

# ARE NORMATIVE PROPERTIES DESCRIPTIVE PROPERTIES?

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## *Abstract:*

Some philosophers think that normative properties are identical to descriptive properties. In this paper, I argue that this entails that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. I argue that Frank Jackson's argument to show that this is possible fails, and that the objections to this argument show that it is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. I conclude that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties. I then show that if we combine this conclusion with the conclusion of a different argument that Jackson has given to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties, it follows that there are no normative properties at all.

## **ARE NORMATIVE PROPERTIES DESCRIPTIVE PROPERTIES?**

Some philosophers think that

- (1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties.

In this paper, I shall argue that this entails that

- (2) It is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Frank Jackson, who endorses (1), has given an argument to show that (2) is true.<sup>1</sup> But I shall argue that this argument fails, and that the objections to this argument show that it is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. I shall conclude that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties. I shall then show that if we combine this conclusion with the conclusion of a different argument that Jackson has given to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties, it follows that there are no normative properties at all.

This paper consists of nine sections. In section 1, I distinguish normative properties from descriptive properties, and I argue that (1) entails (2). In section 2, I present Jackson's argument for (2). In sections 3 and 4, I argue that this argument fails. In section 5, I present Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties, and I argue that those who endorse (1) cannot appeal to this argument to show that (2) is true. In section 6, I argue that

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson 1998 only endorses (1) about moral properties, but Jackson 2000, p. 29, makes similar claims about the property of reasonableness and the property of rationality, and Jackson's arguments for the claim that moral properties are identical to descriptive properties can be applied to all normative properties. I shall therefore take Jackson to endorse (1).

the objections to Jackson's argument for (2) show that (2) is false. In sections 7 and 8, I conclude that normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties, and I show that if we combine this conclusion with the conclusion of Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties, it follows that there are no normative properties at all.

## 1. Normative and descriptive properties

To distinguish normative properties from descriptive properties, we first need to distinguish normative predicates (such as 'is right', 'is good' and 'is rational') from descriptive predicates (such as 'is square', 'is yellow' or 'is large').<sup>2</sup> We can then say that

(3) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

(4) A normative property is a property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate,

and

(5) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical to a descriptive property.<sup>3</sup>

All philosophers who are realists about normative properties, including Jackson, think that there are normative properties in (4)'s sense. But these philosophers disagree about whether it is true that

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<sup>2</sup> I here follow Jackson 1998, pp. 120-121. See also Streumer 2008, pp. 538-9, 550-3.

<sup>3</sup> It may be objected that some predicates (such as 'is courageous' or 'is just') are both normative and descriptive. If so, we should either say that these predicates contain both a normative and a descriptive component, or that these predicates ascribe normative properties.

(1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties.

According to reductive realists like Jackson, (1) is true.<sup>4</sup> But according to non-reductive realists, there are irreducibly normative properties.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, according to non-reductive realists, (1) is false.

Since descriptive properties are properties that can be ascribed with descriptive predicates, (1) entails that

(1') Normative properties can be ascribed with descriptive predicates.

Of course, (1') does not entail that we can say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties. For we may not have enough information to be able to say this. But (1') does entail that

(2') If we had full information, we could say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties.<sup>6</sup>

For suppose that we had full information but we nevertheless could not say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties. This would show that there is no fact of the matter about which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties. And if normative properties can be ascribed with descriptive predicates, there must be a fact of the matter about which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties. Therefore, (1') entails (2'). And (2') entails that

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jackson 1998, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Non-reductive realists include Moore 1903, Dancy 1993 and 2004b, Parfit 1997, Scanlon 1998, and Shafer-Landau 2003.

<sup>6</sup> I take the 'could' in the consequent of (2') to express logical possibility: the consequent of (2') says that there is a possible world in which we say which descriptive predicates ascribe which descriptive properties.

- (2) It is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Therefore, (1) entails (2).

It may be objected that, if we had full information but we could not say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties, this would not show that there is no fact of the matter about which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties. For we may have some other limitation that makes us unable to say this: for example, we may not fully understand some of the information we have, or we may not have a language that contains sufficiently complex descriptive predicates. However, in that case, (1') would still entail that

- (2'') If we had full information, we fully understood this information and we had a language that contains sufficiently complex descriptive predicates, we could say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties.

And (2'') also entails (2). Therefore, even if we had some other limitation that made us unable to say which descriptive predicates ascribe which normative properties, (1) would still entail (2).

Some realists about normative properties may seem to deny that (1) entails (2). However, these realists do not endorse (1), but instead claim that

- (6) Normative properties are natural properties.<sup>7</sup>

If natural properties are properties that are causally efficacious, normative properties can be natural properties even if they cannot be ascribed with descriptive predicates. In that case, (6)

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Sturgeon 1985, Railton 1986, Boyd 1988, and Lewis 1989. A different version of this view is defended by Brink 1989, who claims that normative properties are constituted by, but not identical to, natural properties.

can be true even if (2) is false.<sup>8</sup> But normative properties can only be identical to descriptive properties if they can be ascribed with descriptive predicates. Therefore, (1) cannot be true if it is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

## 2. Jackson's argument

Jackson agrees that (1) entails (2), and has given the following argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.<sup>9</sup> Call beliefs that ascribe normative properties to objects 'normative beliefs', and consider the set of normative beliefs N such that a normative belief is a member of N if and only if we would have this belief after maximum debate and reflection.<sup>10</sup> If we knew which normative beliefs are members of N, we could write down the contents of these beliefs as a long conjunction. This conjunction could, for example, begin as follows:

