

# **What Does Theism Add to Ethical Naturalism?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Recent literature seems to have opened up space for naturalistic theistic metaethics in a contemporary context, as proponents of divine command theories have tended to be restricted to either supernatural or theistic non-natural theories within existing taxonomies of normative theory. While perhaps encouraging for theists, would theism add anything substantive to theories of ethical naturalism? In this paper, I examine this question. I argue that theistic naturalism appears to incur certain objections as well as provide a plausible and explanatory constraint on content for theories of ethical naturalism. As a result, a corresponding challenge to non-theistic variants is raised.

## What Does Theism Add to Ethical Naturalism?

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### GENERAL ABSTRACT

Realists, roughly summarized, are those metaethicists who believe that some moral propositions have truth values, that some (or at least one) of those propositions turn out to be true, and that if rational agents disagree on the truth value of a particular moral proposition, only one of them has the possibility of being correct. Broadly construed, moral realists tend to fall under one of two “tents”, preferring either naturalism (for which moral properties turn out to be wholly natural in constitution) or non-naturalism (which posits that at least some moral properties have, even if only partly, non-natural constituents as part of their make-up).

Theists, who base their theories of morality on some facet of the nature or essence (or commands) of God, have tended to either be relegated in philosophical debate to a characterization of “supernaturalism” or to some seldom visited corner of the non-natural “tent” of moral realism. The former tends to limit theistic engagement in contemporary metaethical dialogue such that it can seem (at times) as if theists and non-theists are talking about two different subjects entirely. On the other hand, a non-naturalistic theory of theistic moral realism saddles the view with some fairly difficult metaphysical and epistemological baggage in the form of powerful objections levied against non-naturalistic theories in general.

This paper explores another option for theism in light of very recent work by Gideon Rosen, namely his article examining the metaphysical implications of varieties of moral realism, particularly naturalistic ones. This article has already garnered a general characterization (within metaethical research, writ large) as being a “taxonomy” of naturalistic (and non-naturalistic, for that matter) theories. Specifically for my purposes here, Rosen suggests that divine command theory (and theistic metaethics in general) should be understood as being naturalistic in formulation.

This would seem to be advantageous to theists, in that their metaethical theories might avoid either the bounded characterization of supernaturalism or the difficult challenges of non-naturalism. However, the theist, should she avail herself of naturalism in this regard, will need to tread carefully. Given that Rosen has couched his 'taxonomy' in terms of metaphysical grounding, I examine some resultant challenges for naturalistic theistic metaethics, concluding they can be overcome, as well as a related objection to non-theistic naturalism that arise as a result of the same grounding discussion coupled with the resources theists can leverage in a naturalistic context.

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Table of Contents:

Abstract.....	ii
General Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Assumptions.....	3
2. Theistic Naturalism: Variants And Objections.....	5
2.1 A 'Plenitudinous' Grounding For Theistic Metaethics?.....	9
3. Grounding Is Supposed To Do Some Explaining, Right?.....	11
4. Conclusion.....	20
References.....	21

## §1 Introduction

Contemporary theistic theories of metaethics have tended to be fairly limited in the nature of their formulations. This might be understandable given both their commitments and contemporarily construed interpretations of how different genres of normative theory should be 'mapped'. One recent proposal, however, seems to have expanded that landscape somewhat.<sup>1</sup> Gideon Rosen has outlined and defended a revised taxonomy of ethical naturalism (within the context of moral realism) that overtly positions divine command theory as an example and, sometimes, foil in order to demonstrate that a broader interpretation of the term 'naturalism', as it applies to normative properties, might be more appropriate in order to clarify relationships between putatively normative and (still) natural properties. If Rosen is right, naturalism might no longer be relegated to the minority view that it recently has been for the theistic metaethicist, and as a result, she can make use of its resources in much the same way as her non-theistic counterparts. In fact, he assumes that naturalism should be the *default* position in the case of theism. To put the ramifications of this claim in perspective, the traditional theist is, at the least, committed to three non-negotiable tenets concerning morality: 1) normative *realism*, 2) some variety of *necessity* applying in the case of those moral propositions that do obtain, and 3) stance-independence (as referenced to created subjects).<sup>2</sup> Stated differently, theism (in its more commonly recognized versions) entails that morality is grounded in God's nature and his creation. It would then seem odd to suggest that a divinely ordered system of normativity would obtain contingently in any world he creates.

Given the requirements "built in" to theistic views, previous versions have run afoul of two problematic objections with regard to the theoretical genre into which they might fall. One of these

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1 This is not entirely accurate. Moore, in his *Principia*, can be read as supporting divine command theory as a form of ethical naturalism, namely 'ideal utilitarianism' (1993 ed., pp. 154-155 and elsewhere) and there may be additional, more contemporary, examples. Naturalism, though, seems not to be the default position for theists. Rosen appears to think it should be. This is what I mean by "opening up space". Thanks to Daniel Wodak for urging me to clarify this as well as to David Faraci for his comments in conversation to the effect that he has never understood why so few theistic theories "go in" for naturalism.

2 This, of course, puts theistic metaethics squarely in the camp of "*robust* moral realism" and its commitment to substantive semantic, alethic, and metaphysical theses. The primary difference between robust realism and minimal realism concerns the metaphysical status of proposed moral truths. To be clear, the kind of view I will be concerned with here entails that moral propositions have truth values, some of them are actually true, and that these true moral propositions pick out normative facts and properties that have an "oomphy" claim on our comportment - a claim that is both objective and stance-independent in nature.

is, perhaps, merely semantic in nature. If the proposal in question is classified as a 'supernatural' description of morality, the view tends to be bracketed in contemporary debate and not considered sufficiently within the literary mainstream to be tenable outside of a given set of cultural and linguistic practices.<sup>3</sup> If, on the other hand, the theory in question aspires to a more philosophically *chic* genre of normative realism, the primary alternative seems to be ethical *non*-naturalism.<sup>4</sup> And this sort of view, of course, comes with troublesome epistemological and metaphysical baggage.

