalism as a non-identity claim

One might think that non-naturalism is simply the following claim:

Non-Identity Normative properties and facts are not identical to any other kinds of properties and facts.

But the tricky part is specifying the right-hand side of this non-identity claim – what “other kinds of properties and facts” are – in a way that makes Non-Identity both controversial and an illuminating characterization of non-naturalism.

First, one might specify the “other kinds of properties and facts” as simply the *non-normative* facts. But this makes Non-Identity trivially true: a property cannot be both normative and non-normative. Even naturalists do not deny this. For example, someone who takes the property *being good* to be identical to the property *being pleasurable* does not thereby take *being good* to be a non-normative property. Rather, one thereby takes *being pleasurable* to just be the normative property of *being good*.

Second, one might specify the “other kinds of properties and facts” as the *descriptive* properties and facts, where the descriptive properties and facts are simply those properties and facts that are referred to by descriptive, non-normative terms (whereas the normative properties and facts are those properties that are referred to by our normative terms). Non-Identity, thus understood, thus amounts to the claim that normative terms don’t refer to the same properties as descriptive terms. But this claim is false. Consider Eklund’s (2017) alien linguistic community that introduces the term ‘thgir’ into their language to stipulatively refer to the property, whatever it is, that we refer to with our term ‘right’:

Suppose, for example, that one of them, when learning English, has overheard English speakers speaking of what is “right,” having only an unspecific or mistaken idea of what the word might stand for – and introduced into her community’s own language a new expression, “thgir,” with the stipulation that “thgir” is to ascribe the property, whichever it is, that “right” ascribes, and then uses “thgir” in accordance with that stipulation. “Thgir” is then meaningful, but the meaning with which it is endowed does not guarantee that it plays the role in deliberation characteristic of normative concepts. “Thgir” ascribes the same property as “right,” but it is hardly a normative predicate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Eklund (2017), 75.

Eklund uses this thought experiment to show that what makes a concept or term normative is not the property that it refers to, but the conceptual role that the term plays – namely, its connection to deliberation, motivation, and reactive attitudes. “Thgir” doesn’t seem to be a normative term, but a descriptive, non-normative term because it doesn’t play the right conceptual role. But since “thgir”, by stipulation, refers to the same property that “right” refers to, this thought experiment also shows that we can refer to normative properties with descriptive, non-normative terms. So, it’s false that normative properties and facts are not identical to properties and facts that are referred to by descriptive, non-normative terms.

Alternatively, then, one might suggest that we simply list all the other kinds of properties and facts there are and specify non-naturalism as the claim that normative properties are not identical to any of those properties and facts:

*Non-Identity*_{List} Not all normative properties and facts are identical to natural, supernatural, or ... properties and facts.

But the problem with *Non-Identity*_{List} is that it presupposes that we have an independent grasp on whether certain properties are of the same kind, rather than elucidating what that amounts to. For example, *Non-Identity*_{List} presupposes that we have an independent grasp on which properties are *natural* properties – i.e. which properties are of the same kind as paradigmatic scientific properties – and states that there are at least some normative properties that are not identical to any of those properties. But *Non-Identity*_{List} does not tell us what makes properties such as *having negative charge*, *being in pain*, *being a toaster*, and *being a city* all natural properties.

*Non-Identity*_{List} thereby fails to be an illuminating characterization of non-naturalism. Consider a view according to which every normative property is identical to some very long disjunction of paradigmatic scientific properties. Is this a view according to which *Non-Identity*_{List} is true or false? In order to answer this question, we need to know whether a long disjunction of paradigmatic scientific properties is a natural property. But *Non-Identity*_{List}, by itself, does not provide an answer here. Of course, it may seem intuitive that a disjunction of paradigmatic scientific properties is of the same kind as its disjuncts, and is thus a natural property.¹¹ But this intuitive judgment simply presupposes the pre-theoretical notion of properties being of the same kind. *Non-Identity*_{List} in no

¹¹ Jackson (1998) and Enoch (2011) assume as much.

way helps elucidate what this pre-theoretical notion amounts to. So, in order for Non-Identity_{List} to be an illuminating characterization of non-naturalism, it needs to be supplemented with an account of what metaphysical relation some normative property must stand in to paradigmatic scientific properties (or paradigmatic supernatural properties) in order for that normative property to be of the same kind as those paradigmatic scientific properties (or supernatural properties).

One candidate relation is the *grounding* relation: one might think that the sense in which such diverse properties like *having negative charge*, *being in pain*, *being a toaster*, and *being a city* are all of the same kind is that facts about charge, pain, toasters, and cities are all ultimately fully grounded in paradigmatic scientific facts. And so, the disjunctive property *having negative charge or being in pain or being a toaster or a city* is also a natural property because facts about this disjunctive property are ultimately fully grounded in paradigmatic scientific facts too. So, one might think that by using the notion of grounding, we can specify Non-Identity in a way that illuminates the pre-theoretical idea that normative properties are different in kind from all other kinds of properties.

Indeed, this is how many contemporary metaethicists and metaphysicians seem to think of non-naturalism. So, this is the proposal I turn to in the following section. After explaining this grounding characterization of the debate in more detail, I argue that, upon closer inspection, grounding does not seem apt for capturing the dispute between non-naturalists and their opponents.

