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HISTORICIZING SECOND NATURE: THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE IS/UGHT GAP

Abstract: In this paper, I examine the normative problem from the standpoint of the following question: should normative explanations be regarded as a genuine form of explanation, or should we consider them as transient modes of intelligibility, requiring reduction to the valid explanatory frameworks of the empirical sciences? In particular, I scrutinize John McDowell's attempt to defend the genuineness of normative explanations by adopting the notion of second nature. I will show that, in light of the development of the social and behavioral sciences, McDowell's account lacks adequate defense against the skeptical arguments put forth by scientific naturalists. Thus, I will provide a further argument aimed at defending the autonomy of the domain of normative explanations without restricting the scope of the empirical sciences. I will conclude that the essential feature of second nature—or, more correctly, of rational second nature—is the human ability to cognitively grasp the causal goings-on that are part of both first and second nature. Finally, I will very briefly examine the consequences of my account for Hume's is/ought gap.

Keywords: Normativity, naturalism, John McDowell, Hume's law, social and behavioral sciences.

1. Introduction:

The normative problem as an explanatory problem

In this paper, my attention will be directed toward the normative problem, examining it through a distinct perspective—specifically, treating it as a matter of explanatory genuineness.¹ From this vantage point,

¹ The present paper is founded on the critical examination of John McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature,' as outlined in (Dimitrakos, 2020), and the logical distinction between normative and empirical-scientific explanations, as discussed in (Dimitrakos, 2021). However, here I also delve into the implications of my account for the is/ought gap.

a pivotal question arises: should normative explanations be regarded as a genuine form of explanation, or should we consider them as transient modes of intelligibility, requiring reduction to the valid explanatory frameworks of the empirical sciences? This, I take it, aligns with John McDowell's perspective on the normative problem: 'The problem posed by the contrast between the space of reasons and the realm of law, in the context of a naturalism that conceives nature as the realm of law, is not ontological but ideological' (McDowell, 1996, p. 78, fn 8).

From this perspective, we can frame the normative problem as a dilemma: either normative explanations lack genuineness, allowing them to be entirely assimilated into the realm of empirical-scientific explanations (as posited by the proponents of scientific naturalism), or normative explanations possess a unique status (they are *sui generis*), making their reduction into the explanatory patterns of empirical science impossible without sacrificing valuable information about the world (as asserted by normativists). Consequently, in the subsequent discussion, I will scrutinize McDowell's distinction between first and second nature primarily as an effort to uphold the authenticity of normative explanations. Additionally, I will try to show that, in light of the development of the social and behavioral sciences (human sciences for short), McDowell's account lacks adequate defense against the sceptical arguments put forth by scientific naturalists. Thus, I will provide a further argument aimed at defending the autonomy of the space of reasons without restricting the scope of the human sciences.

One final introductory remark is needed here. Normative concepts, explanations, etc. should not be considered as exclusively belonging to the domain of reason. The domain of reason is, of course, a normative domain but not necessarily *vice versa*. Many biological phenomena, for instance, are made intelligible in normative terms but not as rational phenomena. In what follows, for the sake of brevity, I will treat the normative realm as co-extensive with the domain of reason, even though, as I said, they are not. I acknowledge that a conceptual distinction between the rational-normative, the nonrational normative, and the non-normative domain is a philosophical necessity. However, in the present paper, I won't be concerned with the difference between the rational and the non-rational normative realm. I will focus on the contrast between the empirical-scientific understanding and the understanding which is proper to reason.² This is

2 By contrasting empirical-scientific explanations with the understanding proper to reason, I just follow McDowell's terminology. This terminology, by no means, implies that empirical-scientific explanations are not rational. The distinction lies in the presentation of the object of the explanation. Normative explanations portray the

why I am going to treat biological and other non-rational normative phenomena crudely as belonging to the non-normative domain. I will take the normative domain as co-extensive with the realm of reason, intentionally ignoring the part of this domain which belongs to the empirical-scientific understanding in order to examine the above-mentioned contrast in a simpler way.

My argumentation will take the following course. First, I will provide a distinction between the normative and the empirical-scientific explanations. Then, I will briefly present McDowell's both initial (*Mind and World*) and revised versions of second nature, focusing on the problems of these versions. In the fourth section I will list the possible normativist strategies for dealing with the problems in question. In the fifth section I will provide a further conceptual distinction between the reducibility and the eliminability of the normative realm. Next I will argue that the essential feature of second nature—or more correctly of rational second nature—is the human ability to grasp cognitively the causal goings-on that are part of both first and second nature. Finally, I will very briefly examine the consequences of my account in Hume's law, i.e. the logical gap between is-statements and ought-statements.

