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Why Naturalism?

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## WHY NATURALISM?

**ABSTRACT.** My goal in this paper is to explain what ethical naturalism is, to locate the pivotal issue between naturalists and non-naturalists, and to motivate taking naturalism seriously. I do not aim to establish the truth of naturalism nor to answer the various familiar objections to it. But I do aim to motivate naturalism sufficiently that the attempt to deal with the objections will seem worthwhile. I propose that naturalism is best understood as the view that the moral properties are natural in the sense that they are empirical. I pursue certain issues in the understanding of the empirical. The crux of the matter is whether any synthetic proposition about the instantiation of a moral property is strongly *a priori* in that it does not admit of empirical evidence against it. I propose an argument from epistemic defeaters that, I believe, undermines the plausibility of *a priorism* in ethics and supports the plausibility of naturalism.

**KEY WORDS:** *a priori*, causal properties, empirical, moral properties, naturalism, non-naturalism

My goal in this paper is to explain what ethical naturalism is, to locate the pivotal issue between naturalists and non-naturalists, and to motivate taking naturalism seriously. It is no part of my goal to establish the truth of naturalism. There are various familiar objections to it, including, most importantly, the objection that naturalism cannot explain the normativity of moral judgment. In this paper, my goal is simply to motivate naturalism sufficiently that the attempt to deal with the objections will seem worthwhile.

An ethical naturalist holds that there are moral properties and relations – for example, there are moral rightness, goodness, justice, and virtuousness – and she holds that these properties and relations are ‘natural’.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, when a naturalist hears us say that something is right or wrong, just or unjust, she takes the truth of what we say to depend on whether the relevant thing has the relevant property, and she takes this to depend in turn exclusively on the way things are in the natural world. The chief problem, of course, is to explain what it might mean to claim that moral properties are *natural* properties. I think that once this is properly explained, naturalism will seem enormously attractive. If we believe that there are moral properties at all, we will find ourselves moved in the direction of naturalism.

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<sup>1</sup>In what follows, I ignore relations.



It is important to understand from the outset the relation between ethical naturalism and the unrestricted form of naturalism according to which the natural world is all that there is. There are two points. First, an ethical naturalist can consistently reject an *unrestricted* naturalism. She needn't be a naturalist about mathematics, for example. Her thought is specifically about morality. Second, unrestricted naturalism does not commit one to ethical naturalism. Ethical naturalism, as I understand it, involves the thesis that there are *moral properties*, and this thesis is not entailed by unrestricted naturalism. Ethical naturalism is a kind of moral *realism*, but an unrestricted naturalist could accept an error theory in ethics, or a version of expressivism.<sup>2</sup>

Moral realism is controversial, and so might be my characterization of it as involving the thesis that there are moral properties. Nevertheless, I will not attempt here to defend either moral realism or my characterization of it. Instead, I will simply take moral realism as given and proceed to investigate the naturalistic form of realism. Ethical naturalism combines moral realism with the doctrine that the moral properties are 'natural'. This is where I want to focus my attention. What does the naturalist mean by a natural property?

### 1. G.E. MOORE ON NATURAL PROPERTIES

Since G.E. Moore famously argued against moral naturalism, I want to begin by asking what Moore meant by "naturalistic ethics".<sup>3</sup> In *Principia Ethica*, in what appears to be his official characterization, Moore says that a naturalistic theory selects "some one *natural* property" and proposes that "to be 'good' *means* to possess the property in question."<sup>4</sup> For example, a hedonistic theory might propose that to be 'good' means to be pleasant. Moore's way of formulating his view does raise some questions, but he appears to have understood ethical naturalism in the way that I am proposing to understand it, as the thesis that moral properties are natural. The key problem, then, is to determine what he meant by a "natural property."

<sup>2</sup>Mackie (1977, chapter 1), Gibbard (1990).

<sup>3</sup>Moore (1993c). The naturalistic fallacy is introduced in section 10, p. 62; the open question argument in s. 13, pp. 66–68. The argument and the fallacy are linked to "naturalism" in s. 14, pp. 71–72. We cannot equate naturalism with the kind of view Moore thought guilty of the naturalistic fallacy because he held that "metaphysical ethics" also commits the fallacy (s. 25, p. 91).

