

**Morality United.
Answering the Normative and Nonnormative of Moral Norms**

Anton Leist

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Does morality need unification? And if so, with what? Such a reaction may be the usual one, presupposing that morality is no more than something normative with a specific content. But this would be a very abstract way to represent morality. The “normative”, whatever it is, must be connected with something material. How else should a moral thought be able to cause our behaviour, at least sometimes? How else should Bruno’s striking the dog be less admirable than Bruno’s fondling the dog— Bruno’s hand being involved in both? If we want to explain how moral causes or how moral judgements relate, something nonnormative has to be allowed into the picture. If so, however, we face problems ahead: what is meant by the normative and the nonnormative, and how could they be related, if not identified? Regarding my title, I take “unification” minimally to be a state or process of coming together, not necessarily of merging. Identity is one kind of unity, correlation or concomitance is another and perhaps the more usual one. This at least is the form of unity searched for in the following.

1. The Normative and the Nonnormative

The more classical, albeit well-trodden path to my topic is via the notorious “problem of normativity”. Normativity has very much been in the minds of moral philosophers recently, but of course the underlying problem has a longer ancestry. In its most general form, the problem springs from an amazement which arises once we reflect on normativity. We seem to understand, naturally, what it means that something *is*, but given this understanding it becomes a puzzle what *ought* should mean and, connected, how such an ought should come about. If the *is* points to things in the world, an *ought* seems not to fit well with these things. What we ought to do might be

given somehow, but it is not clear how it can be given, and how it comes about that it is given.

If we introduce the problem of normativity like this, we introduce it in the context of what there is, and therefore as a problem of a relation to an opposite, the nonnormative. For the moment I will take the nonnormative to be the factually empirical, something that is not clearly correct in several senses.¹ Due to this opposition the problem of normativity cannot be discussed, let alone solved, without clarifying this relation itself. However this relation will look in the end, unity and difference will have to be part of it: obviously for difference, but also for unity, otherwise the normative and the nonnormative would not be related. In the following I will concentrate on the unity-side, which hopefully will also throw some light on difference.

In one sense the unity of the normative and nonnormative might not seem to be a problem at all. That Bruno ought not to kick dogs for fun can be seen as the content of some empirical belief. People in our societies do believe that one ought not to kick dogs for fun; and Bruno's friends certainly believe the same of him. The beliefs of people in our societies being empirical constructs, there might not seem to be a problem concerning how the normative and the nonnormative relate to each other. Is there, then, a problem of unity at all?

There is, if one asks for a "*reflective unity*" between the normative and nonnormative. Asking for a reflective unity is asking for the relatedness between both on the most basic level, something not given in peoples' belief of what one ought or ought not to do. By believing what one ought to do, people *presuppose* the distinction between *is* and *ought*, and how they can believe in both is not explained, but simply taken for granted. There is a unity in our actual understanding by throwing of is- and ought-beliefs together: both are part of our linguistic practice, but this is not a reflective unity. In the following I always perceive "unity problems" as being reflective ones in a more elementary sense.²

The unity problem surfaces in different ways, also within different terminologies. But to make use of an intuitively plausible distinction, I will distinguish unity in terms of form and in terms of content concerning morality. Davidson (1984) famously criticised this distinction as an absolute one, so I will take it again to be open for critical revision. Accordingly one could distinguish two central problems in ethics as the "*problem of ethical form*" and the "*problem of ethical content*". Of these, the first is most prominent, dating back to Moore's attack on "naturalist" definitions of

¹ Because, first, the factual could also be normative besides empirical, and secondly, the nonnormative could be factually empirical or expressively empirical.

² Perhaps it would be more natural to call the unity here "explanatory unity". But, as will become apparent, the contrast between justification and explanation will be of some importance in the following and I have to save the term for this occasion.

normative moral concepts (Moore 1903, Ch.1). The problem of form stated more generally is the problem of how to understand basic concepts in an ethical argument, or ethical “theory” (if something like that should be possible). Following Moore, “how to understand” would mean how to elucidate (even if not narrowly to define) these concepts, as for example “good”, “ought”, “right”, “reason” etc. Moore, as is well known, was of the opinion that these most basic concepts, and “good” especially, cannot be defined, rather should be put to work by relating them to exemplars of “the” good, as for example friendship.

If one thinks—as today one obviously must—that Moore’s solution is not workable, one should hesitate to follow him in his rigorous criticism of so-called “naturalist” approaches in ethics. Moore notoriously took “naturalist” to be a wide and heterogeneous predicate, but gave “wanted” or “desired” the most prominent critical treatment as definitional efforts. The problem, pointed out by Moore, is how something wanted or desired can have normative meaning. Why “*ought*” something that is wanted be accepted as desirable, or why *ought* one to want something, independent of whether it is wanted or not on a natural basis?³

Following Davidson I do not think “form” and “content” to be a fully exclusive pair, so the problem derived from Moore, if we call it the problem of ethical form, does not exclude any reference to content, it rather points to finding out about content. There is, certainly, a methodological sense in the distinction, as one can study problems at different levels of concreteness, and something like a focus for doing this is needed. We could, accordingly, distinguish two different levels of structure, “thin” and “thick” structure, of moral thoughts and arguments. On both levels we can be engaged with the problem of unity, the unity between the empirical and the normative. This is obvious on the thin side, if we (disregarding Moore) try to relate the empirical and the normative with each other. Also, on the thick side we have to make clear something Moore and many meta-ethicists following him are bypassing: the specific moral sense in the normative terms, or in other words, what underlies these terms as moral content, the very subject of morality different to other normative subjects.

If what has been said so far is right, it contradicts a long-standing axiom of metaethics, its “normative neutrality”. Metaethics for decades has been conducted in the spirit of whichever metaethical theory you propose being freely combinable with any normative theory. You can be, for example, a noncognitivist utilitarian (such as Smart) as well as a realist utilitarian (such as Mill), a realist Kantian (such as Kant) as well as a constructivist Kantian (such as Korsgaard). But the wide array of combinations in the literature is surely not proof, and the only argument for the normative neutrality of metaethics seems to arise from the analytic/synthetic

³ I am using “wanting” and “desiring” in an identical sense, even if the latter term is often used to point out the sensual aspect of wanting. The difference is neglected here.

distinction. But if we become more experimental towards this distinction we have to face the task of looking into a parallel problem of unity on the more concrete level of moral thinking.