2. Normative vs Empirical-Scientific Explanations and the Logical Mapping of the Responses to the Normative Problem

Treating the normative problem as an explanatory issue requires distinguishing between normative and empirical-scientific explanations.³ Normative explanations render actions or belief modifications intelligible by subsuming them under a norm or a set of norms. For example, if someone questions why I believe *q*, I could respond that I believe *p* and also hold the belief that if *p*, then *q*, i.e., I can explain my belief modification by showing how my belief modification conforms to the epistemic norm of *modus ponens*. Similarly, if asked why the person in front of me stopped her car and assisted a stranger experiencing a heart attack, I

object of their understanding as rational, which is why they are termed 'proper to reason,' while empirical-scientific explanations do not present their object (such as pendulums, tides, molecules, cells, etc.) as rational. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this clarification.

3 My presentation of the distinction between normative and empirical-scientific explanations is inevitably sketchy here. For a detailed presentation, see (Dimitrakos, 2021).

could explain that she expressed solidarity with a person in need. In other words, her action can be explained by showing how it conforms to a practical norm. Conversely, empirical-scientific explanations make things or events in the world intelligible by showing how they conform to the causal order outlined by one or more empirical sciences. This is the case in which we explain someone's belief or action by appealing to the social milieu or the psychological mechanisms that dictate their thoughts and their behavior. For instance, the case where we explain someone's adherence to an ideology based on the interests of the social class to which they belong, or the case where we explain repetitive actions as an expression of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Based on this logical distinction, we can provide the fundamental logical mapping of the possible replies to the normative problem. Scientific naturalists claim that every normative explanation is, in principle, reducible to a set of empirical-scientific explanations.⁴ This entails that the domain of normative explanations is altogether eliminable. Normativists, on the other hand, argue that the domain in question is ineliminable because normative explanations (or at least some of them) are genuine, i.e., incapable of being reduced to empirical-scientific explanations. We cannot reduce genuine normative explanations to empirical-scientific explanations without losing crucial informational content about the world of human beings. However, it is crucial to discern two strands of thought within the normative camp. Idealistic views ground the ineliminability of the normative domain in some sort of non-natural entities (such as values or the soul as supersensible entities) or non-natural cognitive faculties (e.g., the Cartesian mental intuition). On the other hand, liberal naturalists defend the ineliminability of the domain of normative explanations within a naturalist framework that leaves nothing outside the realm of nature (De Caro & Macarthur, 2004, 2010, 2022). John McDowell's (1995, 1996, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2018) conception of second nature is one of the most well-discussed instantiations of the liberal naturalist perspective in contemporary analytic philosophy.

3. Second Nature as a Reply to the Normative Problem

McDowell claims that the normative problem is the result of a mistaken idea which takes the ontological territory of nature to be co-extensive

4 They have to be placed into the 'ordinary stream of explanation' (Turner, 2010, p. 11). The 'ordinary stream of explanation' is the network of explanations employed by the empirical sciences.

with the subject matter of empirical-scientific knowledge. He rejects this view by suggesting that 'nature includes second nature' (McDowell, 1996, p. xx). Second nature is an Aristotelian notion (*Nichomachean Ethics*) which refers to the acquired or cultivated aspects of human behavior and character that arise through conscious or unconscious effort and habituation. Unlike "first nature", which encompasses innate qualities and biological predispositions, second nature involves the development of virtues, skills, and ethical dispositions through practice and societal influence. McDowell adopts the concept of second nature in order to assert that individuals are born as mere biological creatures and are transformed into thinkers and agents, that is, rational animals, by engaging in the process of language initiation. Language does not serve only as a means for communication but also 'as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what' (McDowell, 1996, p. 126).

The notion of second nature plays a dual role. On the one hand, it helps to sever the conceptual tie between the ontological notion of nature and the subject matter of the empirical sciences, thereby avoiding the eliminability of the normative domain proposed by scientific naturalists. On the other hand, since second nature is still nature, it helps to avoid idealism or supernaturalism (or 'rampant platonism' in McDowell's terms), which would make our capacity to respond to reasons 'look like an occult power' (McDowell, 1996, p. 83). However, to effectively play this dual role, the concept of second nature demands several philosophical explications that confront various puzzles. These puzzles forced McDowell to revise the notion that he initially presented in *Mind and World*.

