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Evaluative properties and their non-causal powers

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This paper introduces and defends an account of value and normative reasons according to which evaluative properties confer non-causal powers on their bearers and these powers explain the reason-providing feature of such properties. Moreover, these powers are included in the power profiles of the natural properties that realize evaluative properties. To illustrate its merits, I situate this account in the context of the buck-passing problem, which arises from an apparent tension between the ideas that (i) evaluative properties provide normative reasons for action and (ii) natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for our actions. Since normative reasons of evaluative properties are seen as powers that are included in the power profiles of natural properties, the proposed account gains further plausibility by explaining away this apparent tension between (i) and (ii).

Keywords: normative reasons; buck-passing; evaluative properties; non-causal powers.

I. Introduction

When something is good, there is something about it such that there is a reason to value that thing. Anyone who wishes to reify *evaluative properties* like *being good* must acknowledge this normative feature of such properties, and any plausible form of realism about value should be able to say something interesting about how such properties are related to normative reasons. This paper makes a contribution to this project by highlighting that this feature of evaluative properties bears an interesting similarity to *powers* that we attribute to properties. More specifically, just as a causally efficacious property confers

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on its bearers certain causal powers to bring about certain causal changes, an evaluative property confers on its bearers certain powers to bring about certain normative facts that correspond to reasons. I argue that we should construe these as *non-causal* powers because manifestations of these powers do not *consist in* causal changes.

In what follows, I defend this proposal by illustrating its merits when it comes to addressing key philosophical problems in value theory. I focus on one such problem: *the buck-passing problem*.[1] This problem arises from an apparent tension between (i) recognizing the reason-giving role of evaluative properties and (ii) noting that natural properties seem to fully explain the reasons we have for responding to the world as we do. There is a tension—at least an apparent one—because it is not immediately clear how and whether evaluative properties can in fact provide us with any reasons if natural properties already provide us with those very same reasons. Although there are existing responses and plausible solutions to this problem in value theory,[2] my account provides a specific explanation of what makes the more promising solutions plausible.

Here is how I shall proceed. In Section II, I introduce the buck-passing problem and review extant responses to it. In Sections III and IV, I introduce my non-causal powers account in detail and in Section V, I show how this account explains away the tension that leads to the buck-passing problem. In Section VI, I offer concluding remarks.

II. The buck-passing problem

Consider Café Adria. Adria is a pleasant café; it is a good café; and I judge that I ought to go there. What is it that provides me with a reason to go to Adria? Is it its *being pleasant*—which is a matter of it having some natural property[3]—or is it its *being good*?

You might find it puzzling that I formulated this question in terms of a disjunction. After all, in many cases, there are multiple reasons that favour an action. I may judge that I ought to cycle to the train station because I enjoy the activity of riding a bike *and* cycling is the quickest way to get there. In this case, we don't have to choose one property as *the* reason-providing property. In fact, these reasons seem to *complement* one another by making

[1]Elsewhere, I use this account to formulate a distinctive version of non-naturalism in ethics (Baysan 2025).

[2]See, especially, Crisp (2005) and Johnson King (2019).

[3]Here and throughout, I take '*being pleasant*' to refer to some *cluster* of *prima facie* non-evaluative properties that underlie the goodness of our café. In this example, properties in this cluster are all natural properties—they play causal roles, they are empirically detectable—so I see no harm in taking *being pleasant* to be an example of a natural property too. Further discussion of whether this is a plausible account of naturalness is orthogonal to the main question of this paper, so I set it aside. I address related questions in Baysan (2024).

distinct, 'non-overlapping', contributions to favouring one action.[4] But due to the complementary nature of these reasons, the case of cycling is structurally different from the case of Café Adria as I have presented it. We can list all natural properties that provide me with reasons to cycle to the train station, including the fact that it gives me enjoyment, it is the quickest way for me to get there (and so on), with the hope to obtain a *complete* list of reasons for me to cycle to the train station, and we can stipulate that this generalizes to other actions and attitudes. This is what Scanlon (1998) seems to think when he suggests that

> … natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for reacting in these ways to things that are good or valuable. It is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value, and even less clear how these properties could provide reasons (2005: 97).

The problem that I shall focus on arises from these remarks. There is an apparent tension between the ideas that (i) evaluative properties provide normative reasons for reacting to the world (henceforth, simply *action*[5]) and that (ii) natural properties provide *complete* explanations of such reasons. As it happens, Scanlon doesn't see any problem here, as he thinks that evaluative properties do *not* provide such reasons:

> [B]eing valuable is *not* a property that provides us with reasons. Rather, to call something valuable is to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it (ibid.: 96).

