

NON-NATURALISM AND THE “THIRD-FACTOR” GAMBIT

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Over the last few years, a staggering literature has developed around “genealogical challenges” to moral, or more broadly, normative realism.¹ The basic thought is that the genealogy of our normative judgements lacks the right sort of connection to realistically construed normative truth to allow for epistemic success. For instance, there seems to be no reason to think that evolutionary forces would track realistically construed normative truth. So if evolutionary forces shaped our normative judgements, given normative realism it would be a massive coincidence if those judgements were true.

Different forms of normative realism have different responses to these challenges, but the general consensus is that for non-naturalists, there is only one out: so-called third-factor explanations. Indeed, the current dialectic over non-naturalists’ (in)ability to meet genealogical challenges largely consists of arguments about whether and when third-factor explanations can answer relevant epistemological questions. In this paper, I draw an important but as-yet-unrecognized distinction between two forms of third-factor explanation. One form, I argue, cannot be used to meet these challenges at all. The other can, but faces serious worries.

When motivating the epistemological relevance of third-factor explanations, knowledge of the future is commonly appealed to as a “partner in innocence.” Theorists point out that, plausibly, the truth of my beliefs about tomorrow’s weather is explained by the fact that my beliefs and tomorrow’s weather share a common explanation—say, current atmospheric conditions. This is a case of *common-cause* or, more broadly, *common-explanation* (CE) explanation. Analogously, if there

¹ Much of it fueled by Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value.”

were some common explanation for both our beliefs' genealogy and the normative truth, that genealogy would apparently pose no threat to normative knowledge.

Many non-naturalists deny that there can be any explanatory relations between the normative and non-normative (at the level of fundamental truths). Given this, they cannot employ CE explanations: Any potential explanans will be either normative or non-normative; if the former, it cannot explain our beliefs; if the latter, it cannot explain the normative truths.

Such theorists must instead appeal to what I call *higher-order correlation* (HOC) explanations: Here, a correlation between A and B is explained by a *third-factor correlation* between C (which explains A) and D (which explains B). For example, on David Enoch's² account, the correlation between our normative beliefs and the normative truth is explained by the goodness of survival. But this is not a CE explanation; the goodness of survival does not explain both our beliefs and the truth. Rather, on Enoch's view there is a brute, necessary correlation between (C) survival and (D) goodness. Survival explains (A) our beliefs (via evolutionary forces); goodness explains (constitutes) (B) the normative facts.

Unfortunately, not all forms of explanation can be used to meet genealogical challenges. Following most theorists in this area, including Enoch himself, I understand genealogical challenges as representatives of a broader challenge to explain how our normative beliefs come to correspond to the normative truth. (This broader challenge's most famous representative is the Benacerraf-Field Challenge in the philosophy of mathematics.) I argue that this challenge is partly grounded in the same intuitions that illuminate certain Gettier cases: Knowledge requires an explanatory *connection* between our beliefs and the truth that makes their truth *non-coincidental*. The precise nature of such connections is a vexed issue, but some forms of explanation fail to illuminate a connection on *any*

² Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*.

plausible conception. For example, any time our beliefs are true, there is a trivial explanation: the conjunction of our beliefs' genealogy and whatever grounds the relevant truths. Yet, clearly, not all true beliefs are *non-coincidentally* true, so this sort of explanation offers no help in responding to the challenges on hand. The trouble for theorists like Enoch is that this is just an HOC explanation: The fact that (A) our beliefs correlate with (B) the facts is explained by the higher-order correlation between (C) our beliefs' genealogy and (D) whatever grounds the truths they are about.

The only difference between this and Enoch's HOC explanation is the necessity of the correlation between (C) survival and (D) goodness. But, I argue, our beliefs' correlation to truth can be objectionably coincidental even if it is *modally robust*. Indeed, any correlation which requires a *pure* HOC explanation—i.e., where the highest-order correlation is brute, as the goodness of survival is on Enoch's view—*will* be objectionably coincidental.

I next consider those non-naturalists who allow for the possibility of explanatory relations between the normative and the non-normative (at the level of fundamental truths). These theorists can offer CE explanations and thus seem better equipped to illuminate an explanatory connection between normative beliefs and truth.

To them, I pose a dilemma: Either the relevant form of explanation is of a *sui generis* normative sort, or it is not. If not, then their view reduces to a form of naturalism. Theorists can, of course, use whatever label they choose for their view. But what matters is that their view will be subject to the very challenges to naturalism typically raised to motivate non-naturalism in the first place (plus whatever concerns attach to non-naturalism *per se*).

On the other horn of the dilemma, these theorists appeal to a *sui generis* form of normative explanation. I focus on a recent development of this idea from Ralf Bader.³ I argue that such

³ Bader, "The Grounding Argument against Non-Reductive Moral Realism."

solutions are worryingly ad hoc, and that there are powerful methodological reasons for rejecting them—reasons stemming from the very considerations Bader draws on to rule out various alternative forms of non-naturalism. In closing, I consider a Bader-inspired CE version of Enoch’s proposal, according to which survival *normatively grounds* goodness, rather than being brutally correlated with it. I argue that this depends on a further brute, necessary connection between metaphysically discontinuous forms of explanation. Worryingly, I conclude, it may follow that the explanation considered is really an HOC explanation, and therefore offers no protection from genealogical challenges after all.