3.1. The Mind and World version

In *Mind and World*, McDowell rejects the assumption that the domain of nature is co-extensive with the subject matter of the empirical sciences by distinguishing between first and second nature. In the terminology that I use in the present paper, second nature is the subject matter of normative explanations while first nature is the subject matter of empirical-scientific explanations. In this version of second nature, emphasis is placed on a nomological conception concerning scientific explanations. In essence, McDowell assumes that the empirical sciences render phenomena intelligible by subsuming them under natural laws. Law-governedness is the essential feature of first nature. Consequently, he associates empirical-scientific explanations with nomological explanations, adopting implicitly a neo-positivist (Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948) perspective on scientific

explanations.⁵ The specific kind of intelligibility attributed to second nature involves situating an event within the space of reasons. Thus, the differentiation between first and second nature was grounded on the logical distinction between the realm of (natural) law and the space of reasons (McDowell, 1996, p. 78). In short, in *Mind and World*'s version of liberal naturalism, whatever is law-governed is part of first nature while the rest of nature consists of events belonging to the domain of second nature.

3.2. The revised version

McDowell revised his account by taking into consideration a broader conception of natural sciences, which encompasses more than just mathematical physics and the relevant explanations based on law-governedness. He included biology in his philosophical framework, leading him to the conclusion that second nature is not exclusive to human beings⁶; it is only a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for rationality. The acquisition of rationality presupposes second nature, but the existence of second-natural phenomena does not necessarily guarantee the presence of rationality. Some second-natural phenomena require an intelligibility that is not significantly different from the intelligibility needed to understand first-natural phenomena (McDowell, 2008, p. 220).⁷ Only a subset of second-natural phenomena becomes intelligible by placement in the space of reasons.

This revision makes McDowell's account more refined and science-informed. It incorporates a more nuanced understanding of the explanatory patterns used in the natural sciences, without altering its fundamental idea: the intelligibility associated with placement in the space of reasons is *sui generis*, that is, 'beyond the reach of the natural-scientific understanding' (McDowell, 2008, p. 217). Importantly, this kind of intelligibility is concerned with phenomena belonging to nature; they are not spooky or occult. In the *Mind and World* version of the account, these phenomena were identified with second-natural phenomena, whereas in the revised version they are only associated with a subset of second-natural phenomena. However, this nuanced version leaves room for problems of another sort.

3.3. The problem: The naturalistic threat to human sciences

I claim that McDowell's account stops taking into consideration the lessons from the empirical sciences exactly at the point where the threat

5 McDowell (2000) himself recognized this conception as Russellian.

6 For instance, Pavlovian conditioning is a part of second nature not only of human beings but also of other mammals.

7 Take for instance Pavlovian conditioning.

is less acute. If after biology we try to incorporate human sciences into our philosophical image, the eliminativist naturalistic threat returns. The subject matter of the human sciences encompasses the entire spectrum of human actions and beliefs. Therefore, nothing within second nature can, in principle, be ruled out from the understanding offered by these sciences. It appears that the emergence of the human sciences introduces a more pressing philosophical worry than the challenge posed by the natural sciences. This challenge seems to directly threaten the autonomy of the space of reasons, attempting to render human second nature fully intelligible through explanatory modes foreign to any placement in the space of reasons. Scientific naturalists can claim, putting forth a history-informed argument, that the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries and the relevant emergence of mathematical physics set us free from the ancient and medieval superstition that considered first nature as the realm of final ends. Next, the emergence of biology and modern medicine exempted a part of second nature from the kind of intelligibility which is proper to reason. Now, with the inclusion of the human sciences, the rest of second nature is exempted from this supposedly unique understanding. One could conclude that the more we scrutinize reality, and while the empirical sciences become gradually more mature, the more apparent it becomes that the only legitimate form of intelligibility arises from the perspective of the empirical sciences. Ultimately, the scientific naturalist might posit that the only philosophy informed by science is the kind of naturalism that identifies nature with the subject matter of the empirical sciences.

