7

NATURALISM AND THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

For the reasons explained in the previous chapter, very few metaethicists 7.1
are subjectivists, relativists, or divine command theorists. Most metaethicists reject the idea that the source of moral requirements is what people approve of or what God commands. If these views are not plausible, what other alternatives do you have? This chapter will discuss a metaethical theory called **moral realism** whereas the next chapter will discuss **expressivism**.

Moral Realism

If you didn't like the views discussed in the previous chapter, then you 7.2
might accept that certain acts just are right in themselves. According to this view, acts are not right because you approve of them or because God tells you to do them. Instead, some acts just have the property of being right. In order to understand what this property is like, you shouldn't think about anything else other than the act itself and its basic qualities. **Moral realism**[1] is therefore the view in metaethics that right and wrong are mind-independent moral properties. To say that these properties are mind-independent means that whether an act is right or wrong doesn't depend on what anyone thinks of the act.

There are many other properties that do not depend on what you approve 7.3
of or on what God commands you to do. Some objects are heavy, some move fast, and some are composed of carbon atoms. Likewise, some acts only last

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for ten seconds, some require a lot of effort, and others take place only in the evenings. None of this depends on what you think. Moral realists believe that moral properties similarly do not depend on what you think.

Naturalism vs. non-naturalism

7.4 **One fundamental debate in metaethics**[2] accepts this idea that some acts have the property of being the right thing to do exactly like some objects are composed of carbon atoms. Both of these properties exist, objectively speaking. The different sides in this debate disagree about the nature of these moral properties.

7.5 Both sides in this disagreement believe that all acts have a number of basic properties, which are often called **natural properties**. These properties include many familiar properties such as the ones mentioned above: acts last a certain length of time or they are typically done at a certain time of the day or by a certain group of people.

7.6 When philosophers talk about natural properties, they tend to talk about properties that have three distinguishing features (**Moore, 1903, ch. 2, sect. 26**; **Lewis, 1983, sect. 2**; **Copp, 2003**).[3] Natural properties can be:

i. observed empirically;
ii. studied scientifically;
iii. and the having of them can cause other things to happen.

Therefore, how long an act lasts is one of its natural properties: you can observe how long an act lasts, you can measure this by scientific instruments, and the duration of an act can, for example, cause you to be bored. It is worth adding that not all naturalists think that natural properties have all these three properties. Some naturalists think that a property is a natural property merely in virtue of being something we can observe. These philosophers do not think that natural properties must always be something you can study scientifically.

7.7 The so-called **naturalists in metaethics**[4] believe that moral properties like right and wrong are natural properties. According to naturalists, you can observe and study scientifically which acts are right and what it is for these acts to be right. Naturalists also think that right and wrong can make a real difference to what happens in the world. The wrongness of a public policy such as **slavery**[5] can, for example, cause people to protest against it (Sturgeon, 1988, p. 245).

Different naturalists defend different views about which natural properties rightness and wrongness are. Some naturalists, for example, believe that for an act to be right is for it to maximize the amount of happiness (**Mill, 1861, ch. 4, para. 9**).[6] Other naturalists believe that the rightness of an act consists of the fact that you would want to desire to do the act if you vividly imagined what would happen as a result (**Lewis, 1989**).[7] If these views were right, then you could learn which acts are right through empirical investigation. You could test empirically which acts tend to promote happiness and what you would want to desire if you vividly imagined the consequences of your actions. 7.8

In contrast, **non-naturalists in metaethics**[8] deny that moral properties are natural properties (Dancy, 2006). They think that there are properties that are completely different in kind and that moral properties are that type of properties. It is easy to approach this view with the following illustration. Consider a situation in which **God creates a new universe**.[9] He first creates all the physical particles of the new world. This time God wants to create a clone of our own universe and so He creates in the new universe an identical twin for every atom of our universe. He also arranges these atoms in the same way as the atoms are arranged in our universe. After all this, God has a break. 7.9

At this point, the new universe will have its natural properties. It will contain physical objects like tables, cars, and lions and these objects will have properties like a specific mass, an electric charge, and a size. However, according to the non-naturalists, nothing in this world will yet be right or wrong because so far God has only created the natural properties. They think that, after His break, God would have to add right and wrong to this world, because they are non-natural properties. 7.10

Most non-naturalists do not believe that the universe or its moral properties were created by God. They think that moral properties just happen to exist as an additional part of our universe in the same way as **the Big Bang**[10] just happened. Non-naturalists also believe that these new non-natural properties are different in kind. They can't be empirically observed, you can't study them scientifically, and they can't cause anything to happen. 7.11

