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Who's on First?

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Abbott: Strange as it may seem, they give ball players nowadays very peculiar names.

Costello: Funny names?

Abbott: Nicknames, nicknames. Now, on the St. Louis team we have Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third—

Costello: That's what I want to find out. I want you to tell me the names of the fellows on the St. Louis team.

Abbott: I'm telling you. Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third—

Costello: You know the fellows' names?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Well, then who's playing first?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: I mean the fellow's name on first base.

Abbott: Who.

(From Abbott and Costello's skit, "Who's on First.")

"X-Firsters" hold that some normative feature is fundamental to all others. This is a common view. As Mark Schroeder wrote in *Slaves of the Passions*,

for centuries [metaethicists] have characterized their subject matter as being everything which ultimately involved claims about what was *good*, or . . . what was *right*, or . . . what someone *ought* to do. All of these views claim that what it is for a property or concept to be normative, is for it to be ultimately analyzable in terms of some basic normative property or relation or concept. They merely disagree about what this basic property or concept *is*. (2007: 81)

Much ink has been spilled in the "mere" disagreements about what this basic property is. This is the internecine debate *between X-Firsters*, especially between Reasons Firsters (e.g. Parfit 2011; Scanlon 1998), Values Firsters

(e.g. Moore 1903; Maguire 2016), and Fittingness Firsters (e.g. Chappell 2012; McHugh and Way 2016).

To some, this internecine debate resembles an Abbott and Costello skit. In saying this I do not intend to cast aspersions on interesting, insightful work that has developed problems and solutions for specific X-First views. Rather, I intend to draw attention to something about the debate itself. It takes as a starting point that some normative feature is fundamental to all others. Little to nothing is said about *whether* or *why* we should think that.

That said, to my knowledge there has been no clear argument *against* the X-First program,¹ and no clear articulation of an alternative to it either. Hence my two main goals in this chapter. First, I provide a fairly simple argument that one shouldn't be an X-Firster about the normative domain. The central move is to show that X-First theories have dubious merits when applied to a range of analogous domains. Second, I offer an alternative to X-First views. I develop an approach—taking normativity to be a determinable—that provides a stark contrast with X-First views, especially in how it treats the structure and unity of normativity.

3.1. WHAT IS IT FOR SOMETHING TO BE “ON FIRST”?

Before we proceed to these two main goals, it's worth covering our bases. What exactly are X-Firsters committed to? I'll start with Reasons First, zoom out to characterize X-First itself, then offer two clarifications.

Reasons First is, roughly, the view that reasons are “the only fundamental elements of the normative domain, other normative notions such as good and ought being analyzable in terms of reasons” (Scanlon 2014: 2). Selim Berker argues that this “widely popular” approach is most aptly framed in terms of two theses about grounding: that “reasons are first,” or all other normative “facts are *grounded in* facts about reasons, that it is *in virtue of* the facts about reasons that these other normative facts obtain”; and that “reasons are not tied for first,” or “it is not *because of* any facts about other normative categories that facts about reasons obtain” (2017: 15–16).

Generalizing, the X-First program takes some X, and declares it to be prior to all Ys. What's X? A paradigmatic normative property (or relation or

¹ Though skepticism has been aired: see e.g. Cuneo (2007: 64–5; Väyrynen (2011: 203).

concept or . . .). The three most common candidates are reasons, fittingness, and value. But others are possible—e.g. ought.²

What are all the Ys? All of the other normative properties (or relations or concepts or . . .). Here we obviously need a demarcation of the normative. I suspect X-Firsters have a narrow demarcation in mind,³ but since little is typically said on this score I won't discuss it further.

Note also that X can be prior to all the Ys even if some Z is prior to X. Reasons Firsters can allow that all facts about reasons are fully grounded, so long as they are fully grounded in *non-normative* facts (as Berker notes 2017: 16). More generally, X-First is compatible with both naturalism and non-naturalism. *Modulo* questions about what terms like “priority” mean here—it's compatible with expressivism. Consider Gibbard: “WARRANT I regard as the basic normative concept, the conceptual atom that renders molecular concepts like REPREHENSIBLE normative” (2006: 196–7).

Two further theses are sometimes classed with X-First. The first concerns local questions of explanatory priority, such as: Is the good prior to the right, or vice versa? The good can be prior to the right (or vice versa) without being prior to all other normative properties. X-Firsters sometimes count as allies historical figures who only answer local questions, but those figures seem to be playing a different ballgame.

Gibbard's quote above points to the second thesis. For Gibbard, WARRANT is not just the atomic normative concept out of which other normative concepts are constructed; it is *what renders those other concepts normative*. More generally, X-Firsters might be committed to there being some X that other normative properties have in common, *in virtue of which they are normative*. Call this the thesis that some X is “the mark of the normative.”⁴

Like others,⁵ the Schroeder quote that we started with entangles both issues (“what it is for a property or concept to be normative, is for it to be ultimately analyzable in terms of some basic normative property”). But they

² See also Wodak (forthcoming) on views like Broome's (2013)—which may just answer a local question in the sense described below. It's also noteworthy here that X-Firsters standardly take a commonsensical (rather than some *recherché*) normative notion to be what's on first. Thanks to Francois Schroeter for discussion.

³ X-Firsters focus on what we can call “authoritative” normative properties; they're silent on how we explain “merely formal normativity” (McPherson 2011; Wodak 2019).

⁴ To accommodate views like Raz's (discussed later), the “mark of the normative” thesis needs to be framed somewhat broadly: for all Y, Y is normative iff Y is related in “the right way” to X. It's unclear how to cash this out. (What does Raz mean by “otherwise related to reasons?”) Thanks to Selim Berker and Gabriel Shapiro for helpful discussions here.

