

Expressivism and Normative Metaphysics*

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1 Preliminaries: Lewisian eliteness and metaphysical commitments

Begin with David Lewis's notion of a perfectly natural property, or (to avoid terminological confusion at a later point) a perfectly elite, joint-cutting property. To a rough first approximation, these are the metaphysically privileged properties that are distinguished from other, less elite properties by the theoretical roles that they play. Any two things which share a perfectly elite property will thereby objectively resemble each other to some degree; the perfectly elite properties provide a supervenience base on which all else supervenes, and the presence of perfectly elite properties distinguishes genuine laws from gerrymandered generalizations.

Because eliteness plays these roles, differences over perfect eliteness are not metaphysically inconsequential. Take two theories which agree entirely over what exists—say, both theories hold that properties A, B, and C exist. In Quinean jargon, these theories agree over ontology. But suppose one theory holds that each of the properties A, B, and C are perfectly elite, while the other theory holds that only A and B are. These theories differ, intuitively, over an important point of metaphysics, as the former takes on additional commitment by calling C perfectly elite.¹

The picture described above is a familiar and contentious one from the metaphysics literature; my aim is not to defend it here. Instead I wish to explore the consequences of such a picture for the metaphysical implications of "Quasi-realist" Expressivism about the normative, of the kind developed by Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn.² The central thesis I will explore in this is that Quasi-realist Expressivism differs from standard non-naturalistic realism about the normative

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¹For example: if C is a mental property like *pain*, then the first theory might be Cartesian about mental properties, while the second is a reductive physicalist theory. (Note the difference cannot be captured by claiming that pain does not exist according to second theory—see Dunaway (MS) for discussion.)

²The canonical discussions of the Quasi-realist view can be found in Blackburn (1980) and Gibbard (2003: Ch. 9).

in exactly the way the two views described in the previous paragraph differ from each other. Both theories hold that there are normative truths, that there are normative facts and properties, and that these exist mind-independently, etc. In this respect they hold the same commitments regarding what exists. But they differ over the Lewisian eliteness of normative properties: while the non-naturalist view entails that a metaphysical halo of eliteness is drawn around the property *obligation*, the Quasi-realist view entails that there is no halo there.

To explain the significance of this thesis, I first discuss in §2 the Quasi-realist program in more detail. I then outline in §3 I outline the case that standard non-naturalistic realism is committed to the eliteness of the normative. 4 makes the case for the second half of this thesis, that Quasi-realism entails that the normative is not elite.

2 Quasi-realism

2.1 A very brief primer on Quasi-realism

The Quasi-realist program, as I will understand it, proceeds roughly as follows. First, it begins with the familiar Expressivist theory of normative language, according to which the meaning of normative sentences is explained by the state of mind those sentences express. Let us follow Gibbard and say that, according to the Expressivist, for any atomic normative sentence *S*, the meaning of *S* is explained by the planning-state (or *plan*, for short) it expresses.³ Thus on the Expressivist view the meaning of sentences like

- (1) One ought not to tell lies

is explained by the fact that (1) expresses a plan that rules out telling lies in a variety of conceivable circumstances.

So far this is a theory of what *sentences* mean. There is, at this point, the possibility of claiming that while an Expressivist can accept the sentence (1), she cannot accept that one ought not to tell lies, since the sentence is only acceptable for the Expressivist on something other than its English meaning. Since I do not wish to critique the basic Expressivist view on these grounds, I will spot her a premise which guarantees that, since the sentence (1) is acceptable on her view, then that one ought not to tell lies is also consistent with her view (and similarly for other transitions between the formal and material mode). I will call this the *disquotational principle*, or DISQUOTATION for short:

DISQUOTATION If '*S*' is a basic normative sentence and the acceptability of '*S*' is explained in terms of the coherent planning state it expresses, then how it

³On Gibbard's official theory, a planning-state is a state of mind that is consistent with some *hyperplans*—fully decided plans for what to do in every conceivable situation—and rule out others. I will ignore these details of Gibbard's view for the sake of exposition in what follows.

could be that *S* has thereby been explained.⁴

A few notes on DISQUOTATION: first, while (given Expressivism) explainability is preserved under disquotation, the principle does not say that *what the explanation is* is preserved under disquotation. To take an example: the Expressivist explains (1) as a sentence that is coherent to accept by virtue of the coherent planning-state that it expresses. She thus has explained how the world could be such that one ought not to tell lies. But she is *not* committed to saying that the state of planning not to tell lies does anything at all to explain why the world is, or could be, such that one ought not to tell lies. The explanation of this fact might, for all we have said, have nothing to do with thoughts, beliefs, or plans.

Second, the principle is restricted so that true instances of DISQUOTATION are the products of substituting basic normative sentences for the schematic variable *S*. I am granting this restricted principle for the sake of argument. But as we extend the Expressivist explanatory strategy, it will be an open question whether her explanations of the meaning of other sentences will permit disquotation in the same way. We will have to keep an eye out for the possibility that, while the Expressivist can explain the meaning of non-atomic *sentences* using her favored strategy, her explanation does not give the meanings of the sentences in English, and hence does not permit disquotation.

I will also assume here that a theory of atomic normative sentences along these lines can be extended to explain the meaning of complex normative sentences and the normative aspects of “mixed” sentences that contain descriptive and normative elements.⁵ What is important for the Quasi-realist project is the following extension of the basic Expressivist approach to normative sentences. Complex sentences about normative truth, facts, belief and so on are plausibly equivalent to normative sentences. To take a well-worn example, the Quasi-realist might claim that a sentence about normative truth such as (2) is equivalent to the basic normative sentence (1):

(2) It is true that one ought not to tell lies.

Given that these sentences are equivalent and an extension of DISQUOTATION, the Expressivist can then accept the biconditional (3):

(3) It is true that one ought not to tell lies iff one ought not to tell lies.

Thus Expressivists with certain normative commitments can infer from this that there are normative truths, which include the truth that one ought not to tell lies.