Pros and cons of non-naturalism

An example from Gilbert Harman illustrates the advantages of non-naturalism nicely (**Harman, 1977**).[11] Imagine that you are walking home 7.12

from a party when you suddenly see a group of kids setting a cat on fire. You might be tempted to say that you could just see that this act is wrong, but this way of talking must be highly metaphorical. What you really see is the kids, the cat, the petrol, and the cat catching fire, but you do not see the wrongness of it all. **What you see just makes you think that the act in question is wrong**.[12]

7.13 The same goes for science. Scientific instruments like **the huge particle accelerators**[13] do not detect right and wrong and chemistry textbooks do not have chapters on moral properties. Moral properties do not seem to be needed in causal explanations either. Do you really need to explain why people protest against a policy by how unjust the policy is? It seems as though you could always find better and more basic explanations in these cases. Perhaps people protest against the policy because it discriminates arbitrarily against certain groups or because it makes so many people poor and these are things they don't want to happen. These are basic natural properties that seem to suffice for explaining why the protests happened. There's no need to mention any additional moral qualities of the protests (admittedly, some naturalists think that we should, exactly for this reason, think that moral properties just are natural properties of the type that can influence what happens).

7.14 Moral properties therefore seem to be very different from natural properties since it doesn't seem as if these properties cause anything to happen. Non-naturalists believe that this means that moral properties must be of their own unique kind (**Moore, 1903, ch. 1, sect. 15**).[14] This supports the idea that you can't use science to investigate what is right and wrong. Yet it is not enough to say that moral properties are not like natural properties. You want to know: what *are* they like, then?

7.15 Non-naturalists struggle to give an informative answer to this question. They often say that **normativity**[15] makes moral properties unique and special (Dancy, 2006, pp. 132–142). This is the idea that, unlike other properties, moral properties have a certain authority to require that you act in certain ways. For example, the fact that it is wrong to lie to other people requires you to not do so. But explaining what this ability to require consists of is equally difficult.

7.16 The best that philosophers have come up with has been to say that moral properties have unique **practical relevance** – they directly bear on what you are to do. In contrast, whether a natural property bears on what you are to do is always a further fact about the natural property on this view. If what you do is wrong, then you are not to act in that way, whereas if you

are considering making other people laugh, this as such leaves it open what you are to do.

The second problem with non-naturalism is that it is mysterious 7.17
how you could ever know[16] what's right and wrong if these were non-natural properties. According to this view, moral properties don't cause anything to happen and they can't be empirically observed or studied scientifically. Therefore, how could you know which acts have these properties?

Before we tackle these problems of non-naturalism, let us first look 7.18
at G.E. Moore's hugely influential **Open Question Argument** *for* non-naturalism (**Moore, 1903, ch. 1, sect. 13**; Feldman, 2005).[17] This argument attempts to show that moral properties must be simple non-natural properties of their own kind. As will be explained below, this argument too has its problems. Despite these problems the argument continues to be important in metaethics since all theories must still be able to give an explanation of the powerful intuitions behind it.

The Open Question Argument

One simple distinction plays a crucial role in the Open Question Argu- 7.19
ment. On one side of this distinction is the world in which you live. It is populated by concrete objects such as **Barack Obama, the Eiffel Tower**,[18] and your teeth. The properties of these objects are also part of the world. Barack Obama is tall, the Eiffel Tower is made of iron, and your teeth can bite.

These worldly objects and their properties must be distinguished from 7.20
the language you use to describe them. The basic units of language are words and sentences. **These words and sentences have meaning and they refer to the objects and properties in the world**.[19] In philosophy it is extremely important to keep track of when you are talking about the world (and its objects and properties) and when you are talking about language (and its words and sentences).

Philosophers have devised a convention that helps you to keep track of 7.21
this. You should use quotation marks when you talk about words. It is therefore correct to write that the word "red" has three letters. Here I have mentioned the word "red" and described its quality of having three letters. In contrast, when you talk about the world you should not use quotation marks (except when you are quoting other people). Therefore, it is correct

to write that red is one of the three basic colors, but "red" is not colored – it is a word and thus has no particular color.