⁵ Consider Snedegar (2016: 156): a central “appeal of the reasons first program is that it promises to explain what it is that makes the normative *normative*”; but this “really only motivate[s] taking some single notion to be normatively basic.” This assumes a great deal:

should be separated. For instance, Raz has endorsed the view that “the normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons” (1999: 67); but he has also endorsed the view that facts about practical reasons are explained in terms of facts about value.⁶ These commitments don’t seem inconsistent. So while Raz is often classed with Reasons Firsters, this is a mistake. The commitments about explanatory priority are definitive of the X-First program, I think. That said, there’s no use fighting over terminology. The crucial point is the distinction between the claim that some normative X is on first and the claim that some normative X is the mark of the normative, so defined. I’ll discuss both claims, but mostly focus on the first.

3.2. IS SOMETHING “ON FIRST”?

3.2.1. The Goal

My first goal is to argue that one shouldn’t be an X-Firster. But that’s ambiguous between two claims.

X-FIRST ISN’T FAVORED: We should not assume that there’s some X that’s “on first” for normativity.

X-FIRST IS FALSE: It’s false that there’s some X that’s “on first” for normativity.

I am somewhat sympathetic to the second claim, and some of what I’ll say can be marshalled in its defense. My case for the first claim is stronger.

Some may think the first claim is a weak target. But it’s dialectically significant if I can provide a good case that X-FIRST ISN’T FAVORED is true. The X-First debate takes as a starting point that some normative feature is fundamental to all others. More specifically: the X-First debate proceeds via arguments *for* preferred X-First views (e.g. Reasons First) that are just arguments *against* rival X-First views (e.g. Values First). These arguments obviously rely on the assumption that *some* X is on first. If we shouldn’t assume that, the whole debate is built on sand.

Some X-Firsters might find this characterization of the debate to be unfair. Some X-Firsters explicitly say they aren’t *assuming* that some X is on first.⁷ And some may say that they are defending that claim, not assuming it.

that we can explain what it is that makes the normative *normative* only by taking there to be a mark of the normative, and that the mark of the normative must be on first.

⁶ For discussion and references, see Heuer (2004), especially at 133: for Raz, “we have reasons to act in certain ways because so acting is an appropriate response to value.”

⁷ See e.g. McHugh and Way (2016: 577): “Why expect that there will be some basic normative or evaluative property from which the rest of the normative and evaluative

Two responses. One, X-Firsters sometimes hedge, but that doesn't fit with the conclusions they draw. Consider Howard (2019). Howard argues for Fittingness First by arguing that Reasons First and Values First are unacceptable. If Howard grants that we have no good reason from the onset to think that some X is on first—or, more specifically, that reasons or values or fittingness is on first—his argument can't be for The Fundamentality of Fit (which is his title). It can only be for the less interesting conditional claim: *if* reasons or values or fittingness is fundamental *then* fittingness is fundamental. Either the antecedent of that conditional is assumed to get to a stronger conclusion, or X-Firsters' conclusions aren't as interesting as their titles suggest. Pick your poison.

My second response may initially seem like a curve ball, but bear with me. Alonzo Church once considered a view he called “ontological misogyny.” One form of this view would explain all facts about women in terms of facts about men plus the *being a father of* relation. As Church noted, this view may give us adequate resources to express all facts about women, but if so that doesn't seem like a good argument *for* the doctrine.⁸ Now compare this to X-Firsters' arguments views for their preferred views. Chappell's main argument for taking fittingness to be “primitive” is that this provides “adequate conceptual resources for us to express any expressible normative truth” (2012: 686). Does that really show that fittingness is “The Sole Normative Primitive”? Or that there is *any* “Sole Normative Primitive”? No. The point here is simple. X-Firsters often aim to show that we *can* put some X on first for normativity (without losing expressive power or extensional adequacy). But so what? That we *can* does not mean that we *should*. If ontological misogyny lets us express any expressible truth about gender, that does not mean that men are “on first” with respect to gender, or indeed that there is any Sole Gender Primitive. (If Church's example is too out of left field, we could make similar points concerning e.g. logical concepts. See McSweeney (2019) on this issue: we *can* take ‘V’, ‘&’, and ‘~’ to be the sole logical primitives without losing expressive power or extensional adequacy; that doesn't mean we *should*!)

Let me put the preceding points differently. The stronger conclusion X-FIRST IS FALSE rejects every X-First view. The weaker conclusion X-FIRST ISN'T FAVORED rejects the X-First debate. As Schroeder put it, everyone in the debate agrees that that there's some basic normative property and “merely disagrees” about what it is; so that starting point is some X is on

domain is constructed? We do not assume from the outset that this is so.” (I discuss the “significant attractions” they attribute to this “hypothesis” in n. 20.) Cf. Rowland (2017: 213, emphasis mine), who assumes that “We should accept an account of *the basic normative property* that enables us to analyze the evaluative in terms of the normative.”

⁸ For references for Church's 1958 talk, see Inwagen (2004: 123).

first, and we argue from there to work out whether X is reasons or values or whatever. If X-FIRST ISN'T FAVORED, X-FIRSTERS owe us much more.

3.2.2. The Argumentative Strategy

There are domains where X-First views seem plausible. Take rectangles. For any shape, if it's a rectangle, this is in virtue of its being equiangular-and-quadrilateral. That conjunctive property is “on first” for rectangles.

Perhaps normativity is like rectangles. But many domains that are analogous to normativity don't look like rectangles in this respect. This is the basis for my master argument against X-Firsters:

- P1. We should not have an X-First debate for Z.
- P2. If P1, we should not have an X-First debate about normativity.
- C. So, we should not have an X-First debate about normativity.

There are different instances of this argument, depending on which domain we focus on—i.e. what candidate for Z we consider.⁹ I'll consider a few different candidates below. I don't need each of them to succeed, obviously; if one version of the argument is sound, that'd suffice. But it's valuable to consider a range of candidates to see how much the X-First debate in metaethics seems like an aberration in philosophy. This sociological observation will do some work in the argument below.

