

MORAL THEORIES AS (MERELY) METAPHYSICAL

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Normative-Metaphysical Transitivity (NMT) If a normative fact A is (partially) normatively explained by B and B is (partially) metaphysically explained by C then A is (partially) normatively explained by C.

I'll argue that NMT is false¹ and that this has interesting implications – it opens up some novel and attractive metaethical options.

CLARIFICATIONS

Normative explanation isn't just an explanation of a normative fact. It's a distinctive type of explanation, familiar from first-order ethical theorizing – *e.g.* *Why is discrimination bad? Why should doctors get informed consent before performing medical procedures?*

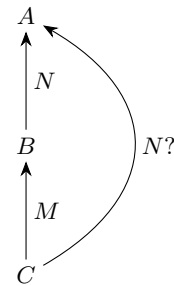
It's closely related to *normative reasons*. In the sense of normative explanation I'm focused on, normative explainers must have some reason-giving power. If something is not a reason for ϕ -ing (not even in conjunction with other facts) then it doesn't normatively explain why we should ϕ .²

More clarifications:

- Explanations are relations between facts, not communicative acts.
- I'm not assuming that normative explanation is a subset of metaphysical explanation.
- I'm attempting neutrality about the nature of normative facts.

AGAINST NMT

1. Related principles, like *Scientific-Metaphysical Transitivity*, appear to be false.³
2. **Normative-Metaphysical Transitivity** commits us to strange normative explanatory claims and so sits awkwardly with plausible candidates for the true first-order normative theory. If NMT was true then facts about quarks would be basic moral explainers of facts about rightness. But Act Utilitarianism is naturally understood as an account of what is of basic moral importance – it's utility.
 - This points to a kind of methodological and explanatory *autonomy* of the normative from the low-level physics and metaphysics. Such an autonomy is familiar from scientific practice.
3. Facts about quarks don't seem to be normative reasons for, *e.g.* me telling the joke.⁴



¹ Väyrynen (2021b) also argues that it's false. Berker (2018, section 5.1) argues that a related, but importantly distinct, principle is true.

² Compare Behrens (2026), Väyrynen (2021a)

³ **Scientific-Metaphysical Transitivity:** If a scientific fact A is (partially) scientifically explained by B and B is (partially) metaphysically explained by C then A is (partially) scientifically explained by C. (Lange, 2013)

⁴ 'it might be that all metaphysical hierarchies bottom out in facts about the speed and location of fundamental physical particles. But, again, these facts intuitively do not seem like reasons to do anything' (Johnson King, 2019, 176)

One reaction is to say that facts about quarks really are normative explainers, they are reasons for action – we can explain away the intuitions that they are not by arguing that we don't normally recognize them as reasons because they are complicated, hard to detect etc..

- I'm happy to accept that facts about quarks are in some sense explanatorily relevant to the rightness of my telling a joke – they are just not normative explainers.
- It's possible to insist that quarks are normative explainers. That would just be an alternative first-order moral theory. But why insist on an intuitively unattractive view when we are not forced to?

The falsity of NMT doesn't require that normative and metaphysical explanation are *radically* different. Normative explanation might be a subset of metaphysical explanation, or they might both be species of the same genus.

NORMATIVE LAWS

I'll assume that there are normative laws that are part of the normative explainers of facts.⁵

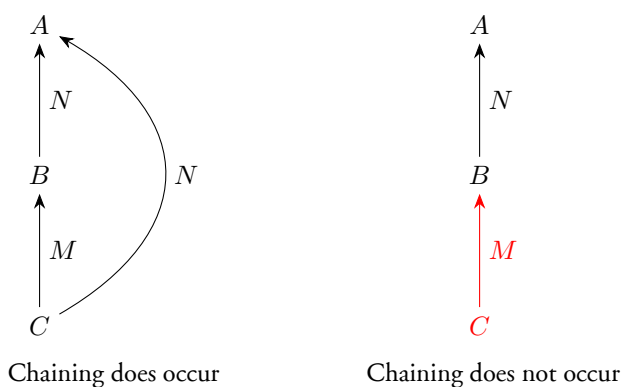
Sometimes the ground of normative principles can also explain what those principles explain – e.g. that doctors should get informed consent for patients for medical procedures.

Sometimes such chaining is less intuitive. Is whatever piece of metaphysics that metaphysically explains the principle of utility part of a normative explanation of whatever the principle explains? Plausibly not.⁶

⁵ I don't think it matters much for what's to come if we instead take normative laws to have a metaexplanatory role.