Is there a natural link between the thin and the thick level? Even if one is, like Moore, interested in the definitional problem of “good”, one should not follow him in his de-contextualised understanding of definitions. Instead one should think of definitions playing a role, and being definitions through this role, within a specific *use*. Which use? The use-context Moore obviously operated in was justification.⁴ Therefore one should think of the abstract unity-problem as not being one for definitions in isolation, but firstly one for *reasons*, and then for *definitions within* reasonings. Reasons and reasonings are also part of the “structure”, both thin and thick, of ethical thoughts referred to a moment ago. (Reasons are a topic common to metaethical and normative-ethical analyses.) Given this common structure, the thin unity problem, roughly speaking, is one concerning the *concept* of reasons, the thick unity problem is, again roughly speaking, one concerning the more *concrete kind* of reasons.

Now let me formulate the two sorts of problems more explicitly, making use of what has been said so far.

2. The Puzzle of Coincidence

Here are, first, two versions of the thin problem.

The thin unity problem (r)

If practical reasons are reasons somehow related to wants (or similar pro-attitudes representing the factual side of agents), is it wants that constitute normative reasons or normative reasons that constitute wants, or is there a third kind of unity?

Is this r-formulation of the thin unity problem indeed the most basic one? Following on from the remarks made earlier, there might not be “the” most basic formulation, but rather a family of interdependent ones. It might be that normative reasons, normative meanings, normative truth, etc. are to such an extent interdependent that none of these is the most fundamental one, and through this constitutive for the others. Note also that it is *practical* and not more narrowly *moral* reasons which are in the focus. The thin problem is still open concerning content.

The thin unity problem (m)

⁴ This is a crucial and restricting hypothesis, something perhaps not obvious at first. But why should a justificatory use be so important, given that language is used for purposes like the influence on or control of other persons? Also, being part of the interests behind the latter-mentioned use, explanatory use seems at least as important as a justificatory one.

If the meaning of thin normative terms (“ought”, etc.) is elucidated by “wanting” (or similar pro-attitudes representing the factual side of agents), is it “wanting” that elucidates normative terms or normative terms that elucidate “wanting”, or is there a third kind of unity?

Given that there is one family of thin normative concepts which together represent the most abstract side of morality, is there a corresponding family of thick normative concepts representing the more concrete side? How does the more concrete side come about? By it we refer to normative moral theories. But what is the object of these theories? Pointing simply to “justification” will not do, otherwise we could not distinguish the more concrete from the more abstract level. What *is* missing so far is what makes normative reasons *moral* normative reasons. Here is where concern for the *content* of moral reasons comes in and why we are dealing with two basic problems in ethics, the problem of ethical form and the problem of ethical content.

Again, why is there a problem of ethical content, and which one is it? One way to characterize moral content is to see the core of morality in *social norms*, and to call those social norms *moral norms* “which help living together in the most general way”.⁵ Why then should there be a unity problem given *this* idea of moral content? The answer is: because the thin unity problem surfaces also on this more concrete level of moral norms. Speaking of moral norms, we have to suppose that moral norms are “fact-based” in some sense. If we take it that moral norms are based on moral reasons, reasons for moral norms, these reasons themselves have to involve facts in some sense. We could leave open at the moment whether these facts are empirical facts or not, as we leave open at the moment what the definitive form of moral reasons is. But given that moral norms are fact-based, a “*puzzle of coincidence*” arises which is, I will argue, the core of the thick unity problem. This puzzle arises simply because, and given that, moral norms are fact-based. To see this, think of the following.

Normative reasons aim, in order to be *moral* normative reasons, at justifying moral norms. Moral norms are necessary to help people living together. If normative reasons were not fact-based, there would be nothing else but justification, running from premises to conclusions. But if we accept that normative reasons exist in order to be functional for helping people living together (through moral norms) it seems rather far-fetched that the reasons for this job are not fact-based. Living together is, one should think, heavily fact-dependent. So we should also accept that moral reasons are fact-based. Given that, one can wonder why the facts which moral reasons (and indirectly: moral norms) are based on are just the adequate ones to make justification successful. This I will call the puzzle of coincidence.

⁵ For the present I take this to be a general definition. Alternatively we could say that moral norms are “functional” given this aim. Also, “norms” will be understood here in the wide sense allowing respective dispositions or virtues to be included.

Another way to make this puzzle visible is this one. Again, start with justification of moral norms. Either this “justification” is self-constitutive in the sense that it does not depend on facts. Consequently, it creates all relevant facts on its own. Then moral norms would rest only on justification. Or, alternatively, justification depends on facts which it has to take as given. (Remember: these can be empirical or nonempirical facts.) If we believe in the first alternative of justification, no puzzle of coincidence arises, as justification is then not dependent on empirical facts. But in this case we are confronted with a mystery: how could nonempirical facts be constituted out of nothing? How should we humans be able to step into an empirical environment and act within this environment, creating all relevant facts in order to orient ourselves in this environment? This seems a bit God-like and in any case difficult to explain. But if we opt for the second alternative, preferably, facts relevant for moral reasons are not themselves justified. Therefore, one could ask: how does it come about that they are just the “right” facts? To be “true” facts would not be enough for an answer as there are countless facts which are true, but not the right ones for moral reasons. This, again, is the puzzle of coincidence.⁶

One could think that this puzzle cannot be answered. We are contingent beings and have to accept an amount of contingency. This may be right in a global sense, but need not be so in the local one concerning moral reasons or, even more generally, reasons for acting. If we have something to eat and we eat because of being hungry, it is part of our “understanding” of the situation to know why we are hungry. We are beings, roughly speaking, with a metabolism which makes us need nourishment at regular time intervals. Our “reason” for eating would be rather different or not a reason at all if we did not presuppose this understanding of ourselves, rough as it may be. What is taken as given is, in other words, an *explanation*, accompanying the justifying reason. Similar to justification, explanations of facts cannot be endless ones, they also depend on something given. But that does not invalidate their significance. Explanations are the answer to the puzzle of coincidence!

In conclusion, I propose formulating the thick unity problem like this:

The thick unity problem

Given moral behaviour, how do *justification* and *explanation* of this behaviour, or *normative* reasons and *explanatory* reasons, relate to each other regarding the aspect of moral content?

⁶ Could one think of the “right facts” as ones justified indirectly, given that the justification is overall successful? No, because success in this case would depend on the presupposed facts, and the proof reclaimed would be circular!