Here's the first candidate for Z: the mental. Considering P1 helps us elucidate a curious feature of X-First theories. You might think they are simply *monistic* theories: they just require a single property to be fundamental to normativity. But that's not right. They require a single *normative* entity to be fundamental to normativity. The equivalent view in philosophy of mind is that there's a single *mental* property that's fundamental to the mental. This involves something like a Beliefs First theory of the mental. There are theories in this ballpark. Maybe *ideas* or *intentionality* are “on first.” But there are well-known and widely accepted theories, like functionalism, which don't have this structure.¹⁰ We have theoretical resources—like Ramsey sentences—to explicate the intuitive idea that the most basic mental concepts like BELIEF and DESIRE might be *interdependent*, such that no mental X is “on first.” It would be a mistake to set aside all views like

⁹ I'm using “domains” roughly in the way that Scanlon (2014) does, but nothing hangs on the term. It may be more apt to speak of normativity as a *category*. (Interestingly, for “the highest kinds” in Aristotle's *Categories*, like qualities, no X is “on first”—or so I'm told.)

¹⁰ One way of thinking about functionalism is that to be a mental property is to be a realizer of a certain functional role that's specified via a Ramsey sentence. But the single entity “on first” (a) isn't mental, and (b) is a *recherché* second-order property. Cf. n. 15. Thanks to Jan Dowell and Laura Schroeter for helpful discussion here.

functionalism and construct a central debate in philosophy of mind to only be between theories like Beliefs First.

Now consider P2. One point in its favor: if we need not be X-Firsters about the mental, why must the normative be so different from the mental? X-Firsters have an explanatory debt here. (I'll expand on this below.) Here's another point in its favor. Considering views like functionalism helps us set aside a wide set of considerations that might seem like putative advantages of being an X-Firster about normativity: that such views are *simpler*, or *more conducive to a naturalistic reduction* (e.g. Schroeder 2007: 81). Is functionalism *less simple*, or *less reductionist-friendly*, than views like "Intentionality First"? If so, is that a good ground to reject functionalism and agree from the onset to only consider views like Intentionality First? Once we attend to theoretical positions that don't fit the strictures of an X-First program, it's hard to see why general theoretical virtues (or an appetite for reduction) should be a good motivation for that program.

Let's turn to a more obvious candidate for Z: descriptivity. By this I mean the facts, properties, etc. that fall on the "is" side of Hume's is/ought gap. This is a motley crew. Numbers and narwhals, sensations and supernatural beings, photons and pharmacies, Germany and gravity: if they all exist, they are all descriptive. Must there be some descriptive property, X, that is prior to all other descriptive properties (some descriptive X that is "on first"), and that all other descriptive entities have in virtue of which they are descriptive (that is, a "mark of the descriptive")? If so, what would X be? What is the equivalent of *being equiangular-and-quadrilateral* for numbers, narwhals, photons, and so on?

Any candidate for X would be highly contentious. Consider dualism: the mental and the physical are plausibly both descriptive, but dualists say they're fundamentally different. Can an X-Firster about descriptivity respect that commitment? If the mental and the physical are like isosceles and oblique triangles, are they really fundamentally different? A similar concern arises for *abstracta* and *concreta* (Rosen 2017; Thomasson 1999).¹¹

Say I'm right about P1. Why believe P2? Because normativity and descriptivity are meant to carve an important joint in reality. If the heterogeneous stuff on one side, descriptivity, does not fit the mold of an X-First theory, why should the heterogeneous stuff on the other? Even if we could entertain some X-First theories for descriptivity, we shouldn't construct a debate comparing them and taking the best of the bunch to be the true theory of descriptivity. So why have that debate for normativity?

¹¹ Consider e.g. the view that the essential descriptive feature is *having causal powers*. Adopting such an Eleatic Principle is hard to square with *abstracta* and dualist views.

I suspect that most objections to this argument will target P2. You may think, for instance, that it's a mistake to posit a descriptive property that's "on first," but only because *being descriptive* is primarily a feature of sentences or propositions, rather than of properties or relations. But similar motivations for taking descriptivity to be primarily a feature of sentences or propositions can be marshalled in favor of taking normativity to be primarily a feature of (uses of) sentences or propositions. Why should X-Firsters treat normativity and descriptivity so differently?

A better way to reject P2 is to argue that "descriptivity" is just the grab-bag of whatever is not normative. *If* this is so, of course P2 will be false! It's like saying rectangles need not have any essential feature because there is no essential feature for the heterogenous collection of non-rectangles.

But is it so? I'm not sure. Something can be rectangular or non-rectangular, but not both. But it's at least coherent to take something to be normative *and* descriptive. So the distinction between the descriptive and the normative doesn't seem akin to the distinction between rectangles and non-rectangles: "descriptive" means something other than "not normative."

Even if one sympathizes with such objections, however, the X-Firster isn't home. The objections only target one version of the argument. They don't help with the mental. Nor do they help with our final candidate for Z: the physical. *Being physical* is clearly not a feature of sentences or propositions in the way that *being descriptive* might be. And the domain or category of the physical is, it's safe to say, not some grab-bag of leftovers.