Despite its monolithic conception of scientific explanations and, in one sense because of it, the *Mind and World* version of McDowell's account could provide a philosophical ground for the genuineness of normative explanations. In this version, the notion of second nature is co-extensive with the domain of application of the normative explanations, and hence the genuineness of the latter is secured by the existence of the former. The domain of normative explanations could easily be determined by the logical contradistinction to the notion of law-governedness. In the revised version, on the other hand, there is no such possibility. Second nature and the domain of application of normative explanations cease to be co-extensive notions. Second nature is divided into one rational and one non-rational part: one part consists of phenomena like Pavlovian conditioning, which are part of empirical-scientific understanding, and another part consists of phenomena made intelligible by placing them into the logical space of reasons. But then second nature cannot provide a philosophical ground for the genuineness of the normative explanations. We need a further criterion for demarcating the second-natural phenomena which have to be explained by the empirical sciences (e.g., biology)

from the second-natural phenomena which have to be made intelligible by placing them in the space of reasons, that is, by providing a normative explanation. In short, we need a criterion for demarcating rational from non-rational second nature. The logical contradistinction to the law-governedness can provide no help here.

4. Responding to the Threat

It seems that if we want to defend the genuineness of the domain of normative explanations, we are left with the following options.

- (a) To endorse some version of *anti-naturalism* in the philosophy of human sciences, asserting that human sciences do not exclude normative explanations.

Anti-naturalism of this sort claims that there is a logical gap between the explanatory patterns of the human and the natural sciences. The most traditional expression of this view is Hermeneutics.⁸ But this option suffers from two major problems. First, the evolution of the empirical sciences does not appear to support the stark differentiation between natural and human sciences. By highlighting the distinctions within both categories, the unity of natural and human sciences becomes plausible. The rejection of the monolithic view that the nomological model in natural-scientific explanations entailed has given rise to a more comprehensive understanding of scientific explanations. In this broader perspective, there is no clear-cut division between the explanatory patterns employed by the human and natural sciences. As Sandra Mitchell (2009, p. 131) points out, '[t]he types of knowledge gained of the social world are much like the types of knowledge we can claim of the biological world' (Mitchell, 2009, p. 131). Second, and more important for my argument, opting for the anti-naturalist approach in the philosophy of human sciences doesn't dissolve the philosophical problem concerning the relationship between nature and reason; rather, it relocates this issue to a different philosophical subarea. Instead of addressing why normative explanations are genuine and cannot be entirely reduced to empirical explanations offered by the

8 Hermeneutics in philosophy of history and in philosophy of social sciences in general involves a distinction between Naturwissenschaften (natural sciences) and Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences), not just in terms of the scientific subject matter but also concerning the distinctive logical forms of explanation. Sciences of nature "involve Erklären (explanation by way of laws) while [sciences of spirit] involve Verstehen (hermeneutic understanding from the "inside")" (Macarthur, 2010, p. 134).

human sciences, the normativist now needs to answer why normative explanations within the human sciences domain are genuine and resistant to reduction to explanations of a different logical kind. The fundamental philosophical requirement to present an argument against the eliminability of the domain of normative explanations persists.

- (b) To establish a demarcation criterion, distinguishing cases that should be understood through empirical-scientific understanding from those that should be understood by placing them in the space of reasons. The Kantian categorical imperative is a paradigmatic expression of formulating such a criterion. It distinguishes between cases of heteronomy (i.e., those requiring understanding through empirical factors) and cases of autonomy (i.e., those that are genuine expressions of reason).

The fundamental flaw of this demarcationist view is that it is vulnerable to sceptical historicist arguments. Anti-normativists consider the diversity of normative contexts throughout history and the world to raise doubts about the genuineness of the domain of normative explanations. We can reconstruct their argumentation as follows: given that ‘most of the people in history and in the present were and are living in normative error’ (Turner, 2010, p. 181)⁹, the validity of appealing to binding rules of reason and of their corresponding explanatory power is called into question. This argument follows the structure of the pessimistic meta-induction against scientific realism, which underlines that all past scientific theories once deemed successful are now regarded as false. ‘Therefore, the pessimist concludes, current successful theories will turn out to be false as well’ (Mizrahi, 2013, p. 3210). Similarly, Turner (2010) argues that appealing to some normative force that binds rational beings, along with the demarcation of cases representing genuine expressions of rationality, is chimerical. This is because our historical record reveals that, by any universal criterion, most people in the past have lived in normative error. The error becomes evident as we can explain people’s actions and beliefs not by invoking the truth or goodness of their beliefs and actions, respectively, but by taking into account various biological, psychological, or sociological causal factors. Therefore, the pessimist concludes, no demarcation criterion is capable of singling out cases of genuine rational expression. Consequently, every aspect of human thinking and behavior should be considered as the potential subject matter of empirical scientific research.

9 The normative error here is nothing more than a deviation from normative standards. The historical evolution of the normative frameworks reveals that all previous human beings used to live contrary to the present normative standards.