Why is the coordination of justification and explanation a problem? Two reasons that come to mind in the context of morality are the following ones. First, justification of morality, as morality itself, seems to presuppose free choice, whereas explanation seems to imply determinism and so to contradict free choice, and thereby justification. Secondly, justification is strongly linked to the epistemic concepts of knowledge, facts and truths. But explaining moral beliefs may incline us strongly to doubt the adequacy of these epistemic concepts for moral beliefs. I will discuss Harman's well-known argument along these lines in section 4, which ranges in the literature as a standard example of how explanation could debunk the epistemic form of moral beliefs. The case is, as we will see, obscure concerning moral beliefs, but can be made more convincingly concerning religious beliefs. If we become well aware of the psychological sources for having religious beliefs, these beliefs are thrown into doubt. Let us call this the "invalidating force" of moral explanations.

In the following I will concentrate on the second of these two obstacles for "thick moral unity". The basic reason for such a priority is that the invalidating force which moral explanations can have rests heavily on the is/ought distinction and shows the thick unity problem connected with the thin one. Explanations of our observation processes of material things, say the sunlight, do not easily (within normal ranges of observation) disqualify our certainties within observation. The facts which explanations of our factual beliefs build on harmonize in kind with the facts as objects of our factual beliefs, even if they may have a corrective function in part (as with very small things or things far away, as in physics and astronomy). But, as with religious beliefs, the facts underlying explanations of moral beliefs and the moral beliefs themselves do not harmonize in kind, due to the is/ought distinction, and therefore the debunking tendency of moral explanations results from the special normative quality of moral beliefs and their objects.

The conflict referred to as the thick unity problem is, of course, not a new problem. Philosophical tradition has largely answered it by shielding justification from being dependent on empirical facts whatsoever. Moral reasons then would be dependent on "rational" or "moral" facts only, i.e. normative facts, and these facts would be thought to be self-explanatory.⁷ Let me call this first alternative for the following the "*anti-naturalist answer*" to the thick problem of unity. Even if this answer is the dominant one in the philosophical tradition—being present, for example, both in Kant and in Moore—there is also, of course, the opposing, second, "*naturalist answer*" to the thick unity problem.

There are different ways to think of "ethical naturalism" as a programme. I will make further remarks on these ways in sections 3 and 5. All of them, however, tend to translate "natural" as "empirical". Ethical naturalism in this wide sense permits

⁷ One could think of different forms of dependence here. Under one of them, expressivism would fall into this alternative, strangely because of being otherwise not fitting. I will come back to this.

different ways for how moral reasons are to be interpreted and how (or whether at all) they are related to explanations. Not all, and indeed few ethical naturalists think of the puzzle of coincidence as a problem.⁸ This is obviously so if one takes naturalism to be reductive: then moral reasons would analogously be empirical reasons, as empirical reasons are for *empirical* beliefs. There would be nothing distinct, just something normative and something empirical, and no problem of coincidence could arise.

Now, on which side should we start tackling the problem of unity: on the side of the thin or rather the thick problem of unity? There is a continuum between these two problems in the form of what can be said of normative reasons. (The m-version of the thin problem is, as mentioned, dependent on the r-version.) To rephrase the thin unity problem as one concerning moral unity, i.e. of normative reasons being *morally* normative reasons, seems to be impossible without connecting it to an idea of moral content. So, in order not to lose sight of our topic we had better start with the thick unity problem.

3. Which Naturalism?

Let me formulate, in general terms, when the puzzle of coincidence would be solved. It would be solved if *two conditions* were to be fulfilled. First, each individual agent should be in possession of a reason to accept moral norms, or to have his behaviour coincide with moral norms. This would be the justificatory side for all individuals, given that they fulfil some standard conditions of being an agent. But, second, an argument addressing the puzzle also should explain why standard agents by and large behave morally, or show the psychological characteristics needed for moral reasons, being for them moral reasons. This would be the explanatory side. Accordingly, we could speak of the *justificatory* and the *explanatory condition*. For a sufficient answer to coincidence, both conditions have to be fulfilled.

We can also put, still in general terms, the mutual dependency of justification and explanation like this. Justification has to be, in order to meet with real-life agents, “*fact-sensitive*”. The facts it is sensitive to will be facts relevant to moral behaviour. If justification were not fact-sensitive in any sense, it would be difficult to understand how it should link up with individuals displaying empirical characteristics themselves. But, on the other hand, explanations have to be “*reason-sensitive*” too. Not every sort of explanation of moral action will do. Clearly, physical or chemical explanation will not do, but also neuropsychological explanation will not do. The latter, even though popular today, will not do as it is a reductive form of

⁸ There is growing attention to the problem, arising from Street 2006 (also later work by Street) and Joyce 2006, Ch.6. Following Street, Dreier identifies as the “problem of unexplained coincidence” the fact that beliefs in independent moral facts and moral sensibilities fit together: Dreier 2012. Street, Joyce and Dreier are not discussing unity, however, but a more open kind of coherence. I will comment on this difference in the next section.

psychological and social agency. In order not to come down on such eccentricities on the scientific side, we should think of the explanations suitable here to be ordinary psychological ones which cover an agent-inherent understanding of his reasons to act.

The most obvious conclusion to draw is that, in order to answer the puzzle of coincidence, a candidate who is fact-sensitive must also be a candidate who is reason-sensitive or, in other words, there must be a unity in the candidate fulfilling the two conditions.⁹ This at first seems easy to accept but if we look at it more closely it has restrictive consequences for the ontological status of the candidate fulfilling the two conditions. We could illustrate this with the concept of “*reasons*” itself. Reasons would obviously meet the explanatory condition to be reason-sensitive, but would they be fact-sensitive? This depends on what we think reasons to be. And here we are struck with one typical alternative haunting metaethics for ages.

Reasons could be either *propositions* or *motives*. If they were propositions, they would be truth-conferring and would fit with the normal epistemic model of justification. Propositional reasons would justify moral beliefs as being true or false beliefs. In order to explain moral behaviour, one has to explain how beliefs in this sense are able to cause actions. For this, two regular proposals are the “internalist” one and the “externalist” one. According to the externalist proposal, there is a general motive to act in accordance with moral beliefs. This reconstruction, however, “alienates” all singular moral actions by making them instrumental to the general motive. For this and additional reasons (see Lenman 1999), the internalist proposal is the more adequate one. The proposal splits into two offerings, the “belief-internalist” and the “motive-internalist”. Again I think the belief-internalist to be ontologically eccentric, which leaves the motive-internalist proposal. Given this train of thought, reasons cannot be propositions or beliefs. Also given the alternative we set out from, reasons are here—within the context of moral actions—motives.