The idea expressed in this latter quote is known as *the buck-passing account of value*, as the metaphor is that 'the reason-providing buck' is passed from evaluative properties to other properties. So, Scanlon and other buck-passers can and do reject (i).[6] However, since it is intuitively plausible that something's being good is a reason to promote, favour, or have some positive attitude towards it (e.g., it is intuitively plausible that Adria's being good provides me with such a reason), I will assume that there is a problem awaiting a solution. Given the role Scanlon's remarks play in setting out the problem, it is fitting to call this 'the buck-passing problem'.

[4]See Maguire and Snedegar (2021) for a discussion of overlapping and non-overlapping reasons.

[5]I will often use 'action' in an inclusive sense, referring to *attitudes* too, such as favouring, as well as actions like visiting a café.

[6]See also Parfit (2011: 38–9) and Cosker-Rowland (2019) for other notable defences of the buck-passing account. For Parfit, there is a slightly different explanation of why there isn't a problem, as he makes a 'small revision' (2011: 38) on Scanlon's view, adding that evaluative properties could provide reasons, but such reasons must be merely *derivative*, 'since their normative force would derive entirely from [the reasons that natural properties provide]' (ibid.). See Maguire & Snedegar (2021) for a discussion of derivative reasons (in comparison with what they call 'load-bearing' reasons) and Schroeder (2009) on whether buck-passers' are indeed committed to rejecting (i).

More precisely, we can put forward the buck-passing problem in terms of the following mutually inconsistent theses:

(B1) Evaluative properties provide reasons for action.
(B2) Natural properties provide a complete explanation of reasons for action.
(B3) Evaluative properties are distinct from natural properties.
(B4) If there is a complete explanation of reasons for an action with reference to some set of properties S_N, no explanation of reasons for that action by reference to some evaluative property V is available (unless V is one of the properties in S_N).

Given their mutual inconsistency, at least one of these claims must be false—hence the tension. Let's consider each in turn.

Starting with (B1), it should be obvious that this is the thesis that the proponents of the buck-passing account reject, given that they hold that to be valuable is to have some *other* properties that provide reasons. In fact, we can see the buck-passing problem as constituting an argument for the buck-passing account.[7] However, I find it difficult to accept this as a satisfactory response to the buck-passing problem. First, from a purely pretheoretical point of view, it is intuitively plausible that Adria's being good provides me with reason to have some pro-attitude about it. Second, from a theoretical point of view, if *being good* doesn't provide normative reasons so that, for example, we judge that we ought to promote good things, it is not obvious why we must posit it as a real property. It is tempting to agree with Roger Crisp that 'if goodness is just the higher-order property of having certain lower-order reason-giving properties, then it is unclear why we should be especially interested in retaining the concept of goodness at all' (2008: 466). To support this second point, consider the fact that those who deny the existence of *being good simpliciter* support their view by showing that *being good simpliciter*, if existed, could not provide any reasons for action.[8] So, in general, the idea that some evaluative property is not in a position to provide normative reason supports some sort of scepticism about that evaluative property. Third, as Zoë Johnson King (2019) points out, there is something problematic with the buck-passer's strategy in rejecting (B1), if this strategy rests on the remaining theses set out above.[9] As she points out, the buck-passer's thinking seems to be as follows: given (B2), any reasons that are allegedly provided by evaluative properties are *redundant*, as

[7] In fact, for any entity X (where X may be a property, a fact, or a principle) that is not identical with a natural property, the conjunction of (B2) and (B4) can be used as an argument for the conclusion that X doesn't provide reasons.

[8] See Kraut (2011) for an example. While Kraut doesn't defend the buck-passing account, he argues that if *being good simpliciter* exists, it 'passes the buck' to other evaluative properties (such as *being good as a kind* or *being good-for*), which he takes to be a reason to reject it as a real property.

[9] Johnson King (2019) focuses on a buck-passing account for deontic properties like *being right*. However, her arguments straightforwardly apply to evaluative properties too.

they are already provided by the more fundamental 'good-making' properties (e.g. *being pleasant*). She maintains that this 'redundancy' reasoning jeopardizes the reason-providing feature of good-making properties too, as when something has a particular good-making property, there is often a more fundamental metaphysical explanation of why this is the case, and such explanations should likewise make the reason-providing feature of good-making properties redundant. For these reasons, (B1) seems well-motivated.

Moving on to (B2), this is a claim whose rejection is often associated with G. E. Moore (1903).[10] Motivated by Moore's 'open question' argument, we can question the reason-giving nature of natural properties altogether. For any natural property N, it is possible to doubt that we ought to respond to N positively (or negatively, for that matter). This second response is also not very palatable as it is counterintuitive to think that Adria's being pleasant doesn't give me *any* reason to go there or have some pro-attitude towards it. So, if we can find a solution to the buck-passing problem that doesn't rule out the reason-providing feature of natural properties, we ought to explore that option.

