In his under-celebrated book, *Ethics*, Nowell-Smith presses a problem for the realist version of the view. If they are right, he remarks

A new world is revealed for our inspection; it contains such and such objects, phenomena, and characteristics; it is mapped and described in elaborate detail. No doubt it is all very interesting. If I happen to have a thirst for knowledge, I shall read on to satisfy my curiosity, much as I should read about new discoveries in astronomy or geography. Learning about ‘values’ or ‘duties’ might well be as exciting as learning about spiral nebulae or waterspouts. But what if I am not interested? Why should I do anything about these newly-revealed objects? Some things, I have now learnt, are right and others wrong; but why should I do what is right and eschew what is wrong? (Nowell-Smith 1954, p. 41)

This passage ends with a traditional problem for all cognitivists: normative (moral) judgments have a *practical* profile that diverges from the profile of standard beliefs. Let us set this to one side.

Nowell-Smith’s opening observations can be used to raise a different problem: normative judgments do not have the right *epistemic* profile to be beliefs about non-natural properties. What things are like non-naturally is not relevant to our normative judgments in the way we would expect them to be if such judgments were beliefs about those sorts of properties. Non-natural properties would belong to a menagerie of curiosities if we could map and catalog them, but our deepest normative convictions do not hang on how they are arranged. Section 2 spells out the epistemic profile I have in mind. Sections 3 and 4 argue that normative judgments lack it. The conclusion is that normative judgments might be beliefs, and there might be non-natural properties, but normative judgments are not beliefs about non-natural properties.
One way to distinguish cognitive attitudes from non-cognitive attitudes is to say that judgment $J$ with content $P$ features a cognitive attitude only if $J$ enjoys a thetic (or mind-to-world) direction of fit, whereas $J$ is a non-cognitive attitude only if it enjoys a telic (or world-to-mind) direction of fit. This leaves questions about how to characterize directions of fit. Focusing on the thetic ones, we should not say a judgment $J$ with content $P$ is cognitive only if it would tend to go out of existence in case not-$P$. Beliefs need not be directly sensitive to worldly facts. If one judges that a dictator has weapons of mass destruction, for instance, that judgment does not fail to be a belief merely because the dictator lacks such weapons. More plausibly, if one acquired conclusive evidence that the dictator lacks weapons of mass destruction, we would expect any belief that the dictator has such weapons to go out of existence. Even more plausibly, if one acquired such evidence and accepted it as evidence, or took it to be evidence (I will use these phrases interchangeably), we would expect the corresponding belief to go out of existence.

This suggests the following characterization of at least one aspect to the thetic direction of fit: Judgment $J$ with content $P$ is cognitive only if it would tend to go out of existence in case not-$P$. According to strong dispositionalism, the above is a necessary truth (perhaps a conceptual truth). This view is widely, though not universally, accepted. I think the position is too strong, for individual beliefs can lack the characteristic disposition for a variety of local reasons and still count as beliefs.

So let me appeal to weak dispositionalism: if a type of judgment systematically fails to have the thetic direction of fit, this is very good evidence that the judgment is not belief. Here, we type judgments according to content. To take beliefs about being alive as an example, the thought is that individual beliefs might fail to be sensitive to accepted evidence (perhaps one might believe a son or daughter is still alive in the face of accepted evidence of death), but if somehow all of one’s judgments about being alive were systematically insensitive to accepted evidence putatively concerning what is living and what is not, this would be very good evidence that the judgments are not beliefs about being alive after all.

Counter-examples to weak dispositionalism are hard to find. Consider religious beliefs about entities outside of the scientific worldview. Such theistic beliefs are not generally held by people who accept evidence against the relevant entities. In fact, they might well accept good evidence for their beliefs, including testimony from trusted peers who are otherwise generally reliable sources of information, communities of like-minded people who are otherwise reliable, ways of interpreting certain experiences that make them apparently confirmatory of their religious views, a lack of conflict between religious views and other views about the scientific order, and so forth.

In any event, I will use weak dispositionalism to raise an explanatory burden: anyone who would maintain that there is a type of belief that systematically deviates from the normal epistemic profile for belief has some explaining to do. So putative counter-examples would themselves need to come with an explanation for why weak dispositionalism fails for that type of belief. Absent such a compelling explanation, the better view is that the relevant judgment type is not belief, or it is belief, but not about the suspect entities for which one has decisive accepted evidence.