The perspective now shifts to the other side (which is why I mentioned haunting). If reasons are motives, the explanatory condition seems to be fulfilled easily. It is reasons which are the object of explanations, and as motives are a sort of facts we seem to have a regular form of empirical (i.e. psychological) explanation. Doubts

⁹ Those who are aware of the coincidence problem, for example Street and Joyce, regularly do not conclude this. They do not ask for such a narrow “unity answer”, but simply for permitting explanations alongside a rationally justified morality. Typically, the sort of explanation they think of is one in terms of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary explanations, surely, will hardly reach down to the specific content of single moral judgement, for example the moral rightness or wrongness of abortion (Joyce 2006, 176). If one restricts moral explanation to the evolutionary type, the best thing one might achieve is the state of non-contradiction between evolutionary reflections (typically done in a philosophical style, that is, not backed by scientific data) and justifying reasons, something also on the mind of those defending the cognitive content of morality against “evolutionary debunking”, like Joyce 2006, Ch.6 and Wielenberg 2010. But why should explanations of morality not be ones of moral *behaviour*, including thinking, and thereby psychosocial ones?

arise on the side of justification: Can motives justify? Not in the regular sense of epistemic reasons, as motives are not true or false, and therefore cannot be truth-conferring. Why should one call a relation which seems to be a causal-empirical relation one of justification? As such it is given or not, but not true or false. It is an elementary part of our moral consciousness, however, to think of our acting as “right” or “wrong”, in the light of our moral beliefs. But if our acting is right or wrong in the light of our beliefs, this could not be without these beliefs themselves being right, at least partly. So, if moral beliefs cannot be captured by justification as being right, at least partly, one hardly seems to capture moral beliefs.

What is the way out of this quandary of two problematic alternatives? The best attempt to me seems to be a *two-stage construction*. We have to distinguish moral standards and moral beliefs. In order to rescue moral beliefs (something we are obviously advised to), we have to relate them to “something” which cannot be “moral reality per se”, but something ontologically less eccentric. “Moral standard” is a catch-all for different candidates here: rules, norms, dispositions, attitudes, etc.¹⁰ The answer to doubts about justification based on motives, then, is this: moral justification is a two-stage kind of justification, which combines truth-conferring reasons for moral beliefs relative to moral standards, and non-truth based moral standards themselves. A fully elaborated theory of moral reasons will not only be more explicit concerning moral standards, it also will link moral standards to explanations. In so doing it will give a definite answer to the puzzle of coincidence.

A classical defender of moral reasons will feel hesitant to follow this proposal, as it makes moral reasons (in terms of beliefs) strongly dependent on facts, and indirectly on explanations. Is this, then, still a form of justification and not rather simply an exemplar of explanation? This would be the case if moral standards were determined strictly empirically. This is something defended by the *realist* proponents of a two-stage construction.¹¹ If they were right, justification and explanation would indeed fall into one. Whether or not such a case could exist needs further argument and not simply a reminder of conceptual distinctions. The classical defender of moral reasons cannot simply refer to a self-grounded concept of justification. For the following I wish to distinguish, in this sense, between an “*exhaustive naturalism*” which would fuse justification and explanation, and a “*complementing naturalism*” which concedes that justification plays a part in “making sense” of morality, letting explanation play another part. Indirectly, one is thus offered two different interpretations of what “unity”, as well as an answer to the unity problem, would mean. For exhaustive naturalism unity tends to boil down to identity, typically reductive identity. For complementing naturalism unity means regular correspondence, something to be explained on its own.

¹⁰ I take the idea of two stages and the term “moral standards” from Copp. See especially Copp 1990, 253ff; 1995, Ch.5; 2009.

¹¹ The ones I have in mind here are Copp 1995; 2003 and Railton 1986.

4. Problems with Exhaustive Naturalism

One way to argue in favour of complementing naturalism is to point to problems in the exhaustive competitor. For this a reminder of a classical dispute in recent metaethics is helpful. The dispute arose from Harman's (1977) defence of what in one sense could be called "psychological naturalism". The classical response was Sturgeon's (1985; 1986) opposite "realistic" (i.e. non-psychological) naturalism.¹² What is the issue in this dispute? Harman and Sturgeon propose an exhaustive naturalism in which, for them, ethical justification is best understood as a form of ethical explanation. They differ in how to think about the explanation looked for. Harman defends a psychological explanation, whereas Sturgeon is critical of this and suggests a "moral-fact"-based explanation. The one is, in another terminology, a moral anti-realist, the other a moral realist. Both, again, are naturalists in the sense that they believe in one kind of facts only, empirical facts. Harman, however, denies that there is a special class of moral facts, whereas Sturgeon sorts moral facts—inspired by "theoretical facts"—as one sort among other empirical facts. If both Harman's and Sturgeon's positions can be shown to be flawed, this supports complementing naturalism.

For a partial naturalism, not all phenomena in moral behaviour are the object of explanation. This is not the case in exhaustive naturalism. Exhaustive naturalists (ENs in the following) want to explain moral behaviour, and especially moral beliefs and judgements, otherwise they could not claim justification to be part of explanation. Here is the controversy. In order to reveal what is controversial I shall first try to list what is not controversial. Shared preconditions of the dispute are the following:

(c1) "Moral explanation" is the single project of normative ethics. "Moral justification" either becomes superfluous or is indirectly included in explanation.

(c2) The objects of moral explanation are simple, non-contested moral judgements, like the moral wrongness of setting a cat on fire for fun (MJ for "non-contested moral judgement" in the following).

(c3) All observation is theory-laden and moral properties are theoretical properties similar to (say) physical properties. A typical case of physical observation is the vapour-trail sign of protons in a cloud chamber.

¹² There is additional literature, especially on the side of Sturgeon's position, which I neglect. But see treatments of the controversy in Copp 1990; Leiter 2001; Miller 2003; Lenman 2006; Loeb 2005.

(c4) An explanation of moral judgements has to explain (i) why moral judgements are true/false and (ii) why people believe them to be true/false.