So, should we have an X-First debate about the category of the physical? Is there some physical X that's prior to all other physical properties and relations (some physical X that's "on first")? There's some precedent for this view. Thales of Miletus—perhaps the first philosopher—held that everything is water. On this Water First view, water is a "primary principle" of all things like the sun, the stars, and the cosmos. But this Water First theory is false. And it's not just false because water itself is not fundamental to physics—that is, we didn't just learn it was false when we discovered that water is H₂O. One way to see this is to think of some more contemporary counterparts to Thales' view about physics. A Photons First ontology for the physical may not be threatened by a discovery like Lavoisier's, but we still know that it's a non-starter. Why? For one thing, physical entities include material things like molecules and non-material things like forces. If there are "fundamental physical forces," the prospects for anything like a Photons First ontology are dim.¹² (This is part of what led materialists to become

¹² Some may endorse a Particles First or Fields First ontology of the physical. But the correspondence to an X-First theory here is superficial. Being committed to a *plurality* of fundamental particles (photons, bosons, whatever) or a *plurality* of fundamental fields

physicalists in philosophy.) A similar point applies to the view that there some X that all physical entities have in virtue of which they are physical (i.e. some X that's "the mark of the physical"). There's a debate about what makes entities physical (see Stoljar 2017: §§11–12). But it does not resemble the X-First debate—there's no agreement from the onset that some X is "the mark of the physical."

This is why the case for P1 here is strong: X-First theories about the physical are implausible, and we certainly shouldn't assume that one is right. The case for P2 is just as strong as before. The distinction between the normative and the descriptive is often used because of a taxonomical consideration in the naturalism vs. non-naturalism debate. One way of denying the fundamentality of the normative is to claim that normativity is ultimately explained in terms of the supernatural, which is descriptive but not physical. But much of what drives naturalism about normativity drives one towards physicalism (at least, *ceteris paribus*); a distinct realm of *sui generis* normative stuff raises similar concerns to a distinct realm of *sui generis* supernatural or mathematical or mental stuff. If so, the normative and the physical are playing similar roles as philosophical domains.

3.2.3. The Sociological Observation

These three candidates—the descriptive, physical, and mental—hardly exhaust the categories which are similar to the normative, but don't have anything resembling the X-First debate in metaethics. (For instance: once vitalism was rejected, it has become unclear if there's any essential feature that all animate beings have in virtue of which they're animate.) In this sense, the X-First debate in metaethics is something of an aberration in philosophy.¹³ And this sociological observation warrants an explanation: why does the X-First debate have pride of place in metaethics if there aren't analogous debates about these analogous philosophical categories?

Here are three possible explanations for this sociological observation:

- (i) *Pessimism about X-First Views*: The X-First debate is built on sand.
- (ii) *Normative Exceptionalism*: We have to be X-Firsters about normativity, but not about these other philosophical categories.

(electromagnetism, maybe gravity, some poorly named ones) is being committed to the kind of *fundamentally disjunctive account* that X-Firsters want to reject. See section 3.3.

¹³ It's not quite an anomaly. Attempts to reduce all mathematical entities to sets or categories are arguably similar to X-First theories about normativity. (Though I do not think sets were thought to be "the mark of the mathematical" in this literature.) That said, there was no assumption in this literature that some view like Sets First must be true.

(iii) *Revisionism about the Non-normative*: We need, and sorely lack, X-First debates about these other philosophical categories.

I think the best explanation is the first: we should think either that X-First views are false, or (more modestly) that the X-First debate is misguided. Just as there *may* be an essential mental feature, there *may* be an essential normative feature. But there's no cause to agree from the onset that there is an essential normative feature and merely disagree about what it is.

X-Firsters may wish to take the second option. But if so, they really need to step up to the plate and give us arguments that explain what makes the normative exceptional. This requires more than throwaway remarks. We need an explanation for why whatever motivates being an X-Firster about normativity doesn't motivate being an X-Firster across the board. If we baldly declare that X-First theories are always preferred on grounds like simplicity, we take on odd commitments about e.g. functionalism.

I find the third option to be the least appealing. Though *if* it's the right way to go, my argumentative strategy won't have yielded the fruit that I expected, but it will have led to something surprising and significant nonetheless: there's an enormous amount of new work to be done in almost every field.

This observation, then, poses a simple challenge for X-Firsters. Note that it's not a direct challenge to the arguments that preoccupy the literature (whether Fittingness First is a better view than Reasons First or Values First, and so on). It's a challenge to an inference from such arguments to the conclusion that the preferred X-First theory about normativity is true. Unless more is said, it's unclear if those arguments show us much more than the argument that Photons First is a better theory than Water First, or that Intentionality First is a better theory than Berkeleyan idealism.

3.3. WHAT IF NOTHING IS "ON FIRST"?

If I'm right about the X-First debate, how should we theorize about normativity instead? Currently we lack any systematic work on what alternatives to X-First views about normativity can and should look like.

There's plenty of space for many different rivals to X-First views. The alternative I present below is by no means the only way to go, or indeed the way we should go about all philosophically interesting categories. I'm going to go in to bat for it because it provides a particularly sharp contrast with X-First research programs, and in doing so offers an interesting, fruitful way to think about some of the considerations that I suspect are driving metaethicists towards embracing X-First theories. I'll initially present a clearer, albeit

more committed, version of this view, then show how we might be able to water down some of its commitments.

3.3.1. Two Kinds of Categories

Let's start by contrasting two kinds of categories. Some are *genera*. Following Rosen (2010: 124–7), it is definitive of genera and species that:

For all x , that x is a member of species y is fully explained in terms of x having the genus's essential feature(s) and species's *differentia*.

Recall the example of rectangles: they all have one essential feature in common, namely being equiangular-and-quadrilateral. $ABCD$ is member of a species of this genus, a square, in virtue of having this essential feature plus the requisite *differentia* (being equilateral).

But not all categories are genera. Some, for instance, are determinables. Here's how Rosen (2010: 127) contrasts genera and determinables:

[D]espite the similarities between the determinable–determinate relation on the one hand and the genus–species relation on the other, there is this difference: the determinate grounds the determinable, but the species does not ground the genus.

Take a scarlet letter. Scarlet is a determinate of red, which is in turn a determinate of color. So the letter is red in virtue of being scarlet, and colored in virtue of being red. It is not scarlet in virtue of having some essential feature that colored things share, plus some *differentia*. On a common—though by no means universal—approach, the facts about a determinable are fully explained in terms of the facts about the disjunction of its determinates (see Wilson 2017: §3.4.1).¹⁴ So on this approach, we can have fundamentally disjunctive accounts of determinables such as color.