Weak dispositionalism in place, let us consider the following case, which is a version of Harman’s classic (Harman 1977, p. 4). Young boys are tormenting a cat. They are causing him intense pain. I think that tormenting the cat is wrong, and I hope you agree. To believe that this is
Wrong, the attitude must be of a type that does not systematically lack the thetic direction of fit. If we plug in non-naturalism, the relevant evidence would concern the existence and instantiation of a non-natural property, namely, wrongness, which would be distinct from natural properties concerning pain, causation, disapproval, and so forth.

Weak dispositionalism would predict that normative judgments as a class are disposed to go out of existence in light of decisive accepted evidence that their contents are false (where this is consistent with some isolated normative judgments lacking this disposition for local reasons). Importantly, when paired with the view that the judgments purport to be about non-natural properties, it should be possible to manifest this disposition based solely on accepted evidence regarding the absence of the relevant non-natural properties, without any change in one’s non-cognitive attitudes (though we might expect non-cognitive attitudes to shift with shifts in moral judgment, the moral judgments would be directly sensitive to non-natural properties). Decisive accepted evidence about the absence of the relevant non-natural properties should trigger the disposition.

Below, I give two arguments against the predicted evidence-sensitivity of normative judgments: an argument from error-theoretic reactions to cases like the one above, and an argument from normative discovery. The end result is that normative judgments do not behave as cognitive non-naturalism predicts, so they are not beliefs about non-natural properties.

3. The Argument from Error Theoretic Reactions

J. L. Mackie (1977) exhibits dispositional conservation. He defends nihilism as part of the error theory of chapter 1 in Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, and then develops (“invents”) a moral theory in the rest of that book. Indeed, it looks as though chapter 1 had no effect on his substantive moral judgments. More recently, Charles Pigden has said: “I am not only addicted to moralizing but I sometimes even act on my principles” (Pigden 2007, p. 445). These reactions certainly suggest that substantive, first-order moral judgments are quite resilient.
in the face of what is taken to be decisive evidence of nihilism. For these error theorists, it is as though the error-theoretic beliefs remain isolated at a level of abstraction, often formulated in universally quantified terms such as “there are no (non-natural) moral properties,” but ineffectual when it comes to altering substantive moral judgments about cases. The point now is not that one should conserve moral judgments in the face of error theory (though Jonas Olson (2011) explicitly argues for this) but that one is disposed to and does in fact conserve moral judgments. Aside from any recommendation to conserve, these error theorists avow dispositional conservation. Having once been an error theorist of sorts, I can report in my own case that there was no discernable difference in my first-order normative judgments before and after accepting nihilism. The meta-normative position did not penetrate my everyday moral life.

So some error theorists pretty much acknowledge that their first-order views are not disposed to change in the face of error theory. This is good evidence of dispositional conservation.

Even if we do not take them at their word, there is other evidence that error theorists continue to moralize. In the cat case, for instance, it is hard to imagine that one hangs one’s moral conviction on the presence or absence of a non-natural property. The features to which one’s normative judgments are responsive are still there, after all: the cat is being tormented, it is experiencing pain, the boys enjoy this fact, and so forth. It is these natural features to which substantive moral judgments are sensitive, not the thought that metaphysically suspicious non-natural properties do not exist.

One might reply on behalf of the error theorist that there are different contexts of belief at play. In everyday life, when one fails to attend to the evidence for nihilism, one might believe that the boys’ actions are wrong. But in the philosophy seminar room, when attending to the evidence for nihilism, one genuinely lacks (or tends to lack) this belief. Or perhaps in all contexts, one lacks (or tends to lack) such beliefs, but in some one is more willing to talk as though one has them. But it is hard to believe that these shifts are going on. Assume that our protagonists are just now in the seminar room and have just now conclusively establish nihilism to their satisfaction when young boys burst through the door while tormenting a cat. Would the error theorist’s moral attitudes toward this action really be all that different than if they encountered the torment on the street hours later? Would they tend to alter because of the error theory? I think not.

If it is evidence of moral belief we are looking for, the expected outrage at the young boys, criticism lodged in their direction, punishment or other disapprobation, and similar attitudes and actions that we expect both in the seminar room and outside of it are far more probative of their moral judgments than a cool existential generalization that there are no (non-natural) moral properties. It is not just that their reactions betray non-moralized concern for suffering and non-moralized outrage at the action, perhaps expressed in moral language during moral make-believe. Rather, the reactions they maintain through the error-theoretic conversion are excellent grounds for attributing to them the thought that the boys’ actions are wrong despite their error-theoretic avowals. Again, it seems that the nihilistic beliefs fail to influence their first-order moral judgments.