(7) Happiness is good, and breaking one's promises is wrong, and virtuous people

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<sup>8</sup> See Sturgeon 1985, pp. 58-61, and 2005, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson 1998, pp. 129-62; see especially pp. 140-3. Jackson only gives this argument for moral properties, but it can be applied to all normative properties. See also Jackson 1992, pp. 485-6, 2000, 2005, pp. 102-4, 2009, pp. 442-9, and Jackson and Pettit 1995 and 1996. For discussion of the argument, see van Roojen 1996, Yablo 2000, pp. 16-9, Zangwill 2000, Schroeter and Schroeter 2009 and Horgan and Timmons 2009.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term 'object' to cover anything that has properties. Jackson 1998 restricts this set to moral beliefs, and calls it 'mature folk morality'. As he puts it, folk morality is "the network of moral opinions, intuitions, principles and concepts whose mastery is part and parcel of having a sense of what is right and wrong" (p. 130) and mature folk morality is "what folk morality will (would) turn into in the limit under critical reflection" (p. 139; see also p. 133). Jackson's claims may suggest that mature folk morality is restricted to moral beliefs whose possession is required for mastery of moral concepts, and it may be thought that N should be restricted in a similar way. I shall come back to this in section 4. I assume in what follows that this definition of N leaves it open whether, if the normative beliefs that some people would have after maximum debate and reflection are inconsistent with the normative beliefs that other people would have after maximum debate and reflection, these people's normative beliefs form a single inconsistent N or one or more different but internally consistent Ns.

bring about good things without performing wrong actions, and . . .

We could then rewrite (7) in the following way:

(7') Happiness has the property of being good, and breaking one's promises has the property of being wrong, and people who have the property of being virtuous bring about things that have the property of being good without performing actions that have the property of being wrong, and . . .

And we could then replace all property names in (7') with variables  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$ , which would give us:

(7'') Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .

Now suppose that there is a unique set of descriptive properties that are related to each other the way the variables  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  in (7'') are related to each other. In that case, the following claim would be true:

(8)  $(\exists x_1) (\exists x_2) (\exists x_3) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .) &  $((\exists y_1) (\exists y_2) (\exists y_3) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Happiness has  $y_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $y_2$ , and people who have  $y_3$  bring about things that have  $y_1$  without performing actions that have  $y_2$ , and . . .)  $\supset (x_1 = y_1 \ \& \ x_2 = y_2 \ \& \ x_3 = y_3 \ \& \dots \ \& \ x_n = y_n)$ ).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In this claim, the clause ' $(\exists x_1) (\exists x_2) (\exists x_3) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .)' says that there is a set of properties that are related to each other the way the variables  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  are related to each other, and the clause ' $((\exists y_1) (\exists y_2) (\exists y_3) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Happiness has  $y_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $y_2$ , and people who have  $y_3$  bring about things that have  $y_1$

According to Jackson, this claim would enable us to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.<sup>12</sup> For example, it would enable us to say that the normative property of being good is identical to

The descriptive property  $x_1$  such that  $(\exists x_2) (\exists x_3) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .) &  $((\exists y_1) (\exists y_2) (\exists y_3) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Happiness has  $y_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $y_2$ , and people who have  $y_3$  bring about things that have  $y_1$  without performing actions that have  $y_2$ , and . . .)  $\supset (x_1 = y_1$  &  $x_2 = y_2$  &  $x_3 = y_3$  & . . . &  $x_n = y_n)$ ),

that the normative property of being wrong is identical to

The descriptive property  $x_2$  such that  $(\exists x_1) (\exists x_3) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .) &  $((\exists y_1) (\exists y_2) (\exists y_3) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Happiness has  $y_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $y_2$ , and people who have  $y_3$  bring about things that have  $y_1$  without performing actions that have  $y_2$ , and . . .)  $\supset (x_1 = y_1$  &  $x_2 = y_2$  &  $x_3 = y_3$  & . . . &  $x_n = y_n)$ ),

and that the normative property of being virtuous is identical to

The descriptive property  $x_3$  such that  $(\exists x_1) (\exists x_2) (\exists x_4) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Happiness has  $x_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $x_2$ , and people who have  $x_3$  bring about things that have  $x_1$  without performing actions that have  $x_2$ , and . . .) &  $((\exists y_1) (\exists y_2) (\exists y_3) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Happiness has  $y_1$ , and breaking one's promises has  $y_2$ , and people who have  $y_3$  bring

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without performing actions that have  $y_2$ , and . . .)  $\supset (x_1 = y_1$  &  $x_2 = y_2$  &  $x_3 = y_3$  & . . . &  $x_n = y_n)$ ' says that this is a unique set of properties.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson is here applying the method for defining theoretical terms proposed by Lewis 1970, which draws on work by Ramsey and Carnap.



about things that have  $y_1$  without performing actions that have  $y_2$ , and . . . )  $\supset (x_1 = y_1$   
&  $x_2 = y_2$  &  $x_3 = y_3$  & . . . &  $x_n = y_n$ )).<sup>13</sup>

Jackson concludes that this argument shows that if we knew which normative beliefs are members of N, we could say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. He therefore takes this argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

### 3. The objection from inconsistency

However, Jackson's argument faces a serious objection, which we can call

*The objection from inconsistency.* Suppose that the normative beliefs that some people would have after maximum debate and reflection are inconsistent with the normative beliefs that other people would have after maximum debate and reflection. If these people's normative beliefs form a single N, this N is inconsistent. In that case, Jackson's argument does not enable us to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. But if these people's normative beliefs form two or more different Ns, Jackson's argument identifies each normative property with several different descriptive properties. And a single normative property cannot be identical to several different descriptive properties. Therefore, Jackson's argument fails to

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<sup>13</sup> These claims identify each normative property with what Jackson calls its 'realizer' property, which is the descriptive property that plays the role that the relevant  $x_i$  plays in (8). We could also identify each normative property with what Jackson calls its 'role' property, which is the descriptive property of playing the role that the relevant  $x_i$  plays in (8). Jackson 1998, pp. 141-2, says that we should identify rightness with its realizer property. But Jackson 2000, p. 28, suggests that the predicate 'is right' ascribes the property of *having* its realizer property, which seems to be distinct from both its realizer property and its role property, and Jackson 2005, p. 104, suggests that it does not really matter which of these properties the predicate 'is right' ascribes. I shall ignore this in what follows, since it does not affect my arguments.