A similar strategy might be employed to show that it is consistent with the

⁴The relevant principle will of course need to be restricted to not permit disquotation of sentences containing indexical or context-sensitive vocabulary, though I will not try to formulate the principle in detail here. See also Cuneo (MS) for a critical evaluation of uses of disquotation in Expressivist theorizing.

⁵Cf. the “Frege-Geach” problem as discussed in detail in Schroeder (2008) and elsewhere.

Expressivist view that there are some normative facts and properties, and that these facts and properties are mind-independent.

2.2 *The No DIFFERENCE conclusion—what is the problem?*

Suppose the Expressivist's basic explanatory resources also extend to allegedly metaphysically substantive claims about truth, facthood, etc. in the way outlined above. Dreier (2004) summarizes an apparent looming consequence of the success of this program: "those of us who feel confident that there *is* some difference between the two meta-ethical camps should be concerned that we don't know how to say what that difference is."⁶ Gibbard considers a related conclusion: "Quasi-realism, in short, elaborates Expressivism so that it might turn out to coincide with a form of non-naturalism."⁷

The naive formulation of the conclusion suggested here is NO DIFFERENCE:

NO DIFFERENCE There is no difference between Quasi-realist Expressivism and non-naturalism.

On reflection, however, it is clear that NO DIFFERENCE isn't the central question that arises out of the possibility of Quasi-realist Expressivism. There are liable to be *some* differences between the views as developed, though some of these differences will be fairly trivial and pointing them out won't fully resolve the initial puzzle. Gibbard acknowledges the existence of some differences between the views when he says:

Questions of what we ought to do are questions of what to do, questions we pose in deliberation—and this explains the phenomena to which descriptivists appeal. Indeed, I argue that a form of non-naturalism is correct in a way, as far as it goes—but that it is incomplete.⁸

Here Gibbard is referencing his distinctively Expressivist explanation of the meaning of normative language—*viz.*, the explanation of sentences like (1) by reference to the planning state expressed. Since non-naturalists do not typically accept such claims as the explanation of the meaning of normative language, there is clearly some difference between their views, namely a difference in whether the non-naturalist and Expressivist are willing to accept a certain semantic explanation of (1).

What it would be desirable to do, in order to fully resolve Dreier's puzzle, would be to use the difference Gibbard acknowledges to derive a substantive difference between the views. One way to do this—which I will focus on here—would be to argue that, from the difference Gibbard acknowledges, differences

⁶Dreier (2004: 31)

⁷Gibbard (2013: 233)

⁸Gibbard (2003: 20), see also Dreier (2004: 36).

in the *metaphysical commitments* of Quasi-realism and non-naturalism follow. I will understand a difference in metaphysical commitment to be, a difference in the consequences of the views regarding the distribution of some canonical metaphysical category. This is the NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE thesis:

NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE There is no difference between the metaphysical commitments of Quasi-realist Expressivism and non-naturalism.

Traditional attempts to show that NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false have focused on the metaphysical categories of truth, facthood, and existence. I will argue that the project is much more promising when it targets the category of perfect eliteness instead.

2.3 *Theoretical roles: truth, facthood, and eliteness*

Before turning to substantive arguments against NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE, it will be first helpful to make some general observations about why the possibility that it might be true arises in the first place.

Begin with an unpromising resource for showing that NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false, namely truth. Plausibly, if it were the case that non-naturalism entailed that there are normative truths while Quasi-realist Expressivism denied this, then we would have a substantial metaphysical difference between the views; there would, in particular, be a difference over the existence of normative truth. But the Quasi-realist can accept that there are normative truths, for reasons described above. Here is a conjecture about why this is the case, and consequently why the prospects for showing the existence of a metaphysical difference over truth are not good: the theoretical role truth plays is extremely thin. We know that a candidate meaning for 'true' must be one that makes instances the following schema valid, given suitable restrictions:

TRUTH-ROLE

- If S , then it is true that S ,
- If it is true that S , then S .⁹

Henceforth I will say that any property satisfies TRUTH-ROLE is just one with the following feature: were it to be the referent of 'true', all appropriate instances of TRUTH-ROLE would be valid.

One significant constraint on the Quasi-realist program is that it must not only provide some interpretation of sentences like (2) on which it is acceptable given the Expressivist's commitments, it must in addition provide an interpretation of the sentence which is plausibly what the sentence means in *English*. The disquotational principle which we spotted the Expressivist earlier only applies

⁹This principle will need to be restricted to avoid paradox, but I will not attempt to formulate the needed restrictions here.

to English sentences; there would be no path to material mode claims about truth if it could be shown that her claims about what sentences containing 'true' mean were incompatible with the meaning of 'true' in English. There would in this case be no problem in the vicinity of NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE.

(To take an extreme example: suppose the Quasi-realist accepted the sentence (2) but only because she held that it means what 'grass is green' means, and she can accept that grass is green. One could in this case show quite easily that she doesn't accept the existence of normative truth at all, since on her view there is no property that satisfies TRUTH-ROLE. (2) would take on whatever semantic properties 'grass is green' has, and these do not include a satisfier of TRUTH-ROLE.¹⁰)

But there are straightforward reasons to think the Expressivist can not only accept sentences containing 'true'; she can in addition accept that there is a property which satisfies TRUTH-ROLE. She accepts basic normative sentences, via her distinctive Expressivist explanation of their meaning. And there is no obvious reason why, given this explanation, she cannot in addition accept that there is a property which satisfies TRUTH-ROLE.

To deny at this point that the Expressivist genuinely accepts that there are normative truths—to be contrasted with accepting some sentences containing the word 'true' on an alternative interpretation—the truth-enthusiast would need to point to some role over and above TRUTH-ROLE that is such that (i) it is plausible that the English predicate 'true' refers to a property that plays this role, and (ii) Expressivism cannot consistently be extended to accept that there is a property that plays the role. Additional roles for truth are bound to be controversial. And even if there is a more robust role in the offing, the Quasi-realist may succeed in extending her theory to show that she can accept that there is a property which plays the more robust role.