The point generalizes to other cases. Moral beliefs do not change in the minds of those who become nihilists. Because this runs afoul of the dispositions one would expect if cognitive non-naturalism were true, we have very good evidence that normative judgments are not beliefs about non-natural properties after all. At least, this is so concerning the moral judgments of conservative error theorists. Can we generalize beyond these folks? Yes. In fact, it would be odd
if we could not generalize. To quarantine the result, we would have to say that the moral judgments in the minds of these would-be error theorists (prior to becoming error theorists) are different in kind from the moral judgments in the rest of the population. Without some reason to make an exception of the people who happen to become error theorists, what has happened in the minds of these few individuals is good evidence of what would happen to anyone who became convinced of nihilism, namely, dispositional conservation.

Similarly, we should not limit the claim to morally normative judgments. Normative but non-moral judgments would exhibit the same resilience in the face of blanket normative nihilism. It is hard to imagine, for example, that one would tend to stop thinking the probable truth of \( P \) is a good reason to believe that \( P \) even if one thinks in the abstract that there are no non-natural reason relations.

But what of those error theorists whose writings less clearly avow dispositional conservation? When we look at what revisionists and abolitionists do say, and what this reveals about their natural psychological responses, it turns out that we find further support for dispositional conservation.

3.2 The Shape of the Debate

Consider the general shape of the debate. As already indicated, some conservatives do not merely carry on with their substantive moral judgments, but recommend that other error theorists do so as well. In opposition, there are revisionary and abolitionist recommendations. Revisionists like Richard Joyce (Joyce 2001, pp. 177-203; see also Nolan et al. 2005) recommend a move toward moral fictionalism, whereby one would pretend to assert moral propositions because of their instrumental benefits. The mental state involved is meant to be moralized thought, even a kind of acceptance of moral propositions, that falls short of belief (Joyce 2001, pp. 196-197; cf. Joyce 2005). At times Joyce characterizes it as a non-cognitive attitude (2001, p. 200). Elsewhere he says that one has a fictional stance “so long as she remains disposed to deny it [a given substantive moral proposition] in her most rigorous court of inquiry” (2001, p. 205; cf. 2005, pp. 289-290). Abolitionists like Richard Garner (2007), on the other hand, generally dispute the instrumental benefits of retaining moral language and thought. They recommend that we jettison them altogether, if possible.

These error theoretic recommendations show that there is a debate about what to do with moral language and thought in light of evidence for nihilism. But this is an odd debate to have if moral judgments are beliefs about entities that have been rejected. Witness the lack of similar debates for error theories about witches, phlogiston, or the dodo bird. Once one takes oneself to have decisive evidence that these things do not exist, there is no further debate about what to do with the thought and language. The very nature of belief ensures what happens next: they tend to go out of existence. Why, we must ask, is this not the case with moral judgments, and more generally with normative judgments, when individuals accept the case for nihilism? Here is a straightforward explanation: normative judgments are not beliefs about the suspect entities after all.

To be sure, there is a case to consider for the utility of normative judgments, a utility not shared by witch, phlogiston, or dodo judgments. This does not alter the basic point. For one would expect these arguments from utility to proceed from a different starting point. Rather than debate about whether to continue moralizing because it is useful, adopt a modified discourse with similar utility, or abandon the discourse and lose its utility, one would expect the debate to be about whether to continue on without the discourse, attempt to re-introduce the discourse.
because of its utility, or introduce a modified discourse with similar utility. Put another way, if moral judgments tend to extinguish in the minds of error theorists, the recommendation to abolish moral thought and the recommendation to retain moral thought would not be the cognitively open recommendations for error theorists that they appear to be.

Consider next a theme common among error theorists, that it would be tremendously difficult to extinguish one’s moral judgments. Daniel Nolan, Greg Restall, and Caroline West have said: “Giving up moral talk would force large-scale changes to the way we talk, think, and feel that would be extremely difficult to make” (Nolan et al. 2005, pp. 307, 311).