show that (2) is true.<sup>14</sup>

For example, suppose that, after maximum debate and reflection, conservatives would believe that euthanasia is wrong and liberals would believe that euthanasia is not wrong.<sup>15</sup> If conservatives' and liberals' normative beliefs all form a single N, this N is inconsistent. In that case, Jackson's argument does not enable us to say which descriptive property the property of being wrong is identical to. But if conservatives' and liberals' normative beliefs form two different Ns, Jackson's argument identifies the property of being wrong both with

The descriptive property  $x_1$  such that  $(\exists x_2) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $x_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists y_1) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $y_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (x_1 = y_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ x_n = y_n)$ )

and with

The descriptive property  $v_1$  such that  $(\exists v_2) \dots (\exists v_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $v_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists w_1) \dots (\exists w_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $w_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (v_1 = w_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ v_n = w_n)$ ).

And the property of being wrong cannot be identical to both of these different descriptive properties.

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<sup>14</sup> The objection from inconsistency is closely related to Horgan and Timmons' 'moral twin earth' argument against various versions of reductive realism. See Horgan and Timmons 1992a, and also Horgan and Timmons 1991 and 1992b, and Timmons 1999, pp. 32-70. Horgan and Timmons 2009 apply this objection to Jackson's view.

<sup>15</sup> I assume throughout that the belief that X is not wrong is identical to the belief that X both lacks the normative property of being wrong and has the normative property of being not wrong, and that the normative property of being not wrong is identical to the normative property of being permissible. This enables me to say both that the belief that X is not wrong is inconsistent with the belief that X is wrong (since the latter belief ascribes the property of being wrong to X), and also that the belief that X is not wrong is itself a normative judgement (since it ascribes the normative property of being not wrong, or being permissible, to X). This does not affect my arguments, but it makes their formulation less complicated.

It may be thought that Jackson's argument would not face this objection if the normative beliefs that people would have after maximum debate and reflection happened to be consistent with each other.<sup>16</sup> For example, suppose that, after maximum debate and reflection, conservatives and liberals would both believe that euthanasia is not wrong. In that case, it may be thought, Jackson's argument identifies the property of being wrong with

The descriptive property  $v_1$  such that  $(\exists v_2) \dots (\exists v_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $v_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists w_1) \dots (\exists w_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $w_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (v_1 = w_1 \& \dots \& v_n = w_n)$ ).

However, suppose next that conservatives and liberals have children. And suppose that these children turn out to be reactionaries, who would after maximum debate and reflection believe that euthanasia is wrong. If conservatives', liberals' and their children's normative beliefs all form a single N, this N is again inconsistent. In that case, as before, Jackson's argument does not enable us to say which descriptive property the property of being wrong is identical to. But if conservatives', liberals' and their children's normative beliefs form two different Ns, Jackson's argument again identifies the property of being wrong both with

The descriptive property  $x_1$  such that  $(\exists x_2) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $x_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists y_1) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $y_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (x_1 = y_1 \& \dots \& x_n = y_n)$ )

and with

The descriptive property  $v_1$  such that  $(\exists v_2) \dots (\exists v_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $v_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists w_1) \dots (\exists w_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $w_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (v_1 = w_1 \& \dots \& v_n = w_n)$ ).

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<sup>16</sup> This may be suggested by Jackson's remark that "what I hope and believe is the truth of the matter" is that everyone would have the same moral beliefs after maximum debate and reflection (1998, p. 137).

And, as before, the property of being wrong cannot be identical to both of these different descriptive properties.

If the property of being wrong is identical to a descriptive property, it cannot suddenly stop being identical to this descriptive property in this way. More generally, if normative properties are identical to descriptive properties, they cannot suddenly stop being identical to descriptive properties in this way. Therefore, even if the normative beliefs that people would have after maximum debate and reflection happened to be consistent with each other, Jackson's argument would still face the objection from inconsistency.

Of course, Jackson realises that his argument faces this objection. He responds to it with what we can call

*The reply from different normative properties.* If the normative beliefs that some people would have after maximum debate and reflection are inconsistent with the normative beliefs that other people would have after maximum debate and reflection, these people's normative beliefs form two or more different Ns. But when people's normative beliefs form two or more different Ns, these people use the same normative predicates to ascribe two or more different normative properties. And the argument identifies each of these different normative properties with a single descriptive property. Therefore, the argument does show that (2) is true.<sup>17</sup>

Suppose again that, after maximum debate and reflection, conservatives would believe that euthanasia is wrong and liberals would believe that euthanasia is not wrong. According to this reply, they then use the predicate 'is wrong' to ascribe two different normative properties. Jackson's argument identifies the first of these properties with

The descriptive property  $x_1$  such that  $(\exists x_2) \dots (\exists x_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $x_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists y_1) \dots (\exists y_n)$  (Euthanasia has  $y_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (x_1 = y_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ x_n = y_n)$ ),

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<sup>17</sup> Jackson 1998, p. 137.

and the second of these properties with

The descriptive property  $v_1$  such that  $(\exists v_2) \dots (\exists v_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $v_1$ , and  $\dots$ ) &  $((\exists w_1) \dots (\exists w_n)$  (Euthanasia does not have  $w_1$ , and  $\dots$ )  $\supset (v_1 = w_1 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ v_n = w_n)$ ).

However, this reply makes Jackson's argument face a different problem. It makes the argument entail that

(9) Necessarily, the normative beliefs that people would have after maximum debate and reflection are all true.

But we clearly do not believe that

(9\*) Necessarily, the normative beliefs that people would have after a *long* period of debate and reflection are all true.