On the other hand, is naturalism the panacea for theistic metaethics it might seem? Are certain challenges for theists entailed by the versions of naturalism Rosen proposes? All told, just what does theism add to ethical naturalism, given the rich and varied naturalistic accounts already prominent in the literature as well as what is implied by the term 'naturalism' simpliciter? This is a fair question and one the theist must address if she is to champion naturalism. In what follows, I consider it in light of Rosen's taxonomy and certain other related considerations. I argue that theism adds both challenges and benefits in this context. More specifically, a certain way of cashing out theistic naturalism (in perhaps its most robust form) seems to incur certain theoretical objections with respect to the nature of the grounding relationships it proposes in order to explain the instantiation of normative properties. Additionally, all variants of theistic naturalism appear to face a related Ockhamite concern. Despite these worries, I claim that theism also adds something substantive to naturalism: namely a constraint of, and explanation for, its *content* as a result of the necessary relationships between the attributes of God's nature and the required, maximally intimate normative grounding relationships that would obtain in any world he chooses to create.

Here's the plan. I first outline the assumptions I will make throughout the paper. I then quickly summarize the variants of naturalism Rosen explicates and compare these with theistic commitments (and in light of the previously noted assumptions). My goal will be to discover the most difficult case for theism, one that satisfies the most robust theistic interpretations of God's role

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3 Much like a Wittgensteinian 'language game', perhaps.

4 See, as a paradigmatic example, Adams (1973, pp. 116-120). He identifies "being contrary to the commands of God" as a *non-natural* fact referred to by the believer of something that is "wrong".

in a theory of normativity, and highlight the theoretical worries it incurs. To this I add a related objection, one that touches all versions of theistic metaethics, and argue that theism not only can answer both of these challenges plausibly, it also is able to offer a contentful constraint on content for ethical theories. This constraint provides both boundaries and an explanation for what morality *could consist of* that non-theistic accounts seem to lack systemically. As a result, a subsequent challenge to non-theistic naturalism's parity is generated.

### **§1.1 Assumptions**

In this sub-section, I clarify my assumptions going forward. This seems warranted as there appears to be little discussion “across the metaethical table” between theists and non-theists. The entailments associated with traditional constructions of divine command theory probably play a leading role in this impasse. Given that most of these define the rightness and wrongness of any action such that it is (and *only* is) how that action stands in relation to God's commands, it might be unclear how a theistic metaethics allows for mixed debate. In an effort to bridge this gap, Adams developed a version of divine command theory that introduced a limited semantic intersection. His original “modified divine command theory of wrongness” attempted to describe a scenario in which believers and unbelievers were “kind of” talking about the same thing.<sup>5</sup> In response to subsequent objections, Adams refined his view in light of Kripke and Putnam's work concerning *a posteriori* necessary truth. The payoff seems to be that speakers can discuss the nature of a thing without agreeing on its specific meaning. In our context, all competent users of the term “wrong” can intelligently discuss an action's wrongness without agreeing on the specific meaning of just what it is to be “wrong”. This strikes me as correct, or at least quite plausible; however, theistic philosophers certainly begin with significant commitments that could derail meaningful discussion.

As an example of one such derailer (and in the way of clarifying my assumptions here),

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<sup>5</sup> 1973. pp. 116-120. literally, "partly the same and partly different."



Euthyphro-based worries often short-circuit this kind of mixed debate.<sup>6</sup> Recall that the first horn is concerned with the logically possible arbitrariness of God (in the actual or possible worlds) and/or Leibniz' worry about trivializing God's goodness, and the second horn's concern is the difficulty of explaining the necessary connection between something's goodness and God's will (or "God's loving x"). Adams' theory is crucially concerned with avoiding any possibility of God's arbitrariness in this context, and I will assume that he is successful in that effort. As for why I set the second horn aside here as well, note that although certain theological positions concerning God's nature are threatened by his being constrained by certain necessary truths, I follow Plantinga (1980) and Zagzebski (2004) in that: 1) God does have a nature, and 2) he is constrained by that nature in all possible worlds - e.g. he is loving and necessarily so, and it could not have been otherwise than that he is loving.<sup>7</sup> This nature (i.e. his properties *qua* perhaps his motivations) constrains his will, or the aspect of God that initiates actions (see Zagzebski, 2004: 293-295). As God is then necessarily loving, it straightforwardly follows that he would create a normative 'system' for rational agents that 1) is stance-independent entailing obligatory 'oughts' that have a claim on our comportment,<sup>8</sup> and 2) is good without the possibility of being arbitrarily cruel. To be clear, this concept, that of God being subject to a nature that is necessarily made up of certain attributes, is integral to my arguments.

I will also assume, with Adams, that theists and non-theists can discuss the nature of 'rightness' or 'wrongness' without agreeing on their specific definitions. Put differently, metaethical interlocutors should be able to discuss comparative advantages and disadvantages that theism or atheism incur within any given theory, in this case ethical naturalism. To that end, I intend to defend naturalism's feasibility within a theistic construct as well as explain what I think are its

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6 Thanks to Tristram McPherson and Nate Rockwood for urging me to highlight this.