The first thing to note is that there is disagreement about the degree of difficulty involved in giving up moral judgments (see, e.g., Garner 2007, pp. 504-505). But if it is difficult, the question is why it is difficult. What is the best explanation of the difficulty in the face of what one takes to be decisive evidence against the existence of non-natural properties? Again, one straightforward explanation is that one’s moral judgments are not beliefs about non-natural properties after all. Perhaps evolutionary pressures would have selected for resilient normative judgments. However, to the extent that evolution selected for judgments that do not tend to extinguish in light of what one takes to be decisive evidence against suspect non-natural entities, evolution selected for judgments that lack a thetic direction of fit with respect to those entities.

Perhaps there are alternative explanations. One explanation is that we are all irrational when it comes to moral judgments and more generally normative beliefs. But that sounds more like a restatement of the phenomenon of resilience and a label one must give it (systemic irrationality) if one remains a cognitive non-naturalist, rather than reason to believe that the judgments really are beliefs about non-natural properties. Similar considerations apply to other hypotheses. Pigden likens the resilience to an addiction. But again, this makes a great swath of our judgments—all those pertaining to normativity—exceptional. Why is this class of judgment exceptional? Without some further explanation backing up the addiction metaphor, the better explanation is that the judgments are not about non-natural properties after all. Reiterating the social function of the discourse does not help. Having the function of maintaining pro-social behavior and coordinating action is consistent with a number of meta-ethical views. Noting this function does not help the error theorists explain why her first-order judgments do not naturally tend to extinguish in the face of decisive accepted evidence against non-natural properties. At best, it helps make a case for introducing an alternative discourse with similar functions.

In sum, because normative judgments systematically fail to exhibit the thetic direction of fit for error theorists, we have good evidence that this judgment type—whether it be found in error theorists or not—is not belief about non-natural properties. This does not depend on a strong version of the thetic direction of fit thesis, but a weak one—that systematic failure to exhibit a thetic direction of fit for an entire class of judgment is good reason that they are not beliefs about the suspect domain after all. Further explanation for the lack of fit can certainly overturn the evidence, but that further explanation has yet to be given.

I do not think this leaves big puzzles for how to interpret what error theorists say. If they say there are no moral properties, we can take them to mean that there are no non-natural moral properties, for their existential denials are heavily informed by the theoretical view that moral properties would be non-natural. This is entirely consistent with maintaining the judgment that it is wrong to torment the cat, and other first-order normative judgments, unfazed. As already suggested, one’s attitudes and behaviors toward those who torment cats are much more probative
of one’s moral judgments than are one’s meta-ethical pronouncements. If error theorists explicitly say that it is not wrong to torment the cat, we can take them to mean that tormenting the cat does not instantiate the non-natural property of being wrong, which again is consistent with the thought that tormenting the cat is wrong so long as this second thought does not feature belief-like attitude about a non-natural property, as I have argued it does not.

The apparent tension in any of what the error theorist says dissipates once we realize that they are expressing some seemingly first-order views—there are no moral properties, it is not wrong to torment the cat—in light of the mistaken meta-belief that their moral judgments are beliefs about non-natural properties. That doesn’t necessarily serve to make their judgments about non-natural properties; many mistaken beliefs about the referents of terms fail to affect what those terms are about. In our case, the exhibited sensitivity of first-order judgments to natural features or conative attitude is more probative of the attitudes and contents involved than the controversial theories given by error theorists.

To be clear, error theorists might be right in the metaphysical claim that there are no non-natural moral or normative properties. Then again, they might be wrong—non-naturalist realists have some interesting replies. And both sides to that debate might be right to think that moral judgments are at least cognitive, standard belief-like mental states. Then again, they might be wrong—non-cognitivists have some interesting replies. The present argument takes aim not at these individual positions but at the combination of cognitivism and non-naturalism, a position error theorists, realist non-naturalists and some skeptics share. It is undermined by the dispositional of normative judgments in the face of error theory.

Before turning to a second argument for the same conclusion, let me pause to consider whether the first argument proves too much. For in philosophy there are many subjects with their fair share of skeptics: about the mental categories of lay psychology, about numbers, free will, colors, and so forth. Perhaps in many of these areas, one does not think skeptics are always disposed to abandon their first-order beliefs. Isn’t victory over skepticism too easy if all it takes is to raise this inconvenient observation?

