

The Source of Normativity

JOHN BENGSON

University of Texas at Austin, USA

John.bengson@austin.utexas.edu

TERENCE CUNEO

University of Vermont, USA

tcuneo@uvm.edu

RUSS SHAFER-LANDAU

University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

shaferlandau@wisc.edu

This paper seeks to clarify one of the deepest questions about the source or ground of normativity, while also presenting an essence-based approach to answering it. We call it the 'Arché Question.' Though all metanormative theories must address this question, very few realists have explicitly grappled with the challenge it poses; those who have appear to deny any need to give an answer. After critically discussing extant realist responses, this paper outlines an essence-based approach to answering the Arché Question that draws on theoretical resources forged in recent advances in post-modal metaphysics.

1. The Arché Question

One of the hardest and deepest questions about normativity asks after its source or ground. We call this the 'Arché Question.' A satisfactory answer to it will identify the explanatory foundations of normative reality.

All metanormative theories must address this question. Yet very few realists have explicitly grappled with the challenge it poses. And those who have appear to deny any need to give an answer. Rather than attempting to furnish candidate explanations, some have pointed to alleged companions in innocence, arguing that fundamental reality in other domains is explanatorily brute, and none the worse for that. Others have insisted that the explanatory demand is confused, maintaining that the only coherent questions to ask concern the character of the fundamental normative facts, or the aetiology of normative thought and discourse.

While we critically discuss each of these responses below, the primary goals of this paper are to clarify the Arché Question and present an essence-based approach to answering it. Our proposal draws on

theoretical resources forged in recent advances in post-modal metaphysics, revealing their potential to facilitate progress on a central problem of normative philosophy broadly construed. We wish to emphasize at the outset that what we identify is a *strategy* for resolving (rather than dissolving) this question on behalf of normative realism. Although we'll illustrate the strategy by invoking particular normative claims, these might be replaced by others, depending on the outcome of substantive normative theorizing. Our central thesis is simply that successfully implementing the strategy enables normative realists to identify the source of normativity.

Presenting this strategy will require some stage-setting. We begin by distinguishing the Arché Question from related questions, getting clear on the character of normative realism and essence explanation, and explaining why normative realism faces a serious challenge. After this preliminary work, we'll present our strategy in detail, clarifying what is required for its successful implementation. Since fully executing each step of the strategy would require a great deal of theoretical skill, our approach explains why identifying the explanatory foundations of normative reality is extraordinarily difficult. Still, if our discussion is on the right track, it charts the way forward for normative realism. When asked the question, usually meant to be embarrassing to realism—What is the source of normativity?—realists can point in the direction of an answer.

2. Clarifying the question

The philosophical concerns we seek to address are not new but familiar. The issues are not of interest only to the pros; as evidenced by lay queries such as 'Where did morality come from?' and 'What is the source of norms for conduct?', many non-philosophers are fascinated and troubled by our topic. However, despite the intuitive appeal of such popular formulations, they are too amorphous to frame our discussion.

Many of the important questions at the centre of philosophical discussions about the foundations of normativity are in better shape. But they, too, should not be conflated with the Arché Question. For example, theorists sometimes have in mind a substantive question in normative theorizing:

What is the identity of the fundamental normative principle(s)?

This is often paired with an epistemological follow-up:

Why think that the candidate (or set of candidates) being advanced is correct, as opposed to another intramural competitor?

And a third, etiological question sometimes hovers in the vicinity:

What are the origins of normative thought and discourse?¹

These three questions each represent legitimate ways of probing the foundations of normativity. But the question we're focusing on here is none of these questions. It can arise even when we've resolved all three of those inquiries to our satisfaction. Equally, it can be pressed even if all parties to the debate have agreed to punt on the issues they raise.

Instead, the Arché Question asks for a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative facts, namely, those normative facts not explained by any other normative facts.² As we understand it, a treatment of such facts provides a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of them just in case it satisfies a pair of conditions. First, it must identify the non-normative facts that ground these normative facts; second, any ground must be such that no further ground would aid understanding of why the fundamental normative facts hold. We'll use the term 'arché' to refer to the non-normative ground of fundamental normative reality identified by such an explanation.

Note that we are offering a stipulative definition of 'fully adequate', one that is compatible with the possibility that a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of fundamental normative reality might not invoke its *ultimate* ground. To appreciate this possibility, suppose we've identified a fundamental normative fact [p] that grounds all other normative facts.³ And suppose we've identified its proximate non-normative ground [q]. Identifying the ultimate ground of [q] may not aid understanding of why [p] holds. For example, suppose [q] were ultimately grounded in a fact regarding atoms in the void. If citing the latter fact would deliver a ground that does not aid understanding of why [p] holds, then it would not be needed to achieve a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of [p].

¹ It is not uncommon for authors focused on this question to frame their investigation using the language of 'source.' See, for example, Harms and Skyrms' treatment of 'the source of morality' (2008, p. 434) and Kitcher (2011, p. 311) on 'the source of ethical precepts and values.' Cp. Wilson (1998) and Pettit (2018). By contrast, Mill (1863, ch. 1) connects "the question ... concerning the foundation of morality" to "the controversy respecting the criterion of right and wrong"—the first of the three questions we've identified.

² Throughout, when we speak of explaining a fact, we mean explaining why the fact holds or exists. We'll use the term 'ground' in a neutral way to refer to a non-causal, metaphysical explanatory relation.

³ We employ brackets to designate facts.

The Arché Question queries the source of fundamental normative facts, but it does not itself ask about the property *being normative*, as in:

What is it to be normative? (Or: what is normativity?)