7.22 With this distinction in mind, we can return to **G.E. Moore**'s famous argument, which you can find in the first chapter of Moore's ***Principia Ethica***.[20] It is worth knowing that even if the Open Question Argument is usually attributed to Moore, many other philosophers before him had presented similar arguments against naturalism (**Price, 1758, ch. 1, sect. 1**; **Sidgwick, 1889, 480–483**).[21]

Stage 1: Words and properties

7.23 Moore's argument begins with an assumption about words. They have two essential properties – **meaning** and **reference**. The meaning of a word is roughly what you have in mind when you are using the word. When you use the word "ice-cream," you might have in mind an idea of a frozen dessert which is made out of dairy products and which you can buy from a van or a supermarket. This is what the word means according to this simple view (**Locke, 1690, book III, chs 1–2**).[22]

7.24 Words also have a reference. The reference of a word is an object, property, or substance which the word picks out. In Paris, there is a tall iron building which was constructed in 1889. This object is the reference of the words "the Eiffel Tower."

7.25 The basic assumption behind the Open Question Argument is that the meaning of a word determines what the word refers to. People have a certain idea in their mind when they use the word "snow": it's something cold and white and it falls from the sky in the winter. Because we have this idea in mind when we use this word, it refers to a certain substance that covers the ground in the winter. The reference of a word is thus whatever satisfies the idea we have in our mind when we use the word.

7.26 This assumption has an implication which is the first premise of Moore's argument:

> Premise 1: Two seemingly different properties are in fact one and the same property only if two words that are used to talk about these properties have the same meaning.

To see the point of this premise, consider the word "grandmother," which means the same as the words "mother's or father's mother" because you have the same ideas in mind when you use these words. This is why

"mother's or father's mother" is the correct definition of the word "grandmother." Moore's first premise then says that, because of this, the properties of being a grandmother and being a mother's or father's mother must be one and the same property.

7.27 Moore thought that this premise follows from the earlier assumption. If you assume that what words refer to is determined by what you have in mind when you use them, then it is easy to think that if you have two different ideas in mind when you use two words then these words must stand for different things. Likewise, if you have the same idea in mind when you use two different words, then presumably these words must refer to the same thing.

Stage 2: Moral words and moral properties

7.28 The first stage of Moore's argument has an important consequence for ethics. It means that:

> Premise 2: A moral property such as the property of being good can be a natural property only if the word "good" means the same as some words which we use to talk about natural properties.

It follows from this premise that the property of being good can be a natural property only if the word "good" means the same as the words "whatever maximizes the amount of happiness" or "whatever you want to desire in the circumstances in which you vividly imagine the consequences of your options" or the like. In terms of definitions, the second premise of Moore's argument states that the property of being good is a natural property only if the word "good" can be correctly defined by using words which pick out natural properties.

Stage 3: The open question test

7.29 The third stage of Moore's argument gives you a test which you can use to see whether two words mean the same thing or not. If a good definition captures the correct meaning of the analyzed word, then this is also a test for the correctness of definitions. The Open Question Argument bears the name of this test.

7.30 Imagine that someone claims that the words "brother" and "male sibling" mean the same. Here is how Moore's test is supposed to work. You are

supposed to first take an object that satisfies the suggested definition. So let us assume that Richard is your male sibling. Moore then suggested that in this situation you should consider the question: "Richard is your male sibling, but is he your brother?"

7.31 Can you begin to consider how you should answer this question? Moore thought that if you can't, then this question is closed. He then claimed that if this question is closed then the words "brother" and "male sibling" must mean the same. The explanation for this is that when you use the words "male sibling" in the first part of the question you attach one idea to Richard in your mind – namely, that he is your male sibling. You then can't begin to think about whether Richard is your brother because when you apply the word "brother" to Richard you have that very same idea in your mind again. You are in effect asking, "Richard is my male sibling but is he my male sibling?" which must be a closed question.

7.32 When the words in question mean something different, the corresponding questions will be open. Consider someone who wants to define the word "dessert" as "something sweet." We can then consider an object which satisfies this definition, say a banana. Moore says that you should then consider the question: "A banana is sweet, but is it a dessert?"

7.33 You can begin to consider how to answer this question and therefore it is an open one. You can eat a banana for a dessert, but is it the case that whenever you have a banana you are having a dessert? This is debatable. Because the question is an open question, according to Moore the words "dessert" and "something sweet" cannot mean the same and so you cannot define one of them in terms of the other.

7.34 Moore's third premise can then be formulated like this:

> Premise 3: The words "A" and "B" mean something different if and only if the question "X is A, but is it B?" is an open question. A question is open if you can begin to consider how to answer it and closed if you can't.

Stage 4: Moral words and open questions

7.35 Let us then return to the word "good." In this last stage of the argument, Moore argues that the open question test shows that the word "good" doesn't mean the same as any other words that are used to talk about natural properties. Take the utilitarian who claims that "good" means "whatever maximizes general happiness." Let us assume that your act of

reading this book makes more people happy than anything else you could do. Ask yourself then: "Reading this book maximizes general happiness, but is it good?"