Well, maybe one argument against some versions of skepticism is this easy. But more caution is in order, and a case-by-case approach is best. The best I can do here is hint at some areas that invite skepticism and indicate whether an argument similar to the one pressed above is available.

Regarding numbers, some mathematical skeptics think mathematical judgments commit them to non-existent Platonic entities. But then they do have some explaining to do if they retain their mathematical judgments unchanged (and have no disposition to alter them). For then they need to reject weak dispositionalism for mathematical beliefs. Maybe the skeptics there are mistaken in thinking that their mathematical judgments are about Platonic entities after all. So parity with this normative case is one option. Another option, however, is to consider explanations for the failure of weak dispositionalism in the mathematical case. There seems to be no good explanation in the normative case, but perhaps there is one here. Unfortunately, this is not the place to explore this possibility, but it suffices to note that parity of argument in the mathematical case is not a forgone conclusion.

Another option is to attribute to such a mathematical skeptic a mathematical discourse identical to the old one save its Platonic pretensions. The availability of such a discourse is debatable. And, of course, one could try this move for the normative nihilist and attribute to him
a slightly modified discourse. However, I have argued that there is good reason to attribute to the normative nihilist the old discourse based on avowals of conservation, sensitivity to natural features or the presence of non-cognitive attitudes (which are probative of whether he still thinks, e.g., tormenting the cat is wrong), the presumptions behind recommended revisions, and the general difficulty of revision. Not all of this evidence translates to the mathematical case. So the case for wholesale rejection of mathematical claims in the putatively error-ridden discourse is more of a live option there.

Let me take one other example. In the free will debates, one question is what free will is, and another is whether we have it. Some theorists think free will attributions would commit them to something that is not so (a god-like power to break causal laws, or metaphysically open alternative possibilities, or what have you). One natural thing to say there is that such theorists really do not believe we have free will, at least in that sense. One could look at these skeptics and nevertheless attribute to them belief in free will because they keep holding people morally responsible in various ways, and one thinks doing so only makes sense if people have free will (something the skeptic might dispute). That, however, is much less direct evidence of whether they believe in free will than some of the evidence adduced for thinking that error theorists maintain their first-order normative judgments. Above, I did not merely argue that error theorists have other judgments or practices that only make sense if there are first-order moral facts. Rather, I pointed to more direct evidence that they are disposed to retain their first-order judgments, namely, avowals of conservation, sensitivity to natural features, or the presence of non-cognitive attitudes, the presumptions behind recommended revisions, and the general difficulty of revision.

There is more to say about the analogies and disanalogies when it comes to dispositional conservatism across skeptical cases. But I hope I have said enough to show that the arguments given here do not clearly earn an easy victory, or at least not a victory that is too easy, in all skeptical cases.

Having said that, if we find someone with a class of beliefs that are not disposed to extinguish in the face of what the believer takes to be decisive evidence against their putative contents, this is good reason to think the class of beliefs are not about the suspect entities after all. At least, more needs to be said for siding with such a skeptic and rejecting weak dispositionalism. Absent this explanation, the more attractive alternative is crediting his actual dispositional sensitivities as more probative of what his judgments are and what they are about, attributing to the skeptic a mistaken (though understandable) theoretical belief about what his first-order judgments commit him to, and retention of weak dispositionalism.

Stepping back, I hope that the focus on moral error theory does not obscure a broader consideration. The big question is this: What is fundamentally relevant when making up our minds about normative matters? Is it the existence of a non-natural property or relation, so that if we were convinced of nihilism, we would naturally give up our substantive normative views? I think not. Learning about those sorts of properties (or their absence) would be as relevant to our first-order normative attitudes as learning about spiral nebulae or waterspouts. Let me expand on this thought with a second argument.

4. The Argument from Normative Discovery

So far I have considered under what conditions moral judgments tend to go out of existence and how well this fits cognitive non-naturalist predictions. Now I consider the
complementary questions: Does cognitive non-naturalism uniquely predict any disposition to adopt moral judgments in light of what one takes to be decisive evidence for the presence of some non-natural property, and do moral judgments exhibit that disposition?

According to cognitive non-naturalism, whether any given action is right or wrong is something to be discovered (perhaps a priori, but not simply by examining concepts), and there is the possibility of error for any of our normative judgments. After all, these judgments are about properties independent of us, and we endeavor to figure out how they are arranged. Applied to the cat case, then, there is a possible non-natural property that is possibly exhibited by the boys’ actions, and discovery that this property is so exhibited would dispose one to judge that tormenting the cat is right. As before, this disposition can manifest while holding fixed one’s beliefs about the natural properties of the case and one’s non-cognitive attitudes.