And maximum debate and reflection is nothing but a *very long* period of debate and reflection. Therefore, we do not seem to believe that (9) is true either.

For example, suppose that conservatives and liberals engage in a long period of debate and reflection. And suppose that, after this period of debate and reflection, conservatives believe that euthanasia is wrong and liberals believe that euthanasia is not wrong. In that case, conservatives will surely also believe that their belief that euthanasia is wrong is true and that liberals' belief that euthanasia is not wrong is false, and liberals will surely also believe that their belief that euthanasia is not wrong is true and that conservatives' belief that euthanasia is wrong is false.<sup>18</sup> This shows that they both believe that (9\*) is false. And, as I have said, maximum debate and reflection is nothing but a very long period of

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, these beliefs are likely to be implicit or dispositional beliefs, which would only give rise to explicit or occurrent beliefs in certain circumstances. The same is true of many of the other beliefs I discuss here.

debate and reflection. Therefore, this also seems to show that they both believe that (9) is false.

Jackson could reply that there is an important difference between a long period of debate and reflection and *maximum* debate and reflection: after maximum debate and reflection, he could say, conservatives would stop believing that their belief that euthanasia is wrong is true and that liberals' belief that euthanasia is not wrong is false, and liberals would stop believing that their belief that euthanasia is not wrong is true and that conservatives' belief that euthanasia is wrong is false. But if so, what would they come to believe instead? If they believed that (9) is true, they would have to come to believe that

(10) Conservatives' belief that euthanasia is wrong and liberals' belief that euthanasia is not wrong are both true.

And that is unlikely to happen. The irresolvability of their disagreement is much more likely to make them believe either that

(10\*) Conservatives' belief that euthanasia is wrong and liberals' belief that euthanasia is not wrong are both *false*,

or perhaps that

(10\*\*) Conservatives' belief that euthanasia is wrong and liberals' belief that euthanasia is not wrong are both *neither true nor false*.<sup>19</sup>

And if conservatives and liberals came to believe either (10\*) or (10\*\*) rather than (10), this would again show that they believe that (9) is false.

Jackson could also reply that we should accept an error theory about the belief that (9)

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<sup>19</sup> As Sturgeon 1994 argues, nihilism is a more plausible response to irresolvable normative disagreement than relativism.

is false, since this would enable us to be reductive realists about normative properties. However, for it to be true in a non-misleading way that

(1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties,

the properties that (1) calls ‘normative properties’ must be properties of the kind that we take our normative predicates, such as ‘is right’, ‘is good’ and ‘is virtuous’, to ascribe. And which kind of properties we take our normative predicates to ascribe depends on our meta-normative beliefs, such as the belief that (9) is false.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if the truth of (1) is incompatible with the falsity of (9), the properties that (1) calls ‘normative properties’ are not properties of the kind that we take our normative predicates to ascribe. In that case, (1) can misleadingly be said to be true, but reductive realism about normative properties is false.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. The objection from regress**

Reductive realists could also give other replies to the objection from inconsistency, all of which involve a revision of Jackson’s claim about which normative beliefs are members of N. The first is what we can call

*The reply from mastery of normative concepts.* Suppose that a normative belief is a member of N if and only if having this belief is required for having mastered a normative concept, and suppose that there is a different N for every different set of

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<sup>20</sup> I take meta-normative beliefs to be beliefs about the properties of normative judgements or of normative properties.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson agrees that offering a philosophical account of something that is incompatible with our central beliefs about his thing changes the subject (1998, pp. 30-1). But he also thinks that a philosophical account should be allowed to change the subject in a limited way (pp. 44-5), which presumably means that, though such an account must be compatible with our central beliefs about this thing, it need not be compatible with all our beliefs about this thing. However, the belief that (9) is false is clearly one of our central meta-normative beliefs.

normative concepts. In that case, the normative beliefs of people who have mastered the same normative concepts form a single N. The normative beliefs of people who have mastered different normative concepts still form different Ns, but it is not implausible to claim that these people use the same normative predicates to ascribe different normative properties. Therefore, if we revise the membership of N in this way, Jackson's argument does show that (2) is true.

However, very few normative beliefs are such that having these beliefs is required for having mastered a normative concept. Therefore, if reductive realists gave this reply, N would be very unlikely to contain enough beliefs to make it true that there is a unique set of descriptive properties that are related to each other the way the variables  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  in (7'') are related to each other. And if there is no such unique set, Jackson's argument fails to identify each normative property with a single descriptive property.<sup>22</sup>

Second, reductive realists could give what we can call

*The reply from a normative property of normative beliefs.* Suppose that a normative belief is a member of N if and only if this belief has a certain normative property, such as the property of being rational. In that case, we can suppose that there is a single N no matter what people's normative beliefs are. And in that case, Jackson's argument identifies each single normative property with a single descriptive property. Therefore, if we revise the membership of N in this way, the argument does show that (2) is true.

However, this reply makes Jackson's argument face a different objection, which we can call

*The objection from regress.* If Jackson's argument is sound, whether an object has a normative property depends on whether N contains a normative belief that ascribes

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<sup>22</sup> A similar point is made by Smith 1994, pp. 54-6. See also Schroeter and Schroeter 2009, pp. 8-9, and Horgan and Timmons 2009, pp. 229-31.



this property to this object. This means that whether a normative belief has the property of being rational depends on whether N contains a second normative belief that ascribes the property of being rational to the first normative belief. And whether N contains this second normative belief depends on whether N contains a third normative belief that ascribes the property of being rational to the second normative belief. This is the start of an infinite regress. Therefore, if we revise the membership of N in this way, Jackson's argument fails to show that (2) is true.<sup>23</sup>

For example, suppose that the belief that euthanasia is wrong is a member of N if and only if this belief has the property of being rational. If Jackson's argument is sound, whether the belief that euthanasia is wrong has the property of being rational depends on whether N contains a second normative belief that ascribes the property of being rational to the belief that euthanasia is wrong. And whether N contains this second normative belief depends on whether N contains a third normative belief that ascribes the property of being rational to the second normative belief. This is the start of an infinite regress.

