Rightness = Right-Maker: Reduction or *Reductio?*

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Abstract

I have recently argued that if the causal theory of reference is true, then, on pain of absurdity, no normative ethical theory is true. In this journal, Michael Byron has objected to my *reductio* by appealing to Frank Jackson's moral reductionism. The present essay defends my *reductio* while also casting doubt upon Jackson's moral reductionism.

Keywords

Causal theory of reference, right-making properties, moral reductionism, Frank Jackson, justifying reasons.

In "Right-making and Reference", I argue that if the causal theory of reference is true, then, on pain of absurdity, no normative ethical theory is true (Long 2012). The causal theory of reference (CTR, henceforth) holds that a term 'T' rigidly designates a property F iff the use of 'T' by competent users of the term is causally regulated by F.[1] For example, since being H_2O causally regulates the competent use of 'is water', 'is water' rigidly designates being H_2O. A normative ethical theory, by contrast, is a theory that attempts to specify which property or properties are the fundamental right-making properties (FRM-properties, henceforth). A property is an FRM-property iff it is purely descriptive and is such that, if possessed by a right action, is what ultimately explains the action's being right. For example, utilitarianism implies that there is exactly one FRM-property, viz., maximizing aggregate pleasure: According to utilitarianism, maximizing aggregate pleasure is what makes all and only right actions right. Since a normative ethical theory attempts to specify

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[1] See, e.g., Boyd 1988, Kripke 1980, and Putnam 1975.

which purely descriptive properties are FRM-properties, then if no property is an FRM-property, no normative ethical theory is true. I argued that CTR implies, on pain of absurdity, that no property is an FRM-property and, thus, that no normative ethical theory is true. In this journal, Michael Byron (2014) has objected to my *reductio* by appealing to Frank Jackson's moral reductionism. The present essay defends my *reductio* while also casting doubt upon Jackson's moral reductionism.

1 A reductio

I begin with a summary of my earlier argument, which relies upon the following two assumptions:

> (A1) A property is an FRM-property only if the moral property of being right exists.

> (A2) The moral property of being right exists only if our term 'is right' refers to it.

Regarding the first assumption, if the property of being right does not exist, then no property can make an action right, in which case no property can be right-making. Thus, (A1). As for (A2), its denial is this:

> (~A2) The moral property of being right exists, but our term 'is right' does not refer to it.

Claiming (~A2) amounts to denying that the relation between 'is right' and being right is a reference relation, which denial would undermine CTR's motivation. So, for the purposes of this essay, we can assume (A2). With (A1) and (A2) in hand, here is my argument in truncated form:

> (P1) There is a true normative ethical theory only if there is an FRM-property.

> (P2) If there is an FRM-property, then it causally regulates the competent use of 'is right'.

> (P3) If an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of

'is right', then, assuming (A1) and (A2), CTR implies that the FRM-property is identical to the property of being right.

(P4) An FRM-property's being identical to the property of being right entails absurdity.

∴ (C) Either no normative ethical theory is true, or CTR is false.

As construed, the argument is valid. So, let us consider each premise. We have already seen the argument for (P1): since a normative ethical theory attempts to specify which purely descriptive properties are FRM-properties, no such theory is true if there is no FRM-property.

Premise (P2) results from an inductive inference. Suppose, for ease, that there is exactly one FRM-property, in which case 'is right' applies to all and only actions possessing the FRM-property. If 'is right' applies to all and only actions possessing the FRM-property, then the competent use of 'is right' at least "tracks" the FRM-property. For example, if maximizing aggregate pleasure is the one and only FRM-property, then the competent use of 'is right' "tracks" maximizing aggregate pleasure. Presumably, the best explanation of this tracking behavior is that the FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right'. So, (P2) is probably true.

Turning to (P3), trivially an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right' only if an FRM-property exists. According to (A1), an FRM-property exists only if the property of being right also exists. So, given (A1), it follows that if an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right', then the property of being right exists. Now, according to (A2), if the property of being right exists, then our term 'is right' refers to it. So, together (A1) and (A2) imply that if an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right', then 'is right' refers to the property of being right. But CTR implies that if an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right', then 'is right' rigidly designates the FRM-property, which in turn implies that the FRM-property is identical to being right. Therefore, (P3): together (A1), (A2), and CTR imply that if an FRM-property causally regulates the competent use of 'is right', then the FRM-property is identical to the

property of being right.