Next, consider (B3). This can be rejected if we hold that evaluative properties are identified with those natural properties that provide us with the relevant reasons. If, for example, *being good* is the same property as *being pleasant*, the buck-passing problem would have a very straightforward solution: there would be no competition between *being good* and *being pleasant*. For two reasons, I shall not pursue this option. First, as Scanlon makes it clear, such an identity claim is something we should rule out: '[M]any different things can be said to be good …, and the grounds for these judgments vary widely.' There does not seem to be a single, reason-providing property that is common to all these cases (1998: 97–8). While Scanlon offers this as an additional support for the buck-passing account (ibid.: 97), these remarks are better interpreted as a direct argument against identifying *being good* with any individual good-making property. Scanlon's observation supports the claim that there is a plurality of natural properties each of which can be seen as a *distinct* ground for *being good*, therefore, *being good* cannot be identified with any of them.[11] Second, 'naturalness' of the relevant properties is not essential for setting out the problem; the buck-passing problem seems to arise even if the properties that *being good* appears to pass the buck to are not natural properties, but instead 'supernatural' properties, such as *being loved by the gods*.[12] What matters is that evaluative properties don't seem to be identical with any particular reason-providing properties that underlie them.

[10] In discussions related to the buck-passing account of value, this is how Scanlon (1998), Crisp (2006), Stratton-Lake & Hooker (2006) interpret Moore.

[11] See Stratton-Lake & Hooker (2006: 157) for related discussion.

[12] See also note 3 above.

This leaves us with (B4). Recall that this is the claim that if we have a complete explanation of reasons for a particular action where the explanation is provided exhaustively in terms of some set of properties (and evaluative properties are not among these of properties), then no explanation of reasons for that action by evaluative properties is available. Since Scanlon says that 'it is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value' immediately after suggesting that natural properties provide 'a complete explanation of the reasons' (1998: 97) for action, he appears committed to (B4).

In the literature on the buck-passing account, among those who seem to explicitly reject (B4) include Crisp (2005) and Johnson King (2019). Reflecting on a debate concerning Scanlon's and Moore's views about value, Crisp argues as follows:

> According to [Scanlon], [a holiday resort's] being good provides no reason to pay a visit; that reason is provided by its being pleasant. According to the opposing Moorean position, the resort's being pleasant provides no reason to visit; that reason is provided by its being good. But … both of these positions are mistaken, as indeed is any position that allows the question to be raised of which property is the reason-giver (2005: 84).

In Crisp's diagnosis, that *being pleasant* is a good-making property is essential to understanding why these positions are mistaken: *being good* simply does not compete with any good-making property when it comes to providing reasons.[13] Similarly, Johnson King (2019) points out that *being good* and good-making properties[14] stand in a 'metaphysical hierarchy' where something instantiates *goodness* in virtue of instantiating some good-making property; given this hierarchy, *being good* and any underlying good-making property or properties can 'share the normative weight' without competing with each other. Here, 'sharing the weight' needn't be understood in terms of 'dividing' the weight between all reason-providing properties (such that some of the weight is possessed by one property, and the remainder is possessed by another property). Rather, *each* property may possess *all* the weight, especially when one property depends on the other for its instantiation (ibid.:174–5). As Johnson King correctly points out, 'just as facts in a metaphysical hierarchy do not compete for causal relevance, nor do they compete for normative relevance' (ibid.: 177).

I think Crisp and Johnson King are right that when there is a metaphysical dependence relation between two putatively competing properties, there need not be a real competition between these properties for providing reasons. So, my view is that the buck-passing problem's solution relies on a successful

[13]Elsewhere, Crisp suggests that this makes *being pleasant* itself an evaluative property (2006: 66–67). I don't think this further step is necessary for this solution to work.

[14]As noted above (see footnote 9), her discussion focuses on *being right*, so her claim is primarily about *being right* and 'right-making' properties.

rebuttal of (B4) along these lines.[15] In what follows, I will show that by understanding normative reasons as powers of evaluative *and* natural properties, we can offer an interesting metaphysical explanation of how this rebuttal works.

III. A powers-based account of reasons

While Crisp (2005) and Johnson King (2019) give a general compatibilist picture as to why we should think that properties that stand in some kind of metaphysical hierarchy can all share the status of providing reasons, I will present a specific account that offers an explanation of this sort of compatibilism by showing how this phenomenon is continuous with a more general phenomenon concerning properties and their roles in a given ontology. The core claim of my account is that evaluative properties confer on their bearers certain powers to bring about certain normative facts about reasons in a way that is similar to how causally efficacious properties confer on their bearers certain causal powers to bring about certain causal changes. In this section and Section IV, I will provide a sketch of how (B1) and (B2) can be expressed using the resources of this account. I will turn to (B3) and (B4) in Section V.