7 Consider that it seems intuitive that the laws of nature are contingent in some sense – i.e. we can conceive the logical possibility of things behaving differently in alternate possible worlds. Nate Rockwood has recently proposed a theory of *consequent necessity* (2017, forthcoming) whereby the laws of nature that obtain do so as a consequence of God's willing that they be necessary in the actual world, as a result of his creative work in bringing this world into actuality. The theory is roughly Cartesian in its genesis; however, it resists the specter of absolute possibilism by insisting that there are *antecedently* necessary truths (logical, mathematical, etc.) to which God is constrained. These antecedent truths and his nature constrain how the natural laws could be realized. Perhaps moral facts and properties are brought about in just this sort of way. God's nature, and the antecedent truths, constrain the possible ways in which morality could have been realized in the actual or possible worlds.

8 A theory of robust realism without any "real" obligation seems a bit like throwing a birthday party and forgetting the cake. In this I have sympathy for Wedgewood (2007: 174-176, 192 and following) in his desire to ascribe the normative (and, by co-definition, the intentional) a "causally efficacious" role.

challenges and advantages. With regard to its feasibility, I now turn to Rosen's taxonomy.

## **§2 Theistic Naturalism: Variants And Objections**

In this section, I gloss Rosen's proposal in order to evaluate the alternatives. My aim will be to determine what version satisfies the most robust theistic commitments in the context of a theistic metaethics as well as what, if any, difficulties it entails. In the sub-section that immediately follows, I add an orthogonally related objection to theistic theories that: 1) relates to those difficulties orthogonally, and 2) applies in the case of any theistic metaethics, natural or not. Despite these obstacles, I go on to argue that theists need not be dismayed. The ways in which theism can reply wind up highlighting problems for non-theistic theories.

Rosen first addresses reductive naturalism, which, if intensionalism about properties is assumed, is entailed by ethical supervenience.<sup>9</sup> Recall that this co-variance thesis posits that there cannot be two identical non-normative states of affairs that differ *only* in their instantiations of normative properties. Any instantiation of a normative property N then stands in a supervenience relationship with a subvening disjunction of all possible non-normative facts and properties (which can be stated as descriptions  $Da(x) \vee Db(x) \dots Dn(x)$ ) such that for all the possible Ns there would be a normative state of affairs (call this  $\lambda$ ) equivalent to that disjunctive, non-normative profile. If one is an intensionalist about definitions, then N just is the property of being  $\lambda$ . Instantiations of normative properties would then be identified (and *defined*) without remainder by the true disjuncts obtaining within such a disjunction.

Is there room for non-reductive variants? Rosen examines the concepts of real definition and grounding in the process of suggesting two types of non-reductive theories. Beginning with the former, he states that real definition is a concept applicable across numerous disciplines. It is positioned over and against conceptual definition, which constrains answers in an unacceptable way. What is needed is not a concept of normativity, but *the property for which that concept stands*.

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<sup>9</sup> The explanation here is taken, with a good bit of editorial license, from Rosen (2017, pp. 1-12).

And the definition of a given property shouldn't cite itself, even if they are necessarily equivalent. This is where a seam might open between reductive naturalism and ethical supervenience. The fact that for every normative property N, there necessarily exists some non-normative state of affairs  $\lambda$ , does not entail that  $\lambda$  *defines* N.<sup>10</sup> This blocks the immediate inference from supervenience to reductive naturalism; however, it still favors naturalistic reduction. For if N has an *intensional definition*  $\lambda$  citing only non-normative constituents, then N is straightforwardly reducible.

Rosen proposes that *grounding* offers a better way of explaining the relationship between N and  $\lambda$  in this case.<sup>11</sup> If  $\lambda$  grounds N, then N obtains *because*  $\lambda$  obtains. They are not identical, just maximally intimate. The grounds provide the reason for N's instantiation. Importantly, the grounded fact is not additive to the facts that ground it. As Rosen puts it, "When God makes the grounds she ipso facto makes the facts they ground. No further creative activity is required."<sup>12</sup>

Losing the definitional link between N and  $\lambda$  creates space for grounding sets of facts to no longer be necessarily homogeneous in the way reductive naturalism requires. To flesh this idea out further, Rosen proposes 'Type 1' and 'Type 2' non-reductive variants:<sup>13</sup>

Type 1 – Facts of type  $N\alpha$  are always grounded in non-normative facts, but there is *no* non-normative condition  $\lambda$  such that *every* fact of type  $N\alpha$  is grounded in  $\lambda(\alpha)$ .

Type 2 – There *is* a non-normative condition  $\lambda$  such that *every*  $N\alpha$ -type fact is grounded in  $\lambda(\alpha)$ , but  $\lambda$  does not *define* N.

The difference between them then is that the first type allows for heterogeneous grounding conditions while the second does not.

Non-reductive naturalism isn't out of the woods just yet. We still need an alternative to intensionalism (which entails reductionism) that allows for a normative property, that of being N in

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10 Rosen's example of the supervenient property 'house' is germane, as applied to all the possible houses in the form of the aforementioned disjunction. The resultant (disjunctive) description is equivalent to any possible house without at all defining it.

11 There is an active body of recent literature on metaphysical grounding. Here I believe Rosen is referring to a substantive, explanatory version of grounding that might be represented by the "metaphysical foundationalism" construct explicated by Bliss and Trogdon (2016), namely that these relationships would be 'well founded'.