3. Non-naturalism as a grounding claim

While the ideology of grounding and its prominence in metaphysical theorizing is a new development in contemporary metaphysics, it is meant to capture an old, intuitive idea. We often make claims about certain facts obtaining *in virtue of* other facts, where this “in virtue of” locution is not meant to capture anything causal, logical, or semantic. For example, I might say that I am identical to the five-year-old girl in that photograph in virtue of the fact that I’m psychologically continuous with her. Or I might say that Michelangelo’s David has an “innie” belly button in virtue of the fact that the marble has a dent in location L. In making these claims, I am not making a claim about causation, logical entailment, or meaning. I’m not saying that the fact that I’m psychologically continuous with that five-year-old girl caused me to be identical to her, or that it logically entails that I am, or that it literally means that I am identical to her. Nor am I saying that the dent in the marble caused David to have an innie belly button, or that it logically entails or literally means that he has one. Rather, I am saying that, in each case, the former fact metaphysically determines and explains (in a non-causal sort

of way) the latter fact. Grounding is simply a notion that is meant to pick out that non-causal sort of metaphysical determination.

So, I take it that the ideology of grounding is familiar and intuitive enough to warrant using it in our metaphysical theorizing, even though there are many controversial debates about how to best characterize it formally.¹² For the purposes of this paper, I assume that grounding is a transitive relation of metaphysical necessitation, which holds between facts. But much of what I say here could be translated to accommodate alternative views of grounding. Since I take grounding to be transitive, I also take there to be *mediate*, as well as *immediate* grounds: if x immediately grounds y, and y immediately grounds z, then x mediately grounds z. Moreover, a fact may be a *partial* or *full* ground of another fact: for example, the fact that this liquid is beer is fully grounded in the fact that it's an IPA, whereas the fact that the beer is cold and hoppy is partially grounded in the fact that the beer is cold and partially grounded in the fact that it's hoppy. This minimal characterization of grounding will suffice for our purposes.

Most grounding enthusiasts like Fine (2012), Rosen (2010), and Schaffer (2009) claim that one reason for introducing grounding into our ideology in the first place is that it is apt for characterizing the physicalism vs. non-physicalism debate in the philosophy of mind and the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate in metaethics. Indeed, as suggested earlier, grounding seems apt for illuminating what it is for properties to be of the same (or different in) kind in the sense relevant for the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate. We can think of properties being of the same kind insofar as they are all ultimately grounded in the same set of facts: if all facts about some property F are fully grounded in the A-facts, where the A-facts involve properties G, H, and I, then F is of the same kind as G, H, and I. So, for example, *natural* properties are properties that are all ultimately grounded in paradigmatic scientific properties:

For any property F:

- (i) If F is a paradigmatic scientific property, F is natural.
- (ii) If the F-facts are (mediately or immediately) fully grounded in facts involving only paradigmatic scientific properties, then F is natural.

¹² For example, Fine (2012) takes grounding to be a sentential operator, whereas Rosen (2010) takes it to be a relation between facts, and Schaffer (2009) takes grounding to be a relation between entities of any ontological category. Moreover, while many take the grounding relation to be transitive, asymmetric, and to involve metaphysical necessitation, the literature abounds with potential counterexamples to these formal features of grounding (e.g. see Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015) and Skiles (2015)).

We may thus understand the naturalist's view as the claim that all normative facts are either identical to or fully grounded in paradigmatic scientific facts. On the other hand, the supernaturalist non-naturalist takes normative properties to be *non-natural* because normative facts are either identical to or at least partially grounded in facts about supernatural entities like God.

What both the naturalist and the supernaturalist have in common, though, is that they both claim that all normative facts are ultimately fully grounded in some other kind of properties – whether they be natural or supernatural. That is, once we have the above recursive way of defining properties that are of the same kind, we may then define up the set of properties that is the complement of the set of normative properties, the *non-normative* properties:

For any property F:

- (a) If F is a paradigmatic scientific property, supernatural property, ... (where we fill in whatever other paradigms there might be), F is *non-normative*.
- (b) If the F-facts are (mediately or immediately) fully grounded in facts involving only paradigmatic scientific properties or supernatural properties or ..., F is non-normative.

We may thus specify what the Moorean non-naturalist's opponents endorse, as the following claim:

Full Ground All normative facts are either identical to or fully grounded in non-normative facts.

On the other hand, the Moorean non-naturalist insists:

Anti-Full-Ground Some normative facts are neither identical to nor fully grounded in non-normative facts.

Anti-Full-Ground is an illuminating characterization of non-naturalism because it offers an account of what it is for normative properties to be different in kind from any other kinds of properties: it is for their instantiations to be not fully metaphysically explained in terms of the instantiation of any non-normative properties. Anti-Full-Ground may also seem to capture the non-naturalist's pre-theoretical claim that countenancing normative properties is incompatible with a

purely scientific worldview. After all, one way of understanding what a purely scientific worldview amounts to is as the view that all facts are ultimately fully explained by the fundamental scientific facts. But according to Anti-Full-Ground, countenancing normative facts requires admitting that there are some facts that are not fully metaphysically explained by scientific facts.