Moore claimed that questions like this are always open. Being able to correctly describe an act with words that refer to natural properties always leaves room for considering whether that act is good. That something maximizes happiness or is what you desire to desire never fully settles whether the act in question is good. You can always begin to think whether acts that maximize happiness or ones you desire to desire are good. Even if later on you come to the conclusion that they are, this isn't true merely on the basis of the meaning of the words. 7.36

This led Moore to the next premise of his argument: 7.37

> Premise 4: Questions of the form "X is N, but is X good?," where N stands for a word used to talk about a natural property, are always open questions.

Stage 5: Putting the argument together

From Premises 3 and 4, Moore concluded that moral terms like "good" and words that refer to natural properties like "what maximizes happiness" can never mean the same thing. Moore thus denied that there are correct definitions of moral words using only words that stand for natural properties. 7.38

If you then return to the Premise 2, you can see how the Open Question Argument forms a strong argument against naturalism. The second premise says that a moral property can be a natural property only if the corresponding moral word means the same as some words which you can use to talk about natural properties. Therefore, good can be a natural property only if the word "good" means the same as words used to talk about natural properties. 7.39

Moore has just concluded that the word "good" never has the same meaning as words used to talk about natural properties. From this and the second premise, he can conclude that: 7.40

> Conclusion: Moral properties (like the property of being good) are not natural properties.

This conclusion led Moore to believe that goodness must be a non-natural property of its own kind.

Responses to the Open Question Argument

7.41 Moore's argument has been hugely influential. Most research in metaethics is still done under the shadow of the Open Question Argument (**Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, 1992**).[23] Despite this, no one really thinks that the argument works in the traditional form explained above. The following section will consider three reasons for this.

Response 1: Begging the question

7.42 **William Frankena** made one of the first objections to the Open Question Argument (**Frankena, 1939**).[24] He accused Moore of **begging the question** against naturalism. Philosophers use **this phrase**[25] in a different and more precise way than other people.

7.43 Consider first an example of this phrase as typically used. Imagine that a politician announces a plan to raise taxes. One thing a commentator might say in response is, "This policy begs the question: will many people who earn a lot move to other countries where the taxes are lower?" Here the commentator is using the words "begs the question" to mean that the given policy invites an obvious question.

7.44 You can't use this phrase in philosophy in the same way, because in philosophy you beg the question with an argument when you use your conclusion as one of your premises. If you are trying to give an argument for the conclusion that God exists, your premises cannot already rely on His existence or you are begging the question in the philosophical sense. Arguments that beg the question like this are no good because they don't give any new reasons to believe in God. Only someone who already believes in God can use them to conclude that God exists.

7.45 If we understand begging the question in this way, then Frankena claimed that when Moore made the Open Question Argument against naturalism he was already assuming that naturalism is false as one of his premises. You would already need to be a non-naturalist to accept Moore's argument against naturalism, which is just as silly as assuming that God exists in an argument for His existence.

7.46 You can see the force of this objection from the perspective of a naturalist. Imagine that you are absolutely certain that for an act to be good is for it to maximize general happiness. You then meet Moore, who tells you that even if an act maximizes happiness you can begin to consider whether it

is a good act. You should protest at this point. Given how certain you are, this is a closed question for you. The answer is so obvious that you can't begin to consider how to answer the question.

Because of this, it looks from your perspective as though Moore has just assumed that "good" and "whatever maximizes general happiness" do not mean the same thing. This assumption that relies on the truth of non-naturalism is what makes him think that you must be confused if you don't think that the relevant question is an open question. In this case the Open Question Argument doesn't give you any new reasons to give up your naturalism. Moore has therefore begged the question. He has assumed his conclusion, non-naturalism, as one of his premises. 7.47

Despite the appeal of this objection, Moore wasn't merely assuming that questions like "this act maximizes general happiness, but is it good?" are open. He had evidence that a lot of normal people begin to consider questions like this. You can go out and ask people and you are unlikely to meet people who think questions like this are silly. This is why Moore was entitled to say that "good" does not mean "whatever maximizes general happiness" in our shared language. As a result, when he said that the crucial questions are open he wasn't merely relying on his personal dislike of naturalism, and therefore it doesn't seem as though he was begging the question. 7.48