As a particularly vivid illustration of this point, it is helpful to consider how some writers have tried to emphasize the inadequacy of deflationary truth, whose essence is exhausted by TRUTH-ROLE. It is common, for instance, to attempt a distinction between deflationary truth and genuine truth by resort to the all caps term TRUTH, or to add modifiers like 'real' or 'robust' to the term.¹¹ But it is quite clear that, in the absence of an interpretation of what it takes to satisfy the enhanced truth predicate, the Expressivist can consistently maintain that not only are normative sentences true but are also TRUE, really true, robustly true, etc. One might insist that this isn't so, but (in order to avoid a debate that devolves into table-thumping and reliance on subtle verbal inflections to mark important metaphysical distinctions) this would require pointing to an additional theoretical role that TRUTH or one of its cousins plays over and above TRUTH-ROLE. And it would require an argument that the Expressivist can't consistently accept that the

¹⁰See Dunaway (2010) for application of this broad strategy to some Quasi-realist approaches to 'believes'.

¹¹See Enoch (2011) and Finlay (2007) for some examples.

satisfier of the role attaches to (for example) that one ought not to tell lies. The prospects for defeating the NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE thesis with truth as a central resource seem dim, precisely because it is hard to see how TRUTH-ROLE can be supplemented in a way that meets these demands.

This dialectic repeats itself with other candidates for driving a metaphysical wedge between non-naturalism and Quasi-realism. Facts and properties likewise seem to likewise be promising candidates for the metaphysical differences between non-naturalism and Quasi-realism, but as before there are deflationary roles for these entities, as there is apparently nothing which prevents the Expressivist from thinking that there are things which satisfy the following schemas:

FACT-ROLE

- If S , then it is a fact that S ,
- If it is a fact that S , then S .

PROPERTY-ROLE

- If x is F , then x exemplifies F -ness,
- If x exemplifies F -ness, then x is F .¹²

And as before, we might hold that the English terms ‘fact’ and ‘property’ refer to things which play much richer theoretical roles. The Quasi-realist might in turn either reject that the theoretical role in question is one that the referent of the English terms ‘fact’ and ‘property’ require their referents to play, or show it is consistent with Quasi-realism that there are things which play the enhanced role. If we wish to avoid table-thumping in our attack on NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE, we need to find plausible claims about facts or properties that satisfy these dual considerations.

The point of emphasizing this aspect the dialectic surrounding Quasi-realism is that some theoretical resources will plausibly be associated with richer theoretical roles than others. These resources will thereby potentially be more promising for showing that that NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false. There are two reasons why this might be so.

First a notion with a rich theoretical role will require additional interpretive work on the part of the Expressivist. Given a theoretical connection between t and t^* , the Expressivist will not only need to provide an adequate interpretation of t , she will also need to provide an interpretation of t^* which preserves the connections between t and t^* . And given further additional theoretical connections for t^* , the constraints on an adequate interpretation will ramify. The Quasi-realist’s success with incorporating talk using the theoretically thin notions ‘true’, ‘fact’ and the like may not extend to more theoretically rich notions.

¹²As with TRUTH-ROLE, these will need to be restricted to avoid paradox.

But second even if the theoretical connections encoded in the relevant role can be accommodated on the Expressivist’s interpretation, it doesn’t follow that the resulting Quasi-realist view will agree with non-naturalism over matters metaphysical. This is because in general it doesn’t follow from the fact that two views accept the same sentences that they agree—they might accept the relevant sentences by attaching different meanings to them. Call such agreement *merely linguistic*. In the case of ‘true’, which has a thin role, it is difficult to show that someone who has provided an interpretation of ‘true’ on which there is a satisfier of TRUTH-ROLE nevertheless succeeds only at earning a merely linguistic agreement with English speakers who use ‘true’. By contrast, a notion that bears rich theoretical connections is a more promising candidate for a notion that can be used to diagnose merely linguistic disagreement: we can accept that Quasi-realism may provide an interpretation for all of the sentences stating the theoretical role distinctive of the notion, but argue independently that the interpretation of the sentences fails to be about the notion in question. In such a case we would have a failure of an extension of the DISQUOTATION principle.

We need to do better than the thin theoretical roles of truth, facts, and properties. Below I outline Lewisian eliteness as a metaphysically substantive notion that plausibly has a richer theoretical role and is therefore a more promising resource for attacking NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE.

2.4 *The eliteness-role*

Metaphysicians have thought that the perfectly elite properties play a number of important connections to other domains; I mention a few below; this list is by no means intended to be exhaustive.¹³

REFERENCE The perfectly elite properties are easy to refer to.

LAWS The perfectly elite properties feature in genuine laws.

CONFIRMATION Claims including perfectly natural properties are easy to confirm.

Qualifications and clarifications of each of these claims are in order, although I will not spend too much time on them here. The basic idea behind REFERENCE is that, while we can refer to all kinds of properties, facts about reference are determined by the twin considerations of fit with use of our terms and eliteness. The perfectly elite properties need to attain a substantially lower fit with use to qualify as referents than other not-very-elite properties. LAWS claims that what distinguishes the claim ‘electrons repel each other’ from other true but gerrymandered universal generalizations is that only the former contains an elite property. And CONFIRMATION claims that what makes the laws of physics and other universal generalizations knowable on the basis of limited observation is

¹³For a full catalogue, see Dorr and Hawthorne (2013).

that they contain perfectly elite properties. The non-elite generalization that all emeralds are grue is not confirmable on a similar evidential basis.¹⁴

I will take it for granted that there are genuine law-like generalizations about obligation (e.g., that we ought to maximize happiness), and that we, with our limited time and resources for ethical theorizing, can come to know these generalizations. There are of course positions in the literature that reject these claims, but in the interests of space will work under the assumption that LAWS and CONFIRMATION are true when applied to the normative. The status of REFERENCE in both the Realist and Quasi-realist setting will receive more discussion in the following sections.