That said, any satisfactory answer to our question must operate with an understanding of what the distinction between the normative and the non-normative comes to. Here we employ a minimal characterization that adverts to five normative categories:

A property is normative if and only if it is evaluative, deontic, (dis) favouring, (un)fitting, or aretaic.⁴

We'll not pause to elucidate the five categories on the right-hand side of this biconditional, or comment on the relations they bear to one another. An intuitive grasp of these categories will suffice for present purposes.

One virtue of the biconditional is that it captures the core of established usage. It is also informative. For example, the property *being required* is deontic: in having that property, an action satisfies a norm of requirement. And the property *being brave* is aretaic: in having that property, an action satisfies a standard of virtue. With a bit of reflection we can also readily see *being good* to be evaluative, *being a reason* to be favouring, and *being appropriate* to be fitting. Since each of these properties is normative, our characterization yields the correct results. By contrast, *being a cloud* isn't normative. Nor is *occurring quickly*. Neither property is evaluative, deontic, favouring, fitting, or aretaic. Likewise for *being a quark*, *having two eyes*, *being in pain*, *being a killing*, and so on. Accordingly, these latter properties are not normative ones.⁵

⁴ It may be that rights belong on this list as well. If so, we believe it likely that claim rights—rather than liberties, powers, or immunities—are the constituents of an additional normative category. That said, we will proceed as if all rights, much like oughts and responsibilities, can be understood entirely in terms of one or more of the five categories we've enumerated, though this is solely for reasons of presentational economy. We remain neutral regarding the relative priority of these categories. We distinguish normative *categories* from normative *domains*; the latter include morality, prudence, epistemology, aesthetics, and so on.

⁵ Our characterization of a normative property differs from the broadly linguistic approach adopted by Eklund (2017, ch. 5) and others, according to which a property is normative just in case it is the referent of a certain kind of predicate. It also diverges from approaches, such as Korsgaard's (1996) and Chang's (2009), that understand normativity exclusively in terms of reasons or emphasize a special property of having 'normative force'. The Arché Question's greater inclusivity helps to distinguish it from more specific questions concerning the grounds of practical reasons or the authority that some of them enjoy, on which these other philosophers focus. A further difference is that the latter questions may be answered by citing another normative fact (for example, an evaluative or deontic one); not so for the question before us. Of course, normative facts regarding practical reasons or their authority might be among the fundamental normative facts; if they are, then the source of normativity will be revealed only by locating their non-normative ground.

Our explication of a normative property paves the way for the following characterization of a normative fact:

A fact is normative if and only if it is a normative property instantiation, or instead a normative principle,

where a ‘normative property instantiation’ is any fact to the effect that something instantiates a normative property (for example, Gandhi’s resistance was admirable), while a ‘normative principle’ is any fact to the effect that something instantiates a normative property if, only if, or because some condition obtains (for example, distributions of resources are just only if they give priority to the least well off). Given this characterization, facts to the effect that (say) *being in pain* or *being a killing* are instantiated do not qualify as normative ones, whereas facts to the effect that (say) *being required* or *being brave* are instantiated do.

While the two biconditionals above speak to the question ‘What is it to be normative?’, they are not designed to address certain longstanding metanormative debates, such as whether all normative properties are in some sense natural ones (however the category of the natural is understood). This issue, which divides naturalists and nonnaturalists, targets the *nature* of normative *properties* rather than the *non-normative ground* of normative *facts*, as our question does.⁶ While we argue below that a promising answer to this question will probe the essences of normative properties, we’ll also emphasize that it does not require resolving the debate between naturalists and nonnaturalists. For despite their disagreement, theorists on both sides may agree that normative facts are grounded in non-normative facts, and so face the Arché Question as we’ve formulated it.⁷

That naturalists must address it should be evident. But many paradigm nonnaturalists may encounter it, too. Moore, for example, combines his nonnaturalist view that goodness is not analysable by a natural property (or bundle of such properties) with the thesis that moral facts do not float free of, but are ‘derivative’ with respect to, natural ones (Moore 1942, p. 588). Similarly, Ross endorses nonnaturalism while also claiming that normative facts are ‘resultant’ or ‘consequent’ *vis-à-vis* natural ones, where the latter claim concerns ‘not the essence of rightness, but its ground’ (Ross 1930/2002, pp. 121-3; 1939, pp. 12, 168). Accordingly, both Moore and Ross, along with other nonnaturalists who endorse the

⁶ Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2023, ch. 3) develops and defends this construal of the naturalism/nonnaturalism distinction.

⁷ We say ‘may agree’ because some theorists have denied the grounding claim, as discussed in the next section.

claim that normative facts are grounded in non-normative facts, may face the Arché Question.

In sum: to ask after the source of normativity in the sense at issue here is not to inquire about the identity of fundamental normative principles, interrogate their justificatory status, reconstruct the history of normative thought and discourse, or query whether all normative properties are natural. Rather, it is to ask: what non-normative facts provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative ones?

There are two ways to hear this question. Heard one way, it asks:

What *sorts* of non-normative facts provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative facts (whatever they are)?

This is what we'll call the 'generic' Arché Question. Heard another way, the question asks:

What are the *specific* non-normative facts that provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative facts (the very ones there are)?

We'll refer to this as the 'specific' Arché Question. While the strategy we develop provides answers to both questions, its focus is the second, more demanding one.