   According to (P4), however, an FRM-property's being identical to being right entails absurdity. My main support for (P4) is that,

   (P4*) The "property that *explains* an action's being right cannot
       be *identical* to the property of being right" (2012: 278).

2 Jackson's moral reductionism

Byron, however, objects. The objection as I understand it has two parts: the first aims at casting doubt upon (P4*), while the second tries to show that (P4*) is actually false. To cast doubt upon (P4*), Byron essentially shows that the following universal statement, of which (P4*) is an instance, is false:

   (UI) For any two properties *F* and *G,* the *F* that explains *x*'s hav-
       ing *G* cannot be identical to *G.*

Here is a counterexample to (UI): the property of being an *Apatosaurus* explains an organism's being a *Brontosaurus*, but being an *Apatosaurus* is identical to being a *Brontosaurus*.[2] Indeed, the property of being an *Apatosaurus* explains an organism's being a *Brontosaurus* precisely because being an *Apatosaurus* is identical to being a *Brontosaurus*. So, (UI) is false. But showing that (UI) is false shows only that, for *some* properties *F* and *G*, it is possible that $F = G$ and having *F* explains having *G*. It might be that the particular explanatory relation cited in (P4*) between the property that explains an action's being right and the property of being right prevents identifying these *particular* properties with each other. So, showing that (UI) is false might—if anything—make one suspicious of (P4*), but anything more than mere suspicion is unwarranted. Consequently, Byron needs to address (P4*) specifically.

   In the second part of his objection, Byron tries to show that (P4*)

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   [2] Byron makes the same point in terms of being the morning star and being the evening star (Byron 2014: 142); however, putting the point in terms of being a *Brontosaurus* and being an *Apatosaurus* would better support Byron's point, since the present discussion is about property-identity rather than object-identity. (It is worth noting that whether the natural kinds *Brontosaurs* and *Apatosaurus* are identical has just come into question; see Tschopp et al. 2015.)

is false. To do so, Byron appeals to Frank Jackson's (1998) moral reductionism.[3] Here is how Byron describes Jackson's view. First, as Byron rightly states, Jackson's view holds that "normative properties are reducible to descriptive properties because the former constitute a proper subset of the latter" (Byron 2014: 142).[4] Furthermore, as Byron claims, "Jackson defines descriptive properties as those that can be picked out by descriptive predicates" (Byron 2014: 142). In conclusion, Byron quotes Mark Schroeder as saying, Jackson's reductionism "'amounts to the claim that normative properties can be picked out by uncontroversially descriptive predicates. *This* is a perfectly coherent view'" (Byron 2014: 142; Schroeder 2003: 10; emphasis in the original). What is more, claims Byron, Jackson's reductionism can "underwrite" the explanatory relation between being right and the FRM-property to which being right is identical (Byron 2014: 142-143). For, if—as Jackson's view implies—being right is a proper subset of purely descriptive properties, then should we discover that an FRM-property term picks out that proper subset, we can conclude that the FRM-property term's referent—that is, the FRM-property—is identical to being right.[5] "Far from being impos-

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[3] Byron initially considers an objection according to which, basically, a property *F* could be both an FRM-property and identical to being right since (i) *F*'s being an FRM-property could amount to *F*'s playing the right-making role, (ii) *F*'s playing the right-making role could amount to *F*'s constituting the property of being right, and (iii) property-constitution could be a form of property-identity. I set aside this objection by Byron for two reasons. First, there are good reasons, none of which Byron addresses, to doubt that property-constitution could be a form of property-identity (see, e.g., Baker 2007: 111-116; Brink 1989: 157-158). But, second, given his appeal to Jackson's moral reductionism, which does not invoke property-constitution, Byron is able to avoid thorny questions about property-constitution altogether.

[4] Relevant to n. 3 above, the term 'constitutes' in the quote from Jackson does not refer to a relation between particular properties. Indeed, as far as I know, Jackson never invokes property-constitution to describe the relation between two particular properties.

[5] This is a charitable interpretation of Byron. Literally, Byron has us first suppose that "value-maximizing is the (descriptive) FRM, and that Jackson is right to think that the normative property of rightness is reducible to a descriptive property" (2014: 143). Byron then claims, "It follows that…rightness is [identical to] value-maximizing" (2014: 143). But just because rightness reduces to some

sible or absurd as Long claims, that result would be informative and illuminating" (Byron 2014: 143).