12 Rosen (2017, p.10)

13 Ibid, p. 12. Emphases mine.

this case, to be necessarily equivalent to a given non-normative condition while still being distinguishable from it. Rosen proposes hyperintensionalism as a solution.<sup>14</sup> If  $\varphi$  represents a condition, and we plump for a grounding relationship (instead of a definitional one) between  $\varphi$  and N, then a way of stating normative grounding hyperintensionally might be:  $\varphi$  defines N iff necessarily, for all x, if x is N or  $\varphi$ , then  $\varphi x$  grounds Nx. This supports Type 1 non-reductive naturalism; however, Type 2 needs yet another modification to this formulation to permit the possibility of *just one* complex uniform grounding condition. Note that if a condition, call it  $\varphi$ , grounds *all* N facts, then those N facts have to be distinguished from another property (call it O) – *which is the property of being  $\varphi$* . If N and O share the same grounding conditions, then they are the same property and as such, indistinguishable.

To make room for Type 2 non-reductive naturalism, the concept of *essence* is needed, as put forward by Kit Fine (1994) and Rosen. In this context, the essence of something can't consist of the set of *all* necessary properties of that thing. For example, it is necessarily true that I am not my wife, yet that doesn't seem to say anything essential about *my* nature. This puts pressure on the modal model of intensional definition explicated earlier and allows Rosen to suggest:  $\varphi$  defines N iff *it lies in the nature* of N that for all x, if x is N or  $\varphi$  then  $\varphi x$  grounds Nx.<sup>15</sup> This allows the Type 2 non-reductive naturalist to posit a homogeneous, non-normative condition that (*uniquely and always*) grounds the instantiations of Ns.<sup>16</sup> This view has a theoretical cost, namely that of identifying a plausible 'mediator' that facilitates a grounding relationship that is *external* to the N facts. As Rosen puts it, this is an odd view, because we tend to be able to pick out something about either the grounded fact or its grounds (i.e. *internal* to them) whose essence explains the connection. In this case,  $\varphi$  has to be the homogeneous ground of *all* the Ns.

To return to the original question, which version should the theist select? Is her choice

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14 Ibid, pp. 14-16

15 Ibid, p. 18

16 The reductionist holds that this relationship is intensionally definitional, and thus reducible. The Type 2 non-reductive naturalist claims that N is equivalent to an *external* grounding condition.

constrained in any obvious way? It might seem fairly straightforward to rule out naturalistic reduction, but this is probably a bit hasty. As noted above, grounding relationships needn't posit additional facts over and above the descriptive (non-normative) facts which obtain, and as such, God's creative actions in fixing the grounding sets of conditions for normative property instantiations, constrained as they are by the necessary attributes of his nature, would seem sufficient to: 1) supply an explanation for those normative grounding relationships that obtain, and 2) appropriately accord God the 'generative' role and place required by theism, *without requiring that he create any additional facts or be causally active in normative property instances.*

Turning to Type 1 non-reductive naturalism, it might seem theistically problematic to allow for heterogeneous normative grounding conditions for the range of normative properties under consideration. While this variant doesn't reduce normativity to all and only disjunctive sets of obtaining descriptive disjunctions (as co-varying necessarily with certain normative properties), the reference to different sets of grounding conditions might also initially appear worrisome for theism. As in the case of naturalistic reduction, however, this concern seems unwarranted if the function of creating those heterogeneous grounds is a result of God's action as before. The initial intuitions that many theists might have in both this and reductionism's case can perhaps be more accurately described as wanting a “ground for the normative grounds”,<sup>17</sup> one that appeals to, and relies on, unique conditions of possibility only satisfied by something that approximates God's nature.<sup>18</sup>

If the theist desires an even more fundamental 'basing' condition for both generating and regulating the grounding conditions for normative property instantiations, specifically one that leverages (God's) causal interventions in those instantiations, then Type 2 non-reductive naturalism would appear to be the most robust option. In that case, normative property instantiations would be both grounded in and causally dependent on God's creative action *and* active intervention (within

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17 I owe this phrasing to Kelly Trogon.

18 This desire for a more fundamental ethical grounding condition is, I think, what informs a number of non-theistic theories as well, to include the 'just too different' claim of certain non-natural theorists and claims about altogether separate ontologies for the domain of ethics (see, among others, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, 2014, David Enoch, 2011, and of course Moore, 1993 ed.).

creation) for their existence and function.<sup>19</sup> This formulation would allow for a homogeneous, external ground for all normative properties while insisting that those connections need not be mediated by anything inherent within the nature of the 'N' facts involved.

To be clear, I am *not* claiming that Type 2 non-reductive naturalism is the option the theist should take. Far from it. I am convinced that many (if not most) theists, most notably philosophers, should they plump for ethical naturalism, will be attracted to the less theoretically-loaded variants. This said, I will continue here on the assumption that Type 2 non-reductive naturalism is both: 1) the version that allows for the most robust interpretation of God's role in normativity, and 2) the hardest case to defend. While Type 2 non-reductive naturalism remains coherent, it faces challenges explaining the nature and mediation of ethical grounding relationships. This is not the only worry our robustly normative theist faces. In the following sub-section, I identify a separate yet related objection that must be addressed by *any* version of theistic metaethics.

## §2.1 A 'Plenitudinous' Grounding For Theistic Metaethics?

In addition to the challenge posed by the seemingly improbable version of non-reductive naturalism I am proposing, we must add another objection concerning the ability to add God to the naturalistic equation at the outset. Specifically, this type of worry concerns whether or not bottoming out an ethical proposal in the putative nature of God, as I have construed it adds anything of substance to *any variant* of theistic metaethics.<sup>20</sup>

Consider the following. Granting normative supervenience (as described earlier), in a formulation involving 'sets of natural and descriptive facts and properties entailing the instantiations of respective normative properties', we could propose a theory of naturalistic metaethics, and its grounding, represented by the following:

$$\text{PNF} \leftarrow (\text{PDF} \wedge \text{GNL})$$

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<sup>19</sup> Aligning with all but the most deistic versions of theistic causation. See footnote 23.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Daniel Wodak for encouraging me to address this objection.