What is a power? In contemporary metaphysics—especially in some 'neo-Aristotelian' and 'anti-Humean' circles—the term 'power' has acquired the status of a very thick concept. Typically, a power is taken to be an *essentially dispositional* entity whose nature is exhausted by its disposition to be manifested in some specific way, given certain conditions—just as *being fragile* is nothing more than being disposed to break under certain conditions.[16] While powers theorists disagree on whether all properties are powers in this sense or not, typically, those who adopt a powers ontology propose to explain various fundamental metaphysical concepts in terms of powers, such as causation, modality, laws of nature, and properties. For example, a powers-based theory of causation explains causation in terms of manifestation of powers (see Mumford and Anjum 2011), a powers-based theory of modality holds that we can account for possibilities in terms of powers (see Jacobs 2010; Vetter 2015), a powers-based theory of laws says that the governing role that laws are stipulated to play is played by powers (see Mumford 2004; Bird 2007), and a powers-based theory

[15] It is worth noting that (B4) also seems to clash with the possibility of 'grounding overdetermination', that is, cases in which some fact is fully grounded in fact A and is also fully grounded in fact B (where A≠B). If (B4) is translatable into a claim about metaphysical grounding, this is correct. I accept the possibility—in fact the ubiquity—of grounding overdetermination (see Baysan 2022), so it shouldn't come as a surprise that I find (B4) problematic.

[16] Some anti-Humeans may resist this characterization, as some think that these properties are essentially qualitative as well as being dispositional; they are 'powerful qualities'. See Taylor (2018) for an insightful assessment of this in-house dispute for powers theorists.

of properties takes properties to be powers or clusters thereof (see Shoemaker 1980).

These are all interesting proposals and valuable projects. That said, when I talk in terms of powers, I have in mind a much thinner concept. My view is that we don't have to settle these fundamental metaphysical questions about causation (or modality, etc.) to be able to say informative things about properties and their powers to shed light on less fundamental, but equally interesting metaphysical questions. This makes my proposal metaphysically more neutral than it may appear at first glance, as by simply adopting this proposal, one wouldn't be committed to a powers theory of causation (or modality, etc.), and wouldn't have to settle in-house debates in the powers theory.[17] Although Sydney Shoemaker's work is often associated with the thicker concept of a power, I find his initial introduction of powers illustrative for my purposes:

> For something to have a power … is for it to be such that its presence in circumstances of a particular sort will have certain effects. One can think of such a power as a function from circumstances to effects. Thus, if something is poisonous, its presence in someone's body will produce death or illness; in virtue of this, being poisonous is a power (1980: 211).

More importantly for our purposes here, we might ask: What does it mean to say that a *property* has some power? Given that properties are abstract entities, it is misleading to think of evaluative properties as 'having' powers in a literal sense, such as when a particular key has the power to unlock a particular door. When I say that some property has some power, what I have in mind is the idea that there is a tight, non-accidental, connection between instantiating that property and having that power. Once again, this is continuous with other metaphysically neutral uses of the locution in contemporary metaphysics. As Jessica Wilson clarifies:

> Talk of [causal] powers is simply shorthand for talk of what causal contributions possession of a given a property makes … to an entity's bringing about an effect, when in circumstances. That properties are associated with … [powers] reflects the uncontroversial fact that what entities do … depends on … what properties they have (2021: 32).

[17] For example, a critic of the powers theory may point out that a powers-based theory of causation cannot explain 'absence causation', that is, cases where the absence of something causes an effect (e.g. when a lifeguard's failure to rescue a swimmer causes the swimmer's death), as absences are not the kinds of things that can have powers. In this particular case, powers-theorists have said plenty of things about how their theory can deal with these cases. While I find Mumford & Anjum's (2011: 143–148; see also Baysan 2025: 1044–5) solution to the problem of absence causation promising, since I am not a powers-theorist of causation, details of this problem should not distract us here. There is an interesting analogue of absence-causation to normative reasons (e.g. cases where the absence of a property may be said to be a reason for action), and I discuss this in detail below.

Consider the property of *being red*. Although we might say that this property 'has' the causal power to generate reddish visual experiences under normal viewing conditions, the idea behind such locutions is that there is some non-accidental fact that concrete objects that instantiate *being red* have the power to generate reddish visual experiences.[18] Metaphysicians who talk about properties and powers often use the term 'confer' to refer to the relationship between properties, their bearers, and the associated powers, and in what follows, I shall adopt this terminology. Accordingly, we can say that *being red* confers on its bearers the causal power to generate reddish visual experiences under normal viewing conditions.