Consider then what non-natural property one could discover that would change one’s mind about the cat case—what could you discover that would convince you that an action that causes intense pain for fun, and toward which you have strong negative conative attitudes, is actually right? It is hard to think that some non-natural property could have this effect.

Sometimes philosophers speak of ought-to-be-doeness, or favoring relations, or fitting relations, and non-naturalists propose that such concepts and terms refer to non-natural entities. But it is very hard to see how direct cognition of any such non-natural property could exert a greater influence on one’s judgments of right and wrong than the pain those boys are causing the cat. Is it because they are causing it pain that the action normatively matters in the way it does, or because there is some non-natural property or relation at play? Surely the former.

More to the point, it seems that direct discovery of any non-natural property or relation (were this possible) would be as idle to the action’s judged normative status as a man’s height is to the judgment that he won the lottery. None of these discoveries about the non-natural domain can be expected to have much impact on what we think of our values, duties, and virtues.

Again, the point generalizes to other cases. What non-natural property or relation could dispose you to think that walking down the street is wrong, or that believing that things are normally as they appear to be is unjustified, or that slavery is just? The general conclusion is that there are no non-natural properties evidence of which has the power to change our normative beliefs, holding fixed our beliefs about natural properties and holding fixed our conative attitudes. Because cognitive non-naturalism predicts there are non-natural properties possibly exhibited in these cases that could change our minds in this way, that view is false.

To be clear, I am not saying that cognitive non-naturalists actually deny that moral judgments are caused by, or evidentially sensitive to, natural features. And I grant for the sake of argument that one way to be sensitive to supervening facts is through sensitivity to subvening ones. Also, I am not attributing to the cognitive non-naturalist the claim that we can in fact directly cognize such non-natural properties (non-causally?). The point is that the cognitive non-naturalist is committed to this false conditional: if one could directly cognize non-natural properties, then one would be disposed to change one’s mind to align with whatever is revealed by that direct cognition (regardless of the natural facts, one’s attitudes, etc.). Metaphorically, imagine that God hands you magic spectacles that reveal all non-natural properties and how they are distributed. Speaking for myself, whatever is thereby revealed to be exhibited by the boys’ actions (if anything), I am not changing my mind about how wrong their actions are. I hope you agree.

In short, accepted evidence of the presence of non-natural properties (which isn’t evidence of yet something further, like evidence of new information about natural properties)
would not trigger any disposition to form moral judgments. It is, of course, possible to change
one’s mind about normative matters. But cognitive non-naturalism says there is a way to do this
that does not proceed from other normative propositions one finds plausible, changed beliefs
about the natural features of cases, or changed conative attitudes. One can appropriately change
one’s mind by directly cognizing some non-natural property, and this is an open possibility for
even our most central convictions, such as those concerning slavery and torture. This is the claim
I call into question.

There is a potential reply. If one is correct in thinking it wrong to torment the cat, it is not
metaphysically possible (or normatively possible if that is something else) for tormenting the cat
to be right, thanks to supervenience. And if it is not metaphysically possible for those actions to
be right, then cognitive non-naturalists reject the thesis that there is a metaphysically possible
non-natural property of rightness, incompatible with wrongness, that could be exhibited by the
cat case. Similarly, if walking down the street is permissible, then it is metaphysically impossible
for it to be wrong. And so forth.

This does not undermine the argument, for the argument does not posit a metaphysically
possible non-natural property of rightness, but an epistemically possible one. Which property is
necessarily (sub specie metaphysicae) exhibited by such an action is something to be discovered
(again, perhaps a priori). In the relevant sense, that tormenting the cat is right (or not) is
discernible—we would be surprised by the discovery, but it is an open possibility in the relevant
epistemic sense. At least, cognitive non-naturalists are committed to this. For they think the
discovery is of metaphysical entities independent of us, how they are arranged, and their
necessary relations to non-normative entities. With any such subject matter, there are no
guarantees prior to discovery that it is arranged one way rather than another, and our current
thinking is admitted to be fallible.

And yet one cannot imagine a discoverable non-natural property in this case that would
make us tend to change our mind. In this case and in others, normative judgments are not beliefs
about non-natural properties, for they lack a direction of fit that view predicts.