3. Options for realism

For normative error theorists, addressing the Arché Question is simplicity itself—on their view, there are no normative facts, and so none in need of explaining.⁸ Normative constructivists also have an easy time handling this question, at least in its generic form: there are normative facts, some of which are fundamental, and these are grounded in some duly specified attitudes or stances (for example, divine approbation, endorsement by an ideal observer, the aims of rational agents, or various cultural commitments).⁹ Answering the specific version of our question

⁸ There are many error theorists about particular normative domains (such as morality) or categories (such as reasons). See, for example, Mackie (1977), Olson (2014), and Streumer (2017). It is difficult to name global normative error theorists, though Quine may be an example.

⁹ Firth (1952), Quinn (1978), Korsgaard (1996), and Street (2008) endorse constructivism about normative domains that are often regarded as particularly eligible for a realist treatment. Global normative constructivism is endorsed by Protagoras and, under one reading, Nietzsche, as well as those who are constructivists about everything (such as Goodman 1978 and Putnam 1981). We treat divine command theory as a version of constructivism because it denies that fundamental normative facts are stance-independent (see the next paragraph).

is no piece of cake for constructivists, however, since it would require identifying the particular stance-facts that explain fundamental normative reality. By contrast, normative realism does not come ready-made with an answer to *either* version of the question. This section is devoted to canvassing the options.

Like most ‘isms’ in philosophy, realism admits of various formulations. For purposes of this paper, we characterize normative realism as the view that there are normative facts, some of which are not explained by any other such facts, and in at least some normative domains those fundamental normative facts are stance-independent—where this means, roughly, that there is a complete metaphysical story about them that is free of stances.¹⁰ Unlike the norms, say, of sportscasting, these fundamental normative facts are not of our own devising. They do not depend in any way on anyone’s (even idealized) say-so.

Given this conception of normative realism, we might wonder about the view’s prospects for identifying the source of normativity. A gloomy forecast would, in our view, be premature. After all, a variety of subject matters include fundamental facts that admit of explanation: the fundamental facts of molecular biology are grounded in those of chemistry; those of chemistry are explained by those of physics; the fundamental facts of number theory may hold in virtue of logical facts. Realism about these subject matters poses no threat to such explanatory claims.

While some realists have had a lot to say about the relation between non-normative facts and normative facts within specific normative domains, such as morality, epistemology, or aesthetics, they have rarely tackled either the generic or the specific version of the Arché Question with respect to the normative realm itself. Nor have they tried to identify the non-normative grounds of the fundamental normative facts in those domains. Even if it were a fundamental moral fact that (say) actions are morally required if, only if, and because they maximize well-being, such realists have had little to say about *why* that principle holds.¹¹

¹⁰ Elsewhere we defend a much richer characterization of realism for the moral domain that more fully explicates the notion of stance-independence and includes a number of additional theses that concern normative strength, alethic and epistemic success, and the explanatory ambitions of the realist theses themselves. See Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2023, ch. 2).

¹¹ In recent years, some metanormative theorists have embraced the plenitudinous thesis that any internally consistent set of normative claims implies a corresponding set of stance-independent fundamental normative facts (see, for example, Clarke-Doane 2020). However, such a view leaves open what grounds such facts, and so fails to deliver an answer to either version of our question.

A small minority of realists do engage with our question, but insist that it rests on a mistake. We have in mind theorists who reject the following thesis, which both readings of the Arché Question presuppose:

Non-Normative Grounds: Fundamental normative facts are (at least partly) grounded in non-normative facts.

Consider, for example, theorists who either maintain that talk of metaphysical grounding has no place in normative theorizing, or endorse a metaphysical picture according to which the fundamental facts of each subject matter (normative and non-normative) are fully autonomous, none standing in explanatory relations to any other.¹² Such quietists deny Non-Normative Grounds. So do metaphysical anti-foundationalists such as infinitists and coherentists, who are committed to the thesis that every normative fact is explained by at least one other such fact.¹³ Primitivists, who affirm the existence of fundamental normative facts while rejecting both quietism and anti-foundationalism, also deny this thesis. On such a view, although different subject matters may stand in explanatory relations to one another, explanation must stop somewhere, and fundamental normative reality is one such terminus: *nothing* explains why the fundamental normative facts hold. They just do.¹⁴

While this is not the place to offer a full-throated critique of these positions, one capable of rationally convincing their proponents to change sides, it is worth calling attention to the attractions of Non-Normative Grounds. This thesis fits neatly with the familiar observation that a wide range of normative facts are (at least partly) grounded in non-normative ones, on which the former supervene. That it is morally bad for border officials to forcibly separate migrant children from their parents is grounded in the damaging psychological effects wrought by such treatment. Its being prudent for your child to heed the babysitter's instructions is grounded in both your command to do so and the sitter's comparatively greater life experience. Epistemic principles regarding the permissibility of various inferences are grounded in logical facts regarding validity. Non-Normative Grounds treats the fundamental normative

¹² The former include Kramer (2009), Dworkin (2011, Part 1), and Parfit (2011); the latter include Scanlon (2014), under one plausible interpretation. While many of these theorists have assumed that they can sidestep metaphysical issues, they must substantiate their claim that, despite the appearances, normative facts cannot stand in the grounding relations in question.

¹³ Cp. Roberts (2018). Anti-foundationalists who wish to affirm normative realism must either abandon its commitment to fundamental normative facts (whose existence they deny) or provide a conception of fundamentality that differs from the one we've offered.