I argue in §3.1, however, that it follows from very general metaphysical considerations that Anti-Full-Ground is true. The debate between Moorean non-naturalists and their opponents thus cannot amount to Full Ground vs. Anti-Full-Ground, since this is a substantive local debate that should not be settled by general metaphysical considerations.¹³

3.1 Against Full Ground

Suppose that Full Ground is true: that for any normative fact N_a , there is some non-normative fact D_a that grounds N_a . For example, suppose that the fact that an action A is right is fully grounded in the fact that A maximizes happiness. Now consider that very *grounding-fact* itself:

GROUND The fact that A maximizes happiness grounds that A is right.

GROUND itself is a normative fact because it involves the normative property *rightness*. So, Full Ground requires that GROUND, too, be fully grounded in non-normative facts.

But what grounds GROUND is also most plausibly some fact that involves *rightness*. That is, on the most plausible views about what grounds grounding-facts, the grounds of any grounding-fact involves both the *grounding* properties and the *grounded* properties. For example, on Fine (2012) and Rosen's (2010, forthcoming) essentialist view of grounding, what grounds grounding-facts like GROUND are facts about the essence of the grounded property. So, for example, if GROUND is true, on Fine and Rosen's view GROUND is grounded by

ESSENCE It's essential of *rightness* that if A maximizes happiness, A is right.

Or on Wilsch's (2015) view, grounding-facts are grounded in general metaphysical laws concerning various "construction relations", such as constitution, realization, set-formation, and so on. So, for example, if GROUND is true, GROUND is grounded in

¹³ The argument in this section is akin to an argument that Dasgupta (2014) attributes to Sider (2011) against using ground to characterize the physicalism vs. anti-physicalism debate.

LAW It's a metaphysical law that *maximizing happiness* realizes *rightness*, and that, if Fa and F realizes G, then Ga.

But both ESSENCE and LAW involve the property *rightness*. So, both ESSENCE and LAW are themselves normative facts too.

There is one competing view in the literature on grounding-facts that does not imply that GROUND is grounded by a further normative fact. Namely, on Bennett (2011) and DeRosset's (2013) "boot-strapping" view, if Fa grounds Ga, the fact that Fa grounds Ga is itself grounded in Fa. So, their view implies that, if GROUND is true, GROUND is itself grounded by

MAX A maximizes happiness.

But as Dasgupta (2014) argues, MAX clearly seems like a worse explanation of GROUND than ESSENCE and LAW. The mere fact that A maximizes happiness does not explain why there is a connection between A's maximizing happiness and A's being right. On the other hand, if it's part of the very nature of *rightness* that right acts maximize happiness, this surely explains why an act's maximizing happiness necessitates that it's right. Similarly, if it's a law of metaphysics that *maximizing happiness* realizes *rightness*, then this surely explains why an act's maximizing happiness necessitates that it's right. Indeed, it seems like any good metaphysical explanation of why there is a grounding connection between *maximizing happiness* and *rightness* must involve both *maximizing happiness* and *rightness*. This seems to be a general feature of explanations, not just grounding explanations: in order to explain why there is an explanatory connection between x and y, one must reference both x and y.

But if whatever fact grounds GROUND must involve *rightness*, this fact must itself be another normative fact. Once again, then, the truth of Full Ground requires that whatever normative fact that grounds GROUND is itself fully grounded in non-normative facts. For example, if ESSENCE is what grounds GROUND, then ESSENCE must itself be fully grounded in non-normative facts. But no non-normative fact could possibly ground ESSENCE. It seems that either ESSENCE is just a brute fact about the nature of *rightness*, and thus does not have any ground at all, or ESSENCE is itself grounded in some further fact about *rightness*. After all, how could any fact that doesn't involve *rightness* explain why *rightness* has the nature that it does? So, if ESSENCE has any ground at all, it must be grounded in some further fact about *rightness*, which is thereby a further normative fact. Similarly,

if LAW grounds GROUND, then it seems that either LAW is just a brute metaphysical law that has no ground at all, or LAW must be grounded in some further fact that involves *rightness*, since no fact that doesn't involve *rightness* could possibly explain why it is a metaphysical law that maximizing happiness realizes rightness.

So, it follows from very general metaphysical considerations that Full Ground is false and Anti-Full-Ground is true.¹⁴ But this is not an argument for non-naturalism! Rather, it shows that this cannot be the right way to specify what's at stake between the Moorean non-naturalist and her opponents, since the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate is a local debate that should be settled by considerations about normative properties in particular.

3.2 Restricting Full Ground

One natural response to the previous argument, however, is to insist that Moorean non-naturalists and their opponents are not concerned with metaphysically “heavy duty” normative facts like GROUND, ESSENCE, and LAW, but are only concerned with normative facts like the fact that A is right or the fact that x is good – facts of the form *Fa*. Those are the sorts of normative facts that naturalists and non-naturalists are preoccupied with; they do not discuss at all whether facts about what makes x good are themselves natural or non-natural facts, or whether, if *goodness* is identical to *being pleasurable*, that identity statement is itself a natural or non-natural fact. So, one might think that we should understand the claim that the Moorean non-naturalist's opponents endorse, which the Moorean denies, as a more restricted grounding claim:

Full Ground_{Fa} For all normative properties F and for all entities a: if *Fa*, then *Fa* is identical to or fully grounded in non-normative facts.¹⁵

Indeed, this is precisely the sort of characterization of the debate offered by Rosen (2017). Full Ground_{Fa} allows that some normative facts like GROUND, ESSENCE, and LAW are not fully grounded in non-normative facts and thereby re-localizes the debate: Full Ground_{Fa} can only be settled by thinking about what grounds normative facts of the form *Fa*, and not by general metaphysical considerations.