For all non-naturalistically inclined philosophers, (c1) will not be acceptable. Given that here we are discussing exhaustive naturalism, we can sidestep this controversy. Interestingly, though, not all naturalists accept (c1). I will come back to this once the opposition of positions has been stated. Here is the opposition, also including other proponents besides the two mentioned:

Anti-realist explanation A (Hume, Harman, Blackburn)

Moral sensibility is able to explain why a MJ is wrong and why people believe it is wrong. And it is preferable to explain the wrongness of MJ by moral sensibility instead of moral facts. Alternatively, “moral observation” is unable to explain why people believe that MJ is wrong.

Realist explanation B (Sturgeon, Boyd, Railton)

Moral facts explain why a MJ is wrong and why people believe it is wrong. Postulating moral facts is not different to postulating physical facts. Alternatively, “moral sensibility” is unable to explain MJ.¹³

A and B seem to oppose each other in some way, but it is important to fix clearly how they do so. The following statement helps to bring opposition into focus:

C: Rightness/wrongness of MJ is irrelevant for moral explanation.

C is, unfortunately, ambiguous in the A/B sense, and must be disambiguated:

C_A: Rightness/wrongness states of MJ are irrelevant for moral explanation.

C_B: Facts of moral rightness/wrongness are irrelevant for moral explanation.

It is C_A but not C_B which is implied in A, and it is C_B which contradicts B, but suits A. Strangely, Harman and Sturgeon are hardly in dispute about the ambiguity of C, but amply about the truth of C_B. As I see it, there are, overall, three points of contention in this dispute.¹⁴

(1) Can the anti-realist position make sense of moral objectivity?¹⁵

¹³ This is a minimalist depiction of the controversy which also is entangled with remarks on moral scepticism, scientific methodology etc., all of which are neglected here.

¹⁴ I am following Leiter 2001 with regard to the second and third.

¹⁵ “Moral objectivity” is meant to represent the practice of moral judgements, moral beliefs, moral truth, without necessarily presupposing a realistic interpretation of these elements.

(2) Are moral realist explanations possible? Are there convincing cases of such explanations?

(3) Is the explanatory claim essential for moral realism? Could the moral realist opt out of it?

Given that the explanatory claim involves the moral realist in tough issues, declaring it unnecessary would be best for him. Whether this works is, of course, also a precondition for deeper engagement with (2). One author who attempts this way out is Copp (1990). Copp thinks that moral explanations are “incidental” to morality in not playing a role in its justification. Now, a naturalist cannot simply presuppose that justification is part of the essence of morality, and that explanations are therefore incidental. Rather he has to show that moral explanations are strongly counter-intuitive, if not also justifications.

Before proceeding let me come back to (c1) in our list of consented preconditions, and a criticism of Sturgeon by Copp (1990). Could moral explanation indeed make justification superfluous? This could either mean that people see no need for justifying reasons or that they are unable to justify such reasons. Neither alternative addresses normal human agents, who are capable and at least sometimes interested in moral reasons. Therefore, explanations have either to include or at least to permit separate justifications. Justification would be identical with explanation if people did not have the choice to behave otherwise. But as people are free to let themselves be guided by reasons, explanations must be seen as a stepping-stone towards justification. This, it seems, puts some restrictions on explanations. Copp’s (1990) objection to moral properties is, if I understand him correctly, that a property cannot be seen to show itself or something in its background (a “moral standard”) to be justified.¹⁶ It is not so easy to understand, though, what the objection is here, because the naturalist will not accept that a moral property cannot be justified per se. One plausible way to understand the restriction for moral properties is to subject them to the following condition:

D: Moral properties playing a role in moral explanations must be *reason-responsive*.

With “reason-responsiveness” I wish to embrace activities like doubting, criticizing, elaborating or justifying with regard to moral facts. This criterion of reason-responsiveness might solve what the problem is here. If moral facts referred to in explanations are not reason-responsive ones, explanations show no connection to justification, unlike if they are reason-responsive.

Sturgeon’s position seems to be adequately addressed by D, as he hardly cares for *how* the judgement of someone “evil” comes about—whether there is a dispute about

¹⁶ Copp argues for this in Copp 1990, 250-2.

the empirical characteristics the moral ones supervene on. But there surely is reason-responsiveness concerning theoretical physical facts, as in the proton behaviour example, which suggests the moral explanatory position in the strongest sense to include D. Again, I think there cannot be an a priori reason that moral properties are not reason-responsive, unlike physical (chemical, biological, etc.) ones.

To summarize: in the absence of a priori statements, one can neither claim moral explanation and justification to be identical, nor to be incompatible. Copp's criticism of Sturgeon is not to the point if moral facts are to be understood as reason-responsive ones, something which Sturgeon's intentions allow.

I now come back to the two more central claims for the dispute, (1) and (2). What is under dispute is whether one needs moral facts to explain moral judgements (MJs) and moral beliefs (MBs). The anti-realist accepts that there are MJs and MBs, as of course does the realist. Without further knowledge about "moral facts", a realist position seems straightforward: the fact that it is raining explains the rain judgement, and the belief that it is raining. If someone, the anti-realist, thought that one can explain the judgement without the fact, he would face the problem of how judgments and facts ever come together (if, according to him, there are facts). Concentrating now on MJs and MBs, the anti-realist is also in a more difficult spot, it seems, than the realist, if he accepts MJs. If MJs are made, but moral facts do not exist, how then to explain MJs? This is now where the anti-realist has to make it clear how he stands with regard to C_A : whether he still wants to accept talk of moral rightness and wrongness or to give up such talk.

(1) puts this problem into the centre. The anti-realist talks of MJs and MBs. Judgements and beliefs go along, normally, with moral truth. If the anti-realist does not grant moral facts, can he make sense of moral truth, and indirectly MJs and MBs? Harman talks of "moral sensibility" which is meant to give sense to both (Harman 1977, 7; 1986, 60). But how does he explain moral sensibility without making use of MJs and MBs, not to mention moral facts? Harman is not extremely outspoken on this point, but wants to make use of a combination of emotivism and impartial observer theories (1977, Ch.4; 1986, 65f.). Emotivism is meant to develop into impartial observer theory, roughly speaking like this:

(E) x is wrong for me *if and only if* I disapprove of x under conditions of optimal knowledge.

(IO) x is wrong *if and only if* one disapproved of x under conditions of optimal knowledge and neutrality of interest.