McDowell correctly rejects both options for defending the ineliminability of the normative domain. He never refers to any kind of anti-naturalism in the philosophy of the social sciences and he explicitly rejects the demarcationist option in saying:

[...] there is no criterion, if by that we mean some general formula that it might be possible to apply to mark off genuine reasons from impostors. It is incumbent on one to reflect about whether what seem to one to be reasons really are reasons, doing one's best not to be taken in by impostors. And there is no straightforward, as it were mechanical, way to guard against the risk. Any general formula one came up with would itself come within the scope of the obligation to reflect (McDowell, 2010, p. 12).

McDowell doesn't seek an infallible criterion to distinguish genuine expressions of rationality. He emphasizes that while autonomy¹⁰ is a capacity which can fail, this does not prove that it doesn't exist at all. Rational subjects may sometimes act or think based on what just appears to be a reason rather than responding to genuine reasons, a point acknowledged by the anti-normativist argument from normative error. This recognition leads to the distinction between genuinely normative facts and seemingly normative facts. However, accepting the existence of genuinely normative facts doesn't necessitate committing to an infallible criterion for their demarcation. The sceptical argument from normative error is only effective against normativist accounts striving to establish an infallible criterion for identifying authentic expressions of rationality. Normative foundationalism (establishing an infallible criterion) and normative scepticism (rejecting the domain of normative explanations due to their fallibility) are not our exclusive options. One can argue that humans possess the capacity to respond to reasons, even if occasional failures occur. In short, the sceptical threat of the argument from normative error applies only to normative foundationalism (i.e., demarcationism). But, as McDowell shows, the defense of the autonomy of the normative domain can also be articulated on the ground of normative fallibilism, thereby sidestepping the aforementioned sceptical threat.

Nevertheless, normative fallibilism alone cannot provide a decisive argument against the eliminative version of naturalism. It can only show

10 McDowell embraces the concept of autonomy within the framework of German idealism. Here, autonomy signifies the ability for self-governance or self-legislation, where individuals act in accordance with principles they determine through rational deliberation. This stands in opposition to heteronomy, where moral principles are imposed externally. In this context, autonomy is closely associated with the concepts of reason and freedom. As Sebastian Rödl (2007, p. 105) points out, '[i]t is the principle thought of German Idealism that self-consciousness, freedom, and reason are one'.

that it is a less vulnerable option than foundationalism. Scientific naturalists can still ask for philosophical grounds to support the idea that certain natural phenomena lie beyond the reach of empirical-scientific understanding. Given my preceding argumentation, these grounds can be provided neither by just invoking the concept of second nature nor by proposing a demarcation criterion to identify genuine expressions of rationality. McDowell's quietist approach, though, does not recognize the need for further arguments. He merely claims that liberal rather than scientific naturalism should be our default position. In McDowell's (2006, p. 237) words, the default view should be that 'human beings are unique among living things – outside the reach of the sort of understanding achievable by a scientific biology – in virtue of the freedom that belongs with our responsiveness to reasons as such, [...] unless it can be shown to be wrong'. But taking into consideration the human sciences, I think, makes McDowell's 'naturalism of second nature' more vulnerable to the crude naturalistic threats and his quietist strategy less convincing.

5. A Further Argument: Reducibility and eliminability

In my view, the defense of normativism requires a further argument which can rely on a conceptual distinction that is necessary for rejecting scientific naturalism. In particular, I claim that we have to distinguish between the concept of explanatory reducibility and the concept of the eliminability of the domain of normative explanations. Only lacking this distinction can scientific naturalism be plausible. I am going to provide the distinction and the relevant argument against scientific naturalism in two steps.

5.1. Reduction and Epistemic Normativity

First of all, in order to reduce normative explanations to scientific explanations we need the normative vocabulary at our disposal. The reduction of a normative explanation to a scientific explanation presupposes that the latter is true and hence the explanatory reduction justified. But this also presupposes the genuineness of the domain of normative explanations. The reduction should be normatively explained, otherwise its validity is at stake. The elimination of the normative vocabulary makes us philosophically blind to the distinction between simply being taken-to-be-justified and actually being-justified. Empirical-scientific explanations can only reveal why something is taken to be justified by a person

or a community and not why something is actually justified. For instance, when we emphasize the role of the social milieu of Weimar Democracy in the emergence of the Quantum mechanics,¹¹ we explain why specific scientists considered their theoretical choices rational. However, to determine whether those choices were genuinely rational, we also require the application of normative criteria. In this sense, empirical-scientific explanations cannot sustain the distinction between ‘taken to be justified’ and ‘actually justified.’