¹⁴ This argument may seem like Vayrynen's (2013) “Moral Relevance Argument”, but Vayrynen actually argues for something much stronger: that *no* normative fact is fully grounded in non-normative facts. I'm only arguing here that not all normative facts are fully grounded in non-normative facts.

¹⁵ This is akin to how Rosen (2017b) characterizes the debate.

Moreover, many contemporary non-naturalists do explicitly deny Full Ground_{Fa}. Enoch (2011), Rosen (forthcoming), and Scanlon (2014) claim that all particular, contingent normative facts (e.g. the fact that my migraine is bad) are partially grounded in particular, contingent natural facts (e.g. the fact that migraines are painful) together with *ungrounded* normative principles (e.g. that pain is bad). This view denies Full Ground_{Fa}. And Bader (2017) and Fine ((2002), (2012)) insist that particular, contingent normative facts are not metaphysically grounded at all, but only *normatively grounded* in non-normative facts (where *normative grounding* is a sui generis, distinctly normative kind of explanation). So, this restricted grounding characterization of the debate fits nicely with contemporary versions of non-naturalism.

The problem with characterizing debate as being about Full Ground_{Fa} is that doing so implies that Moore himself is not a Moorean non-naturalist. While Moore famously argued that, given a complete description of a thing in entirely naturalistic terms, it's always an open question whether or not this thing is good, and took this to show (albeit problematically) that the normative property of *goodness* is a simple, irreducible normative property, he nonetheless seemed to hold that normative facts are fully grounded in non-normative facts:

I should never have thought of suggesting that goodness was 'non-natural,' unless I had supposed that it was 'derivative' in the sense that, whenever a thing is good (in the sense in question) its goodness (in Mr. Broad's words) 'depends on the presence of certain non-ethical characteristics' possessed by the thing in question: I have always supposed that it did so 'depend,' in the sense that, if a thing is good (in my sense), then that it is so *follows* from the fact that it possesses certain natural properties, which are such that from the fact that it is good it does *not follow* conversely that it has those properties.¹⁶

Here, Moore explicitly states that he takes normative facts to “depend on”, or “follow from” natural facts. The sense in which they depend on or follow from the natural facts, for Moore, cannot be logical or semantic entailment, since this is precisely what his open question argument denies. Nor could Moore plausibly be interpreted to mean that the fact that a thing possesses certain natural properties causes it to be good. But while the grounding terminology may be new, the idea that certain facts and properties are metaphysically determined by other facts and properties (in a non-causal sort of way) is an old, familiar one. And this idea seems to be the best for what Moore means here: that a thing's being good is *metaphysically determined* by its natural features. Moore thus seems to think that *goodness*

¹⁶ Moore (1942) p. 588.

may be entirely different in kind from natural properties (or any other kind of properties there are), even though all facts about what is good are fully grounded in natural facts. He thereby seems to accept Full Ground_{Fa}, and takes the relevant sense in which normative properties are *sui generis* to be compatible with this thesis.

Of course, one might think that Moore was simply mistaken in thinking that the claim that normative properties are *sui generis* is compatible with the claim that all normative facts of the form Fa are fully metaphysically explained by non-normative facts. But it seems highly uncharitable to treat these two claims as plain incompatible. We should ask whether there is some sense in which normative properties may be entirely of their own kind, even though all normative facts are fully explained by non-normative facts. This doesn't seem like an obviously unintelligible view.¹⁷

In §4, I argue that we can, indeed, make this view intelligible by appealing to the notion of essence. But first, in §3.3, I discuss Dasgupta's (2014) alternative way of rescuing a ground-theoretic characterization of the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate, which allows Moore's view to count as genuinely non-naturalist.¹⁸

3.3 Dasgupta's alternative restricted Full Ground

Dasgupta argues that all grounding-facts like GROUND must be grounded in *brute connective facts*: facts like ESSENCE or LAW, which explain the connection between the grounding properties and the grounded properties, but which are themselves *ungrounded*. But, according to Dasgupta, facts like ESSENCE and LAW are not ungrounded in the sense that they are fundamental, but rather in the sense that they are not even the sorts of things that can, in principle, have grounds. He makes a helpful analogy with causation to illustrate: the fact that $2+2=4$ has no cause, but it isn't uncaused in the same way that the Big Bang has no cause (in the sense that it is a first cause). Rather, the fact that $2+2=4$ is simply not the sort of thing that could, in principle, be caused. Indeed, the very question of what caused that $2+2=4$ seems like an inapt question.¹⁹ Similarly, Dasgupta claims that the question of what metaphysically explains why a certain property or object has the essence that it does or why some metaphysical law holds “does not legitimately arise”.²⁰ That's simply what the property or object *is* or what the laws *are* – no further story can, in principle, be told.