¹⁴ Shafer-Landau (2003, ch. 4). Cp. Heathwood (2012) and Rosen (2018, pp. 163ff.).

facts in the same way: they, too, have non-normative grounds. That is a unified approach, one promising substantial explanatory depth. Both the unity and the depth are lost by those views committed to denying Non-Normative Grounds. So also is the unified explanation of the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative (which appeals to grounding) that proponents of this thesis have ready to hand.

Non-Normative Grounds is also attractive because it enables us to respect a general explanatory pattern with two parts: for every subject matter *S*, (i) if *S*'s non-fundamental facts are grounded in facts of a different subject matter, then so too are *S*'s fundamental facts; (ii) if *S*'s fundamental facts are *not* grounded in facts of a different subject matter, then neither are *S*'s non-fundamental facts.¹⁵ Take chemistry as an illustration of (i): its non-fundamental facts are grounded in those of physics, but so too are its fundamental ones.¹⁶ As for (ii), consider the widely held position that the fundamental facts of physics are not grounded in facts of a different type; on such a view, neither are its non-fundamental ones. Plausibly, the fundamentals and non-fundamentals in a subject matter go hand in hand in just this way. While we allow that the pattern we've identified may be defeasible, perhaps admitting of legitimate exceptions when there are strong reasons to adopt a very different explanatory structure, it operates as a default nonetheless. As far as we can tell, there are no such reasons in the case of normativity, which is what we should expect were Non-Normative Grounds true.

One might worry that this thesis forces realists to traverse the *is-ought* 'gap' in an objectionable manner. Because grounding implies metaphysical necessitation, affirming Non-Normative Grounds generates a commitment to metaphysically necessary connections between non-normative facts (which stand on the *is* side) and the fundamental normative facts (which stand on the *ought* side) that they ground. But this commitment does not offend against familiar Humean strictures (even granting their legitimacy). For one thing, those strictures are plausibly read as prohibiting analytic or conceptually necessary entailments between non-normative and normative facts. Non-Normative Grounds does not, however, commit realists to taking the propositions that record these grounding relations as analytic or conceptual truths. For another,

¹⁵ Both conditions are restricted to paradigm non-fundamental facts of a given subject matter, and so exclude those facts that (for example) incorporate a disjunct, such as $[1 + 1 = 2]$, that is wholly irrelevant to the subject matter in question.

¹⁶ Or consider a physicalist view: non-fundamental mental facts are grounded in physical ones; likewise for the fundamentals. A neo-logicist view of mathematics would deliver another illustration. Examples abound.

those strictures are best construed as denying any brute (that is, inexplicable) connection between what Hume calls 'distinct existences' (Hume 1739, Appendix). Even assuming that normative and non-normative facts qualify as such, commitment to Non-Normative Grounds needn't render the metaphysically necessary connections between them inexplicable. Indeed, the strategy for uncovering the source of normativity we develop below is designed precisely to explain these connections.¹⁷

In addition to responding to this worry about Non-Normative Grounds, we've briefly sketched two considerations on behalf of this thesis. Neither decisively establishes that normative reality has an arché. But they do indicate a pair of reasons to resist capitulating to the thought that the Arché Question rests on a mistaken commitment to that thesis.

At any rate, our approach is different. As we see things, the fundamental normative facts in at least some normative domains are stance-independent and grounded in non-normative facts. So we embrace realism and Non-Normative Grounds. Using this as our starting point, we set out an essentialist strategy for identifying those non-normative facts.

Our answer to the generic Arché Question adverts to facts regarding the essences of the properties that figure in the fundamental normative facts (whatever they are). That is, when looking to identify the *sorts* of non-normative facts that explain the fundamental normative facts, we recommend that realists cite facts regarding what it is to be one of the properties included therein. Identifying the specific facts that ground fundamental normative reality thus calls for realists to spell out the relevant essence facts. We present a four-step strategy for developing this answer to the specific version of our question below (in §5).

We'll unpack the elements of our answer shortly. Even without these details, the basic gist of our proposal can be appreciated by comparing it to constructivism's approach. Constructivists cite non-normative facts about stances as the sorts of things that explain the fundamental normative facts. Were the Principle of Utility a fundamental normative fact, for example, constructivists would explain this fact by reference to stances of certain kinds (we listed a few options above). Realists who follow our lead would instead look to essences, such as the essence of the normative property included within that principle, claiming that a

¹⁷ Let us add that anyone who accepts the standard view that the normative strongly supervenes on the non-normative (as we do) already countenances metaphysical entailments from the latter to the former. We indicate our preferred explanation of strong supervenience in note 21.

fact regarding the essence of that property explains that fundamental normative fact (again, supposing the principle has this status).¹⁸

Let's now take things more slowly, introducing our ideas about essences and their explanatory power. This will put flesh on the bones of our answer to the generic Arché Question, while also paving the way for the presentation of our strategy for answering the specific version.

4. Essence and essence explanation

The essence, or nature, of something is not a spooky or ghostly aura that somehow attaches to that thing, but is simply what it is to be that thing, or what that thing is at its core. For example,

- a. [It belongs to the essence of water that it be composed of hydrogen molecules].
- b. [Part of what it is to be a desire is to be a mental state that is directed at something].
- c. [It is essential to 3 that it is a number].

Traditionally, philosophers have contrasted essences with accidents—where the latter are merely incidental features of a thing, not what it is at its core. They have also emphasized that essentiality differs from metaphysical necessity. Although the former entails the latter, the converse does not hold. As Aristotle observed, while it may be necessary that a human being is featherless, it is not part of the essence of a human being to be featherless: this is not what a human being is at its core.¹⁹

Call a fact that explicitly registers that the essence of some entity is such-and-such an *essence fact*. There are essence facts about entities belonging to a wide variety of ontological categories, including properties, material objects, mental states, concepts, numbers, and people. Some possible examples are provided by (a) – (c).