Where PNF stands for “particular normative fact”, PDF for “particular descriptive facts”, and GNL for “general normative law”.<sup>21</sup> If GNL is stipulated as an irreducible class of brute, axiomatic normative laws, then why is a necessarily good God needed to ground a robust theory of normative realism with all of its requisite features (i.e. stance-independence, “oomphiness”, etc.)? To flesh this out just a bit more:

$$\text{PNF} \leftarrow (\forall x) (Nx \leftrightarrow ((\exists y) (\exists z) (Dy \wedge Gz) \wedge ((Dy \wedge Gz) \rightarrow Nx)))$$

Where N stands for “being a normative fact”, D for “set of descriptive facts and properties” (or, maybe better, descriptive *and* natural facts and properties), and G for “belonging to the set of axiomatic, irreducible normative laws”. While this formulation might benefit from additional refinement, something like it, I think, sheds light on the nature of the objection. Natural (and non-natural) theories of normativity could be (and have been) constructed along these lines. The “G” predicate in this case seems to gesture at what I am trying to capture or explain by referencing 'God', and the constraints put on him by his nature, as designing and implementing a naturalistic, normative system along the lines being discussed here. One could alternately, to summarize this objection succinctly, base her normative grounding on a putative big bang genesis and the subsequently extant axiomatic, irreducible normative laws as just 'appearing' as part of that event. God seems like something extra in this scenario – something that would perhaps overdetermine any grounding for normativity in a worrisome way.

Taken together, these objections can be seen, I suggest, as constituting a worst-case scenario for theistic naturalism. Rosen's work has clarified problems for the kind of non-reductive naturalism which supports the most robust theistic intuitions. To these can be added a worry about where God 'fits' into normative theories without being merely epiphenomenal. Nevertheless, I think theists can certainly accept these challenges as described and pick up the gauntlet in response. This will be my focus in the next section. It turns out that theistic responses to these objections generate

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<sup>21</sup> See Scanlon (2014) for a relevant example. His effort to avoid "strange metaphysical truthmakers" seems to stem from just this sort of worry (p. 62 and following).

some reciprocal worries for non-theistic variants.

### **§3 Grounding Is Supposed To Do Some Explaining, Right?**

Turning first to Rosen's characterization of oddness in the case of Type 2 non-reductive naturalism, I think a contentful response is less difficult than it might initially seem. While the theist should concede that something within either the grounded fact or its grounds should mediate or explain the connection under consideration, it is unclear, on further reflection, that the theoretical cost she incurs explaining just how something could function as a homogeneous ground for all normative facts uniquely disadvantages *theistic* Type 2 non-reductive naturalism. Let me explain.

If I interpret Rosen correctly, the problem seems to be generated by the need to posit a non-normative (and thus naturalistic), common grounding condition for all instantiations of normative properties. If we are looking *within* creation for something which could serve as a common grounding condition, it might be hard to imagine what might be capable of playing such a role. Put another way, if our naturalistic theory is stipulatively constrained by the 'causal closure of the physical',<sup>22</sup> then Rosen is probably correct in that Type 2 non-reductive naturalism seems a less than optimal choice, given its counter-intuitive commitments with respect to assumptions shared by most contemporary theories about metaphysical grounding.

The theist, on the other hand, isn't looking within creation for the alleged ground in this case for what should be obvious reasons. She necessarily must resist the causal closure of the physical in order to remain within the camp of theism. The extant varieties of theories concerning theistic causation, while certainly differing on how God specifically 'works' with regard to his interaction with his creation, are univocal in their affirmation of his prerogative to be causally efficacious within creation while acting from positions both internal and external to it.<sup>23</sup> As a result, God's

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<sup>22</sup> Phrase borrowed from Bedke (2009)

<sup>23</sup> See Malebranche (1675), Durandus (1571), Suarez (1597), Freddosso (1991), and Plantinga (2015) for examples of the three mainstream theories of theistic causation, namely 'conservationism', 'concurrentism', and 'occasionalism'. All rely on God's causal efficacy *within* creation while remaining outside it. Indeed, the latter variant denies any causation other than divine volition.



nature, while certainly capable of being external to (indeed, responsible for) creation, has an ongoing purpose and role within it. Given our assumptions about his nature (that it is necessarily good, loving, etc.) it seems like just the right sort of thing to provide a homogeneous grounding condition for every normative property that obtains within the actual world as well as any world he chooses to create (as a result of being necessarily constrained by those attributes). This seems to address Rosen's worry in this case.

In fact, from a theistic perspective (i.e. one requiring a plausible and homogeneous ground for normative property instantiations that would then offer some explanation for what could count *as normative*), the tables seem to be turned. To illustrate why, consider that the oddity felt by the non-theist, and articulated by Rosen, when confronted by the proposal of a homogeneous (and, certainly, theistic) ground for all normative property instantiations approximates the oddity felt by 'robust theists' (or any Type 2 non-reductive naturalist) when considering a theory proposing heterogeneous grounds, specifically any type of plausible 'foundation' for those grounds, for various obtaining normative properties. The other types of naturalism, when considered in this manner, seem to raise a related but opposing question. If the grounding condition(s) for any obtaining normative property are not constrained in such a way, what could possibly count as limiting conditions for what normativity is or could be (or, alternately, what could explain the unique status of that class of properties)? If normative properties are instantiated, when they are, *because* the conditions of possibility for their instantiations obtain, then shouldn't those grounding conditions do some explaining 'work' for at least 1) *what* might count as being normative, and 2) *why* those requisite properties obtain within the state of affairs in question?