Three quick asides. First, I'm going to assume this common approach to determinables, though little hangs on it; the main alternative doesn't help X-Firsters.¹⁵ Second, I'm going to play fast and loose with talk of explaining F (e.g. explaining the determinable color) and explaining the facts about

¹⁴ I should note that Wilson rejects this view (2012, 2014: 557); though cf. Bennett (2017: 23–4), who notes that Wilson most plausibly points out that it is not *universally* true that determinables are explained in terms of the disjunction of their determinates.

¹⁵ On the most salient alternative, “each determinable property F of ordinary individuals is associated with a second-order property of properties: the property of *being an F-determinate*” (Rosen 2010: 129). If normativity is a determinate, for x to be normative would be for x to instantiate the second-order property of being a normativity determinate. This fits the letter but not the spirit of an X-First theory: there is a single second-order property that's “on first,” but it's not a paradigmatic normative property like *being valuable*; it's highly *recherché*. So doesn't really vindicate the aims of X-Firsters.

F (e.g. explaining the facts about color); you'll live. And third, I'm going to speak of taking *normativity* to be a determinable below; take such talk as a convenient shorthand for taking some more precise property—e.g. *being normatively valanced*—to be a determinable.¹⁶

3.3.2. The Stark Alternative

Genera and determinables don't exhaust the kinds of categories. But they provide a stark contrast that's useful for our purposes (though accepting an X-First view isn't identical to accepting that normativity is a genus).¹⁷ My proposal is that normativity is a determinable, and it reduces to the disjunction of its determinates. On this view, no single normative feature is "on first" (red and blue are explained in terms of different more specific colors), and no X is "the mark of the normative" (explanations of why something is normative, like explanations of why something is colored, will bottom out in different specific determinates of the determinable).

Call this Stark Alternative. Views in the ballpark have been endorsed by Tappolet (2004) and Oddie (2005), and suggested by Jessica Wilson (2014: 547), who noted that we could formulate normative naturalism as the view that "normative state types and/or tokens stand in something like the determinable/determinate relation to naturalistic goings-on." This brings out that the determinates of normativity could be naturalistic. But they could also be other normative state types and/or tokens. In order for the view to be compatible with naturalism or non-naturalism, Stark Alternative—like X-First—must remain somewhat schematic.

To put some flesh on the bones of this schema, here's a version of the view. It's inspired by Susan Hurley's discussion of "centralism":

A feature common to many philosophical accounts of ethical concepts is that the general concepts, *right* and *ought*, are taken to be logically prior to and independent of the specific concepts, such as *just* and *unkind*. According to such accounts, the general concepts carry a core meaning . . . that also provides the specific concepts with reason-giving status. . . . I shall refer to accounts that take

¹⁶ When someone says color is a determinable, they don't mean that a ball is *color* in virtue of being red. Likewise, when I say normativity is a determinable, I don't mean that an act is *normativity* in virtue of being morally right. That said, *being normatively valanced* may not be the best candidate for the determinable here. *Inter alia*, there's a thorny issue of whether *being permitted* should be among the relevant class of determinates. (This issue is thorny because of the role it plays in a preposterous argument against error theory.)

¹⁷ For one, there could be an essential *non-normative* property or relation that is essential to normativity: that could vindicate the view that normativity is a genus, but could not vindicate X-Firsters. For another, the relevant essential feature and *differentia* could both be normative, which would mean that no single normative notion is "on first."

the general concepts in some category to be logically prior to and independent of the specific as *centralist*. (Hurley 1985: 56)

Hurley suggests that instead of being centralists we should take “discrete particular values as a starting point” (1985: 56). Following her use of examples like justice and kindness, we could take specific *virtues* as determinates of normativity. This gives us a Virtues First account. Hurley’s remarks only touch on moral normativity, but one could generalize: the view dovetails nicely with virtue-theoretic approaches to epistemology, for instance. This may seem to resemble Reasons First, but the resemblance is superficial. Virtues First is disjunctive: Hurley’s whole point is that we do not take a “general concept” like VIRTUE to be what’s “on first”; rather normativity will bottom out in a list of “specific concepts” like JUST and UNKIND.¹⁸

I don’t know whether Virtues First is the best option to take for those who are attracted to Stark Alternative. I’m just using it to illustrate the kind of options that become available on this schematic approach. According to Virtues First, the explanation for why something is normative will resemble the explanation for why something is colored. Being courageous is a specific way of being practically virtuous and being conscientious is a specific way of being epistemically virtuous, just as being scarlet is a specific way of being red and being azure is a specific way of being blue.

3.3.3. Why Accept Stark Alternative?

Good question, subheading. Here’s your answer. Stark Alternative better accounts for what motivates X-Firsters in how it explains how normativity is both *structured* and *unified*.¹⁹

One motivation for X-Firsters is that normativity is *structured*: relations of explanatory priority or relative fundamentality obtain between reasons and oughts and values and so on.²⁰ Of course, X-Firsters disagree about the

¹⁸ Interestingly, the Virtues First view is neither Aristotelian nor neo-Aristotelian. See Hirji (forthcoming) on the structure of each of those views: neither puts the aretaic “on first.” It is also not Hurley’s view. Hurley embraces a kind of Rawlsian coherentism.

¹⁹ There are also some off-the-shelf arguments that I could appeal to in motivating Stark Alternative, e.g. Armstrong (1997: 50) about asymmetric necessitation; see also Wilson (2012: 8). I won’t appeal to those arguments. I don’t like them.