It will be convenient to speak of specific properties having the features specified in REFERENCE, LAWS, and CONFIRMATION. In what follows, I will adopt the convention of speaking of *satisfaction* of the relevant roles; strictly speaking, however, each of these claims expresses a general proposition and is not the kind of thing that can be satisfied. But there are analogous schema for each claim, which are as follows:

REFERENCE_Φ Φ is easy to refer to.

LAWS_Φ Φ is a candidate to feature in genuine laws.

CONFIRMATION_Φ Claims including Φ are easy to confirm.

Here, Φ is a schematic variable which takes property-names as substitution instances. Hence in what follows I will be asking whether obligation (as our placeholder example of a basic normative property) satisfies REFERENCE_Φ; this amounts to the question of whether obligation is easy to refer to. Similar points apply to LAWS_Φ, CONFIRMATION_Φ, and any other structural features of eliteness.

There is a general feature of each of these roles which goes beyond the mere claim that perfect eliteness has the structural features specified by REFERENCE, LAWS, and CONFIRMATION. Consider REFERENCE—not only are perfectly elite properties like mass easy to refer to, what *explains* why mass is easy to refer to is that mass is perfectly elite. Similarly for LAWS and CONFIRMATION: not only are they true, but the perfect eliteness of certain properties also explains why they are true. That is:

EXPLANATION If a property *p* is perfectly elite, then the perfect eliteness of *p* explains why *p* satisfies REFERENCE_Φ, LAWS_Φ, CONFIRMATION_Φ, etc.

This allows us to characterize the *eliteness-role*: if there are perfectly elite properties, then there are properties which are such that, when we replace Φ with a name for them in the following schema, we obtain a truth:

¹⁴See Lewis (1984) on reference, Lewis (1973) on laws, and Lewis (1983) on confirmation. See Sider (2012: Ch. 3) for more on each role. I will focus on the REFERENCE role here; the others function as placeholders for whatever additional role eliteness plays besides settling reference.

ELITENESS-ROLE Φ is such that $\exists x : \Phi$ satisfies REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ; Φ satisfies LAWS $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ; Φ satisfies CONFIRMATION $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has $x \dots$

Call REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$ and similar claims the *components* of the eliteness-role.

The claim that there is a notion which has something like the structural features specified by REFERENCE, LAWS, CONFIRMATION, and EXPLANATION is a well-known one from Lewis and his followers, and in the next sections I will explore its consequences for NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE. The forgoing considerations suggest that the the notion is a rich one, bearing a wide range of explanatory connections to the linguistic, metaphysical, and epistemic domains. It will, then, be correspondingly more difficult for an Expressivist account of the meaning of normative sentences to be turned into a view on which normative properties have all of the structural features of a perfectly elite property. Thus the notion of eliteness is a promising metaphysical category to explore when evaluating NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE.

3 Eliteness and non-naturalism

The aim of this section and the next is to explore an argument that promises to establish that NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false because non-naturalism and Quasi-realism differ over the eliteness of obligation. Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order.

First caveat: I do not take the arguments below to show that, as a textual matter, non-naturalists have said, or even privately believed, that obligation is perfectly elite. Most discussions of non-naturalism are not conducted in an ideology that distinguishes between elite and non-elite properties, and some proponents of the view would reject the distinction as I am conceiving of it. None of these points will matter to for the issues I will discuss below; the question at hand is what the commitments of non-naturalism and related views *are*, not what commentators say these commitments are.

Second caveat: many will find the claim that obligation is perfectly elite to be implausible or perhaps incoherent on the grounds that the central notion, and its most salient structural features, were introduced by Lewis as primarily applying to physical properties. Thus they will conceive of REFERENCE as constraining *naturalistic* reference, LAWS as a claim about *physical* laws, and CONFIRMATION as an explanation of *scientific* confirmation. There are, however, compelling reasons to reject these as constraints on perfect eliteness. These claims might be true, but they cannot be built into the structural features of eliteness at the outset. The reason is that there is a plausible case to be made that structural features which are restricted in application to physical properties only would not be features of a theoretically interesting property. An artificial constraint on application only to properties in the physical domain would, on other words,

threaten to make the satisfier an unnatural or highly disjunctive kind.¹⁵ Hence it is reasonable to assume that the structural features of perfect eliteness do not *preclude* its application to non-natural normative properties, even if in the end the only instantiators of perfect eliteness are physical.

Since REFERENCE is the structural feature I will be giving most attention to here, it will be helpful to say make a few additional remarks about what the claim amounts to. It is, at a first pass, a claim about how eliteness interacts with other reference-determining features to provide a referent for a term. The basic idea is that broad facts about how a community uses a term are not sufficient to pin down a sufficiently determinate referent for a term; multiple properties will “fit” with the community’s use to roughly similar degrees. REFERENCE is the claim that reference is not thereby wildly indeterminate because use alone does not determine reference. This is because eliteness is also a component—reference is determined by maximization of fit and eliteness. An elite property need not fit best with a community’s use of a term in order for the property to count as the referent; some non-elite properties might fit just as well or better, but the eliteness of one moderately good fit candidate referent can in principle override the greater degree of fit of other less elite candidates.

To help gain fluency with this idea, consider an eliteness-based solution to the famous ‘Kripkenstein’ puzzle about the reference of the term ‘+’ in Kripke (1982). The puzzle in basic form points out that it is very natural to think that the referent of ‘+’ in the mouths of a community much like ours is *plus*, but that there are many other candidate referents that fit the community’s of ‘+’ equally well. One example is the *quus* function: it fits the use of the community’s use of ‘+’ just as well as *plus*, as (on Kripke’s description) it is a function which outputs the sum of any input of a pair numbers under 57; otherwise it outputs 5. Thus for a community that has no dispositions to answer questions involving numbers above 57, just as many of the utterances of the community in question come out as true on an assignment of *quus* as the referent of their ‘+’ as on an assignment of *plus* as the referent. Use-based considerations then will not alone secure the conclusion that ‘+’ as used by such a community refers to *plus*. Those who are attracted to REFERENCE will be tempted to say: even if *plus* and *quus* fit with use equally well, the former is plausibly highly elite while the latter is not. According to the REFERENCE-based solution, *plus* is for this reason determinately the referent of ‘+’.¹⁶

3.1 *Non-naturalism: explanatory desiderata*

A typical non-naturalist view will accept the following claims:

NO INDETERMINACY There is no widespread indeterminacy in what ‘ought’ and

¹⁵Plausibly, moreover, EXPLANATION would not be true of perfect naturalness if it is gerrymandered in this way.