To summarize, the apparent oddness of a non-reductive view needing a single, homogeneous ground for normative property instantiations seems to put pressure on Type 2 non-reductive naturalism only if a requirement to find those grounds within the space circumscribed by the causal closure of the physical is levied. Theism must deny that closure, and allowing for the needed

'ground for normative grounding' to come from outside creation opens the door for God (or, better, his nature) to provide the single, required ground (stated in terms of conditions of possibility) for all instantiations of normative properties. Given the necessary features of that nature, this ground also seems to be well-suited to provide some sort of explanation for what normativity could be and for why moral properties are instantiated the way they are in virtue of obtaining states of affairs. It is, conversely, unclear how non-theistic ethical naturalism can provide contentful answers for the same questions. The fact that either perspective views the alternative as unsatisfactory isn't surprising, and it certainly doesn't, to my lights, render theistic variants less competitive as a result. In fact, Rosen's own characterization of God's creative action being 1) consistent with ethical naturalism, and 2) fundamental to (and the grounding condition for, as a result of his creating all the grounds) all normative properties provides what seems to be a very plausible foundation for a nascent formulation of a theistic, naturalistic metaethics. This intuition also informs my response to the second objection concerning theistic overdetermination.

Turning to that challenge, recall that the worry concerns what God would add to an equation entailing specific normative property instantiations being grounded by brute, axiomatic general normative laws. Setting aside for now the fact that simply stipulating the existence of brute laws that ground moral properties might need some explaining of their own, I'll start by noting that what seems to be missing from non-theistic formulations of the type glossed above is any type of 'basing' or 'referencing' relationship, and accompanying explanation, for just what could be considered plausible candidates for the states of affairs which necessarily instantiate normative properties in this world (and across at least some 'set' of possible worlds, for that matter). Recall Rosen's requirement for a 'mediator' between grounding conditions and the facts they ground. If the grounds are merely brute, then what would putatively mediate, limit, or explain their content? Could one say anything at all in this context that would be more than mere stipulations based on intuitions about paradigmatically agreed upon bad or good states of affairs? It would then appear,

on a non-theistic view, somewhat (and worryingly) contingent just what might constitute the complete set of non-normative facts – in short the 'full grounds' for the normative property instantiated' – in virtue of which the properties of wrongness or rightness obtain. What, if any, *constraints on content* would exist in this case? To put the issue in sharper relief, properties like rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, would then seem to be instantiated in the way they are merely as a matter of happenstance. The explanatory poverty of alternate accounts, as I am describing it, perhaps does not consist in the lack of a plausible story about how a normative theory might be grounded, simpliciter. It is in the subsequent difficulty to ground any constraints on the content of such a theory that theism enjoys an explanatory advantage (or so I claim). This advantage is comprised, of course, in what I have already proposed (namely, a theory with content constrained by the nature of a necessarily good, and loving, God).

Indeed, this resonates particularly well with how Rosen describes ethical grounding (as a hyperintensional contrast to intensional definition). Recall:

“Again, as the examples show, the relation between a fact and its grounds is almost maximally intimate. The fact that the rose is red is not identical to the fact that the rose is scarlet. The fact that Sasha is a vixen is not identical to the fact that Sasha is female and a fox. And yet there is a palpable sense in which the grounded fact is not an “addition to reality” over and above its grounds. To employ a familiar metaphor: When God makes the grounds she ipso facto makes the facts they ground. No further creative activity is required. [...] Although metaethicists rarely put the point in quite these terms, it seems to me that the ethical naturalist's key thought is that the normative facts stand to the non-normative facts in precisely this intimate relation.”<sup>24</sup>

I find it hard to see, given this description of ethical grounding, how any plausible ethical ground (or disparate sets of grounds, for that matter) could fail to point towards any explanation at all *for what might make a particular fact or set of facts and properties a candidate for being 'normative'*.

In other words, what constitutes the bar for a state of affairs to instantiate moral properties?

Without an explicatively constitutive component, the proposed ground seems to be nothing over and above a description of the obtaining state of affairs without any qualifying or explanatory referent

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 10

against which it can be measured.

And this raises a more general question about non-theistic ethical naturalism: namely why grounding relationships are needed at all in this case (other than to putatively protect space for non-reductive naturalism)? If it has no explanatory purpose (as described above) it begins to also look worryingly epiphenomenal. To my lights, it would be much simpler and less problematic to return to (1) through (4) in Rosen and call it a day.<sup>25</sup> As an example, one of the scenarios offered glossing heterogeneity in ethical grounding proposes one act being wrong in virtue of being a killing, and another being wrong in virtue of being an act of promise breaking. This is supposed to demonstrate the intuition favoring different grounds for different states of affairs; however, I think it becomes difficult to sustain if we ask the 'next' question: namely, if an act is wrong in virtue of it being the breaking of a promise, what explains *why* promise breaking *is wrong*? Is it just a brute normative fact that necessarily obtains? Is it instead a result of *that* type of promise breaking being non-beneficial in our past evolutionary history (with all the dangerous ramifications for realism on that interpretation)? To plainly state the challenge, in virtue of 'what' do instantiations of wrong *necessarily* supervene on identical acts of promise breaking across *all* possible worlds?<sup>26</sup>

I think, as a positive theistic response, that a (perhaps, for Scanlon, 'strange') metaphysical truthmaker *qua* ground for normativity (or even a ground for normativity's grounding conditions), as provided by theistic theories, provides what is missing in non-theistic accounts – a contentful narrative explaining both 1) the genesis, and 2) the content of the constitutive elements within the theory being considered. These elements are hardly insubstantial, and they are more than merely epiphenomenal within the grounding formulations discussed above. As just noted, they also generate a subsequent challenge to the parity of non-theistic formulations – namely, a request for an explanation for both why normative facts and properties exist at all as well as what might constrain

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-7, entailing, of course, naturalistic reduction.