Third, reductive realists could give what we can call

*The reply from real normative properties.* Suppose that a normative belief is a member of N if and only if the object that this belief ascribes a normative property to really has this normative property. In that case, we can suppose that there is a single N no matter what people's normative beliefs are. And in that case, Jackson's argument identifies each normative property with a single descriptive property. Therefore, if we revise the membership of N in this way, the argument does show that (2) is true.

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<sup>23</sup> The problem is not merely that this is an infinite series of normative beliefs. If this was the problem, reductive realists could perhaps argue that this regress is benign by comparing it to a belief-version of the truth regress (from 'X believes that *p* is true' to 'X believes that it is true that *p* is true' to 'X believes that it is true that it is true that *p* is true' and so on). Rather, the problem is the direction of determination in this infinite series of normative beliefs, which runs from the last belief to the first belief rather than the other way around.

However, as we have seen, Jackson and other reductive realists think that

- (1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties,
- (3) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

and

- (4) A normative property is a property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate.

If these claims are true, what it is for an object to have a normative property is not that this object has an extra property in addition to its descriptive properties. Instead, if these claims are true, what it is for an object to have a normative property is that this object has a descriptive property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate.<sup>24</sup>

What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate? Reductive realists could say that

- (11) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that people are disposed to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> As Jackson writes: “There is no ‘extra’ feature that the ethical terms are fastening onto” (1998, pp. 124-5; see also Jackson 2005, p. 101). Reductive realists who want to deny that their view has this implication could try to do this by endorsing different versions of (1), (3) or (4). I shall come back to this in section 6.

<sup>25</sup> This claim could be complicated in various ways: for example, it could include a clause to ensure that people are disposed to apply this predicate to this object because this object has this descriptive property, or because they believe that this object has this descriptive property. These complications do not matter to what follows.

But if they endorsed (11), Jackson's argument would face the objection from inconsistency again, since different people can be disposed to apply normative predicates to objects in inconsistent ways.

Reductive realists could also say that

(11') What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that, after maximum debate and reflection, people would be disposed to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property.

But if they endorsed (11'), Jackson's argument would also face the objection from inconsistency again, since different people can be disposed to apply normative predicates to objects in inconsistent ways even after maximum debate and reflection.

Finally, reductive realists could say that

(11'') What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that it is correct to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property.

But if they endorsed (11''), Jackson's argument would face another version of

*The objection from regress.* The property of being correct is a normative property. Therefore, if (11'') is true, what makes it the case that an object has a normative property is that applying a normative predicate to this object has the normative property of being correct. And what makes it the case that applying this normative predicate to this object has the normative property of being correct is that applying the predicate 'is correct' to applying this predicate to this object has the normative property of being correct. This is the start of an infinite regress. Therefore, if (11'') is true, Jackson's argument fails to show that (2) is true.<sup>26</sup>

For example, if (11'') is true, what makes it the case that euthanasia has the property of being wrong is that applying the predicate 'is wrong' to euthanasia has the normative property of

being correct. And what makes it the case that applying the predicate ‘is wrong’ to euthanasia has the normative property of being correct is that applying the predicate ‘is correct’ to applying the predicate ‘is wrong’ to euthanasia has the normative property of being correct. As before, this is the start of an infinite regress.

Reductive realists could reply that (11’’) is a claim about *semantic* correctness, and that what makes it semantically correct to apply a predicate to an object is that the vast majority of users of the language that contains this predicate are disposed to apply this predicate to this object.<sup>27</sup> However, this would make (11’’) entail that

- (12) What makes it the case that an object has a normative property is that the vast majority of users of a certain language are disposed to apply a certain normative predicate to this object.

And we clearly do not believe that (12) is true. For example, conservatives surely believe that euthanasia can be wrong even if the vast majority of users of English are not disposed to apply the predicate ‘is wrong’ to euthanasia, and liberals surely believe that euthanasia can fail to be wrong even if the vast majority of users of English are disposed to apply the predicate ‘is wrong’ to euthanasia.

Reductive realists could also reply that we should accept an error theory about the belief that (12) is false, since this would enable us to be reductive realists about normative properties. However, as before, for it to be true in a non-misleading way that

- (1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties,

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<sup>26</sup> As before, the problem is not merely that this is an infinite series of applications of normative predicates. If this was the problem, reductive realists could perhaps argue that this regress is benign by comparing it to the truth regress (from ‘*p* is true’ to ‘it is true that *p* is true’ to ‘it is true that it is true that *p* is true’ and so on). Rather, the problem is the direction of determination in this infinite series of applications of normative predicates, which runs from the last application to the first application rather than the other way around.

<sup>27</sup> Like (11), this claim could be complicated in various ways, but these complications do not matter to what follows. I do not mean to endorse this account of semantic correctness.

the properties that (1) calls ‘normative properties’ must be properties of the kind that we take our normative predicates to ascribe. And which kind of properties we take our normative predicates to ascribe depends on our meta-normative beliefs, such as the belief that (12) is false. Therefore, if the truth of (1) is incompatible with the falsity of (12), the properties that (1) calls ‘normative properties’ are not properties of the kind that we take our normative predicates to ascribe. In that case, as before, (1) can misleadingly be said to be true, but reductive realism about normative properties is false.