Response 2: Making know-how explicit

The second response to the Open Question Argument challenges the argument's hidden assumption according to which it is always easy to know whether or not two words mean the same thing (Soames, 2003, pp. 46–48). You can use the open question test to see whether two words mean the same only if this assumption is true. For example, because it is transparent that "grandmother" and "mother's or father's mother" mean the same, you can't begin to consider how to answer the question "Ann is my mother's mother, but is she my grandmother?" You know that you have the same idea in mind when you use these two expressions and for this reason you can't consider how to answer the question. 7.49

The second objection points out that it's not always easy to know whether two words mean the same (Smith, 1994, pp. 37–38). Because of this, you can sometimes use two words that mean the same without knowing it. In these cases, the relevant questions in Moore's test would feel open for you even if the words in the question meant the same. This would mean that 7.50

the open question test would not work as a test of sameness of meaning and so the whole Open Question Argument would fail.

7.51 Let's make this objection more concrete with an example. There is a difference between skills and more theoretical knowledge. Skills are abilities to do things. If you can ride a bike, you know how to ride one – you have the skill. We call such skills "know-how." In contrast, theoretical knowledge consists of knowing that such and such is the case. You might know that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that John F. Kennedy was the President of the United States.

7.52 The second objection suggests that when you learn a new word you don't do this by learning facts but rather by learning a new skill of how to classify things under a label. When you learned to use the words "green" and "blue," you learned how to separate green things from blue things. When you acquired this skill, you didn't learn any definitions. You just came to know how to react with words to things that resemble one another in a certain way.

7.53 The second response to the Open Question Argument applies this thought to moral language. When you grow up, you see others categorize acts under labels such as "good" and "bad." At some point, you begin to attempt to do the same. In the beginning you might get things wrong in the same way as a baby might call a cow "a horse." When this happens, other people will correct you. Gradually you will learn the skill of calling acts "good" and "bad" in a way that is acceptable to others.

7.54 When you have acquired the relevant linguistic skills, you don't just randomly call things "blue" or "bad." In your mind, you use some implicit standards for making these distinctions. You might call certain objects "books" because they are pages of paper bound together even if you have never explicitly thought about this before. In this case you mean many pages of paper bound together whenever you use the word "book" even if this might not be obvious to you.

7.55 In response to the Open Question Argument the naturalist can then argue that the fact that the relevant questions of that argument are open doesn't show that moral words don't mean the same as other words. The naturalist can insist that the correct definition of "good" ("whatever maximizes general happiness" or "whatever you desire to desire when you vividly imagine things" or…) captures explicitly the principle which we use implicitly to classify acts as "good." Even if you may not know it, this is what you have in mind when you call an act "good."

7.56 This would explain why we can always ask whether an act that maximizes happiness is good. When you ask whether such acts are good, you

are first relying on your implicit ability to classify acts as "good" on the grounds that they maximize general happiness. At this point, you are not using your explicit knowledge about what the word means. This is why you can begin to wonder whether acts that maximize general happiness are good. As a result, "good" can mean "whatever maximizes general happiness" despite the open question. This would be enough to save naturalism from the Open Question Argument.

There is one potential problem with this response. Even if what you mean by different words isn't always easy to know, this cannot be completely hidden from you either (Baldwin, 1993, p. xix). When you think about it hard enough, you should be able to tell which principles you use implicitly when you apply different words. First of all, you can test the suggested principles against what you think of different cases. If the principle doesn't agree with your judgments, then it isn't the one you are using. Secondly, you can think about how natural the principle feels. Is it something you could have in mind when you apply the word? 7.57

If you like the Open Question Argument, you can use these ideas to argue against the naturalist definitions of "good." Whenever a naturalist gives you a definition of the word "good," you can argue that it doesn't fit the way you are using the word or that it feels too alien to be the principle you are using. If you can do this in enough cases, then you are entitled to think that moral words can't be defined by using other words which are about natural properties. 7.58

Response 3: The sense/reference distinction

The third objection attacks the first premise of the Open Question Argument: two seemingly different properties can in fact be one and the same property only if the words we use to talk about these properties mean the same thing. According to this premise, the properties of being a vixen and being a female fox are one and the same property because the words "vixen" and "female fox" mean the same thing. 7.59

The third objection says that what a word means – that is, what you have in mind when you use the word – does not determine what the word refers to (Kripke, 1980). If this is right, then contrary to what Moore believed, words that have different meanings can still refer to one and the same property. 7.60

Two famous examples illustrate this. Consider first the names **"Evening Star" and "Morning Star."**[26] When you use these words, you have in your 7.61

mind the star first seen in the evening and the star last seen in the morning. However, the fact that you have these different ideas in mind when you use these words doesn't mean that the words refer to different objects. It turns out that both of these names pick out the planet **Venus**.[27] This illustrates how words that do not mean the same can be names for the same object.