Harman wants to read IO as a naturalist definition, but however this might be, to apply IO to one's own situation cannot be merely psychological. This follows simply from our not being people who regularly judge under the conditions given in IO,

“regularly” in the sense that we regularly eat and breathe. Another way to make this point is that IO is to be seen as being the content of an *ideal*, or as being the object of an *ought*. IO of course could be embedded in E, i.e. be approved of, but then we are back at E and nothing could be said about when an approval is an ethical one.

Harman’s attempt to explain MJs and MBs on the basis of individual psychological attitudes alone would definitely be an attempt to create something like “moral facts” without presupposing any. Harman thinks of psychological attitudes as ones not presupposing moral-fact based rightness. But if this way to proceed is not successful in explaining MJs, the way to put things suggested by Sturgeon seems to be an unavoidable alternative. B is, in contrast to A, first of all realist: moral facts are meant to explain MJs and people’s MBs. This is proposed on the basis of the scientific analogue: physical facts explain physical judgements and beliefs. This analogue changes the direction of “moral explanations”.

The contrast between the A and B approach is this:

Aexpl: MJs/MBs (& moral facts) are explananda, and nonmoral facts are explanans.

Bexpl: Moral facts are explanans and MJs and MBs explananda.

Most social scientists—and even common sense—would readily think Aexpl to be not only the most apt kind, but the only kind of explanation.¹⁷ But this is only because scientists are not normally aware of the normativity problem, even if a dimly guessed “naturalist-fallacy-objection” often looms over their deliberations. Given the is/ought distinction, Aexpl is not going to work, i.e. is not going to explain MJs in their normative aspects without including the constitution of normativity itself. Confronted with this—perhaps impossible, and in any case difficult—task Bexpl is an intriguing option, if only the analogue holds and moral-fact-based explanations were to explain something. This, however, is seriously to be questioned.

Is there not, to begin with, an a priori objection to be launched against Bexpl? Albert is evil and this explains, first, that he strikes his cat with a stick and, second, that his friend Jane believes his acts to be morally wrong.¹⁸ Could one object: but how is it justified that Albert is evil and, lacking justification, does such an explanation not miss the normative question? Such an objection is an a priori one and will therefore not—rightly I think—cause trouble for the proponent of Bexpl. The alternative would be (again) self-constitutive justifications which are a rationalist aberration. Rather, for the proponent of Bexpl, justifying reasons are at best derived indirectly on the basis of effective explanations. This seems to me an apt rejoinder, as far as it goes.

¹⁷ Whether or not this is due to the influence of Nietzsche and Freud on our common awareness of morality, is open to speculation. Leiter 2001 refers to Nietzsche and Freud as the prototypical champions of moral explanations (besides evolutionary ones).

¹⁸ The example is Harman’s: see Harman 1986, 62.

Even if withstanding a priori criticism, Bexpl suffers under its own conditions. A problem becomes obvious by the tautological character of moral explanations if constructed in the form of Bexpl. Agents are behaving on the basis of their dispositions, including their moral dispositions. Albert's striking the cat is explained by Albert's cruel disposition. But this would be Aexpl. The proponent of Bexpl wants (in addition) to have explained the *moral badness* of Albert's striking the cat by the *moral badness* of his cruel disposition. But in Bexpl Albert's disposition and its moral quality are thrown together, otherwise one would not have an explanation of Albert's action (something observable in the physical sense). The "moral fact" mobilized for explanation covers Albert's disposition *and* its moral quality in an indistinct way. That is a problem.

Empirical/moral indistinctness seems to be essential for Bexpl because a supervenience relation between disposition and moral quality would take the latter out of the explanation. If all the causal work in explaining Albert's action is done by the empirical side of his disposition, it is not moral facts that explain, but empirical facts interpreted morally. The moral quality of the disposition would not be corroborated by the explanatory success, but only the empirical side of the disposition. On the other hand, if Bexpl is indistinct in its empirical/moral property combinations, one is lacking an understanding of why specific empirical properties are morally relevant, and others not. Either way, Bexpl is not convincing.

Harman points to the additional problem that Bexpl is hardly fit to explain Jane's belief that Albert's action is morally wrong (Harman 1986, 62f.). Again it is unclear how the wrongness of Albert's disposition is meant to explain Jane's belief in his actions being wrong, something seen more clearly if tested in the case of an amoral Mary who thinks Albert's cruelty to be alright. How should Mary's belief be caused to change by the moral wrongness of Albert's behaviour? Normally, in Aexpl style, one explains this by drawing on dispositions inherent in Jane and Mary, but this is not allowed under Bexpl. Harman sharpens this objection to Bexpl in the following form: all the Bexpl examples of moral explanation would suit as well a moral epiphenomenalist, which shows that the moral qualities are not doing explanatory work and are therefore not part of the empirical test (Harman 1986, 63).

These objections to Bexpl (and Sturgeon's moral realism) seem to me serious, but it is important to keep in mind what the supervenience view invoked against Bexpl means for a positive solution. A supervenience view coheres with a two-stage construction of moral normativity. Sturgeon accepts a related distinction in terms of "moral" and "nonmoral explanations" (Sturgeon 1992). Nonmoral explanations are ones which are directed at the psychological or otherwise nonnormative properties

making moral properties possible.¹⁹ This is an important distinction, even if it jars with Sturgeon's general argument. The distinction could be used to deflect a criticism brought up by Leiter, if he asks whether Sturgeon's first-class examples of moral explanations are really "fruitful" ones (2001, 93ff.). Indeed, Nietzschean or Freudian-style explanations seem to be more informative of moral behaviour than explaining morally bad actions through morally bad dispositions. But these "more fruitful" explanations seem to be *nonmoral* explanations in the sense of taking as given moral normativity.²⁰ On the basis of Sturgeon's distinction, therefore, it may easily be that what strongly interests social scientists and historians (and all of us as in our everyday life) is not an interest in normativity—something more to the taste of moral philosophers—but psychosocial facts which bring people to behave specifically on moral terms, *given* the normativity of these terms. Moral normativity is not typically on the radar screen of social scientists, they simply take it as being already understood.

The distinction between moral and nonmoral explanations is, of course, itself a contested one. Philosophers like Nietzsche might never accept that their analyses are nonmoral or (thereby) only partial ones and that explanation of normativity is beyond their pale. Denying the distinction unveils the according position to be exhaustively naturalist, something fitting perhaps for Nietzsche. In the introductory statements of this section I also put Harman under this umbrella, something not very clear. Let me, in closing this overview, end with remarks on his project to explain normativity by way of the impartial observer theory.