¹⁸ Here and elsewhere, our talk of principles is not meant to suggest that particularists are unable to identify the arché of normativity. Our recommended strategy for answering both the generic and specific version of the Arché Question (detailed in §5.1) appeals to the essences of the properties that figure in the fundamental normative facts; since many particularists would allow for the existence of such facts (construed as property instantiations, rather than principles), the essentialist strategy is fully compatible with their view.

¹⁹ See, for example, [Fine \(1994\)](#) for further discussion. We maintain that essentiality also differs from intrinsicity: temporary intrinsics are not essential features of their bearers, and essential features may be relational. Essentiality also differs from constitution and grounding: the various ingredients that constitute a cake, or figure in the facts that ground [There is a cake], do not belong to the essence of a cake.

Our strategy for answering the Arché Question requires the provision of a non-normative ground for the fundamental normative facts. We are introducing essence facts here precisely because, on our view, such facts play this role—they are the non-normative grounds of the fundamental normative facts. The success of our strategy thus depends on seeing essence facts as non-normative. We take this to be highly plausible upon reflection. Essence facts regarding water are not chemical facts. Essence facts regarding desire are not mental facts. Similarly, essence facts regarding right and wrong (or any other normative property) are not normative facts.²⁰

To appreciate the rationale for this classification, it is helpful to distinguish essence facts from *essential facts*, which simply register the essence of some entity without explicitly identifying it as the essence of that entity. Possible examples of essential facts, which are correlates of the candidate essence facts listed above, include:

- a. [Water is composed of hydrogen molecules].
- b. [Desire is directed at something].
- c. [3 is a number].

Although none of these candidate essential facts even purports to reveal the whole essence of its target, each registers at least one strand of the thing's essence. Notice, however, that each does so without leaving the domain of the target entity. In other words: unlike (a), (a') is a chemical fact; unlike (b), (b') is a mental fact; and unlike (c), (c') is a numerical fact. While distinguishing between essence facts and essential facts may seem overly fastidious, the difference between the two kinds of facts proves to be philosophically significant, and will play an important role in our strategy.²¹

²⁰ Compare: the logical fact [It holds as a matter of logic that either pigs fly or they do not] and the psychological fact [It belongs to my body of beliefs that pigs fly] do not qualify as zoological or porcine facts, even though they both concern pigs. Another reason to resist classifying all essence facts concerning x as x -facts stems from the observation that those, like Quine, who are sceptical of claims regarding the essence of (say) chemicals, such as water or gold, needn't question any of the deliverances of chemistry. Indeed, such scepticism is metaphysical, not chemical. Likewise, scepticism about claims regarding the essences of normative phenomena is metaphysical, not normative. Considerations such as these and the ones in the text lend support to our characterization of normative facts (in §2), which implies that a range of logical, psychological, and metaphysical facts do not qualify as normative facts, even when they concern normative properties.

²¹ As anticipated in §3, the distinction also enables an explanation of the metaphysically necessary connection posited by Non-Normative Grounds between non-normative facts and the fundamental normative facts they ground. On our approach, the former are essence facts, while the latter are their correlative essential facts. Given the essence fact [It belongs to the essence of x that x is F], it follows necessarily that the correlative essential fact [x is F] holds. (We regard this conditional as a staple of the logic of essence.) Our essence-based approach also explains the strong supervenience of normative facts on non-normative facts, as elaborated in [Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau \(2023, ch. 7\)](#).

There are other facts that are not good candidates for being either essence or essential facts, such as:

- a*. [Water can be found in most refrigerators].
- b*. [Desire is a topic of Shakespeare's sonnets].
- c*. [3 is the number of moons orbiting the terrestrial planets].

These facts register not essences but accidents of the entities in question. That we readily notice the difference provides some assurance that the category of essence is in good standing.²²

Turn now from essences to what we call 'essence explanations'. Such explanations possess the form

p because it belongs to the essence of x that q,

where p and q are possibly distinct facts. The idea behind this formulation is that the *explanans* in an essence explanation is always an essence fact. This formulation acknowledges that there are a variety of facts amenable to essence explanation;²³ candidate examples illustrating this variety include:

Magenta is a colour because it belongs to the essence of magenta to be a colour.

Necessarily, gold has atomic number 79 because it belongs to the essence of gold to have atomic number 79.

A disposition is grounded in its categorical base because it belongs to the essence of a disposition to be so grounded.

These and other candidate essence explanations, when correct, possess the two basic marks of genuine explanations: first, they are not mere descriptions, but specify or state *why* the *explanandum* holds, by citing its ground; second, they are canonically expressed by 'because' or 'in virtue of' statements, which identify such a ground.²⁴ Our answer to the Arché Question comes by way of an essence explanation of fundamental normative reality.

²² We discuss the epistemology of essence in Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (forthcoming).

²³ Our formulation builds on Glazier's (2017, p. 2873) proposal, which effectively requires that p and q be identical, and so cannot accommodate a wide range of candidate essence explanations, including those regarding modal facts (of the sort promoted by Fine (1994) and others, according to which modal facts are explained by essence facts regarding all things considered collectively). We focus here on the primary type of essence explanation; a derivative sort might involve chaining together a non-essence explanation with an essence one. Glazier (2017) also proposes that in essence explanations, 'because' does not designate grounding properly conceived. Though we will use the terminology of grounding, we are officially neutral on the issue. Cp. Kment (2014, ch. 6, §2).

