Practical Reality: 
Supervenience, Centralism, and the Right Kind of Reasons

Dissertation Summary
Nicholas Engel

Ethical irreduciblists assert that some ethical terms denote ethical properties that are numerically distinct from any property that can be denoted by an ideal language impoverished by ethical terms. In this dissertation, I argue that ethical irreduciblists should be ethical non-centralists: they should deny that thin ethical properties are explanatorily prior to thick ethical properties. In elaborating and defending this thesis, I argue for a number of surprising lemmas: that the most common formulations of ethical supervenience are unintelligible; that fitting-attitude accounts of value are cotenable with values-based accounts of judgment-sensitive attitudes; and that the reasons relation is not primitive, but rather a special instance of the relation that holds between questions and answers.

Nearly every ethical theorist affirms what I call

Centralist global ethical supervenience (CS): Ethically discernible worlds must be non-ethically discernible.

CS asserts that, if Edward Snowden is morally good, then Snowden’s counterparts in worlds that are indiscernible in all non-ethical respects must be morally good. Irreduciblists struggle to explain why CS is true. I consider and reject potential irreduciblist explanations of CS that appeal to conceptual entailment and a posteriori necessity. Rosen has recently offered an argument against CS, and Merricks has argued against supervenience more generally. Rejecting CS, however, problematizes irreduciblist accounts of ethical explanation and moral epistemology.

Irreduciblists can avoid this dilemma by arguing that CS is unintelligible. Bilgrami’s arguments against the intelligibility of ethical supervenience doctrines show that CS is in fact unintelligible. They do not, however, show the unintelligibility of a modified formulation of ethical supervenience:

Non-centralist global ethical supervenience (NS): Ethically discernible worlds must be descriptively discernible.

Irreduciblists can explain the truth of NS by affirming a version of non-centralism. In particular, irreduciblists about normative reasons for action should affirm non-centralism. I argue that actions
are individuated partly on the basis of the evaluative valence of their effects. Because of this, evaluative properties must feature in complete explanations for something’s being a reason for a particular action. One surprising implication of this argument is that fitting attitude theories of value turn out to be cotenable with values-based accounts of judgment-sensitive attitudes.

Scanlon has argued that the reasons relation is a four-place relation, relating the facts that are reasons for an agent to perform an action in a given circumstance. I argue that facts are also reasons for an action with respect to fine-grained effects of the action, and in contrast to sets of distinct actions that the agent could perform. Evaluative concepts can be analyzed in terms of effects that constitute relata of the reasons relation. Since our reasons concept, I argued, is also analyzable in terms of evaluative concepts, reason concepts and evaluative concepts are micro-holistic: neither is conceptually more fundamental than the other.

The resulting six-place relation turns out to be an instance of the relation that holds between questions and answers. What it is to be a reason for an agent to do something are correct answers to questions why that agent ought to do that thing. However, contrary to Broome and Kearns and Starr, reasons are answers neither to explanation-seeking why-questions (questions about why something is the case) nor evidence-seeking why-questions (questions about whether one should believe that something is the case). The question of what to do is a sui generis kind of question, distinct from the kinds of questions that guide theoretical reasoning.

Decades ago, Anscombe had also suggested that reasons were answers to why-questions of a certain kind. The attractiveness of this position has been relatively underappreciated in the philosophy of normative reasons, in part because Anscombe had offered the reasons-as-answers thesis as a thesis about motivating reasons rather than normative reasons. The reasons-as-answers thesis also provides resources for those irreducibilists about reasons who reject my non-centralist conclusions to avoid the wrong kind of reason problem: they can distinguish between right and wrong kinds of reasons by distinguishing between answers to distinct kinds of questions.