To evaluate Byron's argument, we must recognize, first, that Jackson's reductionism does not *merely* amount to "the claim that normative properties can be picked out by uncontroversially descriptive predicates," as Byron quotes Schroeder as asserting. For, if that were all that Jackson's reductionism amounted to, then Jackson's view would also imply that normative properties are reducible to geometrical-shape properties since one could use a geometrical-shape property-term—'is a triangle', for example—to pick out the normative property of, say, being right. But showing that one could use 'is a triangle' to refer to being right does not show that being right is reducible to being a triangle; it shows only that one can use 'is a triangle' equivocally. To avoid counting the equivocal use of a term as a form of reduction, Jackson's view needs to show that the property of being right could turn out to be identical to an FRM-property regardless of which terms refer to which properties.

As it turns out, Jackson's view of properties purports to do precisely this. On Jackson's view, properties are basically sets of possible objects.[6] For example, the property of being a triangle would be the set of all possible triangles; being a *Brontosaurus* would be the set of all possible *Brontosauruses*; and being right would be the set of all possible right actions. Now, presumably every possible right action possesses some purely descriptive property; however, some possible actions with a purely descriptive property are not right actions. Therefore, if properties are sets, then being right will turn out to be a proper subset of the union of purely descriptive properties. Of course, if properties are sets, then an FRM-property is itself a set: the set of all possible actions with the FRM-property. But all and only right actions have an FRM-property. So, should properties turn out to be sets, then any FRM-property will be a subset of being right: If there are multiple FRM-properties, then each FRM-property will be a proper subset of being right; and if there is exactly

purely descriptive property, it does not follow that rightness reduces specifically to the FRM-property.

[6] See Jackson 1998: 125-128. McNaughton and Rawling 2003 also contains a useful discussion Jackson's view of properties.

one FRM-property—perhaps maximizing expected hedonic value, to use Jackson's example—then the FRM-property will turn out to be identical to being right. Now, to be sure, Byron mentions that on Jackson's view being right is a proper subset of purely descriptive properties, and obviously being right could be such a subset only if being right is itself a set. But it needs to be emphasized that Jackson's view of properties *qua* sets is what allows Jackson to identify being right with an FRM-property. Consequently, here is how Byron's objection to (P4*) *should* go:

(1) It is coherent that,

    (i) the property of being right is the set R of all and only possible right actions,

    (ii) the property of maximizing expected hedonic value is the set D of all and only possible actions that maximize expected hedonic value, and

    (iii) all and only members of R are also members of D.

(2) If (1), then being right could turn out to be identical to maximizing expected hedonic value.

(3) If being right could turn out to be identical to maximizing expected hedonic value, then an FRM-property can be identical to being right.

∴ (4) An FRM-property can be identical to being right.

If (4) is true, then the property that explains an action's being right can be identical to the property of being right, which is precisely what (P4*) denies. As construed, the argument is valid. Furthermore, I will grant premises (2) and (3) and argue against (1), to which I now turn.

3 Objecting to (1) and defending (P4*)

At first, one might be tempted to object to (1) on the grounds that it allows a property to be both normative and purely descriptive. For, if being right is identical to *R*, and maximizing expected hedonic value is identical to *D*, then if *R* and *D* are identical to each other, it will turn out that being right is normative iff maximizing expected hedonic value is normative and that maximizing expected hedonic value is purely descriptive iff being right is purely descriptive. But allowing a property to be both normative and purely descriptive, the objection would continue, obliterates the is/ought divide between properties.

   Unfortunately for our would-be objector, this is not so much an objection as just a part of Jackson's view. For, as Byron rightly states, Jackson *defines* a normative property as a property that can be picked out by a normative property-term, and a purely descriptive property as a property that can be picked out by a purely descriptive property-term.[7] So, on Jackson's view, the is/ought divide is located at the level of property-*terms*. But if a normative property-term applies to all and only the members of a set of possible actions to all and only of which a purely descriptive property-term applies, then—again assuming that properties are sets—it follows that the set in question is a normative *and* purely descriptive property. By itself, that is no objection to Jackson's view; it is, rather, just part of the view, and that part is at least coherent.

   Nonetheless, one might still challenge Jackson's view of normative properties *qua* sets of possible actions. There are two ways to do this: one can try to show that Jackson's view of properties is simply false, or, more modestly, one can argue that Jackson's view cannot adequately account for normative properties.[8] I will take the second tack. But I will also show that Jackson's view fails for the same

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[7] See Byron 2014: 142 and Jackson 1998: 120-121.