<sup>4</sup>Moore (1993c, s. 26, p. 91).

Moore made several different suggestions about this, but years later, in the preface to the second edition of *Principia*, which he never published, and also in his “Reply to My Critics”, Moore acknowledged that his attempts to explain the idea of a natural property in *Principia* were “hopelessly confused”.<sup>5</sup> He had *no* adequate way of distinguishing natural from non-natural properties, and this means that he had no principled way of distinguishing the ‘naturalism’ he denied from the ‘non-naturalism’ he advocated.

In my view, the most promising of Moore’s characterizations of naturalism was the first one he gave in *Principia*. He suggested there that, according to naturalistic ethics, “Ethics is an empirical or positive science: its conclusions could all be established by means of empirical observation and induction.”<sup>6</sup> Now it clearly would be a mistake to hold that ethics is a science. Instead, the naturalist ought to say that ethics is *empirical* in the sense that any ethical knowledge is based in “empirical observation and induction.” It is no part of naturalism to deny that we could have non-empirical knowledge of analytic moral truths. Hence, the naturalist should say that any knowledge we have of *synthetic* moral truths must be empirical. And, in line with this, she might propose that moral *properties* are empirical in that any knowledge we have of synthetic propositions about their instantiation must be empirical.

Moore is of course a non-naturalist on this proposal. He says that to know what things have intrinsic value, “it is necessary to consider what things are such that, if they existed *by themselves*, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good”.<sup>7</sup> This certainly does not seem to be an *empirical* method. Among the things we can know in this way, Moore suggests, is that friendship is good,<sup>8</sup> which is surely a synthetic proposition. Moore therefore appears to think that our fundamental moral knowledge is *non-empirical* knowledge of *synthetic* moral truths. On the proposal we are considering, moreover, he views goodness as a non-natural property since he thinks that we can have non-empirical knowledge of the synthetic truth that goodness is instantiated in friendships. On the current proposal, then, Moore qualifies as a non-naturalist, which, of course, is the result we wanted to find. I will return to this proposal after considering some contemporary conceptions of the natural.

<sup>5</sup>Moore (1968, p. 582, 1993b, p. 13).

<sup>6</sup>Moore (1993c, s. 25, p. 91).

<sup>7</sup>Moore (1993c, s. 112, p. 236, see also s. 55, p. 145).

<sup>8</sup>Moore (1993c, s.113, p. 237). Moore writes of the intrinsic value of “the pleasures of human intercourse”.

## 2. CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTIONS OF NATURAL PROPERTIES

The idea of the natural is central to philosophical debates in many areas of philosophy. Since different conceptions may be appropriate in different areas, I see no reason to tie our understanding of ethical naturalism to the best understanding of the natural in any other area. It will nevertheless be useful to consider proposals that are familiar from the literature, even if only briefly. There seem to be four basic approaches: (A) reductionist proposals, (B) ostensive definitions, (C) metaphysical definitions, and (D) epistemic definitions.

(A) *Reductionist and Relational Approaches*. A reductionist or relational strategy specifies a base class of properties that are supposed to be uncontroversially natural and then requires, of any other property that is to qualify as natural, that it be suitably related to properties in the base class. As I understand 'reductionism', a naturalistic reduction of moral properties would involve producing necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct predication of a moral predicate, with the conditions being specified in a preferred terminology, using only predicates taken to refer to properties in the base class.<sup>9</sup> Other kinds of relational approach seek to relate moral properties to properties in the base class directly by means of a metaphysical relation, such as supervenience.

These proposals are problematic. For one thing, even non-naturalists must agree that moral properties supervene on non-moral natural properties. Moore agrees, for example.<sup>10</sup> For another thing, some naturalists would deny that there is a need to reduce moral properties to properties in an independently specified base class.<sup>11</sup> The availability of such a view means that goodness might be a natural property even if Moore is correct that it is simple and unanalyzable.