²⁰ That consideration is clear in Schroeder (2018)’s reconstruction of the motivation behind Reasons First: since Ross (1930), many thought that reasons explain oughts, then generalized from the “core case” of ought: reasons are prior to the rest of normativity. The same consideration crops up with Fittingness Firsters like McHugh and Way (2016: 577): since “the normative and evaluative domain seems highly interconnected, the hypothesis that there is one basic normative property has significant explanatory promise.” They say

direction of those relations of explanatory priority. But they agree that these explanations all bottom out in the same place: some highly general feature like reasons or fittingness or value. However, Stark Alternative also accepts that normativity is structured. By analogy: color is a determinable which is explained in terms of its determinates like red and blue, which are themselves determinables that are explained in terms of their determinates like crimson and cerulean. So according to Stark Alternative, normative explanations bottom out in different highly specific places—e.g. on the Virtues First view, in courage and conscientiousness.

So far this only shows that a motivation for X-First is neutralized, and in a way that further supports a point I made earlier: the good can be prior to the right without having to be prior to every other normative property. Further, I want to argue that Stark Alternative is a more plausible account of the structure of normativity than X-First. Our views about how normativity is structured should be in sync with our views about the pattern of normative explanations. If some *X* is “on first,” the pattern of the explanation for why *x* is morally right or aesthetically good is like the pattern of explaining why *ABC* is an isosceles triangle or an oblique triangle: we start with one general property (*being trilateral*) then build to the specific properties. By contrast, if normativity is a determinable, the pattern of normative explanations is like the pattern of explaining color facts: we move from the specific to general. The latter seems much more promising. That is: an act is normatively valanced (colored) in virtue of being *prima facie* wrong (red), and *prima facie* wrong (red) in virtue of being unjust (scarlet) or being harmful to others (crimson) or whatever. And an act can also be normatively valanced (colored) in virtue of being prudentially good (blue), and prudentially good (blue) in virtue of being an achievement (teal) or being pleasurable (aqua). These explanations start with the specific properties, and they don’t all start in the same place.

Another motivation for X-First is that normativity is *unified*. Concerns about whether a category is unified are often run together with concerns about whether it is a genus. This occurs in the literatures on causation and grounding (see Schaffer 2015, 2016: 152–3). And it occurs in metaethics.²¹ The thought seems to be: Unless there is a single essential feature of normativity, how can normativity be *one thing*? Since the essential feature

nothing about why it is attractive to explain these interconnections *by taking one X to be on first*; they don’t seem to countenance that interconnectedness is otherwise explicable.

²¹ Here’s Kearns and Star (2009: 215): “Philosophers have distinguished between species of reasons in a number of ways (moral/prudential/aesthetic, practical/theoretical etc.), but it is commonly thought that no unified and informative analysis of the genus is possible.” Why must reasons be a *genus*? Why must its varieties be *species* of reasons?

of normativity is presumably normative (i.e. a feature like reasons or values or fittingness), X-Firsters are home free. Or so it may seem.

It may also seem that Stark Alternative is hopeless on this front. After all, the view holds that normativity is fundamentally disjunctive. A common, recurring line of thought in metaethics has been that this *entails* disunity:

If what it is to be a reason were fundamentally disjunctive, then reasons would have about as much in common as pieces of jade, which, beyond being called “jade”, have no more distinctively in common than do moons of Jupiter and natural numbers smaller than 17. (Schroeder 2007: 69; see also 60)²²

Two points here. First, I'll play defense. Arguments like Schroeder's are meant to show that *any* fundamentally disjunctive analysis is disunified. But consider the rhetorical use of gruesome, gerrymandered disjunctions like jadeite-or-nephrite or, to use an example from Michael Smith (2017: 102), “numbers-or-dogs.” The problem with jadeite-or-nephrite—that is, $\text{NaAlSi}_2\text{O}_6$ -or- $\text{Ca}_2(\text{Mg,Fe})_5\text{Si}_8\text{O}_{22}(\text{OH})_2$ —and numbers-or-dogs is *what* gets disjoined, not the mere presence of “or.” (Indeed, X-Firsters can't say the disjunction is gruesome just because of the “or”; in a crucial sense that's often ignored, their views are disjunctive too.²³) Intuitively, an analysis of color in terms of red-or-blue-or- . . . , and of red in terms of crimson-or-scarlet-or- . . . , does not look at all like an analysis of anything in terms of jadeite-or-nephrite or numbers-or-dogs.

This idea is common ground among those who think that determinables are explained in terms of the disjunction of their determinates. As Rosen (2010: 128) notes, not “any old disjunction of properties suffices to define a determinable with the disjuncts as determinates.” What makes the disjunction of determinates different from any old disjunction is that they exhibit sufficient *objective yet inexact* similarity: “objective” because the similarity in question is not just located in something about us (e.g. we call distinct minerals “jade”), but “inexact” because the similarity is not explained in terms sharing a single more fundamental property.

This might sound opaque, but there are ways of cashing it out. Determinates are more specific than determinables. But that's not all that they are. *Red and square* is not a determinate of *red*, even though it is more specific

²² I point to some recurrences of this line of thought below. A kind referee noted another: Schroeder (2015: 381) on analyzing practical and epistemic normativity.

²³ Why? Consider Fittingness First. It can't hold that to be normative is to be explained in terms of fittingness: after all, fittingness is normative, and can't explain itself. So the view must be that for *x* to be normative is for *x* to be fittingness *or* for *x* explained in terms of fittingness. The same holds for Reasons First and Values First. Thanks to Daniel Fogal and Chris Howard for helpful discussion of this point. See Shapiro (n.d.) for an independent (and better) argument that X-First accounts must be disjunctive.

than *red*: “For an object to have a determinate property is for that object to have the determinable properties the determinate falls under *in a specific way*” (Funkhouser 2006: 548). One way of being red (e.g. scarlet) will always differ from another (e.g. crimson), but it will differ along certain dimensions: hue, brightness, saturation. Squareness has nothing to do with these dimensions, so being red and square isn’t a way of being red.²⁴ This talk of determination dimensions is central to how Funkhouser unifies determinables. The dimensions that can determine a determinable generate regions of “property space,” and that gives us an account of objective but inexact similarity (proximity in property space), as well as conditions under which a disjunction is a determinable (2006: 554–6; Fine (2011) takes a similar approach in terms of regions of “state space”).