[8] As an example of taking the first tack, see Elliott Sober 1982. Jackson considers a variation of Sober's case and responds (1998: 126-127). The second tack is more modest since Jackson's general view of properties could be true and yet fail to account for normative properties because normative properties do not exist (see, e.g., Mackie 1977 and Joyce 2006).

reasons that (P4*) is true. So, the argument I shall develop will simultaneously show that (1) is false and give support to my original (2012) argument.

As stated above, the particular explanatory relation between the property that explains an action's being right and the property of being right might make it impossible to identify these two particular properties with each other. I will now show why the explanatory relation between these two properties does indeed, as (P4*) claims, make it impossible to identify them with each other. First, consider that an action is right just in case it is justified. This is so presumably because being right and being justified, as properties of actions, are one and the same property—to be right just is to be justified. It is a platitude, furthermore, that actions are justified for reasons: if an action is justified, there is a reason it is justified. (Call such reasons 'justifying reasons'.[9]) Given that justifying reasons are what justify actions, we cannot identify a justifying reason with the fact that an action is justified. For, to do so would entail claiming this: that which justifies the action is identical to the fact that the action is justified. But that claim is incoherent. The fact that an action is justified cannot be that which justifies the action. It is worth noting that this sort of incoherence is not peculiar to justification. For example, it holds equally for explanation: That which explains an event cannot be identical to the fact that the event is explained. That an event is explained cannot be what explains the event. Similarly, that an action is justified cannot be what justifies the action. Since being right is identical to being justified, it thus follows that an action's justifying reason cannot be identical to the fact that the action is right. An action's justifying reason, that is, must be distinct from the fact that the action is right. Now, on what is probably the most common view of justifying reasons, a justifying reason is a fact that

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[9] Justifying reasons should be distinguished from so-called explanatory reasons, the latter of which often appeal to the psychological states of the agent performing the action: the (explanatory) reason the agent performed that action is that (say) the agent had a certain belief-desire pair. The term 'explanatory reason' is infelicitous, given that justifying reasons can also figure into explanations—namely, they explain why an action is justified. Indeed, that justifying reasons are also explanatory in this way is important for the present argument.

counts conclusively in favor of an action.[10] For example, if the fact
that an action maximizes expected hedonic value counts conclusively
in favor of the action, then that fact is what justifies the action. But
even if justifying reasons should be facts, a justifying reason cannot
be identical to the fact that an action is right. For, whether or not a
justifying reason is a fact, identifying an action's justifying reason
with the fact that the action is right entails identifying that which jus-
tifies the action with the fact that the action is justified, which again
is incoherent. The fact that an action is justified cannot be that which
justifies the action. It follows, then, that whether or not justifying
reasons are facts, we cannot, on pain of incoherence, identify an ac-
tion's justifying reason with the fact that the action is right.

   We are now in a position to see why, as per (P4*), we cannot
identify the property that explains an action's being right with the
property of being right and, thus, why (1) is false. Henceforth, let us
assume the platitude that actions are justified for reasons—which,
for ease, I shall take to be facts—and that being right is identical
to being justified. From these two assumptions, we get our first
premise:

   (~1.1) An action is right only if a fact justifies the action.

Now, as explained above, it is incoherent to identify the fact that
justifies an action with the fact that the action is right. So, here is our
second premise:

   (~1.2) If a fact justifies the action, then identifying the fact that
          justifies the action with the fact that the action is right is
          incoherent.

Our final premise is this:

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[10] Theorists who either identify justifying reasons with facts or take facts to
"give" justifying reasons include Broome (2004), Dancy (2000), Darwall (1983),
McNaughton and Rawling (2003), Parfit (1997), Raz (1975), and Shafer-Landau
(2003). For my purposes here, it will not make a difference whether justifying
reasons are identical to facts or facts "give" justifying reasons. Also, I say 'con-
clusively' because reasons are often taken to be *pro tanto* whereas being justified
implies success. If reasons are *pro tanto*, then a justifying reason is a consideration
that counts in favor of an action and is not overridden by other considerations.

(~1.3) If identifying the fact that justifies the action with the fact that the action is right is incoherent, then identifying the property of being right with an FRM-property also leads to incoherence.