¹⁷ In fact, Moore (1903) himself seems more concerned with

¹⁸ Dasgupta (2014) is primarily interested in whether grounding can be used to capture the physicalism vs. non-physicalism debate in the philosophy of mind, but I carry over his arguments to the metaethical debate here.

¹⁹ Ibid (2014: 576).

²⁰ Ibid (2014: 580).

So, Dasgupta suggests that we need to distinguish between facts that are *substantive* – facts for which the question of what grounds them does legitimately arise – and facts that are *autonomous* – those that are not the sorts of facts that can, in principle, be grounded. And Dasgupta claims that it is only the *substantive* facts that physicalists and non-physicalists in the philosophy of mind and naturalists and non-naturalists in metaethics are concerned with in their respective debates.

For example, Dasgupta suggests that the following claim captures the spirit of naturalism:

Moderate Natural Ground All substantive normative facts are either identical to or fully grounded in either paradigmatic scientific facts or autonomous facts.

Moderate Natural Ground requires that all normative facts of the form Fa and normative grounding-facts like *GROUND* are identical to or fully grounded in paradigmatic scientific facts or autonomous facts. But this is compatible with *GROUND* being fully grounded by *ESSENCE* or *LAW*, since these further facts are autonomous. So, one way of being a naturalist, according to Dasgupta, is to claim that, for any normative fact Na , Na is grounded in some natural fact Da , and the fact that Da grounds Na is itself grounded in the autonomous fact that it's essential of N that if x is D , x is N . Dasgupta takes this view to capture the spirit of naturalism because it says that there is nothing more to the nature of normative properties than that which underwrites naturalistic explanations of them.²¹

A supernaturalist, on the other hand, presumably takes substantive normative facts of the form Fa to be identical to or at least partially grounded in supernatural facts (e.g. facts about what God commands), and thereby denies Moderate Natural Ground. But what the naturalist and the supernaturalist both endorse, which the Moorean non-naturalist denies (given Dasgupta's way of thinking), is the following:

Moderate Ground All substantive normative facts are identical to or fully grounded in facts that are either non-normative or autonomous.

Characterizing non-naturalism as the denial of Moderate Ground makes some space for Moore's view to be genuinely non-naturalist. Even if Moore holds that all normative facts of the form Fa are fully grounded in natural facts, Moderate Ground may nonetheless be false on such a view, so

²¹ Dasgupta (2014: 584-5).

long as the normative grounding-facts like GROUND are not themselves fully grounded in natural facts or autonomous facts.

But this is an odd explanation for why Moore's view is a non-naturalist one. This doesn't seem to be the reason why Moore himself took his view to be non-naturalist. Moore (1903) seems entirely unconcerned with what makes something good, let alone with what makes something make something good. Instead, he seems concerned with the property *goodness* itself, and whether we can state what it is for something to have that property in other terms:

Definitions of the kind that I was asking for, definitions which describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex... "Good," then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition.²²

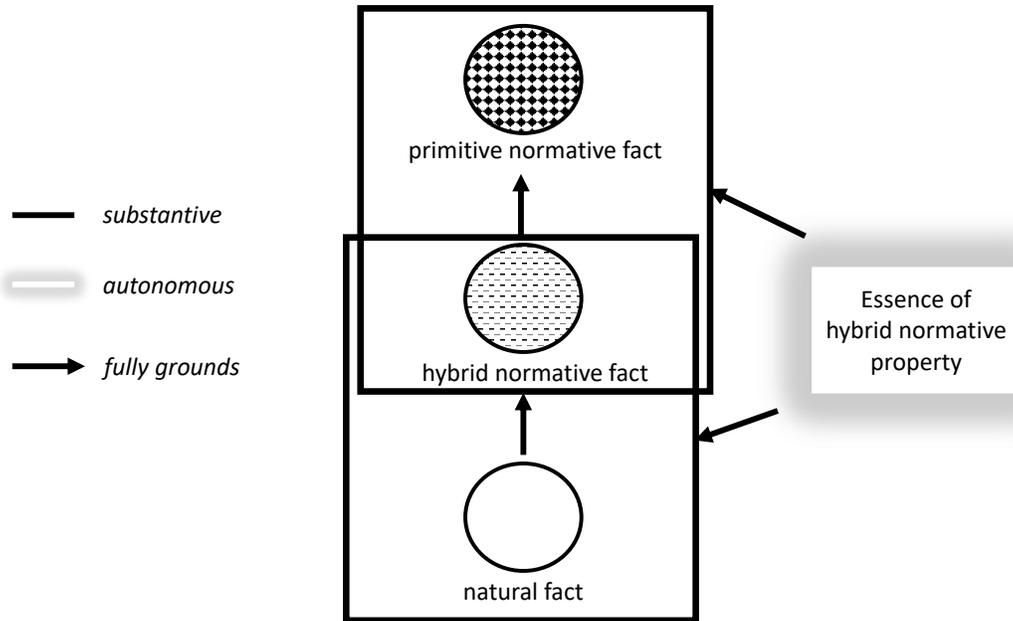
Moore's central claim here is that we cannot state the real nature of *goodness* in terms of any other properties, whether they be natural, supernatural, or otherwise. And it is this sense in which Moore takes *goodness* to be *sui generis*. What the passage from Moore (1942) quoted earlier (in §3.2) brings to light, then, is that Moore distinguishes between *what some property is* and what it is *in virtue of which* something has that property. And Moore's view is that there is at least some normative property N such that *what it is* to be N is primitive and undefinable, but what it is *in virtue of which* something is N is entirely natural. Characterizing non-naturalism as the denial of Moderate Ground thereby fails to capture the original spirit of Moore's view.