Nonetheless, every act of reduction of the normative to empirical-scientific explanations cannot but be presented as genuinely justified. It presupposes the distinction between being taken-to-be-justified and being-justified and hence preserves implicitly the autonomy of the domain of normativity. Therefore, while each normative explanation can be reduced to a set of empirical-scientific explanations, the domain of normative explanations is not altogether eliminable. To put it in a slogan, the reducibility of each and every normative explanation does not entail the eliminability of the domain of normative explanations. We cannot deny the autonomy of normativity and claim that cognitive acts of reduction are correct at the same time.

5.2. Rejecting God’s point of view

What makes the scientific naturalist image plausible is an implicit assumption that should be revealed and rejected. The assumption is that the act of explanatory reduction is performed from a standpoint external to the person or persons to whom the normative explanation is attributed. I have to be extremely sketchy here¹² but consider the following case: I perform an action because I am convinced that it is justified. Someone else, a sociologist for instance, explains my conviction in terms of a causal order entailed by sociology. This is a paradigmatic case of reduction for scientific naturalists. My action and the relevant beliefs have been taken out of the space of reason and have been placed in a social causal chain. In this sense, it is presumed that the domain of normative explanations has been impoverished while the domain of scientific explanations has been enriched. Scientific naturalists think that if we follow this logical path to its end, then we have to conclude that the domain of normative explanations is eliminable through the gradual reduction of its various parts. Now let’s take into consideration a slightly different version of this scenario. I

11 See (Forman, 2011).

12 See the examples in (Dimitrakos, 2020) for more details.

myself acquire access to the sociological knowledge that explains my action. Then I cease to believe that my action is actually justified.¹³ I understand that my behavior was the result of social causes that forced me to act like this. In this version of the scenario, my space of reasons has not been impoverished. On the contrary, it has been enriched in an important sense. If the act of reduction is correct, my new space of reasons contains a few more justifications that prevent me from making a mistake on the issue. During reflective scrutiny about what is a reason for acting in a particular way, taking into consideration the sociological knowledge about my condition can prevent me from believing uncritically that my action is justified. Thus, embracing the cognitive content of the act of reduction enriches the space of reason because it leads to what we may call the *restriction of the possibility of normative error*.

Scientific naturalists are eliminativist with regard to normative content because they take for granted the first scenario. But the first scenario presupposes God's point of view: an external vantage point overarching thought and world. Envisaging the space of reasons as shrinking after every act of reduction requires the putative standpoint of a reason that is not affected by this cognitive act. Only from this standpoint can the normative vocabulary be considered eliminable. But the presupposition of this sort of vantage point is very problematic, especially for accounts which aim to be naturalistic. Therefore, the reduction of a normative explanation to a scientific explanation is not an episode toward the necessary gradual shrinking of the space of reasons, but an episode toward its potential expansion. Equating reduction with elimination presupposes that the subject of reduction is necessarily different from the object of reduction, and this entails that there is something like a super-reason that accomplishes the task of reduction, a super-reason that is not and could not be affected by this very cognitive act of reduction.¹⁴

13 Sometimes, this kind of knowledge doesn't automatically lead to the decision that my action is not actually justified. This occurs only if I realize that the rational ground of my action has disappeared, and additional conditions are necessary for this recognition. The process can be intricate, but its description is not the focus here. The key point is to draw attention to the fact that the cognitive act of reduction is not necessarily supplied by an external point of view to the agent. This suffices for my argumentation here. I owe this clarification to the comment of an anonymous reviewer.

14 Of course, there can always be cases where the human beings that are the objects of the empirical inquiry will never have at their disposal the result of this inquiry. But this is just a contingent issue. My point is that human beings can, in principle, be aware of the act of reduction of a normative explanation to a set of empirical-scientific explanations.