The key problem, however, is that approaches of these kinds do not tell us what it is about a natural property that makes it natural. They depend on the prior selection of a base class of natural properties, and they are therefore parasitic on a proposal of some *other* kind for an account of what distinguishes natural from non-natural properties. Of course, if we had such an account, we could apply it directly to the moral properties

<sup>9</sup>This discussion follows King (1994, pp. 55–56).

<sup>10</sup>Moore (1993a, pp. 292–293). Moore does not use the term 'supervenience'. See also Moore (1968, pp. 587–588). Jackson argues that the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties entails that moral properties are natural. Jackson (1998, pp. 118–125).

<sup>11</sup>Sturgeon (1984), Miller (1985), Railton (1989, p. 161).

to test whether they are natural properties, just as we would test the properties in the base class.

(B) *Ostensive Definitions*. The strategy here is to take the ‘natural objects’ to be such as we find around us, and then to define natural properties in terms of the natural objects. Following Frank Jackson, we could proceed by “pointing to some exemplars” of ordinary objects, such as “tables, chairs, mountains, and the like”, and then say that natural properties are those that are “needed to give a complete account of things like them.”<sup>12</sup> However, even a non-naturalist can insist that moral properties must be mentioned in or implicated by a “complete account” of ordinary objects. A naturalist would insist, of course, that she has in mind what is needed in a complete “naturalistic account” of the world, but this proposal simply shifts the burden to the idea of a “naturalistic account”. Some naturalists would suggest that by a naturalistic account they mean a scientific account. On approaches of this kind, however, it appears that we could simply take the natural world to be the world studied by the sciences, and there would be no need for the ostensive part of the proposal.

(C) *Metaphysical Characterizations of the Natural*. Since the category of natural properties is meant to be metaphysical, it would be ideal if we could define the natural in metaphysical terms. The literature offers at least four suggestions.

(1) Natural properties are sometimes said to be “descriptive characteristics” or “factual properties”.<sup>13</sup> This kind of characterization of the natural is familiar, and indeed Moore flirted with it.<sup>14</sup> The problem is that, in an ordinary sense of the word, we describe a person in saying, for example, that she is a good person. We might describe Mother Theresa as ‘compassionate’, for instance, and if we think she was compassionate, we ought to agree that she was ‘in fact’ compassionate.<sup>15</sup> Non-naturalists ought to agree with this, moreover, so the present characterization of the natural does not capture a view they reject.

(2) The natural world is sometimes said to be the causal order – the universe of events and states of affairs that are linked in a causal order.<sup>16</sup> There are two problems with this suggestion. First, it cannot be assumed that the natural order is causal. It is sometimes said that there is no causation at the

<sup>12</sup>Jackson (1998, p. 7).

<sup>13</sup>Hare (1952, pp. 82, 145), Moore (1968, p. 591), Goldman (1994, p. 301).

<sup>14</sup>Hare (1952, pp. 147, 154–155, 171–172), Moore (1993a, pp. 296–297, 1968, pp. 590–591).

<sup>15</sup>For this usage, see Gibbard (1990, p. 9).

<sup>16</sup>For a related suggestion, see Goldman (1994, p. 302).

most fundamental level of natural reality. Whether this is correct is an empirical issue. Second, a great many people hold supernatural or superstitious views about the causal order, and these views are not all naturalistic. For example, people who accept the story of creation in *Genesis* as the literal truth hold that God caused the world to exist. It would muddy the water to take their view as naturalistic.

The problem here is not that the *Genesis* view makes room for God, for there are theological views that plausibly are naturalistic. Pantheism, for instance, is a kind of naturalism about God. The problem is that the process by which God created the world in the *Genesis* view was not a *natural* process. Hence, if we are to explain the natural world in terms of the idea of a causal order, we need to develop an account of *natural* causation. The obvious way to proceed would be to explain natural causation in terms of science, as causation under scientific law. But on this approach, it appears that we could simply treat the natural world as the world that is studied by the sciences and there would be no need to invoke the idea of a causal order.