Applied to normativity, the task would be to specify the relevant determination dimensions, which would help us pick out the relevant determinates. (We’d also need to specify the levels of determination.²⁵) The Virtues First view sketched above is one option for proponents of Stark Alternative. I’ve already implicitly suggested another (in terms of normative valences). There are more. But I want to stick to the big picture of how Stark Alternative accounts for the unity of normativity, which is via appealing to how the determinates that are disjoined exhibit objective yet inexact similarity, and thereby form a region of property space.

Even if you reject this appeal to “objective yet inexact similarity,” you should acknowledge that metaphysicians are confident that some view can be plugged into its place. As Wilson notes, “determinables clearly terminologically, metaphysically and formally unify their determinates,” and this is a consensus point in the literature even though “philosophers very commonly assume that determinables are reducible to disjunctions of determinates” (2014: 568). This suggests that the view that disjunctiveness *entails* disunity is, at least, highly metaphysically contentious. It’s not something that metaethicists should take for granted, or defend via rhetorical appeals to gerrymandered disjunctions like numbers-or-dogs.

So Stark Alternative can account for the unity of normativity and thereby neutralize this motivation for being an X-Firster. But it can also do more: it can offer a more satisfying account of the unity of normativity.

My case for this is similar to why some have proposed that other philosophically interesting categories are best understood in terms of

²⁴ That said, conjunctive properties like *being red and square* are still partly explained in terms of their conjuncts, and in that sense are still in a rough sense color properties. The same holds for conjunctive properties where one conjunct is normative and the other is non-normative. Thanks to Mark Schroeder for a very helpful discussion of this point.

²⁵ Thanks to a referee for noting this problem. I wish I knew how to solve it.

determinables. For example, some suggest that taking the grounding relation to be a determinable could capture how it is both “unitary and variegated” (Bliss and Trogon 2016: §1). Stark Alternative similarly promises to account for how normativity is unified while capturing the deep variegation in the varieties of the normativity.

To tease this out, return to how X-Firsters unify normativity. Say we're Reasons Firsters, and we say normativity is unified insofar as it is the “domain of reasons.” That seems straightforward. But it isn't. The view doesn't unify normativity unless we can unify *reasons*—or, more aptly, unless we can unify *the reasons relation*.²⁶ And here challenges arise.

Consider the arguments for the view that *some* reasons are internal (or desire-dependent) and for the view that *some* reasons are external (or desire-independent). Reasons Firsters claim that we cannot accept *both*: that'd make their account of normativity fundamentally disjunctive, and hence disunified. It is in this context that we get Schroeder's rhetoric about jadeite-or-nephrite. Similarly, Sobel argues that, with respect to reasons internalism, “the reasons provided by desires in matters of mere taste are the thin end of the wedge.” If reasons were *internal-or-external* we'd end up with a “fundamentally disunited” account (2016: 297).²⁷

There are other similar challenges. Smith's rhetoric about numbers-or-dogs crops up in his discussion of putative differences between practical and epistemic reasons. An account on which the two turn out to be fundamentally different would, he says, make normativity a “ragbag.”

The general point is that there may be deep variegation in the *varieties of reasons relations*, or more broadly in the varieties of normativity. Internal and external reasons and practical and epistemic reasons aren't the only examples. Consider the deontic, the evaluative, and the aretaic; the moral, the prudential, the aesthetic, the rational; and subjective (belief- or evidence-relative) and objective (fact-relative) standards. They strike me as being significantly and deeply distinct, in a way that the varieties of triangles (obtuse and acute; equilateral and isosceles) do not. X-Firsters struggle to explain such differences; that's why Schroeder and Sobel think that because they accept internal reasons, they must deny the existence of external

²⁶ As I noted in my (2019), unifying *causes* (e.g.: they're all events) does not unify *causation*. The *relatum* is not the relation. Metaethicists sometimes focus on unifying *reasons* (e.g.: they're all propositions) but this unifies a *relatum*, not the relation itself.

²⁷ Some adopt such disjunctive accounts. On Chang's hybrid view, “there is no univocal answer to the question, What metaphysically makes a fact have the normativity of a reason?” (2013: 177). But even some defenders of this view concede that it is “metaphysically unsatisfying” because it is not a “unified account” (Behrens 2015: 172). See also Cuneo (2007: 64) for a different disjunctive approach to key normative notions.

reasons. But Stark Alternative makes space for such deep variegation in the varieties of normativity because it can explain how normativity is unified while also being fundamentally disjunctive.

3.3.4. Objections to Stark Alternative

I've offered an alternative view that is schematic, but well-motivated: it better explains two central considerations that were thought to favor the X-First program. There are, of course, objections to Stark Alternative. I won't discuss them all; some are technical issues that don't strike at the core of the view under consideration.²⁸ I'll focus on the two deepest problems.

First, *entailment*. A common view is that determinates entail the relevant determinable.²⁹ If this is right, it poses problems for various ways of spelling out Stark Alternative. Take a view on which normativity is a determinable whose determinates are verdictive properties like rightness, and rightness is in turn a determinable whose determinates are right-making properties. The problem is that the presence of right-makers doesn't entail rightness; they can be defeated or disabled. (This mirrors a long-standing objection to Ought First views about reasons.³⁰) One way to avoid this problem might be to take all determinables and determinates to be either *prima facie* or *pro tanto*. But even then, problems could recur once we factor in how the absence of enablers and the presence of disablers can block entailments. It might be, then, that our model of the contributory properties must be holistic to preserve such entailments (*à la* Fogal 2016).