In fact, Moderate Ground seems perfectly compatible with the spirit of Moore's view. Suppose Moore is right that *goodness* and other basic normative properties are primitive in the sense that we cannot state the nature of those properties in any other terms. As I've argued elsewhere, this is compatible with there being some *hybrid* normative properties, whose essences involve both natural properties and primitive normative properties; and the essences of these *hybrid* normative properties may explain the grounding connections between the natural and primitive normative properties.²³ For example, it may be part of the essence of *being in pain* that (i) if one's C-fibers are firing, one is in pain, and (ii) that if one is in pain, one is experiencing something bad (where *badness* is a primitive normative property). The property *being in pain* would then be a hybrid normative property whose essence

²² Moore (1903: 7-9).

²³ Leary (2017).

explains why C-fiber-firing-facts ground pain-facts and pain-facts ground badness-facts. Regardless of how plausible this view is, it's at least a *coherent* one that is compatible with the spirit of Moore's view. And, importantly, this is a view on which Moderate Ground is true – all the substantive facts are fully grounded in facts that are either natural, non-normative facts or autonomous facts:



In fact, even Moderate Natural Ground is true on this picture. Herein lies the rub: the reason why Moderate Natural Ground seemed to capture the spirit of naturalism is because we were assuming that it must always be the essence of the normative properties that explain why there are grounding connections between normative and non-normative properties. For example, we were assuming that if pain-facts ground badness-facts, this must be because it's part of the essence of *badness* that pain is bad. And if this is all the essence of *badness* amounts to, then it seems that there's nothing more to the nature of *badness* than that which underlies naturalistic explanations of it, which is very much in the spirit of naturalism. But this is a claim about essence, and not about ground. (On the other hand, while Moderate Natural Ground is also true on the view sketched above, some normative properties like *badness* are primitive so that their essences cannot be stated in any non-normative terms, which is very much in the spirit of Moore's view.) What this suggests, then, is that we should instead use the notion of *essence*, rather than grounding, to characterize the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate.

4. Non-naturalism as an essence claim

In light of the previous discussion of Moore, one might think that the best way to capture Moore's (1903) view is in terms of *real definition*. That is, a real definition of x states the very nature of x in the following form: "To be x is to be φ ," where φ is a "complex condition not containing [x]" (Rosen 2017b: 154). Moore seems to be concerned with whether we can give this sort of definition for the property *goodness* – whether there is some non-normative condition φ that defines what it is to be good. And Moore's answer is "no": there is no such condition (neither a natural one, nor a supernatural one). So, one might think that, in order to capture the spirit of Moore's view, we should characterize the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate as being about whether, for any normative property F , there is some non-normative condition φ that defines what it is to be F .

As Rosen (2017) points out, however, understanding the debate in this way rules out the potential for a *non-reductive* naturalist view about the normative. According to non-reductive physicalist views in the philosophy of science, the properties that feature in higher-level sciences are not definable in terms of physical properties, but are nonetheless compatible with a physicalist view. And Rosen insists that an analogous non-reductive naturalist position about the normative is at least intelligible. This is why Rosen claims we should not understand the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate in terms of real definition, but instead as concerning Full Ground_{ra}.

But, importantly, the notion of *essence* is broader than the notion of real definition. According to Fine (1994), the essence of x is the set of propositions that state the very nature of x ,²⁴ whereas a real definition of x is a proposition stating the very nature of x *that has a particular form* – "To be x is to be φ ". Essence is thus broader than real definition because the essence of x may contain some propositions that state the very nature of x , but not in that particular form. So, if x has a real definition, it's real definition is at least part of x 's essence, but x 's essence may not be a real definition of x . For example, consider disjunction: we cannot define what it is for $p \vee q$ to obtain in simpler terms, but it nonetheless seems to lie in the nature of disjunction that disjunctive facts are grounded in their disjuncts (Rosen 2010: 131). So, x may have an essence, even without having a real definition.

This broader notion of essence thereby allows us to distinguish between two different views about normative properties: on the first view, basic normative properties like *goodness* and *badness* do not have real definitions, but they nonetheless have essences that specify natural sufficient conditions for their instantiation. For example, on this view, the essence of *goodness* may include that if x is

²⁴ Fine actually distinguishes between many different senses of essence. This is what he calls *constitutive essence*.

pleasurable, x is good, but since *goodness* is multiply realizable, being pleasurable does not define what it is to be good. Whereas, on the second view, basic normative properties like *goodness* and *badness* do not have real definitions, nor do they have essences that specify non-normative sufficient conditions (natural or otherwise) for their instantiation. The former view captures the spirit of non-reductive naturalism, whereas the latter view captures the spirit of Moore's view.