Having adopted this way of talking about this phenomenon, we can say that evaluative properties confer on their bearers certain powers too, where these powers include powers to normatively explain certain actions, for example, by justifying or requiring them. That said, I don't mean to construe such powers as causal powers. Instead, I see them as *non-causal* powers. Whereas the manifestation of a causal power *consists in* a causal change (e.g. the causal power to push a billiard ball is manifested in the causal relation whereby a billiard ball is pushed), the manifestation of a non-causal power does not consist in such a causal change.

Jonathan Lowe offers a free agent's *will* as an example of a non-causal power in a related sense, as he takes this to be a power whose manifestation does not consist in a causal change (2013: 157–161). According to Lowe's example, when I will to raise my arm, I am manifesting a power: my power to will. But there are cases in which 'I may will to raise my arm and yet my arm may still fail to rise' (ibid.: 161). In such cases, while a power is manifested (simply by my willing), no causal change takes place—or so suggests Lowe. If my will's manifestation consisted in a causal change, this wouldn't have been possible. So, the will is a power whose manifestation does not consist in a causal change: it is a non-causal power.

I am not entirely sure if I want to take an agent's will (in Lowe's sense) to be a non-causal power, and in any case, I don't want to make my account vulnerable to objections that one might want to raise to Lowe's account of agency and will. That said, Lowe's characterization of the phenomenon, that is, a power being manifested without some causal change obtaining, is helpful for my purposes. The powers that correspond to normative reasons are powers to normatively explain certain actions, for example, by justifying or requiring them, so when they are manifested, their manifestations consist in such things

[18]I am leaving the phrase 'some non-accidental fact' intentionally vague, as I don't want to make any stronger commitments about the metaphysics of properties and powers than I need to for the purposes of the present paper. This non-accidental fact may be understood as *metaphysical* necessity, *nomological* necessity, or some other form of non-accidentality, perhaps something to do with the essences of the properties in question. See Baysan (2018) for a discussion of various proposals for understanding the non-accidentality of this relationship.

like the justification or requirement of some action. A central commitment of my account is that these manifestations are non-causal goings-on. As I have argued elsewhere, justifying/requiring some action or attitude is *making it the case* that it is justified/required where the 'making it the case' locution is intended to pick out some non-causal determination relation, such as *grounding* or *truthmaking* (Baysan 2025: 1041). Thus, the power to justify φ-ing is a power whose manifestation does not consist in a causal change: it is a non-causal power.

Importantly, this account is compatible with both naturalism and non-naturalism about value. Non-causal aspects of evaluative properties do not deprive these properties of their roles in causation, as nothing I have said so far rules out the existence of causal powers conferred on by evaluative properties. This means that everything I have said so far is compatible with the claim that evaluative properties have causal powers (as well as non-causal powers), and it is a coherent view—though not my view—that these causal powers determine the identity conditions of evaluative properties. This makes this account compatible with naturalism insofar as naturalism is understood along these causal lines (see Sturgeon 2003: 538; see also Baysan 2024).[19]

In accordance with what has been said so far, we can think of *being good* as a property that confers on its bearers the non-causal power to normatively explain an agent's actions. In the remainder of this paper, I will often use *defeasible justification* as a paradigm example of normative explanation. We can thus see *being good* as conferring on its bearers the power to defeasibly justify certain types of action. Moreover, given their normative nature, I propose that we should understand the justificatory non-causal powers that evaluative properties confer on their bearers as *normative* powers, henceforth to be referred to as *n-powers*.[20] Accordingly, n-powers correspond to normative reasons in the following way:

[19]Plausibly, what marks the difference between naturalism and non-naturalism is not their verdicts on whether evaluative properties have non-causal powers or not. Rather, the crucial question is whether *the non-causal powers that determine the identity conditions of evaluative properties are derivable from the essences of natural properties*. My view is that they are not (see Baysan 2025), and that is why naturalism is false. However, nothing in the present paper commits me to these additional metaethical claims.

[20]So, n-powers are a subset of non-causal powers; there can be non-normative non-causal powers—if Lowe's (2013) example, discussed above, is apt. It is also worth emphasizing that I am using the term 'normative power' in a different sense than its typical use (see Owens 2012). In the more typical use, normative powers are agential powers, such as an agent's ability to bring about normative changes (e.g. by promising). In my use of the term, normative powers are powers of objects (which may or may not be agents) that correspond to normative reasons related to these objects. By referring to these powers as 'n-powers', I am hoping to avoid any misunderstanding due to this ambiguity.

(N-Powers) x has an n-power to justify (require, or otherwise normatively explain) φ-ing just in case x has some property or properties in virtue of which there is a normative reason to φ.[21]

Using the notion of an n-power, we can formulate what it is for a *property* to provide reasons for action:

(Property-Reason) A property P provides a normative reason to φ just in case P confers on its bearers the n-power to justify (require, or otherwise normatively explain) φ-ing.