²⁴ For discussion of the logic of the explanatory connective 'because', see Schnieder (2011).

It is important to distinguish genuine candidates for essence explanations from counterfeits. The doctor in Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* infamously pronounces that 'Opium produces sleep ... because there is in it a dormitive power'—which, the retort goes, is no explanation at all. This is sometimes cited as the basis for scepticism about explanations that advert to essences.²⁵ But there are several reasons to regard this inference as problematic.

First, there is a straightforward diagnosis of the putative explanation's failure, which makes no reference to essences: namely, the explanation invokes, as *explanans*, something that is identical to, or explained by, or can only be understood in terms of, the *explanandum*. In effect, the property *being a dormitive power* is too close to the property *being such as to produce sleep* to adequately explain why opium possesses the latter property. Second, it is doubtful that the doctor's statement should be interpreted as an attempt to provide an essence explanation. For one thing, it doesn't identify an essence fact. Rather, it seems best classified as a dispositional explanation (albeit one that has gone awry, for the reason just mentioned). After all, its *explanans* is a power, and a power may reside in a thing without belonging to the essence of that thing. Indeed, many powers, such as a human being's power to write grammatical sentences in English, are wholly *inessential* to whatever possesses them. Taken together, we believe that these two points support the following conclusion: appeals to such things as dormitive powers needn't be construed as genuine candidates for essence explanation, and do not threaten the integrity or importance of instances of the latter.²⁶

In fact, essence explanations are not only legitimate but also adequate, at least in many cases—recall the three candidates formulated above.²⁷ Essence explanation may sometimes give the appearance of being too shallow, in the sense that the *explanans* is too close to the *explanandum* to be sufficiently informative. Such an appearance can

²⁵ A recent example is Della Rocca (2020, p. 101 *et passim*); cp. Ridge (2012, esp. p. 160).

²⁶ A further, complementary point: there are plainly non-essentialist appeals to dormitive powers, such as 'Opium produces sleep because, *as it so happens*, there is in it a dormitive power', that are equally bad. This confirms our conclusion that whatever makes dormitive power explanations bad, as and when they are, fails to threaten the status of essence explanation. For relevant discussion of explanatory distance, see Taylor (2023).

²⁷ Another source of scepticism about essence explanation, distinct from the one just criticized, targets the principle, endorsed by Rosen (2010, p. 119) and Kment (2014, p. 161), that essential facts are always grounded in their corresponding essence facts. Various objections have been raised against this principle, construed as incorporating a specific notion of grounding (see, for example, Glazier 2017 and Zylstra 2019). We do not assume that specific notion of grounding (recall note 2). Nor do we endorse the principle in question, and see no reason to think that the viability of essence explanations turns on it.

arise when, in citing an essence fact in response to a certain explanatory question, it is correct to say, ‘Because that’s the way it is.’ For example, why is 3 a number? Plausibly, the correct response is not silence but rather: ‘Because that’s just what it is to be 3.’ The ‘because’ signals that one is not shrugging off the query or dismissing it as confused, but meeting it with an explanation. At first glance, the explanation may seem too shallow to be adequate. But on closer inspection, the answer is elliptical; for realists about numbers, it could be fleshed out in a way that draws on the essence fact identified above in example (c), as follows:

3 is a number because that’s just what it is to be 3: it belongs to the essence of 3 that it is a number.

The *explanandum* is the fact that 3 is a number. This is paired with a distinct *explanans*, namely, the essence fact that 3 is, *at its core*, a number—which is not identical to, nor explained by, nor fully understandable in terms of, the explanandum. In one sense, perhaps, the explanation is insubstantial: the property *being a number* shows up in the *explanandum* as well as in the *explanans*. There is another sense, however, in which the explanation is substantial, for the *explanans* takes us considerably beyond that property of 3, by recording the additional information that the property is *essential* to it.²⁸ While such an explanation may not be as deep as various other explanations in certain respects, it is robust enough to provide illumination.

It is also sometimes a fitting end to the explanatory enterprise. There may be nothing more to say to illuminate the fact that 3 is a number than: that’s just what 3 is. In this and many other cases of essence explanation, it may be perfectly legitimate to leave the *explanans*—an essence fact—unexplained, thereby treating it as an unexplained explainer.²⁹

5. Answering the specific Arché Question

We’re now in a position to articulate our strategy for answering the specific Arché Question. After providing a detailed outline of the strategy, we’ll offer an illustration of it in action. As will become clear, the strategy exploits our answer to the generic version of this question, which looks to essence facts as the *sort* of non-normative facts that can serve as the source of normativity.

²⁸ Pace Heathwood (2012, pp. 12–13).

²⁹ This observation is of a piece with, but is not committed to, Dasgupta’s (2016, p. 383) thesis regarding the ‘autonomy’ of essence facts, where a fact is autonomous ‘if it is not apt for being grounded in the first place, if the question of why it obtains does not legitimately arise’.

5.1 The strategy

To preview, the strategy begins with the identification of the fundamental normative facts, on which all other normative facts depend. Subsequently, the strategy calls on realists to probe the essences of things, such as the normative properties in the fundamental normative facts. Doing so unearths a set of essence facts that serve as non-normative grounds of the fundamental normative facts. These essence facts deliver an essence explanation of fundamental normative reality, thereby supplying an answer to the specific version of our question, which asks for the identity of the particular non-normative facts that explain the fundamental normative ones.