So, we may use the broader notion of essence to specify the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate in a way that makes room for both Moore's non-naturalist view and a non-reductive naturalist view. First, since essences are just a set of propositions, we may say that F is *involved* in the essence of G just in case F is a constituent of some proposition contained in the essence of G. Next, we may then specify what it is for a property F to be *of the same kind* as some other set of properties, the A-properties: it's for the essence of F to *ultimately involve* the A-properties, where this *ultimate involvement* is a matter of satisfying the following sort of recursive definition. For example, what it is for a property to be *natural* – i.e. of the same kind as paradigmatic scientific properties – is as follows:

For any property F:

- (i) If F is a paradigmatic scientific property, then F is natural.
- (ii) If the essence of F involves only paradigmatic scientific properties, then F is natural.
- (iii) If the essence of F involves only paradigmatic scientific sufficient conditions for being F, then F is natural.
- (iv) If the essence of F involves only natural properties or natural sufficient conditions for being F, then F is natural.

With this definition of natural properties in mind, we may then construe the naturalist's view as simply:

Natural Essence All normative properties are natural properties.

This allows for both reductive and non-reductive forms of naturalism: the reductive naturalist claims, moreover, that for any normative property N, the essence of N contains a natural condition that defines N, whereas the non-reductive naturalist denies this further claim.

The supernaturalist non-naturalist, on the other hand, rejects Natural Essence because she thinks that the essences of normative properties involve supernatural entities. But what the naturalist and the supernaturalist non-naturalist have in common is that they both claim that the essences of all

normative properties ultimately involve *non-normative* properties, which we can cash out with a similar recursive definition:

For any property F:

- (i) If F is a paradigmatic scientific property, supernatural property, or ... (where we fill in whatever other paradigms there might be), F is non-normative.
- (ii) If the essence of F involves only paradigmatic scientific properties, supernatural properties, or ..., then F is non-normative.
- (iii) If the essence of F involves only paradigmatic scientific, supernatural, or ... sufficient conditions for being F, then F is non-normative.
- (iv) If the essence of F involves only non-normative properties or non-normative sufficient conditions for being F, then F is non-normative.

On my proposal, then, this is precisely what the Moorean non-naturalist denies. Instead, the Moorean non-naturalist endorses the following:

Essentially Normative For some normative property N, the essence of N does not ultimately involve non-normative properties.

In other words, the Moorean non-naturalist insists that the essences of some normative properties do not involve only non-normative properties, nor do they specify non-normative sufficient conditions for their instantiation. This seems to capture the Moorean non-naturalist's pre-theoretical claims that normative properties are *sui generis* and incompatible with a purely scientific worldview. If the essence of *goodness* does not involve only non-normative properties or specify non-normative sufficient conditions for something to be good, then the very nature of *goodness* – *what it is* to be good – is something distinctively normative that is something “over and above” all other kinds of properties, including natural properties. So, there is some feature of reality that cannot be fully described in terms of scientific properties.

As we've already seen in §3.3, though, *Essentially Normative* is compatible with the claim that all normative facts of the form Fa are fully grounded in non-normative facts, and is thereby compatible with Full Ground_{Fa} (and Moderate Ground). So, this characterization of the debate makes intelligible

Moore's claim that *goodness* is a *sui generis* normative property, even though facts about what is good are fully metaphysically explained by natural facts.

But Essentially Normative is also compatible with a variety of other positions about how normative facts of the form *Fa* are grounded. First, Essentially Normative is compatible with Fine's (2005) extreme non-naturalist position, according to which there are *no* grounding connections at all between normative and non-normative properties. Indeed, Fine actually claims that the reason *why* there cannot be metaphysically necessary connections between normative and non-normative properties is precisely that there are no *essential* connections between normative and natural properties:

There would appear to be nothing in the identity of the naturalistic or normative features that demands that they be connected in the way they are. It is no part of what it is to be pain that it should be bad, and no part of what it is to be bad that it should include pain. There is a striking difference between the connection between being water and being composed of H₂O, on the one hand, and the connection between being a pain and bad, on the other. For the identities of the respective features require that the connection holds in the one case, though not the other.²⁵

So, even Fine himself takes the *primary* issue to be whether the essences of certain normative properties like *goodness* and *badness* ultimately involve natural, non-normative properties.²⁶

Second, Essentially Normative is also compatible with the sort of view proposed by Enoch (2011) and Scanlon (2014), according to which all contingent normative facts of the form *Fa* are partially grounded in non-normative facts and partially grounded in fundamental (and necessary) normative principles (what Rosen (2017) calls "Bridge Law Non-naturalism"). Of course, Enoch and Scanlon do not invoke essence-talk at all. But they need to appeal to some additional ideology like essence in order to explain what makes the normative *sui generis* on their view. After all, other types of facts may plausibly have a similar grounding structure. The contingent mathematical facts, for example, are plausibly grounded in both contingent non-mathematical facts together with general mathematical principles: the fact that there are more species of dogs than species of rhinoceroses is grounded in the contingent fact that there are 340 species of dogs and 5 species of rhinoceroses and the general mathematical fact that 340 is greater than 5. So, the grounding structure for normative

²⁵ Fine (2005) p. 271.