I conclude that all replies to the objection from inconsistency either fail or face the objection from regress instead. This means that Jackson’s argument fails to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

## **5. Jackson’s argument against irreducibly normative properties**

Besides giving an argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to, Jackson has also given an argument to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.<sup>28</sup> It may be thought that reductive realists could appeal to this argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

This argument can be presented as follows. Consider an action  $A_1$  that has a certain normative property, such as the property of being right. Given that

(13) Necessarily, anything that has normative properties also has descriptive

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<sup>28</sup> See Jackson 1998, pp. 122-3, and Jackson 2001, p. 655. The argument was inspired by a more general argument given by Jaegwon Kim (see Kim 1993, pp. 68-71, 149-55), and it is also given by Jackson and Pettit 1996, pp. 84-5. For discussion of the argument, see van Roojen 1996, Williamson 2001, Shafer-Landau 2003, pp. 89-98, Dancy 2004a, Majors 2005, Streumer 2008, Kramer 2009, pp. 207-12, Suikkanen 2010, and Brown forthcoming. My reconstruction of the argument in Streumer 2008 implausibly suggested that the number of objects, properties and actions in all possible worlds is finite. My reconstruction in what follows still suggests that these numbers are countably rather than uncountably infinite, but I take this to be merely a matter of presentation.

properties,

action  $A_1$  also has descriptive properties, which we can call  $P_1, P_2, \dots$ . And the objects  $O_1, O_2, \dots$  that are part of the same possible world as action  $A_1$  also have descriptive properties, which for each object  $O_x$  we can call  $P_{O_x-1}, P_{O_x-2}, \dots$ .<sup>29</sup> Action  $A_1$  therefore satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate  $D_1$ :

‘has descriptive properties  $P_1, \dots, P_n$  and is such that  $O_1$  has descriptive properties  $P_{O_1-1}, P_{O_1-2}, \dots, O_2$  has descriptive properties  $P_{O_2-1}, P_{O_2-2}, \dots$ ’.

Given that

(14) A predicate that wholly consists of descriptive predicates is itself a descriptive predicate,

predicate  $D_1$  is a descriptive predicate.

Suppose next that actions  $A_1, A_2, \dots$  are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds. Just as action  $A_1$  satisfies the descriptive predicate  $D_1$ , actions  $A_2, A_3, \dots$  satisfy similarly constructed descriptive predicates  $D_2, D_3, \dots$ . And since action  $A_1$  satisfies predicate  $D_1$ , it also satisfies the following predicate, which we can call predicate  $D^*$ :

‘satisfies either the descriptive predicate  $D_1$ , or the descriptive predicate  $D_2$ , or  $\dots$ ’.

Again, given (14), predicate  $D^*$  is a descriptive predicate.

Now consider the following claim about supervenience:

(15) For all possible worlds  $W$  and  $W^*$ , if the distribution of descriptive properties

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<sup>29</sup> As before, I use the term ‘object’ to cover anything that has properties, and I here use the term ‘property’ to cover both properties and relations.

at W and W\* is exactly alike, then the distribution of normative properties at W and W\* is also exactly alike.

If (15) is true, then for any X, the claim that

(16) X satisfies the descriptive predicate D\*

entails the claim that

(17) X satisfies the normative predicate 'is right'.

For if (16) did not entail (17), there would be two possible worlds W and W\* that have exactly the same distribution of descriptive properties but that do not have the same distribution of normative properties, which would contradict (15).

And for any X, the claim that

(17) X satisfies the normative predicate 'is right'

also entails the claim that

(16) X satisfies the descriptive predicate D\*.

For actions A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>2</sub>, . . . are all the right actions there are in all possible worlds, and these actions satisfy the predicates D<sub>1</sub>, D<sub>2</sub>, . . . Therefore, any action that satisfies the predicate 'is right' also satisfies one of the predicates D<sub>1</sub>, D<sub>2</sub>, . . . And any action that satisfies one of the predicates D<sub>1</sub>, D<sub>2</sub> . . . also satisfies predicate D\*.

Since (16) both entails and is entailed by (17), the normative predicate 'is right' is necessarily co-extensive with the descriptive predicate D\*. Therefore, given that

(18) Necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe the same property,

these predicates ascribe the same property. And therefore, given that

- (3) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate

and that

- (5) An irreducibly normative property is a normative property that is not identical to any descriptive property,

the normative predicate ‘is right’ does not ascribe an irreducibly normative property. And this argument not only applies to the property of being right, but also applies to any other normative property. Therefore, if this argument is sound, it shows that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Non-reductive realists, according to whom there are irreducibly normative properties, have made many objections to this argument: they have objected, for example, that necessarily co-extensive predicates can ascribe different properties, that predicate D\* does not ascribe a property, that predicate D\* does not ascribe a descriptive property, and that the argument relies on implausible definitions of normative and descriptive properties. However, suppose that all of these objections fail, and that the argument is sound.<sup>30</sup> Even if that is so, I shall argue, reductive realists cannot appeal to this argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

If Jackson’s argument against irreducibly normative properties is sound, which descriptive property the property of being right is identical to depends on which descriptive property predicate D\* ascribes. Which descriptive property predicate D\* ascribes depends, in turn, on which actions have the normative property of being right. And as we have seen in the previous section, if (3), (4) and (5) are true, what it is for an object to have a normative property is that this object has a descriptive property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate. This means that, if reductive realists appealed to this argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive property the normative property of being right is identical

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<sup>30</sup> I argue that all of these objections do in fact fail in Streumer 2008.



to, the argument would face exactly the same objections that the reply from real normative properties faced in the previous section. If reductive realists said that

- (11) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that people are disposed to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property,

or that

- (11') What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that, after maximum debate and reflection, people would be disposed to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property,

then the argument would face the objection from inconsistency. And if reductive realists said that

- (11'') What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that it is correct to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property,

then the argument would face the objection from regress. Therefore, reductive realists cannot appeal to this argument to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Non-reductive realists may now say that if this argument fails to show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to, it also fails to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties. But that is not so. For if the argument is sound, it does show that

- (1\*) If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties,

and that is enough to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

Non-reductive realists could reply that the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties entails the claim that

- (1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties,

and that (1), in turn, entails the claim that

- (2) It is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Therefore, they could say, if the argument fails to show that (2) is true, it must also fail to show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

However, (1) can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be interpreted as having existential import, in which case it is equivalent to the claim that

- (1\*\*) There are normative properties that are identical to descriptive properties.