Accordingly, to say that evaluative properties provide normative reasons is to say that evaluative properties confer certain n-powers on their bearers. Positively valenced evaluative properties (such as *being good*) can be understood as properties that confer n-powers to justify φ-ing where 'φ' stands in for those actions that have a 'pro' element, such as favouring, promoting, desiring, or having a pro-attitude to something. Negatively valenced evaluative properties (such as *being bad*) can be understood as properties that confer n-powers to justify φ-ing where 'φ' stands in for those actions that have a 'con' element, such as disfavouring, condemning, despising, or having a con-attitude to something. Under plausible assumptions about property identity, this enables us to think of evaluative properties as individuated in terms of the n-powers they confer on their bearers. In the next section, I shall illustrate how we can reformulate (B1) and (B2) using this powers-based account of reasons.

IV. Properties and their n-causal powers

With the theoretical tools and terminological resources introduced in Section III, we can take (B1) to say that evaluative properties confer on their bearers certain n-powers (such as the n-power to justify some action). Having accepted (B2), we have already agreed that natural properties also provide reasons for action. So, the foregoing considerations should apply to natural properties too. Thus, we can understand the reason-providing feature of natural properties as n-powers also. For example, we can think of *being pleasant* as a property that confers on its bearers the power to justify pursuing them. Of course, as a natural property, *being pleasant* has causal powers too, which is to say that its instantiation can bring about certain causal changes (as well as certain normative facts).

While something's *being pleasant* confers on it the power to justify pursuing it, such justification does not have to be understood as justification *simpliciter*,

[21] We shouldn't read too much into the 'in virtue of' locution here, other than noticing that it flags the non-accidentality of the relationship between something's having certain properties and its having certain powers.

and this is where the *defeasibility* of justification becomes relevant. While something's *being pleasant* may provide justification for pursuing it, when all things are considered, an act that consists of pursuing pleasure may be unjustified from some other normative point of view. In such cases, I take it that the justification that is provided by *being pleasant* is defeated by other properties (either of that thing or of other things). Consider a very tasty almond croissant. Although an almond croissant's pleasantness may contribute to justifying pursuing it, it would be silly to say that acts that involve pursuing an almond croissant are justified *no matter what other considerations there are*. If I am on a calorie-deficit diet, that a croissant has 500 calories per serving can justify refraining from pursuing it regardless of how pleasant it would be to eat it.

Understanding normative reasons as powers is helpful for making sense of the defeasible nature of normative reasons more generally. Typically, when there is a reason that justifies my φ-ing, I have a *pro-tanto*, rather than a *sufficient*, reason to φ; and often when there is a reason that justifies my φ-ing, there is also a reason that justifies my refraining from φ-ing, as we have already seen in the case of the almond croissant. In the case of our almond croissant, we can say that while *being pleasant* does confer on it the power to justify eating it, this power may remain unmanifested if some other property (*being calorie-dense*) confers on it the power to require not eating it.[22] So, reasons that are defeated can be understood as *unmanifested* n-powers.

A somewhat related idea concerns the *conditionality* of powers. Powers theorists sometimes highlight the distinction between conditional powers and powers *simpliciter*, and relatedly, we see the claim that properties typically confer conditional powers on their bearers (see Shoemaker 1980). Consider the property of *being knife-shaped*. A knife-shaped object has the causal power to cut certain things conditionally on what it is made of; if your knife-shaped object is made of wood, it can probably cut through the 'point' muscle of a 12-h-smoked brisket; but if it is made of steel, it can be used to slice an uncooked butternut squash too. So, *being knife-shaped* confers on its bearers the conditional causal power to cut butternut squash, where the condition is satisfied when *being knife-shaped* is co-instantiated with *being made of steel* (but not satisfied when it is co-instantiated with *being made of wood*). If something has the causal power to do something regardless of such conditions (or when such conditions are satisfied), then the causal power in question is a causal power *simpliciter*. The distinction between conditional powers and powers *simpliciter* allows us to make sense of cases where reasons are merely conditional (e.g. my reason to go to my daughter's school at pickup time today is conditional on my daughter going to school today), and enables us to think of n-powers *simpliciter* as a

[22] See Robinson (2010, 2013) for a similar idea where moral principles are dispositions that can sometimes ground an agent's conflicting obligations.

special case of conditional n-powers, that is, when the relevant conditions are satisfied.