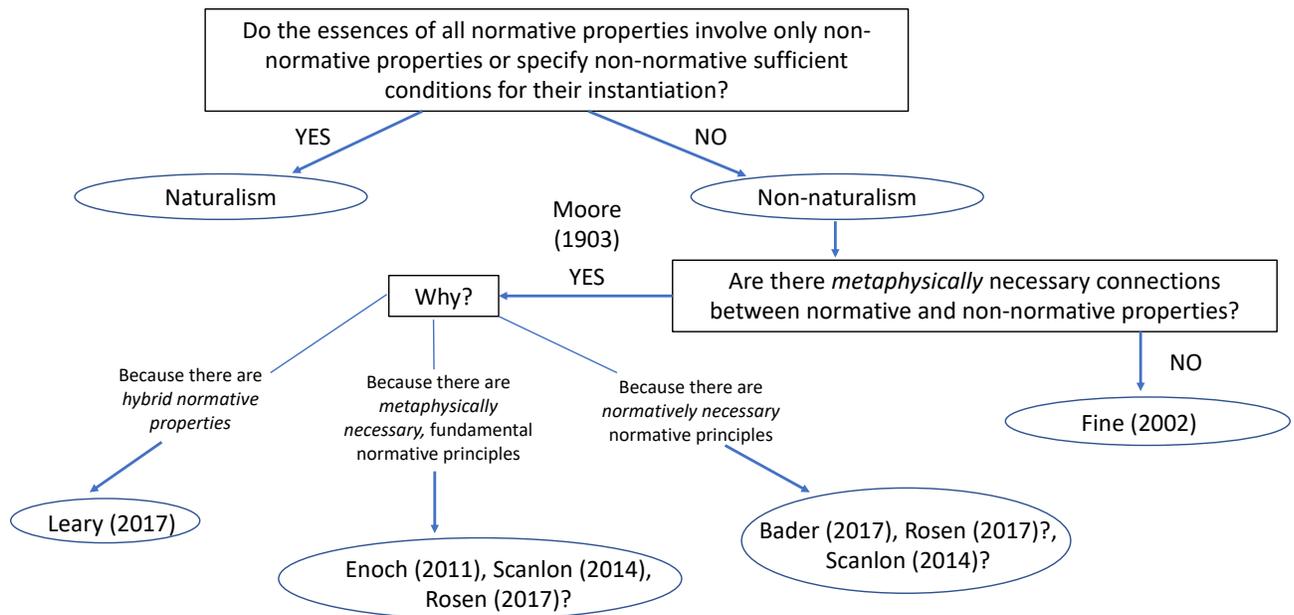
²⁶ This is also what leads Fine to claim that any sort of in-virtue-of relation or necessary connections that hold between normative and non-normative facts must be a distinctly normative in-virtue-of relation and normative necessity, rather than metaphysical grounding and metaphysical necessity.

facts that Enoch and Scanlon appeal to does not explain what makes the normative *entirely of its own kind*.

One might think it's the *content* of the principles in the case of the normative facts that makes the normative *sui generis*: it's the fact that the general principles involve *normative properties* that makes the normative facts that these principles ground different in kind from mathematical facts. But this seems to assume the very thing in need of explanation. The fact that the general principles involve normative properties explains why the normative is of its own kind only if we assume that there is something different and unique about normative properties themselves. And that is not an assumption that we are entitled to make, since the very task at hand is to explain what makes normative properties different in kind from all other properties.

If Enoch and Scanlon adopt the ideology of essence and endorse Essentially Normative, however, this would allow them to appeal to the content of the general normative principles to explain what makes the normative *sui generis*. They could then say that what makes the normative facts different in kind from other kinds of facts that have the same grounding structure is that the general principles that partially ground all normative facts involve properties whose essences do not ultimately involve non-normative properties.

The essence-theoretic understanding of the debate that I offer here thus gives us a specification of Moorean non-naturalism that speaks to and elucidates the non-naturalist's pre-theoretical claims, while leaving room for a variety of more precise non-naturalist views. According to my characterization, the central metaphysical claim held by Moorean non-naturalists is that the essences of at least some normative properties do not ultimately involve non-normative properties. But from here there are further downstream questions about which non-naturalists may disagree (see flowchart below). First, they may disagree about whether there are any metaphysically necessary connections (including grounding connections) between normative and non-normative properties. And even non-naturalists who agree about *that* may nonetheless disagree about *why* there are metaphysically necessary connections between normative and non-normative properties: some might claim that it's because there are some hybrid normative properties, while others might claim that there are metaphysically necessary fundamental normative laws, while others might claim that it's because there are *normatively* necessary normative laws.



5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the ideology of essence is better suited to capture the debate between Moorean non-naturalists and their opponents than mere identity or grounding. Characterizing the debate in terms of identity alone is at best unilluminating, and attempts to characterize the debate in terms of grounding either (a) fail to make the debate a local debate about normative properties (Full Ground), (b) fail to make room for Moore to count as a genuine non-naturalist (Full Ground_{Fa}), or (c) fail to capture the spirit of Moore’s view (Moderate Ground). On the other hand, the essence-theoretic construal of the debate that I have offered here clearly captures the non-naturalist’s pre-theoretical commitments while also localizing the debate and making room for Moore to be a genuine non-naturalist in a way that captures the spirit of his view. Moreover, it does all of this while at the same time making room for a non-reductive naturalist position.

This suffices to show not only that we should understand this metaethical debate in terms of essence, but also that we have good reason to adopt the ideology of essence into general metaphysical theorizing in the first place.

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