<sup>26</sup> I believe this adds weight to Rosen's allusion to the plausibility of 'normative necessity' in his explication of non-naturalism's taxonomy (pp. 26-27 and in his 2014). I cannot explore this further here except to say that I am sympathetic to the idea that what we seem to perceive as metaphysical necessity in the ethical case might actually be something weaker yet still account for our intuitions about normative supervenience (across, perhaps, *nearby* possible worlds).

their content in some principled way. Without answers to those questions, the non-theist seems to be committed to biting a 'bruteness bullet' of her own in this case – perhaps akin to the naturalist's oft-wielded charge of bruteness in the case of explaining ethical supervenience within non-naturalistic ethical theories.<sup>27</sup> One might wonder why non-theistic normative naturalists attempt to stay within realism's camp at this point, when non-cognitive explanations might more easily explain the perceived content of normativity without the apparent need to claim that it's 'just there', without any reason, explanation, or set of limits or definitions for it.

Let me quickly head off a seemingly attractive riposte at this point. It would be tempting to reply that one could base her non-theistic, natural or non-natural theory of normativity on *human nature* in the same way as I describe grounding the theist's theory on God's nature.<sup>28</sup> Can't we simply look at evolutionary history and derive the same lessons from what has served human-kind well and what has not? While this might look initially like an equitable comparison, I don't think it works as such in this context (i.e. as a constraint on content as well as providing an explanation), and it additionally raises the specter of a difficult non-cognitive or nihilistic challenge to moral realism.<sup>29</sup> It seems fairly uncontroversial that human nature (and any conjecture as to its "action-guidingness") is very much a *contingent* quantity. Recall that, if common ground exists between normative realists, it exists in virtue of widespread agreement about normative supervenience, namely: that there cannot be a change in only the normative valences that obtain between identical states of natural affairs. This posits *necessary* connections between natural states of affairs and normative properties. It seems that, if human nature simpliciter is the ground for normative properties (in the same way I have proposed divine nature), then the normative properties that obtain seem to do so in virtue of a worryingly ad hoc basis.

God's nature, as I have described it, is anything but contingent. Being necessary, it fulfills

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27 See McPherson (2012) for a clear and particularly forceful formulation of this kind of challenge. Of course, my point here may not surprise or bother the reductive naturalist at all. See Schroeder (2005: 10-11) for the observation that reductionists may also have to accept discontinuous connections (specifically in the context of reduction as analysis of disjoint sets of properties).

28 Thanks to Nate Rockwood for urging me to clarify this point.

29 See Street (2006) for a representative argument. See Vavova (2014) for a response resulting in a more refined version.

the axiomatic requirements for a “general normative law” as glossed above in a way that contingent human nature cannot match, and, as a result, I believe a theistic theory can still claim an explanatory advantage in this regard. Put differently, theistic naturalism more contentfully grounds (and helps to explain) the necessity of ethical supervenience (in the worlds God chooses to create).

To apply this explanation to a paradigmatic example, consider the case of “torturing a baby for fun”. Theories proposing and defending versions of normative realism often suggest that the widely-held intuitions that apparently obtain in this type of scenario, to the effect that many (if not most) people assess it as necessarily being wrong, lend credence to proposals supporting: 1) the 'existence' of normative facts and properties, and 2) ethical supervenience as a necessarily obtaining co-variance relationship between the non-normative facts as described and the normative properties that travel with them. This seems plausible enough, but as I noted above with respect to heterogeneous sets of grounding conditions,<sup>30</sup> the 'next' question appears problematic. Why is this so? What (truthmaker?) makes it the case that torturing babies for fun is wrong in all possible worlds (i.e. in accordance with ethical supervenience as normally construed)?

If we categorize the wrongness of this scenario as being grounded in some brute, axiomatic normative law(s), then torturing babies for fun turns out to be wrong as a matter of mere happenstance. In virtue of what, then, would it be wrong in all possible worlds? Is it just that we seem to have trouble imagining a world in which causing pain for no useful reason, and deriving pleasure from that act, is other than wrong? Maybe I am in the minority, but I can certainly *imagine* such a world. It admittedly wouldn't be one I'd like to inhabit, but it doesn't seem unimaginable as an option for a distantly possible world. Basing both normative realism, and its associated co-variance with certain non-normative states of affairs, on broadly coincident intuitions (that might be described as being alternately grounded in conative mental states) appears worryingly contingent, and this subsequently puts pressure on realism to explain why these intuitions aren't better explained

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<sup>30</sup> In this case, torturing babies for fun being wrong in virtue of being an act causing pain for no useful reason and also, perhaps in virtue of deriving pleasure from an act of 'senseless' pain-giving.

as having originated alongside evolutionary developments favoring the protection of progeny as well as discouraging pleasure in the case of causing needless pain.