Presented in full, the strategy has four steps. The first is to identify a set of normative facts $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ involving normative properties $N_1 \dots N_n$ such that:

- (1) $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ accord with various realist commitments, such as being stance-independent.³⁰

This condition ensures that our strategy is viable for normative realists.

The second step is to establish that $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ satisfy the following two conditions:

- (2a) $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ are fundamental normative facts.
 (2b) $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ ground all other normative facts.

These conditions entail that $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ are the sole fundamental normative facts, and that all other normative facts are explained by $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$. So this second step identifies the fundamental level of normative reality, on which all the rest of normative reality depends.

The third step looks underneath this reality, by ensuring that $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ satisfy two conditions regarding the essences of things, such as the normative properties $N_1 \dots N_n$ that figure in $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$:

- (3a) $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ are essential facts regarding $N_1 \dots N_n$.³¹
 (3b) $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ are grounded in essence facts $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$ regarding $N_1 \dots N_n$.

³⁰ Other possible commitments are referenced in note 10.

³¹ Strictly speaking, these could be essential facts regarding other things, such as a collective of which $N_1 \dots N_n$ are members (per the Finean collectivist approach mentioned in note 23). But we will continue to use the formulation in the text.

Given our observation above that essence facts regarding normative properties are not themselves normative facts (even though they involve normative properties), these two conditions imply that $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$ are explained by non-normative facts, via an essence explanation. According to this explanation, the fundamental normative facts, $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$, hold *because* various essence facts, $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$, hold. By satisfying the foregoing conditions, then, realists identify a set of non-normative facts that jointly serve as the full non-normative ground of normativity.

This set of facts can serve as normativity's arché only if $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$ provide what we've dubbed (in §2) a 'fully adequate' metaphysical explanation of $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$. This brings us to the fourth step, at which realists certify a final claim:

- (4) There is nothing that must be cited in addition to $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$ in order to provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of $[p_1] \dots [p_n]$.

This condition ensures that there is no further link in this explanatory chain, or any other explanatory chain, that aids understanding of why the fundamental normative facts hold. Even if $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$ are apt for explanation, they are the end of this explanatory line.

If all of the foregoing conditions are satisfied, then realists are entitled to conclude that $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$ are normativity's arché: a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of normative reality is given by $[p_1^*] \dots [p_n^*]$.

5.2 *An illustration*

As the strategy we've outlined is given at a fairly high level of abstraction, it may help to have an illustration of it in action. To avoid entangling ourselves in substantive and highly controversial debates within normative theorizing, we will make four simplifying assumptions to get the illustration off the ground.

First assumption: the deontic is the sole fundamental category within the normative realm—all facts about reasons, goodness, fittingness, and virtue can be explained in terms of facts about requirement and prohibition, though not vice versa.

Second: the set of fundamental deontic facts is a singleton; there is only one such fact, rather than a plurality of them.

Third: this fact takes the form of a normative principle, rather than a normative property instantiation. Specifically, the fundamental deontic

fact will be correctly stated by filling in the following blank: an act is required if, only if, and because _____.

Fourth: the blank is filled in by a condition that adverts to the *maximization of well-being*, where well-being has moral, epistemic, aesthetic, and various other dimensions. This idea is familiar from discussions of consequentialism in normative ethics and epistemology, positioning it to play an illustrative role here.

These four assumptions imply that the following principle identifies the sole fundamental normative fact:

Maximization: [An action is required if, only if, and because it maximizes well-being].³²

At present, it matters not whether Maximization really is the fundamental normative fact. Perhaps some contractarian principle, a universalization principle, or the Principle of Humanity is a more eligible candidate. To reiterate, nothing we say here is meant to justify our four assumptions. Indeed, we have our doubts about most of them; we introduce these assumptions simply to make our illustration manageable and the attendant discussion tractable. In what follows, Maximization merely serves as a placeholder for whatever the fundamental normative fact (or facts) might be.

Suppose that we could certify that Maximization satisfies condition (1): this principle is indeed a stance-independent normative fact and satisfies all other realistic constraints. As such, it is a fact to which realists can appeal in executing the first step of our strategy.

Turning to the second step, recall that we are assuming that Maximization is a fundamental normative fact that explains all other normative facts. Under these assumptions, it follows that conditions (2a) and (2b) are satisfied.

As for the third step, suppose that we were able to make good on the assumption that Maximization really is the sole fundamental normative fact. There would then be excellent reason to regard this as an essential fact regarding the property *being required*: the metaphysically deepest normative principle about that property does not register one of its accidental features, but pinpoints what it is at its core. To help see the plausibility of this claim, focus on any normative fact that seems to you a good candidate for being fundamental. Suppose that fact were

³² We suppose that this principle holds of necessity, though we do not assume that it is explained by its corresponding modal fact. Even if it were, such an explanation would not qualify as fully adequate.

not an essential fact regarding its constituent normative property; instead, some other, non-fundamental normative fact alone identified that property's essence. Then a fact registering only an accidental feature of that property, but not any essential fact regarding that property, would ground the fact that reveals its essence. But arguably that couldn't be. So the initial supposition is deeply suspect, in which case we have strong reason to take a fundamental normative fact to be an essential fact after all.

Suppose, then, that Maximization is an essential fact regarding its constituent normative property, *being required*. Suppose, further, that this essential fact is explained by its corresponding essence fact (which we'll label 'EF'):

[It belongs to the essence of *being required* that an action is required if, only if, and because it maximizes well-being].