¹⁶I discuss variants on the Kripkenstein case more in §4.

other normative terms refer to.

DISAGREEMENT Communities who use normative terms slightly differently nevertheless succeed in (determinately) referring to the same property, and hence disagree with each other.¹⁷

Importantly a purely use-based conception of the reference of normative terms fails to explain **NO INDETERMINACY** and **DISAGREEMENT**. There are communities for whom the facts about the use of the term ‘ought’ are limited—picturesquely, they have only managed to apply ‘ought’ to a finite range of cases, call this *R*. There exist cases outside of *R*, and multiple properties which fit with the community’s application of ‘ought’ within *R* but which diverge in extension outside of *R* will all fit with the community’s use equally well. With only use-based constraints on reference in play, it will be indeterminate what the referent of ‘ought’ is, contra **NO INDETERMINACY**.

For similar reasons fit with use alone will not explain **DISAGREEMENT**: take for example two communities use ‘ought’ slightly differently (say, one persistently applies it to happiness-maximizing violations of autonomy, while the other consciously and persistently refrains from making such applications). Since distinct properties best fit the use of ‘ought’ by these communities, a purely fit-based approach to reference will predict that these communities refer to distinct properties, contra **DISAGREEMENT**.¹⁸ Analogous claims will be plausible given other more sophisticated accounts of reference available to the non-naturalist (see, for instance, Wedgwood (2007) for a more developed account of normative reference).

3.2 *The exhaustive conception of eliteness*

NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false if non-naturalism holds that obligation is highly elite and Quasi-realist Expressivism does not. In this section I will explore an argument that it follows from **NO INDETERMINACY** and **DISAGREEMENT** plus non-naturalism that obligation is elite. And in the next section I will explore the second half of the eliteness-based solution to **NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE**, by arguing that Expressivism does not have the same consequence.

At the center of this argument is the idea that satisfying the components of the eliteness-role pretty much exhausts what it is to be a perfectly elite property. I will

¹⁷Cf. Horgan and Timmons (1992).

¹⁸Such cases obviously bear some resemblance to the “Moral Twin Earth” cases from Horgan and Timmons (1992) and elsewhere. Horgan and Timmons clearly take these cases to be especially problematic for *naturalistic* moral realism, since they take themselves to have an argument that the naturalistic versions are committed to giving the wrong result in these cases. (For interpretation and criticism, see Dunaway and McPherson (MS).) Even though they do not single out moral realism in its non-naturalist incarnations for criticism on similar grounds, a non-naturalist will still need an explanation for the same disagreement data. Moreover I am making no assumptions about the extent of genuine disagreement—I am only assuming that some communities manage to use their normative terms differently yet still refer to the same property. Eliteness-like metaphysical categories are also beneficial to the non-naturalist in other ways too, see Dunaway (2015).

call this the *exhaustive conception* of eliteness.¹⁹ On the exhaustive conception, what it is to be elite *just is* to play the role of an elite property. Playing the eliteness-role is not only necessary but also sufficient for being perfectly elite.

We can encode this claim in the following ELITENESS DEFINITION:

ELITENESS DEF. Φ has the property x and $x =$ perfect eliteness iff Φ satisfies REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ; Φ satisfies LAWS $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ; Φ satisfies CONFIRMATION $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ...

This means that obligation must satisfy REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$ by (i) being easy to refer to because of some property it has, and (ii) being such that the same property also explains why obligation plays the other components of the eliteness role. I will take each of these points in turn.

3.3 *Non-naturalism, reduction, and ease of reference*

The first question is whether obligation has a property that explains why it is easy to refer to (I will assume from here on that it must somehow be easy to refer to; this is needed for an adequate explanation of NO INDETERMINACY and DISAGREEMENT.) The alternative is that the ease of reference to obligation is explained by its relation to other, distinct properties. Take a simple case: if being a Marge is being a thing that either has mass or charge, Margehood will be easy to refer to. One needs only to introduce it via its canonical definition ‘having mass or charge’. But it isn’t a property of Margehood that explains why it is easy to refer to; the ease of referring to mass and charge separately does all of the explanatory work. So the first step is to rule out that the non-naturalist can explain the ease of referring to obligation via the ease of referring to other, distinct properties.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full characterization of the non-naturalist view. I will only assume a minimal commitment of the view, which is ANTI-REDUCTIONISM:

ANTI-REDUCTIONISM If non-naturalism is true, then obligation is not reducible.²⁰

I also won’t say much about what reduction is here, but the key claim for our purposes is that it is a dependence relation, and hence is explanatory. A reduction of As to Bs requires that all of the features of the As be explainable in B -theoretic

¹⁹Compare: there are two conceptions of what it is to be an electron. On one, attracting protons and repelling other electrons is just what it is to be an electron; anything which plays this role is an electron. On the second, electronhood might have played the mass-role, the charge-role, etc. The first conception is akin to a denial that properties have “quiddities”; there is nothing to what it is to be a certain property over and above playing a certain role. The approach to eliteness that I am adopting here is akin to the quiddity-denying approach to electronhood.

²⁰Of course even non-naturalists can accept intra-normative reductions, and some versions of non-naturalism will reduce obligation to other normative properties. For simplicity I have formulated ANTI-REDUCTIONISM under the assumption that it is obligation that is normatively basic.

terms. Given non-naturalism about obligation, all reductive explanations of the features of obligation are false.²¹

The first part of the argument that obligation satisfies ELITENESS DEF. and so is perfectly elite is that the ease of referring to obligation must be explained by a feature of obligation itself, since the non-naturalist is committed to ANTI-REDUCTIONISM. The non-naturalist is as a result committed to the falsity of any view which attempts to explain the ease of referring to obligation in terms of the ease of referring to other properties that are distinct from it. While the ease of referring to Margehood is explainable in non-Marge-theoretic terms, the ease of referring to obligation isn't explainable in non-obligation-theoretic terms: it must be a feature of obligation that, at the most basic level, explains why the property is easy to refer to.