5. Conclusion

Early on I cited a passage by Nowell-Smith, who remarked how interesting it
might be to learn of non-natural properties—one might wish to map them and describe them in
elaborate detail. This nicely evokes the sentiment that such properties belong to a menagerie of
curiosities. Curious as we might be, it is hard to see why we would surrender our deepest
normative convictions to the discovery of how the non-natural happens to be arranged. I have
argued that the error theorist does not surrender his convictions in this way. And I have puzzled
about how the direct discovery of a non-natural property could conclude one’s mind about the
normative status of the cat case, slavery or walking down the street. All told, we have good
reason to think that normative judgments simply do not feature the kind of evidence sensitivity
one would expect if cognitive non-naturalism were true. Normative judgments might be beliefs,
and there might be non-natural properties, but normative judgments are not beliefs about non-
natural properties. Duties do not belong to the menagerie.

References


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My target does not include hybrid views, expressivist views, or constructivist views. Less clear is whether it applies to so-called non-metaphysicalist cognitivist views that are otherwise indistinguishable from cognitive non-naturalism (Parfit 2011, Vol. 2, sec. 113). I am inclined to think so, but I won’t develop the thought here.

^ Add location.
^ Add location of publisher (Oxford, Eng. or New York).
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If we like, we can split the practical profile in two, where one aspect concerns the relation between judgments (or their contents) and reasons for action, and the other concerns judgments and motivation to act.

I have gestured at this sort of argument in a couple of places (see Bedke, forthcoming, 2013), but develop it more here.


Some theories of belief do not explicitly incorporate this dispositional view. For example, one view says that beliefs are such that we ought to give them up when they are false, or when we have sufficient evidence of their falsity (Zangwill 1998). It is not clear to me that strong dispositionalism is inconsistent with these other views, but in any event, an adequate theory of belief should be consistent with weak dispositionalism. Relevant here is Suikkanen (2013), who considers which theories of belief are consistent with various versions of error theory.

Bart Streumer (2013) argues that error theory cannot be believed, where error theory is the combined view that (1) normative judgments are about normative properties, and (2) there are no normative properties. Streumer argues that believing these things simultaneously would entail that one has a belief (error theory) that one thinks one has no reason to believe, which he considers impossible. Whether or not he is right, it is not clear to me whether the position affects my argument. I take it that in at least some contexts of thought an error theorist thinks there is decisive evidence that it is not the case that the boys’ actions are wrong (for nothing is wrong). And I take it that Streumer can agree with this, for these thoughts need not involve a general belief in error theory.

Simon Blackburn and Crispin Wright both think moral error theorists carry on with moral judgments while professing their error theories. Blackburn complains there is “something fishy” about this (Blackburn 1993, pp. 149-152), while Wright complains of “bad faith” (Wright 1992, pp. 149, 152). The present point does not take aim at error theorists as such. They might be right that there are no non-natural moral or normative properties. The point is that their own cognitive dispositions in light of this conviction suggest that their substantive moral judgments (and others’) are not beliefs about such properties.

It is not clear what a non-cognitive attitude toward moral propositions would amount to. What would it be to have a con-attitude toward the proposition tormenting the cat is wrong? More intelligible is the traditional non-cognitivist position, which typically espouses non-belief-type attitudes toward non-moral contents, for example, having a con-attitude toward torment the cat, rather than a con-attitude toward tormenting the cat is wrong.

It is not clear how this complicated disposition would save substantive moral judgments made in less critical contexts from beliefhood. It looks as though the disposition manifested in critical contexts would result from the very abstract commitment that there are no non-natural moral properties—a commitment that is only triggered when we ask abstract questions, like: “Are there moral properties?”

Another example is skepticism about the folk concept of belief. Some are skeptical because they think belief would have to be a type of brain state, and they see no brain state corresponding to attributions of belief. Here, the obvious thing to say is that they have mistaken views about what it takes to be a belief. We can (and I think we do) keep attributing to these self-described skeptics thoughts about beliefs. For their thoughts about beliefs are sensitive to the real truth-
conditions of such thoughts, not the mistaken theoretical view that the truth conditions for belief
thoughts require corresponding brain state types.

11 At least, the cognitive non-naturalist is either committed to this or must reject weak
dispositionalism and explain the resulting normative exceptionalism.