7.62 Another famous example is about scientific identity-statements and water. Water consists of H_2O molecules. If the liquid in your bottle has any other chemical constitution, then it isn't water. In other words, there is just one substance here and we have two different names for it: "water" and "H_2O." These two words refer to the same substance even if they don't mean the same. When you use the word "water," you have in your mind the idea of a transparent, tasteless, and odorless liquid that falls from the sky and fills the seas. In contrast, when you use the word "H_2O," you are thinking of hydrogen and oxygen atoms in a certain formation. Despite this difference in what you have in mind, these two words still pick out the same substance from the world.

7.63 These examples illustrate that words that have different meanings can refer to the very same thing. Moore was therefore wrong when he claimed that two seemingly different properties can be one and the same property only if the words we use to talk about these properties mean the same thing. There is no reason why the words "good" and "whatever maximizes general happiness" could not refer to the same property of acts even if these words do not have the same meaning. This is why the Open Question Argument fails to show that good is not a natural property.

7.64 This response led to the development of the **contemporary forms of metaethical naturalism**.[28] The earlier forms of naturalism were **analytic**[29] forms of naturalism. According to these views, moral properties are natural properties because moral language can be fully understood in terms of non-moral and naturalist language.

7.65 In contrast, according to the new, **synthetic** forms of naturalism, moral words do not mean the same thing as words we use to talk about natural properties; and yet moral words can still pick out natural properties, as the previous response showed. These views then recommend that you should empirically investigate which natural properties moral words pick out (**Boyd, 1988**).[30] In the same way as it was a cosmological discovery that the words "Evening Star" and "Morning Star" refer to Venus and a chemical discovery that water is H_2O, we need to empirically investigate to see which natural property good is. This requires focusing on which natural properties best explain when we use moral words.

This response to the Open Question Argument failed to settle the debate because Moore's defenders have formulated new versions of the argument that can deal with the objection.[31] We must, however, move on. There is one last thing which still needs to be explored in this chapter. Moore concluded from the Open Question Argument that good is a simple, non-natural property of its own unique kind. You can't observe this property empirically or study it scientifically. How then did Moore think we could ever know about what's good? 7.66

Intuitionism in Metaethics*

One traditional answer to this question is called **intuitionism**.[32] We have already discussed one form of intuitionism in Chapter 5. Ross's theory of prima facie duties is called intuitionism in normative ethics because he believed that there are many moral duties that do not have a single source. Ross also accepted the more **epistemological**[33] form of intuitionism which will be discussed in this section (see Huemer, 2005; Zimmermann, 2010, ch. 4; Kaspar, 2012). Here, intuitionism is a theory of how you know which acts have non-natural moral properties. 7.67

The problem of knowledge*

When you investigate the world you should aim at knowledge. Knowledge is the gold standard because when you know something you get things right in a reliable way. What knowledge is more precisely is an interesting and difficult question. 7.68

According to **the traditional theory of knowledge**,[34] knowing something requires three things. Consider the fact that Paris is the capital of France. Knowing that Paris is the capital of France first requires that you *believe* that Paris is the capital of France. If you don't believe that it is, then you just don't know that this is a fact. Secondly, knowing this fact also requires that it is *true* that Paris is the capital of France. You can't know that Marseilles is the capital of France because it isn't. 7.69

Even if you believe something that is true, this isn't enough for you to know. You might believe that it will be sunny tomorrow just because you really want to play tennis then. In this case, even if it turns out to be sunny tomorrow, you didn't *know* that it would be. This is because you just got lucky – you didn't have any real evidence. As a result, it is often said that 7.70

your true belief counts as knowledge only if you have justification for that belief. According to the traditional view, you know that p when:

i. you believe that p;
ii. it is true that p; and
iii. you are justified in believing that p.

7.71 The debate about how you could know what is good if goodness is a non-natural property has focused on the last condition: justification. Clearly we have moral beliefs and, if we are lucky, perhaps at least some of these beliefs are true. Yet in order to know what is good and bad, you would in addition need to have justification for your true moral beliefs. The challenge for the non-naturalist is to explain what could justify our moral beliefs given that most of our other beliefs are justified by what we see and hear.

7.72 One answer to this challenge relies on **inferential justification**.[35] Your belief is inferentially justified when it is supported by your other justified beliefs. Your belief that Max is at home is inferentially justified when it is supported by your other beliefs that he just picked up the phone and that he could have done so only if he were at home.