3.4 Parsimony and consistent roles

The second part of the argument is to establish that it is the same feature which explains why obligation satisfies the other components of the eliteness-role as well. The alternative is that, while obligation has some property which explains why it plays each of the individual components of the eliteness-role, there is no one property that it has which explains why it plays all of them. On this alternative, obligation satisfies not ELITENESS-ROLE but the following, incompatible schema:

DISJUNCTIVE-ROLE $\exists x, y, z \dots : (x \neq y) \vee (y \neq z) \vee \dots$ and Φ satisfies
 REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has x ; Φ satisfies LAWS $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has y ; Φ satisfies
 CONFIRMATION $_{\Phi}$ because Φ has $z \dots$

That is: there is some feature of obligation x that explains why it satisfies REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$; there is some feature of obligation y that explains why it satisfies LAWS $_{\Phi}$, there is some feature of obligation z that explains why it satisfies CONFIRMATION $_{\Phi}$, and so on; and in addition, not all of these explanatory features are identical. If obligation satisfies DISJUNCTIVE-ROLE, it doesn't satisfy ELITENESS-ROLE.

Given the overall coherence of the Lewisian framework we are assuming here, there is a strong case to be made that the non-naturalist should reject that obligation satisfies DISJUNCTIVE-ROLE instead of ELITENESS-ROLE. First there are parsimony considerations: given that there are some unreduced features of obligation which explain why obligation satisfies REFERENCE $_{\Phi}$, LAWS $_{\Phi}$, CONFIRMATION $_{\Phi}$, etc., the non-naturalist should, all things considered, hold that it is the *same* property which is explanatory each case. She would have a substantially less parsimonious theory if she were to hold that the properties in question were distinct.

²¹See Barnes (2012) for more on dependence and related metaphysical notions, and Bennett (2011) for more on the relationship between the metaphysical relation of *ground* and other metaphysical notions.

Of course there are plenty of cases where a lack of parsimony is called for: sometimes a theory cannot be explanatorily adequate without introducing additional explananda. (The non-naturalist should be familiar with this need; her commitment to unreducible normative properties is motivated by the view that the more parsimonious naturalist view is explanatorily inadequate.) If the components of ELITENESS-ROLE could not be jointly satisfied by a single property, then there would be reason to reject the claim that it is a single property of obligation that explains all of the relevant features. For instance: if reference and confirmation were related in ways which required that some properties which are easy to refer to are not properties that feature in easy to confirm claims, then it would perhaps be warranted to think that obligation satisfies DISJUNCTIVE-ROLE instead.

It is a large question beyond the scope of this paper whether the components of the eliteness-role are consistent in this way. All I will point out here is that this is a question about the viability of an eliteness-based metaphysics in general, and is not a question specific to the eliteness of obligation in particular. If the Lewisian program is a viable framework for metaphysics, then there are no features of the normative in particular that require us to accept that obligation satisfies DISJUNCTIVE-ROLE rather than ELITENESS-ROLE.

This concludes the case for the first half of the central thesis of this paper. Within a Lewisian metaphysical framework, non-naturalism will entail that normative properties are perfectly elite. NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false if Quasi-realist Expressivism does not carry the same commitment.

4 Eliteness and Quasi-realism

The hypothesis laid out in §1 was that non-naturalism and Quasi-realism differ in their commitments regarding the perfect eliteness of obligation. We have already seen how the structural features of eliteness might be used to argue for the first half of this thesis: obligation is perfectly elite on the non-naturalist view. This section explores an argument for the second half: obligation is not perfectly elite on the Quasi-realist view. This is because Quasi-realism entails that obligation does not satisfy ELITENESS-ROLE.

An argument that obligation is not a property that plays this role would show that there is no feature it has which explains why it satisfies REFERENCE_Φ or one of the other components. As an explanatory notion, eliteness is subject to parsimony considerations: thus we can infer that the Quasi-realism entails that there is no such a feature if her view explains all of the relevant claims without reference to such a feature. The main concern of this section is then to look an argument for the conclusion that the Quasi-realist view does in fact accomplish all of the relevant explanatory work without invoking a property that plays the eliteness-role. I will focus on the Expressivist account of meaning and reference developed in Gibbard (2013), since it is the most complete and sophisticated discussion of these issues

in the literature.

4.1 Gibbard on normativity and reference

If obligation plays the eliteness-role, then it is necessary (though not sufficient) that it is easy to refer to. That is, that REFERENCE_O must be true:

REFERENCE_O Obligation is easy to refer to.

In addition, if obligation is perfectly elite, it must not only be easy to refer to, it must be easy to refer to *because* of its perfect eliteness. That is, EXPLANATION_O must be true as well:

EXPLANATION_O Obligation is easy to refer to because it is perfectly elite.

First I will outline in simplified form Gibbard's account of why REFERENCE_O is true on (or at least compatible with) his version of Expressivism. REFERENCE_O is equivalent to a conjunction of claims about what particular speakers in particular linguistic and environmental circumstances refer to. Hence if obligation is easy to refer to, then lots of speakers who use normative language in different ways and are in different surroundings will all manage to refer to the same property, namely obligation. That is, a wide range of claims in the form of R_i will be true, where P_O is a placeholder for whatever property obligation is:

R_i 'ought' as used by s_i in c_i refers to P_O .