The relative explanatory deficiency of non-theistic naturalism can thus be stated as the reliance on normativity, and its necessary co-variance with certain non-normative states of affairs, having the makeup it does "just because it does".<sup>31</sup> Perhaps one could say that the common intuitions we report about the apparent necessity of normative supervenience approximate a seemingly miraculous coincidence in the way we conceive of certain states of affairs and the normative properties entailed by them across (at least nearby) possible worlds. What theism adds to naturalism is an explanation for this 'miraculous' convergence of intuitions and the way those intuitions are cashed out within theories of normative realism.<sup>32</sup> The general normative laws that obtain in any world God chooses to create must align with the necessary attributes of his nature. That nature constrains their content by providing a 'bar' for what could count as being right or wrong. Ethical supervenience is explained by his nature in like manner, providing an answer for why certain co-variances obtain in identical situations across *only* those worlds he chooses (or would choose) to create.<sup>33</sup> Fine (2002) refers to 'normative necessity' perhaps picking out the existence of a type of moral law. Theists would agree and, in addition, provide a characterization of that law which is certainly substantive with regard to allaying the worries noted above.

To return briefly to our scenario, torturing a baby for fun, while perhaps normatively acceptable in a distant possible world (one which God wouldn't, presumably, create), seems wrong as a result of intuitions that are designed by him and respond to his creative work in this world. His nature requires that properties like right or wrong reflect its attributes: namely in this case to be good and loving. Our apprehension of normative properties is likewise not mysterious, as it would appear inconsistent for God to have designed and implemented a system of morality without also

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31 This is, I think, precisely the motivation behind Rosen's (and Fine's) arguments for a different sort of necessity that allows for distant possible worlds to exist such that there can be differences in normative valences obtaining as a result of identical non-normative states of affairs.

32 Thanks to Nate Rockwood for this phrasing.

33 Entailing, as a result, a weaker (or world-bound) formulation of ethical supervenience than the consensus version.

providing a way for rational beings to note and respond to it.<sup>34</sup>

In closing, perhaps more could be said supporting a more *general* advantage for theism here. While controversial, a rich tradition of arguments have been deployed (and resisted) concerning not only the existence of God, but also of *sui generis* properties, based on the nature of God and his creation or design. It could be said that those arguments, while perhaps *en vogue*, have framed a significant portion of (western) philosophical debate, especially within the context of metaphysical grounding for ethics.<sup>35</sup> More might then need to be said by non-theists to claim theoretical parity. This might be framed in light of the recent literature discussing metaphysical primitives – specifically in the case of evaluating a putative primitive's explanatory usefulness. Tristram McPherson has recently put forward a well-crafted argument deflating the seeming explanatory advantage (metaphysically) of non-naturalism.<sup>36</sup> It is not, however, clear to me how naturalism escapes the same challenge. If metaphysical necessity is claimed for normative supervenience, as referenced to identical sets of natural properties, the mechanism requiring that co-variance calls for the same kind of explanation. The 'black box' of naturalism seems unsatisfactory in this regard. Coincidence of the “stuff” making up both parts of the equation (non-normative and/or normative) seems inadequate to explain a requirement for *necessary* co-variance, without a requisite constraint on what can or cannot be a candidate for normativity .

I think that theistic formulations of moral realism might escape these worries and gain a general explanatory advantage over non-theistic accounts as a result. The theist's metaphysical primitives just are God and the necessary constraints entailed by his nature. These seem to meet the *desiderata* for being useful in theory – in the way I use them here, they are not wholly mysterious,

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34 Note that the theist can also allow for the fact that we are often mistaken in the interpretation of these intuitions as a result of sin and the 'fall' following the creation of this world.

35 There are, of course, other traditional ethical theories with similar pedigrees in this regard. One immediately thinks of platonic 'forms' and the similarity of their characterization to grounding relationships. Another easy example, in an aristotelian context, would be metaphysical grounding referenced to an 'unmoved mover'. Neither of these are particularly popular within contemporary metaethical literature and especially among ethical naturalists. Interestingly, even given these examples, it is less easy to think of a candidate that does *not* feature what Scanlon would call a "strange metaphysical truthmaker", and as such, they bear a resemblance to theism in this context. As a comment to an earlier draft, Tristram McPherson reminded me that an appeal to God's nature is *the paradigm of metaphysical explanation* (emphasis mine). That is the intuition I am trying to capture here to highlight a putative 'general advantage' for theism if grounding is leveraged as the explanatory foundation under examination.

36 2016, sections 3-4.



and they certainly do plausible explanatory work in the context of being a ground for normativity.

#### **§4 Conclusion**

Theistic theories of metaethics have largely been, to this point, seemingly hostage to either a supernatural characterization (and a resultant paucity of theoretical engagement) or the genre of non-naturalism. Contemporary variants of ethical naturalism, reductive or not, have been quite rare in the case of theorists wishing to base normativity on God's commands or his motivations. Rosen, in his taxonomy, has clarified both logical and metaphysical space for theistic interpretations of naturalistic metaethics while perhaps intimating that theistic accounts *should* be naturalistic.

Naturalism is attractive for several reasons, most notably the avoidance of metaphysical and epistemological objections that non-natural theories incur generally when attempting to explain the apprehension and instantiation of normative properties. If theism can consistently maintain its commitments while by-passing these hurdles, naturalism might be a wise choice. In this paper, I've shown that theism adds both specific challenges and explanatory content to normative naturalism, specifically when considering a variant of non-reductive naturalism consistent with the most robust formulations of theism. These are, I claim, answerable and theistic responses highlight explanatory advantages that a theory of divinely designed normativity brings to the table. They, in turn, generate correlative challenges to which non-theists might need to respond.

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