6. Rational Second Nature as Knowledge of the First Nature

Scientific explanations are constitutive for our freedom¹⁵ rather than a threat to it. They help us become freer. They contribute to the restriction of the possibility of normative error and consequently prevent us from being mere slaves of the various causal goings-on, permitting us to take control of our lives. My main argument is that by rejecting the idea that explanatory reducibility entails the eliminability of the domain of normative explanations, we can create a suitable logical space between scientific naturalism and idealism. The perspective I am proposing is naturalistic insofar as it leaves nothing ‘beyond the reach’ of scientific understanding and presents scientific explanations as constitutive of the space of reasons. It is also liberal in the sense that it rejects the eliminability of normative vocabulary and retains the genuineness of normative explanations. Rationality is not a mysterious power outside of nature but a capacity to take control of our lives by understanding how the causal goings-on work, that is, by gradually knowing more about the cases in which we do not have control of our lives. Furthermore, it is impossible to get rid of the kind of intelligibility which is proper to reason without appealing to the extremely questionable idea of God’s point of view. Therefore, we can say that the essential feature of second nature—or more correctly, of rational second nature—is the human ability to grasp cognitively the causal goings-on that are part of both first and second nature. Second nature is the purely natural ability to adjust our beliefs and actions to the knowledge of the causalgoings-on which dictate our lives. In short, rational¹⁶ second nature is the knowledge of the first.

As I have argued elsewhere (Dimitrakos, 2020), my account has two main philosophical consequences that diverge from McDowell’s liberal naturalist perspective. The first is that freedom, understood as a condition coextensive with the subject matter of normative explanations, is not an ‘either you have it or you don’t capacity’ (Pippin, 2008, p. 214). There are various degrees of freedom that depend on our knowledge of the causal

15 As I mentioned above (see fn 10), freedom is conceptually associated with autonomy and reason. Therefore, this proposition implies that scientific explanations are constitutive of our capacity for autonomy, i.e., for acting in accordance with right reason.

16 I want to stress that only the rational part of second nature can be identified as knowledge of the first nature. As we have seen, second nature can be divided into two domains: one that requires a kind of intelligibility not essentially different from that which takes first nature as its subject matter, and one that requires a kind of intelligibility that is proper to reason.

goings-on that affect us. The more we know the physical, biological, psychological, or sociological factors that affect our lives, the more we can endorse beliefs and undertake actions which can be considered as expressions of our rationality, and consequently, our freedom. The second is that the layout of the space of reasons is historically changeable. This kind of historicism does not entail normative relativism. The idea of the historical changeability of the layout of the space of reasons does not necessarily entail the idea that moral or epistemic judgements can genuinely change truth-value or moral value when they change historical context. It just implies the idea that the space of reasons is reorganized when new judgements become candidates for truth-value or moral-value, as the result of the ongoing expansion of our empirical-scientific knowledge of the causal factors that dictate our lives.

Now, I would like to briefly explore the philosophical consequences of my account for the putative logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ statements.

7. Blunting the Guillotine

The is/ought problem or gap is the central issue in contemporary metaethical conversations. It has its roots in what is often called Hume’s guillotine (Black, 1964), which challenges the logical possibility of deriving an evaluative or ought-statement from premises that are exclusively descriptive or is-statements. In a famous passage in *Treatise*, Hume writes:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis necessary that it should be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it (Hume, 2007, 3.1.27).

As the passage makes clear, Hume considers the derivation of ought-statements from is-statements inconceivable and he argues that the philosophers who make such derivations need to provide an argument which shows the sustainability of this kind of inference. In other words, he takes it that the default position should be that we cannot deduce normative conclusions from descriptive premises. The ‘dominant historical interpre-

tation' (Bělohrad, 2011, p. 263) attributed to Hume the idea that no further argument of this sort can be found and hence that the is/ought gap is unbridgeable. The 'informal philosophical thesis that one "can't get an ought from an is" or, less snappily, that purely descriptive premises never entail normative conclusions' (Russell, 2022), is often called 'Hume's law'.

I would like to argue that Hume's law seems to disregard the logical asymmetry between confirmation and refutation. Even if it is impossible to deduce an ought-conclusion from factual premises, it isn't equally impossible to deduce the refutation of an ought-statement from is-statements. Those are the cases where a normative error is revealed by the reduction of a normative explanation to a set of empirical-scientific explanations. Let me use an example. Someone, say X, believes that gender-based division of labor is right because men and women are substantially different. Therefore, they argue, this kind of division of labor takes advantage of the different skills and inclinations between people of different genders, and hence, maximizes the efficiency of the labor force in society. Let's suppose now that X becomes familiar with sociology, history, and gender studies. X now realizes that his conviction that men and women have substantially different inclinations and skills was the result of his immersion in the dominant patriarchal ideology. He may now think that it was a mistake to believe that gender-based division is right. It's not the case that we ought to follow a gender-based division of labor. The example shows, I think, that the gap between is-statement and ought-statement is not completely unbridgeable. Even if it is a fallacy to make a deduction of the following sort:

Is-statement1
Is-statement2

Ought-statement.