The upshot is that the Expressivist who accepts REFERENCE_O will think that 'ought' as used by s_1 in c_1 refers to P_O , 'ought' as used by s_2 in c_2 refers to P_O , and so on far a wide variety of conceivable speakers and circumstances.²²

The Gibbard account explains why claims of the form R_i are true. The discussion is set in the larger context of an Expressivist treatment of 'means', which Gibbard analyzes as a normative notion. He then applies the explanatory resources to the related notion of reference, which is our primary interest here. As a primer on Gibbard's treatment, consider his case of Quursula, which is a variant on the Kripke (1982) discussion of meaning addition mentioned in §3. Quursula has no dispositions to use the sign '+' when presented with queries involving '+' and numbers over 50. (She simply answers randomly for such questions, or looks confused and doesn't answer at all.) For simpler questions involving '+', she reliably adds—or does something like adding. But her surrounding community is not exactly like her. While they do add for the same simple questions, they also

²²A terminological note: here and in what follows I will assume that single-quoted words like the occurrence of 'ought' in R_i refer only to uses of the word that have the same semantic role as the terms in our actual usage do. Thus all occurrences of 'ought' will be understood to have a broadly normative meaning and I will be ignoring possibilities where, for example, 'ought' is used in the way 'green' is actually used. This papers over some difficult issues, see Schroeter and Schroeter (2009) for more discussion.

take a stance on the more complicated questions, as they respond by applying the *quus* function to the relevant pairs, answering '5' for all of them.

Gibbard next introduces two theorists about meaning; these are theorists who make claims about what '+' means in Quursula's mouth. The first is Tyler, who holds a *communal* theory according to which both the dispositions of an individual and the dispositions of her linguistic community determine what she means. The second is Jerry, who holds an *individualistic* theory according to which an individual's dispositions and the relative simplicity of candidate referents determine what she means. Tyler and Jerry hold two incompatible meta-semantic theories, and Gibbard describes their disagreement in the familiar Expressivist way. In short, he says that Tyler and Jerry, in accepting different theories about what Quursula means, adopt different plans for their own linguistic behavior in Quursula's situation. Tyler plans to quadd with the rest of Quursula's community in the circumstance where he is presented with a problem containing '+', while Jerry plans for the same circumstance to add. These plans are incompatible. It would be incoherent to plan for one and the same circumstance to both respond with the result of adding and quadding. Thus Tyler and Jerry disagree about what Quursula means. Gibbard summarizes:

An Expressivist could further maintain that the issue is just this: which statements of Quursula's to accept if one is Quursula. At issue between Jerry and Tyler is at least this: whether, if one is Quursula, to accept or reject the sentence she writes ' $68 + 57 = 125$ ' [...] It is a difference on what to accept if in a hypothetical circumstance, that of being Quursula.²³

It is straightforward to turn this into an account of what it is to accept claims about what 'means PLUS' refers to. Accepting a meaning-claim is just to plan to use the term in question in certain ways. Claims about reference follow from meaning-claims in these cases, and so accepting a reference-claim must also consist in planning in certain ways. In Gibbard's example, Jerry and Tyler will not only disagree about the meaning of '+' in virtue of their divergent plans for which sentence to accept in Quursula's circumstance. And they disagree about the *referent* of '+', for the same reason: their plans for which property to apply their term '+' to are incompatible. Jerry thinks '+' refers to whatever has the individualistic property, and plans to apply '+' accordingly; Tyler thinks that '+' refers to whatever has the communal property, and adopts the corresponding plans. So Jerry and Tyler disagree about the reference of '+' because these plans are inconsistent: in some circumstances (e.g., Quursula's), the individualistic and communal plans are incompatible. Planning with Jerry means thereby not planning with Tyler, and *vice versa*.

This is an explanation of what claims about the reference of '+' are, and how disagreements on the topic are explained by plans about what to do with '+' in

²³Gibbard (2013: 46)

Quursula's circumstance. The same resources can be used in an explanation of what 'ought' refers to as well. Begin with claims about the reference of 'ought' in a circumstance, which are instances of R_i . Since—just as in the case of Jerry and Tyler with '+'—these claims will be explained by reference to the plans that constitute accepting them, each instance of R_i will be explained by the planning-state RP_i which constitutes acceptance of it:

RP_i For the circumstance of being s_i in c_i , to apply 'ought' to P_O .

Since REFERENCE_O is a conjunction of R_i -claims, it is, in the language of Gibbard (2003: 92 ff.), *plan-laden*, and is consistent with Expressivism.

4.2 Interlude: plan-laden plans

How does this explanation of normative reference bears on the eliteness of obligation? I will address this question below, but there is one crucial resource we need first to address it. This is the concept of claims that are *doubly plan-laden*.²⁴

Above we showed how an Expressivist can accept a about the reference of 'ought', REFERENCE_O . This claim is "plan-laden", in the sense that accepting it is constituted by adopting a certain type of plan. But some plans are themselves specified using plan-laden terminology. These are doubly plan-laden claims. More carefully, a claim that is doubly plan-laden can be characterized as follows:

S is *doubly plan-laden* just in case:

- (i) Accepting S is constituted by adopting plan P_S , and
- (ii) A description of P_S is itself plan-laden; P_S is a plan to ϕ if s in c where the expression ' ϕ if s in c ' is itself plan-laden.

Claims about normative reference are paradigms of the doubly plan-laden. We have already explored in detail why they satisfy clause (i). But they are distinctively doubly plan-laden because they also satisfy clause (ii).

To illustrate: to claim that 'ought' refers to P_O is to plan to apply 'ought' to P_O in various circumstances. But P_O is a placeholder for the property of obligation, whatever property that might be. And 'obligation' is plan-laden. So planning to apply 'ought' to a property when one thinks that 'ought' refers to that property involves thinking that one ought to do the actions that have that property. And that involves planning to *do* the action that has that property, which is a further plan. This makes claims about the reference of 'ought' doubly plan-laden.

We can be more specific about what the second layer of plans consists in. Plans of the form RP_i constitute acceptance of claims about the reference of 'ought' in a circumstance c_i . But since 'ought' is a term that expresses all-things-considered practical obligation, it is incoherent to plan to apply 'ought' to an action in a circumstance yet not plan to *do* that action in the relevant circumstance. Thus

²⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this issue.

one's first-order plans about what to do in various contingencies constrain how one might coherently plan to use the word 'ought'. It is only coherent to adopt RP_i -plans which coincide with one's plans concerning what to do in the relevant circumstances. And this means that, for the specific speaker s_i and circumstance c_i , one can rationally adopt the plan RP_i only if one has the corresponding plan OP_i :

OP_i For the circumstance of being s_i in c_i , to do the action that has P_O .