7.73 Intuitionists argue against the idea that all our moral beliefs could be inferentially justified. They claim that all your moral beliefs can't be justified because they are supported your other justified beliefs. Intuitionists claim that the inferential justification requirement leads either to **a vicious regress or a vicious circle**[36] (BonJour, 1985, pp. 17–25).

7.74 The inferential justification view says that justified beliefs must always be supported by your other justified beliefs. We can then ask: what justifies these supporting beliefs? According to the view we are discussing, these beliefs too must be supported by some other justified beliefs. What justifies those beliefs? This leads to an infinite chain of justifying beliefs. However, as a finite being, you can't have an infinite number of beliefs that support one another.

7.75 To avoid this problem you could argue that the mutually supporting beliefs form **a network of beliefs**[37] in which every single belief is supported by some other beliefs in the network. This is no good either. Different people can have different networks of mutually supporting beliefs. Consider a scientist and **a scientologist**[38] who hold internally consistent but mutually conflicting beliefs. It would be odd to think that their beliefs are equally justified. Furthermore, it would be strange to think that no matter

how wacky a view is, the beliefs of that view are justified just as long as they are consistent.

Foundationalism to the rescue*

One traditional solution to this problem of knowledge is called **foundationalism**.[39] According to this view, not all justified beliefs need to be justified by some other justified beliefs. Some foundationalists have argued that some basic beliefs are justified because we are directly acquainted with the objects of these beliefs (**Russell, 1911**).[40] You might, for example, be justified in believing that you are hot now because you are acquainted with how you feel at the moment. Other foundationalists claim that some of our basic beliefs can be justified because they are produced by a reliable mechanism. 7.76

Intuitionists in metaethics are foundationalists in this broad sense. They too deny that all justified moral beliefs need to be supported by some other beliefs. Many other views in metaethics can accept this type of foundationalism too. What makes intuitionism a special form of foundationalism, however, is that they have introduced a distinct way in which some basic moral beliefs could be justified even if they are not justified by other justified beliefs. They argue that you are justified to believe certain moral propositions because these propositions are "self-evident" (**Ross, 1930, ch. 2, para. 27**).[41] This doesn't mean that these propositions will necessarily seem obviously true to you. Rather, intuitionists argue that understanding and attentively considering a self-evident proposition is sufficient for being justified to believe it (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 247). 7.77

Intuitionists argue that some basic moral propositions are self-evident in this sense. These propositions might include the following propositions: 7.78

- Pain and suffering is bad.
- It is wrong to kill innocent people in ordinary situations.
- Other things being equal, you should keep your promises.

If (i) you understand the concepts used in these propositions and (ii) you carefully consider these propositions in a calm and unbiased way, then you are justified to believe these things irrespective of what else you believe. Note that here neither understanding the concepts nor carefully considering the proposition on its own justifies the given moral belief. Rather, both

conditions need to be satisfied at the same time. If this is the case, then you do not need to give any further reasons for why you believe these propositions to be true. Just understanding and accepting them after careful consideration justifies your belief in itself.

7.79 This becomes less mysterious if you consider the following basic propositions:

- Nothing can be both red and green all over.
- $2 + 2 = 4$.
- The existence of grandchildren is impossible without at least three generations.

If you understand these propositions, you are justified to believe them to be true even if you cannot give any further reasons for why these propositions are true. They just are true and you are justified to believe this. Intuitionists then argue that some basic moral propositions are exactly like this too.

Misconceptions and objections*

7.80 *Misconception 1: The role of experience and emotions* Intuitionism in metaethics has often been misunderstood. First of all, even if intuitionists argue that you don't need any external justification for some of your basic moral beliefs, they can also emphasize the importance of experiences, emotions, and education. Intuitionists can claim that without the right experiences, feelings, and upbringing you could not properly understand the relevant propositions or consider them carefully enough.

7.81 For example, without having been upset because someone has cheated on you, you might not understand what it means to say that cheating is wrong. In this way, even if experiences and emotions do not directly justify your moral beliefs, perhaps our moral beliefs would not be justified without them.

7.82 *Misconception 2: What seems self-evident to you* Secondly, the self-evident basic beliefs need not be obvious to you or be based on quick moral reactions. Coming to accept the relevant propositions may often require a lot of time, effort, and serious thinking. This is why many moral propositions that seem self-evident to you at first may turn out not to be self-evident in

the end. These seemingly obvious beliefs can be based on our emotional and selfish biases. This is why you can't object to intuitionism on the grounds that the suggested moral propositions do not seem self-evident to you. The claim is only that if you eventually come to accept these propositions when you fully understand them and consider them carefully, your beliefs will be justified. A quick emotional reaction doesn't show that you have understood the proposition.