In addition to the topics of defeated and merely conditional reasons, there is the issue of absences. It might be tempting to think that there are cases where the *absence* of a property justifies a certain kind of action; but an absence is not the right kind of thing to have a power. What should we say about these cases? Consider Café Nondria: a café so unremarkable that it is neither good nor bad (and neither pleasant nor unpleasant). Can Nondria's *not being good* provide me with a reason not to go there according to the n-powers account? Possible answers here are analogous to the options that are available to the proponents of the powers theory of causation in their treatment of absence causation.[23] In some cases, the absence of a property just is the presence of some other property, in which case the n-power conferral is carried out by that property. But in other cases, the absence of a property corresponds to *the absence of a reason*. In Nondria, the absence of *being good* (without the presence of *being bad*) merely corresponds to the absence of a reason to go there; it doesn't correspond the presence of a reason *not* to go there. The mere fact that Nondria is not good (without being bad) could mean that *there is nothing* that defeasibly justifies going there. This, on its own, would not mean that there is a reason *not* to go there. It might very well be that there are reasons to do other things some of which are *incompatible* with going to Nondria (e.g. a reason to go to a different café). Given that Nondria doesn't have any property that provides me with any reason to go there (not even a pro-tanto reason), and that there are other things whose present properties provide me with reasons to do things that are incompatible with going to Nondria, overall, I have a reason not to go to Nondria. This shows that while it might be true that I have a reason not to go to Nondria when Nondria is not good, it is not true that the absence of *being good* provides me with this reason.

I take these remarks to be sufficient to introduce the idea of normative reasons as n-powers as a coherent, interesting, and promising idea. In the next section, I will illustrate how this idea offers a neat solution to the buck-passing problem.

V. The subset view of normative reasons

In Section IV, I suggested that evaluative properties have n-powers, and natural properties have n-powers as well as (non-normative) causal powers. Now,

[23] See Mumford & Anjum (2011: 143–148) for a comprehensive discussion. They review three general strategies: (i) admit absences into *being*; (ii) leave absences as *non-being* but hold that non-being has causal powers; or (iii) *deny* causation by absences. They opt for the third option and argue that instantiated properties dispose objects to certain manifestations and absences of certain properties simply fail to counteract these dispositions. I discuss this issue in Baysan (2025: 1044–5) too.

recall that there is an important connection between evaluative properties and natural properties: when something has some evaluative property, it is because it instantiates some natural property or properties that bring about that evaluative property; that is, evaluative properties depend on natural properties. This is the idea, familiar from Section II, that *being pleasant*, for example, is a good-making property. And recall my suggestion that it is plausible that it is not the only good-making property; different things may be good in virtue of different good-making properties. I believe that these observations support the claim that there is the following proper subset relation between the powers of *being good* and *being pleasant*: the n-powers of *being good* are a subset of the powers of *being pleasant*. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that this subset relation follows from what has been said so far and show how this presents itself as a solution to the buck-passing problem. Inspired by Wilson and others' work on 'the subset view of realization' in discussions of the causal exclusion problem in philosophy of mind and inter-level metaphysics, I will call this 'the subset view of normative reasons'.[24] This solution proceeds by assuming that evaluative properties provide reasons for action (as previously explained along the lines of the n-powers account) and showing that nothing about the reason-providing features of natural properties undermines this plausible assumption.

First, consider the following two claims:

(1) *Being pleasant* is a good-making property.
(2) If P is a good-making property, then, in all normatively relevant circumstances, all bearers of P are also bearers of *being good*.

As we have seen in Section II, (1) is a plausible assumption, so we will take this on board without further discussion. In (2) and in what follows, I am using the phrase 'in all normatively relevant circumstances' in lieu of a modal operator to the effect that the unqualified version of (2) is true only to the extent that we are holding all normative facts fixed, where these facts include evaluative and deontic facts, whatever these might be. (2) is supported by the intuitive idea that if P makes something good on one occasion, presumably, under similar conditions, other things that have P will also have some goodness in them.

[24]The subset view of realization is proposed as a solution to the causal exclusion problem in philosophy of mind and related debates, and is advanced by Wilson (1999), Shoemaker (2001), and others. The causal exclusion problem arises because of the tension between the ideas that (i) mental and other higher-level properties are causally relevant in the physical world and (ii) any physical effect has a sufficient physical cause. The subset view's solution to this problem rests on the observation that the causal powers of a given higher-level property M are a proper subset of the causal powers of the physical properties that realize M, and given this proper subset relation, there is no real tension between (i) and (ii). While I happen to think that the subset view of realization is a plausible account of higher-level causation (see Baysan 2016), the subset view of normative reasons that I propose in this paper can be held independently of this, so I will not offer a defence of the subset view of realization here.

From (1) and (2), we get:

(3) In all normatively relevant circumstances, all bearers of *being pleasant* are also bearers of *being good*.

If we accept (Property–Reason), namely the thesis that a property provides a normative reason to φ just in case it confers on its bearers the n-power to justify (or require, or otherwise normatively explain) φ-ing, it is reasonable to expect the following to be true:

(4) A property P has, among its powers, an n-power NP just in case, in all normatively relevant circumstances, all bearers of P have NP.