Reductive realists like Jackson are committed to (1\*\*), and (1\*\*) entails (2). But the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties does not entail (1\*\*), since it is compatible with the non-existence of normative properties. By contrast, (1) can also be interpreted as lacking existential import, in which case it is equivalent to the claim that

- (1\*) If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

Clearly, the claim that there are no irreducibly normative properties does entail (1\*). But (1\*) does not entail (2). Instead, (1\*) merely entails that

- (2\*) If there are normative properties, it is possible to say which descriptive properties these properties are identical to.

And (2\*) is compatible with the negation of (2), since it is compatible with the non-existence of normative properties. Therefore, though Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties does not show that it is possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to, it may nevertheless show that there are no irreducibly normative properties.

## **6. Why the objections from inconsistency and regress show that (2) is false**

I have argued that Jackson's argument for (2) fails, and that reductive realists cannot appeal to Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties to show that (2) is true. Of course, reductive realists could reply that this does not show that it is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to. But I shall now argue that the objections from inconsistency and regress do show that this is impossible.

It can only be possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to if it is possible to say which objects have which normative properties. As we have seen, Jackson and other reductive realists claim that

- (1) Normative properties are identical to descriptive properties,
- (3) A descriptive property is a property that can be ascribed with a descriptive predicate,

and

- (4) A normative property is a property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate.

And as we have seen, if these claims are true, what it is for an object to have a normative property is that this object has a descriptive property that can be ascribed with a normative predicate. Therefore, if (1), (3) and (4) are true, it can only be possible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to if it is possible to say which

descriptive properties can be ascribed with which normative predicates.

Any attempt to say which descriptive properties can be ascribed with which normative predicates will have to appeal to a claim of one of the following two kinds. First, it can appeal to a claim according to which

(11\*) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that, in certain descriptively specified conditions, people would be disposed to apply this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property.<sup>31</sup>

But any attempt that appeals to a claim of this kind will face a version of the objection from inconsistency, unless the descriptively specified conditions in (11\*) make it impossible for different people to be disposed to apply normative predicates to objects in inconsistent ways.

Second, an attempt to say which descriptive properties can be ascribed with which normative predicates can appeal to a claim according to which

(11\*\*) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that the application of this normative predicate to objects that have this descriptive property has a certain normative property.

But any attempt that appeals to a claim of this kind will face a version of the objection from regress.

There are three ways in which reductive realists could try to get around this. First, they could try to specify the conditions in (11\*) in such a way that these conditions make it impossible for different people to be disposed to apply normative predicates to objects in inconsistent ways. But it is hard to see how they could do this in a plausible way. Of course,

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<sup>31</sup> Like (11), this claim could be complicated in various ways: for example, it could include a clause to ensure that people are disposed to apply this predicate to this object because this object has this descriptive property, or because they believe that this object has this descriptive property. These complications do not matter to what follows.

they could endorse implausible claims like

(11†) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that this was the outcome of a coin toss that people organised to decide this for everyone who will ever live,

or

(11††) What makes it the case that a descriptive property can be ascribed with a normative predicate is that people asked a single person to decide this for everyone who will ever live.

But such claims avoid the objection from inconsistency only by making which objects have which normative properties unacceptably arbitrary. This is why reductive realists need to specify the conditions in (11\*) by taking people's normative beliefs into account, and by taking more than one person's normative beliefs into account.

Second, reductive realists could reject (3) and adopt a different definition of descriptive properties instead. But it is hard to see which definition they could adopt. They could, of course, reformulate their view in terms of non-normative properties. But since non-normative predicates and descriptive predicates are exactly the same predicates, non-normative properties and descriptive properties are exactly the same properties. They could also reformulate their view in terms of natural properties, like the naturalist realists I mentioned in section 1. However, if Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties is sound, it shows that

(1\*) If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

And it shows this whether or not these properties are *also* natural properties. Therefore, if Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties is sound, anyone who thinks that there are normative properties is committed to the truth of (2), including realists who think that normative properties are natural properties. And it is this commitment to the truth of (2)

that makes reductive realism face the objections from inconsistency and regress.

Third, reductive realists could reject (4) and adopt a different definition of normative properties instead. They could, for example, say that

(4') A normative property is a property that makes it the case that we have a normative reason to have a certain attitude or to perform a certain action,

or that

(4'') A normative property is a property that plays a certain role in our deliberation.

However, if a definition of normative properties specifies what normative properties are in partly normative terms, as (4') does, any attempt to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to that makes use of this definition will face a version of the objection from regress. And if a definition of normative properties specifies what normative properties are in wholly descriptive terms, as (4'') does, any attempt that makes use of this definition will either face a version of the objection from inconsistency or will make which objects have which normative properties unacceptably arbitrary.

I conclude that any attempt to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to that is not unacceptably arbitrary will face either a version of the objection from inconsistency or a version of the objection from regress. And I therefore conclude that

(~2) It is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Though it will become clear in the next section that this does not matter to my arguments, I think that the objections from inconsistency and regress also apply to many versions of naturalist realism.<sup>32</sup> For example, according to Richard Boyd,

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<sup>32</sup> These objections do not apply to the version of naturalist realism defended by Sturgeon 1985 and

- (19) The natural properties that moral predicates ascribe are those natural properties that causally regulate people's use of moral predicates.<sup>33</sup>

This view faces a version of the objection from inconsistency, since different people's use of the same moral predicate can be causally regulated by different natural properties.<sup>34</sup>

According to David Lewis,

- (20) The property of being valuable is the property of being what we would be disposed to value under conditions of the fullest possible imaginative acquaintance.<sup>35</sup>

This view also faces a version of the objection from inconsistency, since different people can have dispositions to value different objects under conditions of the fullest possible imaginative acquaintance.