Objection 1: People who understand but don't agree A more serious 7.83
problem is that not everyone who understands the relevant propositions (like that pain is bad) believes these propositions to be true. Consider Fred, who thinks that suffering is good because it makes people appreciate the small pleasures in life. In this case, you would want to say that Fred perfectly well understands the proposition that suffering is bad but he just doesn't agree with it. Shouldn't this undermine the idea that you can have justification for believing that suffering is bad merely by understanding the concepts in question and considering the proposition carefully (Nowell-Smith, 1954, p. 48)? What should the intuitionists say about people like Fred?

Many critics have missed the point that intuitionism itself is neutral 7.84
about cases like Fred. It only says that, if you understand and believe the proposition that suffering is bad after careful consideration, then you are justified to have that belief. This has no consequences for the cases in which people like Fred do not believe that suffering is bad. Some people just are so convinced about the truth of their own views that there is nothing you can do to change their mind. Because of this, you can't require intuitionists to be able to do so either.

Even if this response can deal with the objection itself, it is still not 7.85
perfect. Intuitionists should be able to say something more informative about Fred. The basic question is: what kind of a mistake does Fred make if he doesn't accept that pain is bad? What is it about him that prevents him from accepting the belief that would justify itself? Does he not understand the words in question after all? Does he fail to consider the proposition carefully enough? Or, is he just not required to accept this belief even if he understands the proposition and considers it carefully? Many people think that intuitionism should be able to answer these questions as this would be the best way to explain the difference between people who hold justified moral beliefs and those who don't. Yet even if the intuitionists fail to answer these questions, they can still argue that normal people who are not like

Fred – people who understand and accept the proposition that pain is bad – are justified to hold this belief.

7.86 *Objection 2: Dogmatism* You will probably not be happy with this answer. It seems objectionably **dogmatic**[42] to ignore people who disagree with your view. It also seems too conservative to say that our own current moral beliefs are unique in the sense that only these beliefs can justify themselves.

7.87 However, intuitionists are not committed to ignoring other people's views or to saying that only they know what is right and wrong. Intuitionists can accept that disagreement between carefully reflecting people is a reason to doubt the seemingly self-evident moral propositions. Whatever beliefs seem self-evident to you at one moment may turn out to be a mistake later on. What seems self-evident to us can therefore later on fail to be self-evident in the required way. Intuitionists who understand this need not be guilty of pushing their own prejudiced beliefs on others.

Summary and Questions

7.88 This chapter has explored different versions of moral realism according to which there are objective moral facts. All these views accept that acts have moral properties independently of what we think of these acts. The main disagreement between realists, therefore, is about whether moral properties are just like all other properties or whether they are properties of their own unique kind.

7.89 Naturalists in metaethics believe that moral properties are just like all other properties. They believe that you can observe and scientifically study moral properties, which also can cause things to happen. For example, you can use people's moral qualities to explain their behavior. According to this view, you can say that Mother Teresa helped so many people because she was so kind. Naturalists therefore attempt to make moral properties a part of our scientific worldview.

7.90 In contrast, non-naturalists defend the idea that moral properties are of their own unique kind, because they are *normative* properties. That these properties have practical significance is built into these properties themselves, which makes them unique.

7.91 The main bulk of this chapter then investigated Moore's influential argument against naturalism. According to it, moral properties can't be natural

properties because even if you know what natural properties an act has you can still always meaningfully ask whether the act is good. Understanding this argument and the responses to it is essential for understanding much of moral philosophy today.

The very last part of this chapter considered how you could know about moral properties if they were non-natural properties. The traditional non-naturalist response to this challenge is a theory called intuitionism, which relies on the notion of self-evident truths. According to this view, there are some basic moral propositions which you are entitled to believe merely in virtue of understanding them. 7.92

Based on the philosophical resources introduced in this chapter, consider the following questions: 7.93

1. What do moral realists believe? How plausible do you find the view?
2. What are the differences between natural and non-natural properties supposed to be?
3. How would you explain the Open Question Argument to your friends?
4. Consider the second objection to the Open Question Argument. How do the defenders of this objection and Moore disagree about what goes on in your mind when you use words?
5. How do intuitionists explain moral knowledge? Is this explanation satisfactory?

Annotated Bibliography

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