To recap, the impartial observer theory runs like this:

(IO) x is wrong *if and only if* one disapproved of x under conditions of optimal knowledge and neutrality of interest.

If IO were meant to answer to the "thick unity problem" it would have to answer the question of moral content, which fits justification and explanation together. According to IO the content of moral judgements would be interest-neutrality, something also often circumscribed as the "impartial point of view". Given my description of the thick unity problem, this point of view would have to answer two things, content and justification-and-explanation-harmony. Both, however, are not easily fulfilled if one recognizes that IO implies a utilitarian morality.

Let me first suggest that this indeed is true, that IO implies utilitarianism, and then comment on an alternative. *If* IO implies utilitarianism the twin objects favoured

¹⁹ One has to keep in mind that the distinction reported here cannot be sufficiently informative so far as *moral content* and thereby the meaning of "moral" is concerned. Like many metaethicists Sturgeon often reads as if normative quality alone would constitute the meaning of "moral".

²⁰ Perhaps a better term would therefore be "internal" explanations, as opposed to "external" ones which also explain normativity itself.

here, justification and explanation, hardly will be fulfilled. This can easily be concluded from widespread opposition to utilitarianism, once its moral profile (excessive demands, conflicts with moral rights) becomes clear. If utilitarianism is not taking hold in actual social milieus even under ideal conditions like a secular culture, then there is nothing to explain—the rare public advocates remain philosophical devotees rather than influential figures. Consequently, IO were flawed by failing to meet an effective naturalist demand.

But one can doubt that impartial observer theory, in the formulation of IO or in another formulation, necessarily leads to utilitarianism. Sayre-McCord (2010) made a convincing case for Adam Smith's version not to imply this, widespread opinion in the literature to the contrary. If the impartial observer is understood less idealized the figure somehow summarizes, or leads to, the constructive process of how standards of moral norms come about, something similar to the two-stage construction already mentioned and made more explicit in the next section.²¹ If IO is not to lead to utilitarianism, in other words, it better be reformulated in a way which hardly will fit under the auspices of exhaustive naturalism, something Harman started with.

5. Towards Complementing Naturalism

On the basis of the argument so far, I take it as given that two positions are untenable: the one either ignoring explanations of moral reasons or reducing them to justification, and the other reducing justification to explanation.²² If one thinks the puzzle of coincidence to be a problem, this is not too surprising, as such a puzzle would not arise if there were not a task of coordinating something to begin with: justification and explanation, normative reasons and empirical reasons, normative truth and empirical truth, the normative and the factual. If we think the puzzle to be a problem and think the two one-sided positions indefensible, we end up with complementing naturalism. This is, I think, the point arrived at in the argument so far.

One could think that complementing naturalism is open for a host of possible combinations of normative and empirical reasons for morality, something also suggested by the multiple explanatory approaches on the market: psychological, social, evolutionary ones. This plurality is offered, however, *without* an eye on the unity problem, the task of fitting justification and explanation together. And, consequently, it may reduce if we keep this task in mind.

²¹ Sayre-McCord sees Smith describing „how we move, first, from approving or disapproving others, through discovering that they likewise are responding to us, to distinguish what is approved from what merits approval, to subjecting our own patterns of approval to the standard of merit, on, finally, to asking whether the standard of merit itself merits approval.“ (2010, 143, fn.27)

²² The first sub-position in the first alternative is the regular nonnatural moral-realist one, the second sub-position is hardly ever defended: but see Dancy 1995. The second alternative is represented by the exhaustive naturalists dealt with in section 4.

The guiding principle of complementing naturalism could be formulated like this:

(CN) Justification and explanation of moral norms harmonize only if an individual A's justifying reasons can be translated into explanatory reasons for B's (C's etc.) behaviour, and vice versa.

CN represents the following considerations. Moral norms are the basic content of morality. Understanding morality as including justification and explanation is directed at these norms. Normative explanations of moral norms are external and not internal ones.²³ Given these premises moral explanation will not be an explanation of morality as an additive list of norms, but one of a structured system, making the normativity of moral norms understandable. The best candidate for such an explanation is to see moral norms as *intersubjectively structured social norms*. As social norms, moral norms are structured by one-to-many or first-person-to-third-person relationships. Moral realism out of the way, morality can only be an interconnected system of norms and not one of looking into a normative "sun", as if leaving the pre-normative cave.²⁴

If we ask in which way justifying and explanatory reasons for moral norms will fit into a whole, the one-to-many relation above all comes to mind. My reasons for behaving morally have to fit with the reasons all (or most of) the others follow, otherwise I would not be part of a system of moral norms as social norms. And this means that the attitude I have for following a moral norm, i.e. my justifying reason (for me), and the attitude I expect others to have, i.e. my explanatory reasons (regarding them), have to fit each other. Otherwise a puzzle of coincidence concerning the correspondence of my behaviour and their behaviour would arise.

So far it is plausible that there has to be a correspondence of justification and explanation, but why need there be an internal link in reasons, something implied in the condition of "translation" in CN? If one of us comes into a country known for its traditional, *inegalitarian* morality (say between women and men), our egalitarian normative reasons will not fit with reasons explaining the behaviour of others (say of men in this society discriminating women). Have we to conclude, by CN, that the visitor's justifying reason has to become *inegalitarian*, because only then being "translatable"? And anyhow, secondly, why should everyone's reasons to behave translate into mine? Something like this surely is not binding for empirical beliefs!

²³ See the distinction between internal and external explanations in footnote 20. External or (Sturgeon's view) "moral" (as against "nonmoral") explanations are ones directed at the *normativity* of moral claims, not at the development of capabilities *within* a given normativity. All naturalist approaches to morality are suspect of neglecting this distinction!

²⁴ Plato's famous picture started philosophy on an extremely erroneous path, for any kind of knowledge. All knowledge, including empirical knowledge is basically social and not sun-given knowledge.