Second, *exclusion*. A common view is that determinates at the same level of determination exclude each other. A ball can't be fully red and fully blue at the same time. But it can be both morally and aesthetically good for Peter

²⁸ For instance, a determinate property must be attributed to the same object as its determinable (see e.g. Berker 2017: n. 35), but reasons, fittingness, and value are not attributed to the same objects. I think we can specify the relevant properties in such ways that they are attributable to the same objects, but I admit that this requires work.

²⁹ One could also have the view that complex determinables generate a reverse entailment: any object that instantiates the determinable (sound) must instantiate each determinate (pitch, volume, timbre) at least to some degree. (Thanks to Jan Dowell and Pekka Väyrynen here.) If so, this poses a similar problem. Perhaps some things can be normatively valenced by being to some degree right and good, without being to any degree virtuous or vicious. I think this problem might just arise from over-generalizing from the case of sound. Something can have a taste by being sweet and/or salty, without being to any degree sour or bitter. For examples, see most British culinary inventions.

³⁰ Cf. Toulmin (1950: ch. 11) and Schroeder (2007: 35–6), and for contemporary responses to the problem see Nebel (forthcoming); Alvarez (2010); Broome (2004).

Singer to gracefully scoop a drowning child out of a shallow pond: these properties don't exclude each other, even though they are putative determinates at the same level of determination. This strikes me as a harder challenge. But I'm not sure if it's ultimately a successful one. I suspect that the challenge arises only when we bring in totality facts: a ball can be red and blue, but it cannot be *fully* red and *fully* blue. (What does "fully" contribute beyond specifying that the ball is red, *and that's it?*) Once we add in totality facts in the normative case, the problem disappears. If it is aesthetically good for Singer to gracefully scoop up the drowning child *and that's it*, then it cannot also be morally good for him to do so.

I'm not sure whether these responses to the problems above are adequate. And they only scratch the surface of the challenges that we face in taking normativity to be a determinable in the way that I've proposed. So let me offer three further points about the project at this incipient stage.

First, these problems might beset some versions of Stark Alternative but not others, depending on how we specify the determination dimensions and so on. This is one reason why I've kept the account schematic. To get a sense of some of the variety of options here, consider a different example of a determinable: "Pitch, timbre, and loudness may be properties in their own right, but many think they also combine to form a unity—the property *sound*" (Funkhouser 2006: 553). One option for Stark Alternative would be to take deontic, evaluative, and aretaic valences to be properties in their own right which combine to form normativity. This is very different from the Virtues First account sketched earlier. Just as an objection to Ought First need not rule out X-First per se, an objection to (e.g.) Virtues First need not rule out Stark Alternative per se.

Second, these problems might beset all versions of Stark Alternative, but not all views in the ballpark. Stark Alternative says normativity is a determinable. Certain commitments about the determinable–determinate relation may generate potential problems for the view. But perhaps we can water down those commitments while keeping its motivations intact. Consider, for instance, Bennett's discussion of how to explain the unity of the grounding relation by appealing to "resemblance classes":

[R]esemblance classes are more straightforward and better understood than talk of determinables or genuses. Indeed, I'm not entirely sure what the difference is between a determinable property and the disjunctive property that is the result of disjoining the members of a reasonably natural resemblance class. (2017: 20)

What would be an example of a reasonably natural resemblance class whose members are unified when disjoined? You can probably guess:

Consider the colors. Whatever we take colors to be, and whatever exact kind of unity is in play in this case, we can all agree that the colors form a unified family. That's why we have the general label "the colors". But . . . [n]o one would say that the determinable property *being colored* is more fundamental than the more determinate color properties like *being red*, *being blue*, and *being green*. Nor would anyone say that really there is just one property—Color with a capital "C"?—which is very general, can be had in different ways by quite different things, and whose pattern of instantiation makes true all color sentences, like "this mug is red" and "my shirt is black". (2017: 23–4)

The colors form a resemblance class, even though there is no X—like *being colored*, or Color, or whatever—that is "on first." Given this, in virtue of what do the colors form a resemblance class? On her view, "a family of properties and relations are unified" as a resemblance class when they are "objectively similar to each other"; or, more aptly, they are more or less unified depending on whether they are more or less objectively similar (2017: 19). This relies on a notion of objective, inexact similarity, as before. But taking normativity to be a "natural resemblance class" may let us avoid commitments that are thought to be definitive of determinables, without putting just one property—or Normativity with a capital "N"—on first.

Third, even if all views in the ballpark of Stark Alternative face decisive objections, I still don't think we should all just agree that there's some X "on first" and merely disagree about what it is. The challenge from the previous section remains: there seem to be many philosophically interesting categories that don't obviously allow for, let alone insist upon, an X-First approach. Taking normativity to be a determinable or a resemblance class is just one way to depart from the X-First program.

3.4. CONCLUSION

The "Who's on first?" debate has pride of place in contemporary metaethics. It's high time we ask why. Why should we think that some normative property or relation or concept is "on first"? And if nothing is "on first," it's high time we provide alternatives to the X-First program.

I've tried to make progress on both fronts. But I want to conclude with a methodological point about how the debate should proceed. The best path is to see what we want from a general theory of normativity, then see what models best fit those motivations. I've argued that we should want a model on which normativity is like color in two ways: normative explanations go from the more specific to the more general, and normativity can be unified despite deep variegation between the varieties of normativity. I've argued

that these motivations point towards Stark Alternative, or at least something like it. My main complaint about the X-First program is that it is Procrustean. It does not start by investigating the nature of the phenomenon we want to explain and looking at what models provide the best fit. It starts by assuming that some X must be on first, then tries to chop and change normativity to fit the theory.³¹

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