The first step toward seeing that (~1.3) is true requires seeing how FRM-properties relate to justifying reasons. Assuming (as we are) that justifying reasons are facts, we can express the relation like this: a property *F* is an FRM-property iff a token action's justifying reason is the fact in which the action possesses *F*. For example, if maximizing expected hedonic value is the one and only FRM-property, then what would justify an action would be the fact that the action maximizes expected hedonic value.

The second step toward seeing that (~1.3) is true requires recognizing that the following conditional is also true: If *F* is an FRM-property just in case a token action's justifying reason is the fact in which the action possesses *F*, then, on pain of incoherence, should *F* be an FRM-property, *F* cannot be identical to being right. To see why this conditional is true, suppose that a token action *a* possesses an FRM-property. If *a* possesses an FRM-property, then there is a fact in which *a* possess an FRM-property and, what is more, that fact justifies *a*. If the fact in which *a* possesses an FRM-property is what justifies *a*, then, trivially, some fact justifies *a*; and if some fact justifies *a*, then *a* is justified. So, *a*'s possessing an FRM-property results in there being two facts: the fact in which *a* possesses the FRM-property and the fact that *a* is justified. As explained above, however, we cannot identify the two facts. For, to do so would amount to claiming that that which justifies *a* is identical to the fact that *a* is justified, which is incoherent. So, the fact in which *a* possesses an FRM-property cannot be identical to the fact that *a* is justified. But the token action in both facts is one and the same action, viz., *a*. Consequently, if the properties in the two facts should also be one and the same property, then the facts themselves will be one and the same fact. To see this, suppose that it is a fact that a token organism *o* is a *Brontosaurus* and it is also a fact that *o* is an *Apatosaurus*. If being a *Brontosaurus* is identical to being an *Apatosaurus*, then the fact that *o* is a *Brontosaurus* and the fact that *o* is an *Apatosaurus* are the same fact—the fact just involves a property (viz., being a member of a

certain natural kind) picked out by two property-terms: 'is a *Brontosaurus*' and 'is an *Apatosaurus*'. But the facts are identical nonetheless. By parity of reasoning, then, if an FRM-property is identical to being justified, then the fact that justifies our token action *a* is identical to the fact that *a* is justified, which is incoherent. So, on pain of incoherence, no FRM-property can be identical to the property of being justified; and since being right and being justified are one and the same property, it follows that no FRM-property can be identical to being right. Premise (~1.3) follows. Having already established (~1.1) and (~1.2), we can now validly infer that identifying the property of being right with an FRM-property leads to incoherence. Since (1) implies, to the contrary, that identifying the property of being right with an FRM-property is coherent, we can conclude that (1) is false. Since (1) is false, Byron's objection to (P4*) fails; and since Jackson's view of properties, when applied to moral properties, implies (1), we can also conclude that Jackson's view of properties fails to account for moral properties, which ultimately casts a dubious light upon Jackson's moral reductionism.

Finally, we can see why (P4*) is true. The particular explanatory relation cited in (P4*) prevents identifying the property that explains an action *a*'s being right with the property of being right, since (i) the property that explains *a*'s being right is, roughly put, the property whose possession by *a* is what justifies *a*[11] and (ii) being right and being justified are one and the same property. For, if (i) the property that explains *a*'s being right is (roughly put) the property whose possession by *a* is what justifies *a* and (ii) being right and being justified are one and the same property, then to identify the property that explains *a*'s being right with the property of being right entails identifying that which justifies *a* with *a*'s being justified, which is incoherent. So, the particular explanatory relation, cited by (P4*), between the property that makes an action right and the property of being right makes it impossible to identify these two properties, in which case not only is (1) is false, but (P4*) is true.

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[11] If justifying reasons are facts, it would be more precise to say this: the property that explains an action *a*'s being right is the property whose possession by *a* results in the fact that justifies *a*. This degree of precision is not required for the point being made in the text.

Conclusion

In an earlier article, I argued that if the causal theory of reference is true, then, on pain of absurdity, no normative ethical theory is true (Long 2012). Michael Byron has objected to my argument—specifically, to the premise I have labelled '(P4*)'—by appealing to Frank Jackson's moral reductionism. My defense of (P4*) is essentially that Byron fails to appreciate the particular explanatory relation, cited in (P4*), between the property that explains an action's being right and the property of being right and that by getting clearer on this relation, we see not only that Byron's objection fails, but that (P4*) is both true and calls into question Jackson's account of moral properties and thus Jackson's moral reductionism. What is more, we can once again conclude that if the causal theory of reference is true, then no normative ethical theory is true.[12]

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