As I clarified in Section III, when I say that some property 'has', or confers on its bearers, some power, I mean that there is some non-accidental fact that bearers of that property have that power. This is, on the proposed account, *what it is* for a property to have, or confer on its bearers, some power. Given the phrase 'in all normatively relevant circumstances' is used in lieu of a modal operator, we can ensure the non-accidentality of this relationship by holding these facts fixed. Next, let's assume that:

(5) *Being good* has the n-power to justify responding to it positively.

This is just an instance of (B1), which we are now assuming to be true. Now, from (4) and (5), it follows that:

(6) In all normatively relevant circumstances, all bearers of *being good* have the n-power to justify responding to them positively.

Now, from (3) and (6), it straightforwardly follows that:

(7) In all normatively relevant circumstances, all bearers of *being pleasant* have the n-power to justify responding to them positively.

And this takes us to our final step in this argument. From (4) and (7), it follows that:

(8) *Being pleasant* has, among its powers, the n-power to justify responding to it positively.

How do these eights steps show that there is a proper subset relation between the n-powers of *being good* and *being pleasant*? We have seen that a given n-power of *being good* turns out to be an n-power of *being pleasant* and we can generalize this to any n-power of *being good*. So, any n-power of *being good* is also an n-power of *being pleasant*, which gives us a subset relation between the powers of *being good* and *being pleasant*. But note that there is an asymmetry here, as this doesn't show that any n-power of *being pleasant* is an n-power of *being good*. Thus, this subset relation is presumably a *proper* subset relation: there may be

n-powers of *being pleasant* which are not n-powers of *being good*. One such n-power that *being pleasant* has but *being good* does not might be the n-power to justify one's belief that something (*de re*) is pleasant.

Of course, there is nothing special about *being pleasant*, given that we have allowed there to be other good-making properties too. We can run the eight steps above for any good-making property (e.g. *being loved by the gods* if that is indeed a good-making property), and get similar results about the n-powers of *being good* and the power profile of that good-making property. Moreover, we can run this argument for *any* evaluative property (such as *being bad*) and the properties that realize that evaluative property (such as *being unpleasant*) and we should obtain the same subset relation. Thus, the following claim about evaluative properties and properties that underlie them seems to be true:

> (The Subset View of Normative Reasons) If a given evaluative property V is realised by some property N, then the n-powers of V are a proper subset of the powers of N.

Let me emphasize the importance of these observations regarding the buck-passing problem. If the subset view is true, we can make sense of the fact that evaluative properties can provide reasons for action even if natural properties provide a complete explanation of reasons for action. If an n-power an evaluative property V confers on a bearer is identical with some n-power that a natural property N confers on it (where N realizes V), explaining the reasons for an action by reference to V will not compete with explaining the reasons for the same action by N. Moreover, there will not be any redundancy of reasons provided by *being good*. One and the same reason is being provided—or, one and the same power is being conferred—by two distinct properties.

Importantly, we can accept all of this without having to identify evaluative properties with natural properties. In fact, the subset view gives us an additional way of expressing the non-identity of *being good* with individual good-making properties: given the *proper* subset relation between the powers of these properties (as opposed to an *improper* one), the power profiles of these properties are not identical. Under some plausible assumptions about property identity, this supports the claim that these properties are distinct (because they are properties with non-identical power profiles), so we have a robust and illuminating way of securing the truth of (B_3).

It should now be clear that (B_4) is false, as it says that if there is a complete explanation of reasons for an action with reference to some set of properties S_N, no explanation of reasons for that action by reference to some evaluative property V is available (unless V is included in S_N). If the subset view is true, for V to provide reasons for a given action, V does not have to be identical to any of the properties in S_N. All that is required is that the properties in S_N must have powers that include the n-powers of V. Going back to the question concerning Café Adria, we can say that, in virtue of being good, Adria has the n-power to justify my having some pro-attitude towards it. Here, *being good*

is realized by *being pleasant*, and the very same n-power that corresponds to my having some pro-attitude towards Adria is a power that *being pleasant* confers on it also. The fact that this n-power is conferred on Adria by *being good* as well as *being pleasant* does not generate a metaphysical puzzle or a problematic sort of overdetermination, as there is only one power that is being conferred here, which is a power of two distinct properties.

VI. Conclusion

I have introduced and defended an account of the relationship between evaluative properties and normative reasons: evaluative properties provide us with reasons for action in virtue of conferring (normative, non-causal) n-powers on their bearers, where manifestations of these powers normatively explain certain actions. I have argued that this account is compatible with the claim that natural properties provide a complete explanation of reasons for action, which means that this account has the resources to solve the buck-passing problem in an illuminating way. This, I believe, gives us good reason to take this account seriously and explore its prospects further.

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