Let me answer the second objection first, in order to have it out of the way. The answer is based on the practical/empirical distinction. Moral beliefs depend differently on social standards than empirical beliefs, as empirical beliefs refer to something third, even if in need of being socially “triangulated”, in Davidsonian terms. Moral beliefs only refer to social others, albeit a multitude of others. Thinking of such a multitude refers to a class of social agents standing in reciprocal relationships to each other which represent generally what social action comes to, but also more specifically moral behaviour. There are, to note, different ways how normativity could be thought of in reciprocal relationships, but basically it is in view of (unavoidably) acting together with others that moral normativity comes into the world.²⁵ Part of this view is that each single agent is a member in a social collective and the reasons he has are to be coherent with the reasons the others have, at least on average.

Moral beliefs may then be sufficiently different to empirical beliefs. But being strongly dependent, through the explanatory condition, on empirically real agents within a real social collective only strengthens the first objection. How to avoid the conclusion that being part of particular society determines one’s moral beliefs? Having to forego one’s egalitarian convictions by visiting a traditional country is only one side of the more general query, firstly that CN implies moral relativism, and, secondly, again rather an exhaustive kind of naturalism—documented in the sociological commentary on moral behaviour given just now. If moral relativism is implied in any view of morality which makes it dependent somehow on empirical facts, not least social ones, moral relativism has to be accepted by any naturalist analysis, however wide. Moral relativism could only be avoided by non-naturalism. Arguing within a basically naturalist framework, therefore, the relativism query has to be answered not on principled but on constructive terms.²⁶ It has to be understood, by justification-cum-explanation, what makes some societies egalitarian and some non-egalitarian.

Let me further comment on CN. I suggested reading CN as making my justifying reasons dependent on others’ justifying reasons, grasped through explanations of the others’ behaviour. The remarks I made in illustrating how CN could be answered may be strongly reminiscent of moral contractualism. But moral contractualists typically start with a theory of rationality and thereby restrict their argument to justification (see Gauthier 1986).²⁷ The problem one must have with this proceeding

²⁵ The possible ways include: evaluating others (A.Smith), prescribing towards others (Hare), expecting others to prescribe (Mead), expecting norms to be accepted by all to prescribe (Gibbard), and combinations of these.

²⁶ By a principled dispute of relativism I think of the classical rebuke to meta-apply relativists’ statements. See also Harman 1996 for a defence of moral relativism in line with my position here.

²⁷ An analogous problem would arise from working with a universalization principle (U) which is a purely normative principle making one accept similar actions in all others. U is also often seen as giving meaning to the “moral” in moral reasons. But U is doing such work only, of course, if there

is that it is either incoherent or empirically flawed. It is incoherent if taking self-interested motivation to be covered by rationality as a norm, declaring altruist motivation to be “less rational” than self-interested one. There simply is no fact-free norm of rationality which signs off such an asymmetry. If, however, the first step into self-interested rationality is also meant to be fact-based, as it had better be, then it is, to say the least, in need of empirical evidence, and given the evidence we presently have it seems to be clearly wrong. A culture-independent altruist motivation has been strongly verified by behavioural economists recently, in many dictator and ultimatum games.²⁸ This evidence is empirically disputable, of course, and in any case it is collective- and culture-related evidence. Different to conceptual reasoning it is particularized evidence—but moral behaviour is particularized, too, and only in philosophy theory is there this “one” natural kind of “morality”. The simple conclusion is that if we take moral reasons to be fact-based, something which as naturalists we should, then moral reasons/justification are in need of empirical evidence, that is explanation. This line of thought shows that typical moral contractualism, too, tends not even to address the problem of unity, let alone answer it.

If the line of thought so far is correct, there is a way to answer the puzzle of coincidence, and also the thick unity problem. The puzzle of coincidence was: why do the facts our normative reasons depend on exist, or why select just these facts and not others? The answer is: because these facts work well within morality seen as a system of social norms. Let the “facts” be motivational potentials, then these potentials give rise to justifying as well as explanatory reasons. Both kinds of reasons are needed because of the very structure of social norms. Social norms do not fall from heaven or arise out of an explicit contract, but are developed through mutual exchange in social behaviour. Orientation within this exchange for the individual agent asks for two things at once: what one ought to do oneself and what one takes others to do (in part, again depending on what one will do oneself). The dual (and interdependent) functionality of motivational potentials is the answer to the puzzle of coincidence. Elaborating on this, moral norms adequately understood as social norms are a solution to the thick unity problem. Morality has the content these social norms have in answering the interests of all agents involved.²⁹

I am aware, however, that these remarks are not satisfactory in the light of the metaethical quandary of how the normativity of moral norms comes about. Important for this seems to be the distinction made earlier between moral and nonmoral,

is an adequate normative source powering such reasons, something its proponents are still in search of.

²⁸ See Anderson 2000 and Leist 2011.

²⁹ If one asks, further, whether moral content is due to normative or empirical, individual or social conditions, the answer is that these are not mutually exclusive. Moral content cannot be solely normative, as it cannot be solely individual, it is necessarily based on *empirical and social* conditions.

external and internal explanations. Certainly other explanations of moral behaviour are available than those being translatable into justifying reasons, as asked in CN. The evolutionary explanations prominent in recent metaethics, for example, do not translate into justifying reasons.³⁰ This again points to the difference between unifying justification and explanation, and the attempt to make both mutually compatible. My impression is that if we accept justifying reasons to be fact-based, the puzzle of coincidence is only solved if explanations reach up to these very facts, something evolutionary explanations (and similar genealogical explanations) are inapt to do.

Even if I am not in a position to answer the thin unity problem satisfyingly here, the two-level construction offer should be an apt guide, incorporating the idea that normativity can only be explained socially. But how? Attitudes (first-person) and expectations (second-person) are merely empirical psychological states and, as such, are easily probed for their normative quality themselves. Identifying moral beliefs with attitudes or expectations would come down, therefore, to exhaustive naturalism again, or to a one-level view. For a two-level view, moral beliefs or (more explicitly stated) moral norms have to be accepted *on the basis of* attitudes or expectations. There are two metaethical positions on offer for how to interpret this relation, expressivism and constructivism, and I will not undergo the task here of commenting on these alternatives. What seems important is that these metaethical theories have to be integrated more closely (something which I hope will follow from these remarks) with the empirical evidence available regarding the psychology empowering moral behaviour. No less than other philosophical reflections, metaethical ones too are also easily in danger of missing what has been characterized here as unity in moral behaviour.

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³⁰ Evolutionary reasons for morality are discussed positively by Gibbard 1990 and Street 2006, critically by Enoch 2010 and Wielenberg 2010. Critically on the explanatory power of such explanations see Leiter 2001 and Joyce 2006.

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