According to Michael Smith,

- (21) The property of being right in circumstances C is the property that we would want acts to have in C if we were fully rational.<sup>36</sup>

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2005.

<sup>33</sup> See Boyd 1988, p. 195. What Boyd actually writes is: "Roughly, and for nondegenerate cases, a term *t* refers to a kind (property, relation, etc.) *k* just in case there exist causal mechanisms whose tendency is to bring it about, over time, that what is predicated of the term *t* will be approximately true of *k* (excuse the blurring of the use – mention distinction)." He then applies this claim to moral terms.

<sup>34</sup> As I said in note 14, Horgan and Timmons' 'moral twin earth' argument against Boyd's view is closely related to what I have called the objection from inconsistency. See Horgan and Timmons 1992a, and also Horgan and Timmons 1991 and 1992b, and Timmons 1999, pp. 32-70. I cannot do justice here to the details of Boyd's view, or to the replies he could give to objections like this (see Boyd 1988, pp. 223-6, and 1995).

<sup>35</sup> See Lewis 1989, p. 77. Lewis identifies the normative judgement of valuing with the second-order attitude of desiring to desire (p. 71).

<sup>36</sup> Smith 1994, p. 185. Smith uses the term 'feature' rather than the term 'property', and adds that these wants should have 'the appropriate content'.

Smith does not identify the property of being fully rational with a natural property, but merely says that the property we would want acts to have in C is a natural property, and that fully rational creatures must be naturalistically realised.<sup>37</sup> But if naturalist realists tried to use Smith's view to identify the normative property of being right with a natural property, they would face either a version of the objection from inconsistency or a version of the objection from regress, depending on whether they take being fully rational to be a natural property or a normative property.

Finally, according to Peter Railton,

(22) The property of being an individual's personal good is the property of being what this individual would want him- or herself to want if he or she were fully instrumentally rational and fully informed,

and

(23) The property of being right is the property of being what would maximize people's personal good, taking each individual's personal good into account equally.<sup>38</sup>

Since many people reject the version of consequentialism that (23) is an expression of, and may continue to reject this version of consequentialism after maximum debate and reflection, this view is unacceptably arbitrary. Of course, Railton could avoid this arbitrariness by giving the normative beliefs of non-consequentialists an equal role in (23). But if he did this, his view would face a version of the objection from inconsistency.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Smith 1994, p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> See Railton 1986.

<sup>39</sup> Railton would probably reply that (23) offers a 'reforming definition' of rightness, which does not have to fit with all our present beliefs about rightness (see Railton 1986, pp. 204-7, and 1989, pp. 157-9). Jackson similarly suggests that it is enough if the descriptive properties  $x_1, \dots, x_n$  make (8) "near enough true", and adds that "[w]e should not expect perfect solutions here any more than in physics where we found what the term 'atom' denoted by finding something that near enough



## 7. What is the significance of the falsity of (2)?

As I have said, I think that the objections from inconsistency and regress show that

- (~2) It is impossible to say which descriptive properties normative properties are identical to.

Since (1) entails (2), it follows from this that

- (~1) Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

We may wonder what the significance of this conclusion is. Clearly, its significance is not that it shows that there are irreducibly normative properties. For (~1) is not only compatible with non-reductive realism about normative properties, but also with two forms of irrealism about normative properties: non-cognitivism, according to which normative judgements are non-cognitive attitudes or combinations of non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs that ascribe descriptive properties, and the error theory, according to which normative judgements are beliefs that ascribe normative properties even though such properties do not exist.<sup>40</sup>

Instead, the significance of this conclusion is that it shows that

- (~1\*) If there are normative properties, these properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

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satisfied atomic theory” (1998, pp. 141-2). It seems to me, however, that attempts to say which descriptive or natural property the property of rightness is identical to that face the objection from inconsistency fit so badly with our meta-normative beliefs that they cannot plausibly be put forward as reforming definitions of rightness.

<sup>40</sup> There is also a third version of irrealism, according to which normative judgements are beliefs with non-descriptive content. See Horgan and Timmons 2000 and 2006. I discuss both this view and several versions of non-cognitivism in Streumer unpublished 1. I discuss (and defend) the error theory in Streumer unpublished 2.

In other words, the significance of this conclusion is that it shows that reductive realism about normative properties is false.

If Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties is sound, we can make use of ( $\sim 1^*$ ) to draw an even more significant conclusion. For if Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties is sound, it shows that

(1\*) If there are normative properties, these properties are identical to descriptive properties.

And ( $\sim 1^*$ ) and (1\*) together entail that

(24) There are no normative properties at all.

Therefore, if we combine the objections from inconsistency and regress with Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties, we can conclude that all versions of realism about normative properties are false, and that the truth about normative properties and judgements must be either non-cognitivism or the error theory. And we can draw this conclusion irrespectively of whether or not it is true that

(6) Normative properties are natural properties.

This is potentially very significant. For it means that we can conclude that there are no normative properties irrespectively of whether such properties are 'queer', whether we would need a special faculty to detect them, or whether such properties are naturalistically respectable in other ways.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For the classic argument against the existence of normative properties based on their 'queerness' and our need for a special faculty to detect them, see Mackie 1977. For discussion, see, among many others, Brink 1984, Garner 1990, Joyce 2001, and Shepski 2008.

## 8. Conclusion

I conclude that the objections from inconsistency and regress show that

(~1) Normative properties are not identical to descriptive properties.

In other words, I conclude that these objections show that reductive realism about normative properties is false. Moreover, if we combine the objections from inconsistency and regress with Jackson's argument against irreducibly normative properties, we can conclude that there are no normative properties at all, and that the truth about normative properties and judgements must be either non-cognitivism or the error theory. And we can draw this conclusion irrespectively of whether normative properties are natural properties.<sup>42</sup>

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