But OP_i -plans just are the plans that constitute acceptance of ordinary normative claims, such as claims in the form of O_i :

O_i In the circumstance where one is s_i in c_i , one ought to do the action that has P_O .

To sum up: reference-claims about 'ought' are plan-laden. In addition the descriptions of these plans are themselves plan-laden, what it is to think that someone has the plan that constitutes thinking that 'ought' refers to a particular property involves thinking that actions which have that property ought to be done. These obligation-claims are themselves plan-laden. So reference-claims about 'ought' are doubly plan-laden.

4.3 *Expressivist reference and explanation*

The forgoing gives some details on an Expressivist explanation of normative reference. We can now apply these details to the question of whether EXPLANATION_O is true according to the Quasi-realist, and more generally to the question of whether obligation is elite on this view.

Note first that the Quasi-realist who takes Gibbard's approach can grant that obligation is easy to refer to. This just means that some people refer to obligation without using 'ought' in a way that perfectly fits the property. And of course the Quasi-realist will think that these people do refer to obligation; the Quasi-realist will plan to apply 'ought' to obligation in the circumstance of being one of these users.

So the Quasi-realist need not disagree with others over what certain speakers refer to with 'ought'. REFERENCE_O is not in dispute. Rather there is disagreement over why REFERENCE_O is true. And this gives rise to a non-trivial difference between the Quasi-realist and her opponents: they disagree on the truth of EXPLANATION_O by virtue of adopting different explanations of the agreed-upon facts about normative reference.

Gibbard's view entails that EXPLANATION_O is false because nothing in the explanation invokes a feature of obligation that explains why it is easy to refer to. We needed only plans in the form of OP_i . These not only explain ordinary normative claims, they also constrain which plans of the form RP_i one can coherently adopt. Since the RP_i -plans in turn explain reference-claims (including

REFERENCE_O), no property of obligation appears in the explanation of why it is easy to refer to. Hence considerations of parsimony require that the view hold there is no property that plays the eliteness-role. EXPLANATION_O is false.

Thus obligation is not elite according to the Quasi-realist. But it is crucial to note that this argument does not show that *no* properties are perfectly elite on this view.²⁵ There is room on Gibbard's view for eliteness to explain why some physical properties are easy to refer to; this space cannot however be extended to include normative properties among the perfectly elite.

Consider a reference-claim for a paradigm physical property:

REFERENCE_E Electronhood is easy to refer to.

REFERENCE_E is also a claim which can be captured by a long conjunction of claims which hold that various speakers in various circumstances refer with their term 'electron' to electronhood. And these particular claims about reference are plan-laden. To accept them is to plan, for the circumstance of being the speaker in the circumstance in question, to apply 'electron' to electronhood.

But this does not mean that an Expressivist explanation of REFERENCE_E does without appealing to the eliteness of electronhood. For the planning-states which feature in the explanation of REFERENCE_E are plans concerning what to do in various circumstances relation to *electronhood*, and what it is to have *that* plan may be partly explained by the eliteness of electronhood. Planning to apply 'electron' to electrons is easy because electrons are easy to refer to. Similarly for other physical properties; there is room for their eliteness because eliteness can explain why a wide variety of speakers in various circumstances have plans about these properties rather than some other non-elite, gerrymandered properties in the vicinity. Thus Gibbard's expressivist account of reference does not rule out eliteness explaining REFERENCE_E and other claims about naturalistic reference.

But REFERENCE_O cannot be explained via an analogous role for eliteness of obligation. This is why the fact that claims about normative reference are *doubly* plan-laden is significant. Instead of the eliteness of a property in the content of the relevant plan, the second layer of plan-ladenness does the explanatory work in explaining the reference of 'ought'. Given one's first order planning-states about what to do in for the circumstance of being s_i in c_i , one is already committed to planning for the circumstance of being s_i in c_i to apply 'ought' only to the relevant action. This is what explains REFERENCE_O, not eliteness. The work is already done by plans about what to do in the relevant circumstances, the OP_i -plans. In general, normative facts (which the Expressivist has a plan-based explanation of) do the explanatory work for reference-claims about 'ought', where eliteness does the analogous work in non-normative cases.

Since this gives us an explanation with out recourse to eliteness, we have an explanation of why obligation is not elite on the Quasi-realist view. And it does the explaining without generalizing to show that eliteness cannot explain reference

²⁵Thanks do David Faraci and an anonymous referee for comments on this topic.

to ordinary naturalistic properties on this view, because the Quasi-realist will not treat reference to these properties as doubly plan-laden.

5 Concluding remarks

What I have given above is a rough outline of how one might go about showing that NO METAPHYSICAL DIFFERENCE is false given a metaphysical framework that countenances perfect eliteness. The eliteness-based arguments sketched above are much more promising than traditional resources for attacking the problem, since they employ a metaphysical notion with a rich theoretical role.

Of course if this strategy is successful, then some of the old-style methods for distinguishing the Expressivist from the Non-naturalist can come back into vogue. We can give derivative characterizations of differences over truth, facthood, property-instantiation, etc. as well. If a *fundamental* truth involves instantiation of a single elite property, then Quasi-realists will deny that normative claims are fundamentally true. Similarly for the analogous notion of a *fundamental fact*: there are no fundamental normative facts on the Quasi-realist view. And if we use *heavyweight quantifiers* to range over those properties that are perfectly elite (and not Boolean operations on them), the Quasi-realist must deny that there is a property telling lies has, using a heavyweight quantifier. But these differences in the standard metaphysical categories will only arrive once we use eliteness to supplement the notions of truth, facthood, and property, and thereby connect them to the robust theoretical roles that eliteness plays.

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