It does not follow that it is equally fallacious to make one of the following sort:

Is-statement1
Is-statement2

It is not the case that [ought-statement].¹⁷

The question now is whether the proposition 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' is a factual or a normative one. If my previous argu-

17 For instance, it is not the case that gender-based division is right.

mentation about the epistemic normativity and God's point of view is sound, the propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' are not mere factual propositions. Only the propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that we think/believe/suppose that [ought statement]' are mere factual propositions. But, as I attempted to show above, the rejection of the philosophical presuppositions of scientific naturalism entails securing the distinction between being taken-to-be-justified and being-justified, and thus the distinction between the propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' and the propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that we think/believe/suppose that [ought statement]'. Hence, there are at least some propositions of the kind 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' which are normative and they can be deduced by factual premises.¹⁸ This means that the is/ought gap is not totally unbridgeable. By combining (a) the logical asymmetry of confirmation and refutation, (b) the rejection of the philosophical presuppositions of scientific naturalism, and (c) the possibility of reduction of (at least some of) the normative explanations to a set of empirical scientific explanations, we can reach the conclusion that we can infer normative statements from factual premises.

Two remarks are necessary at this point. First, the epistemology of the refutation of ought-statements appears way more complicated than the epistemology of the refutation of is-statements. For instance, refuting the conviction that gender-based division of labor is right appears extremely more complicated than refuting the conviction that all swans are black. However, as the Duhem-Quine thesis and other lessons from the philosophy of science teach, the refutation of factual propositions can be equally complex. Moreover, complexity is not the main point here. The point is whether or not there can be, in principle, an inference of normative statements from descriptive statements. Propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' show that there can be.

Second, one may object that this kind of proposition offers only a negative determination. They inform us about what actions we should avoid rather than providing positive guidance about what we ought to do. But statements, the objection could continue, need to have positive content in order to be normative. I wouldn't disagree with that. I am not suggesting that propositions of the sort 'it is not the case that [ought-statement]' can exclusively provide the normative content that we need. Nonetheless, I argue that even if they don't provide the entire content, it is difficult to deny that they do provide some content. As Hegel says in *Logic*, complet-

18 For instance, the sociological, historical, and other descriptive propositions about the dominant patriarchal ideology.

ing Spinoza's famous motto that determination is negation (*determination negation est*), every negation is also determination.

The one thing needed to *achieve scientific progress* – and it is essential to make an effort at gaining this quite *simple* insight into it – is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its particular content; or that such a negation is not just negation, but is the negation of the *determined fact* which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation; that in the result there is therefore contained in essence that from which the result derives – a tautology indeed, since the result would otherwise be something immediate and not a result. Because the result, the negation, is a *determinate* negation, it has a *content* (Hegel, 2010, 21.38, emphasis in the original).

I think that this kind of relation between the normative and the factual creates a middle ground between scientific naturalism and idealism. This middle ground is necessary for liberal naturalism. The middle ground is created through a rejection of both the view that the domain of ought-statements needs to be reduced to the domain of is-statements (crude naturalism), and the view that ought-statements are absolutely independent of any factual information about the world (idealism). Liberal naturalism requires an intermediate position according to which factual statements about the world play a significant role in the determination of the normative content. However, they don't exclusively dictate this content.

8. Conclusions

The account that I proposed here is necessarily incomplete. I am aware that a lot of philosophical questions concerning the relationship between factual and normative content need to be answered. For instance, apart from the factual content provided by the cases of reduction of a normative explanation to a set of empirical-scientific explanations, what are the other sources of determination of normative content for an account that aspires to be liberal naturalist? These questions disclose difficulties since they can reinstate the oscillation between crude naturalism and idealism. Despite the difficulties though, I think that the way to articulate a coherent liberal naturalist account goes through the three theses I attempted to defend here:

- (a) Rejecting the idea that nature is coextensive with the realm of law is not sufficient in order to cope with the threat of scientific naturalism. We also need to reject the implicit idea that the re-

ducibility¹⁹ of each and every normative explanation to a set of empirical-scientific explanations entails the eliminability of the domain of normative explanations.

- (b) In the light of the abovementioned rejection, the human sciences should be considered as constitutive for our freedom rather than a threat to it. Rational second nature should be first and foremost understood as knowledge of the first nature.
- (c) The is/ought gap is not absolute. Even if we cannot derive ought-conclusions (i.e. conclusions that consists in ought-statements) from factual premises we can derive refutations of ought-conclusions from factual premises.

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19 I want to stress that reducibility here means only the possibility of reduction.

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