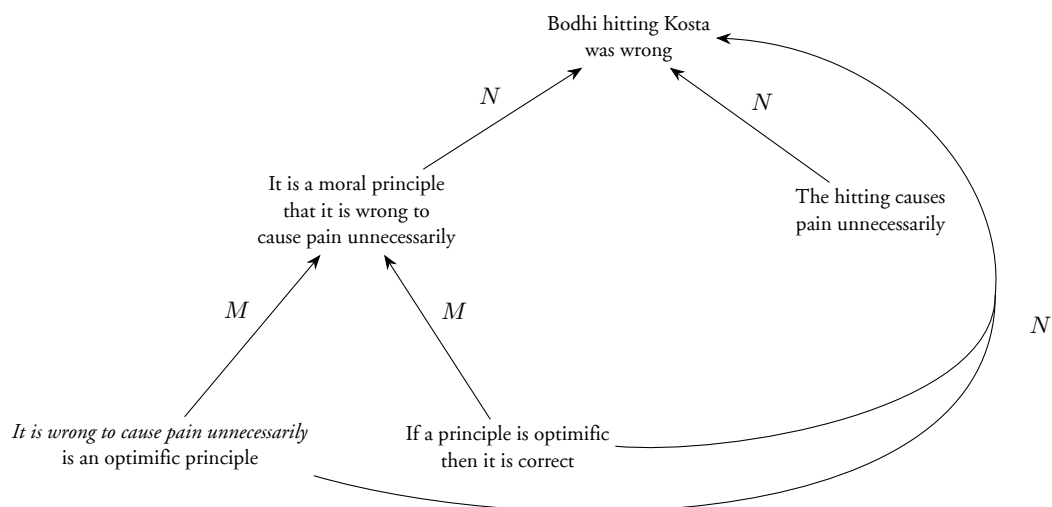
⁶ For the rest of the paper I'll put aside questions about what the correct metaphysics of moral principles is. Feel free to substitute in your favorite view.

MERELY METAPHYSICAL EXPLANATIONS

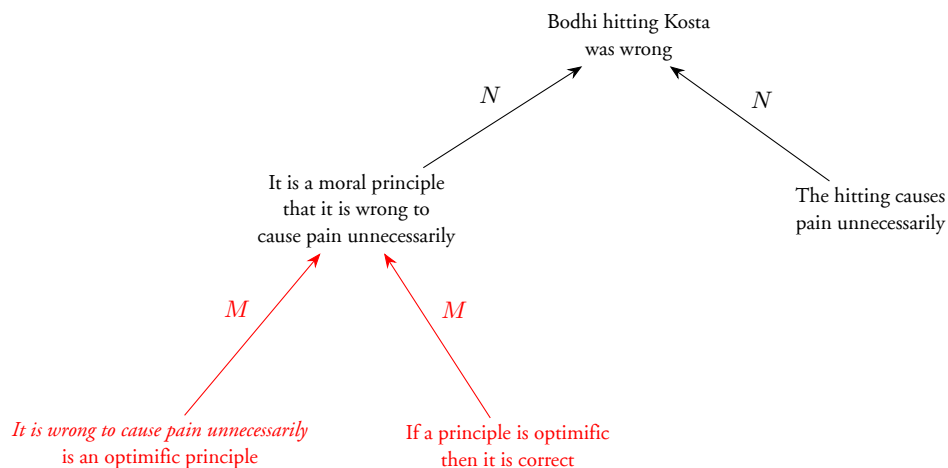


The red represents a *merely metaphysical* explanation.

Two theories can differ in *how far down the metaphysical hierarchy normative explanation extends*.



Normative Rule Consequentialism



Metaphysical Rule Consequentialism

Metaphysical RC is an extremely revisionary version of rule consequentialism.

The normatively basic principles – the starting points of normative explanation – are not distinctively consequentialist. In this way it's consistent with deontological or Kantian theories.

I'll consider two attractive features of *Metaphysical RC*.

OPTIMIFICNESS AND MORAL EXPLANATION

Given *Metaphysical RC* facts about what rules are optimific are not normative explainers, and so are not reasons for action.

This is an attractive result. It's rather strange, I think, for facts about what is optimific to provide a reason for Bodhi not to hit. Facts about *optimificness* are far away from what is intuitively a reason.

COUNTERFACTUAL OPTIMIFIC RULES

Often the natural reading of counterfactuals about some higher-level domain involves apply the relevant higher-level principle but ignoring how they are grounded in the lower-level. Consider an economist asking what would happen if information moved instantaneously and costlessly – they don't reason that GPS would be inaccurate and so this would have major economic consequences.

Relatedly, a rule consequentialist think about what we should do in a non-actual situation. There are two readings of the relevant counterfactuals:

1. Apply the actually optimific rules
2. Apply the rules that are optimific in the counterfactual world

Metaphysical RC motivates the first reading, since the actually optimific principles – things like, it's wrong to cause pain unnecessarily – are normatively fundamental. And it's natural to hold fixed the normatively fundamental principles when considering what do in other situations.

The first reading generates intuitive results in many cases. A doctor killing one and harvesting their organs to save five violates actually optimific rules. But consider *if it were easier for doctors to keep killings secret then the doctor's killing would still be wrong*. This will come out true on the first reading, but not on the second.

GENERALIZING

Rule consequentialism is just a case study. The same move can work for other views. E.g. we can distinguish normative and metaphysical versions of (some forms of) subjectivism about reasons.

Metaphysical subjectivism can allow us to make sense of counterfactuals like 'even if my preferences were different and I didn't care about helping others then I still would have reason to help people in need'.

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