If Maximization really does hold in virtue of EF, then conditions (3a) and (3b) are satisfied. In effect, we will have discharged the third step of our strategy, securing an essence explanation of the fundamental normative fact.

Moving to step four: suppose that no further explanation would aid understanding of why Maximization holds. In such a case, we may conclude that EF also satisfies condition (4): there is nothing that must be added to EF to achieve a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative fact. Accordingly, when asked about the source of normativity—*why do the fundamental normative facts hold?*—realists would then have an answer. They could cite EF.

5.3 *The difficulty of the task*

The brevity of our illustration is not intended to disguise the difficulty of the task facing realists who aspire to implement the strategy we've outlined. Our strategy has several moving parts; putting them together and getting them running imposes sizable demands on theorists ambitious enough to make the effort.

Given this point, one might worry that the feasibility of our strategy depends on the simplifying assumptions in our illustration. But that is not so. For example, while we assumed that Maximization is the sole fundamental deontic fact, the strategy is also readily available to realists who look to other candidates to fill this role. It is also available to realists who assign fundamentality to a normative principle (or principles) concerning a non-deontic normative property, such as an

evaluative or aretaic one.³³ Further, it is open to realists who conceive of normative reality as metaphysically ordered in a very different manner—for instance, to those who insist that there is only one normative domain whose fundamental facts ground the facts in all other normative domains or to those particularists who maintain that all fundamental normative facts are normative property instantiations rather than principles.³⁴ Our strategy is compatible with various resolutions to these intramural disputes.

Nor does our strategy require that normative realists already take a stand on controversial questions about specific normative domains. For example, it may be that the fundamental normative facts in some domains are stance-independent, while those in others are not; it is the former that will receive the essence explanations we've depicted. Our strategy also does not force realists to choose a side in the debate between naturalism and nonnaturalism. As anticipated by our discussion of this debate in §2, the difference between these two views is this: when striving to meet condition (3a), naturalists must identify a set of essence facts regarding $N_1 \dots N_n$ that completely specifies the essence of those properties while adverting only to natural properties, whereas nonnaturalists lack this restriction. As it happens, our illustration is congenial to the naturalist tradition, which has long sought to understand requirement (and other normative properties) in ways entirely free of normative properties. But even if EF—the essence fact regarding requirement in our illustration—incorporates no such things, unpacking the *whole* essence of requirement might require identifying additional essence facts, such that a normative property figures ineliminably therein; accordingly, the illustration is compatible with nonnaturalism. The primary point, however, is that our strategy does not prejudge the character of the normative properties in the fundamental normative facts, but is available to naturalists and nonnaturalists alike.

Finally, nothing in our strategy presupposes a particular number of normative facts that ground all other normative facts. While our

³³ Much ink has been spilled in the last few decades on the question of whether reasons, values, virtues, requirements, or fittingness relations are 'first'. While our illustration assumed that one normative category is explanatorily fundamental, the strategy we've described is neutral between this and the possibility that fundamental normative facts incorporate properties from multiple categories.

³⁴ The last view is a consequence of the position defended by Berker (2019), which is of a piece with the particularist option discussed in note 18.

illustration invoked a single fundamental normative fact, the strategy we've offered explicitly allows for a plurality of such facts.³⁵

Again, our strategy is intended to be neutral on this matter. But suppose that there are multiple fundamental normative facts. On that assumption, satisfying all of the conditions with respect to a proper subset of these facts would yield only a partial answer to the Arché Question. Likewise, fulfilling most but not all of the conditions would yield another type of partial success. For example, an answer that satisfies the conditions at the first three steps would represent a genuine advance, even if the final condition remained unfulfilled. We hasten to emphasize that given the difficulty of the question, either type of partial success would represent a significant theoretical achievement.

We do not profess to have unearthed the arché of normativity. After all, we've not endorsed, let alone substantiated, our illustration. Indeed, we've not defended (and in fact are suspicious of) the claim that Maximization is a fundamental deontic fact, much less one that explains all other normative facts. Nor have we established that EF all by itself would suffice to provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of Maximization (supposing it's true). Still, our strategy points the way forward for realists seeking to uncover normativity's arché.

It also explains why that project is extraordinarily difficult. While both versions of the Arché Question are formidable, what makes the specific version so challenging, on our diagnosis, is that it requires realists to do all of the following:

- identify the full range of fundamental normative facts;
- confirm that all of these facts accord with the whole set of realist commitments;
- argue that each of these facts is an essential fact regarding its constituent normative property;
- verify that these facts are explained by essence facts; and
- defend the claim that these essence facts provide a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative facts.

The first item presents a highly ambitious task in normative theory that faces any theorist who affirms the existence of fundamental normative facts, while the second identifies a project in metanormative theory that falls upon the shoulders of any comprehensive realist view. To fulfil all

³⁵ Such a plurality might be drawn from multiple normative domains. A position of this type is suggested by Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason and by familiar opposition to reducing epistemic rationality to practical rationality (and vice versa).

three of the remaining tasks requires embarking on an abstract and arduous venture through largely uncharted metaphysical waters.

The path we have laid is not easy. But tracing its contours reveals how progress is possible. While one might have sensed that essence was an important resource for normative realism, few contemporary proponents have explicitly embraced and utilized essence facts, and none has put them to work in uncovering the source of normativity. Our discussion has endeavoured to highlight the merits of such an approach. By doing so, we've responded to the charge that realism is incapable of providing a fully adequate metaphysical explanation of the fundamental normative facts. While spelling out all the details of that explanation seems to us a Herculean ambition, we suggest that realists are now equipped to envision its realization.³⁶

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