(3) Following David Armstrong, we might take the natural world to be the “spatiotemporal manifold”, the conjunction of all states of affairs in space and time.<sup>17</sup> One problem with this proposal is that, on various Platonist conceptions of properties, *properties* are not in space-time, and this ought to be compatible with the thesis that there are *natural* properties. Of course, the objects that instantiate natural properties are in space-time, but so are the objects that instantiate moral properties. One way around this problem would be to say that the natural world consists of the spatiotemporal manifold along with the properties that are “needed to give a complete [naturalistic] account” of everything in the manifold. But as we have already seen, this approach would place a great deal of weight on the idea of a “naturalistic account” of the world. On this approach, moreover, it appears that there would be no need to invoke the idea of the spatiotemporal manifold.

(4) The final metaphysical suggestion is that the natural world is the *material* or the *physical* world.<sup>18</sup> Since this proposal involves explicit reference to science, it anticipates the discussion about scientific accounts of the world that we have so far left unfinished. The problem with this proposal for our purposes is that ethical naturalism need not be materialist or physicalist.

<sup>17</sup>Armstrong (1989, pp. 76, 99).

<sup>18</sup>According to Papineau (1993, p. 2), this is to be understood “not in terms of current physics,” but in terms of the science that eventually explains “the behaviour of matter.”



(D) *Epistemological Characterizations of the Natural*. Given what we have said, the obvious next idea is to take the natural world to be the world studied by the sciences and to take natural properties to be those that are “needed to give a complete [scientific] account” of this world. Proposals that tie the conception of the natural to science are very common throughout philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton have said, for example, that the moral naturalist aims to effect an ‘assimilation’ between ethics and science.<sup>20</sup>

The reason we are tempted turn to science in explicating naturalism, I think, however, is that we take science to be our most reliable source of empirical knowledge. But if there are non-scientific means of acquiring empirical knowledge, whatever we learn by using these means ought also to count as knowledge of the natural world. And it does seem that we can have empirical knowledge that is not scientific, including knowledge of street names, dollar bills, aches and pains, and popular foods. Accordingly, we would need a rationale for tying our understanding of naturalism to science rather than to the empirical. If mental properties are epiphenomenal, for example, they presumably will play no role in the true scientific story of the world, yet for my purposes they ought to count as natural.<sup>21</sup> Naturalism is not scientism, and here is the place to distinguish the two by insisting that the naturalist holds only that natural properties are empirical, not that they must be properties that figure in scientific theory. Given these considerations, I propose to explicate naturalism in terms of the empirical and to leave aside issues about the relation between science and other putative sources of empirical knowledge.

### 3. NATURAL PROPERTIES AS EMPIRICAL PROPERTIES

My proposal distinguishes natural from non-natural properties on the basis of the nature of our epistemological access to them. It construes a natural property as an empirical property; that is, ignoring certain complexities, and as a first approximation, it holds that

A property is natural if and only if any synthetic proposition about its instantiation that can be known, could only be known empirically.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>King (1994, pp. 53–56), Kornblith (1994, pp. 39–52).

<sup>20</sup>Darwall et al. (1992, pp. 126, 165).

<sup>21</sup>I owe this example to Jeffrey King.

<sup>22</sup>A proposition counts as being “about the instantiation” of a property if either (a) it implies that the property is instantiated, or (b) it implies a proposition about the circumstances in which the property would be instantiated. The proposition that friendship is good illustrates (b).



On my proposal, ethical naturalism is the position that moral properties are empirical properties.

The empirical is traditionally contrasted with the *a priori*, such that all of our knowledge and all warranted beliefs are either empirical or *a priori*. The basic idea of course is that *empirical* knowledge or warrant is grounded or based in *experience*. The proposal, then, is to define naturalism in terms of what we can know or believe with warrant on the basis of experience.<sup>23</sup>

The restriction to 'synthetic' ethical propositions is required since, as I explained before, it is no part of ethical naturalism to deny that there might be conceptual or analytic truths in ethics and that we could have *a priori* knowledge of their truth. It is arguable, for example, that the concept of murder is the concept of a wrongful killing, and if so, then the proposition that murder is wrong is analytic, and we can have *a priori* knowledge that it is true. More significantly, it is arguably a conceptual truth that the moral supervenes on the non-moral.<sup>24</sup> If so, then a naturalist can concede that we can have *a priori* knowledge that the moral supervenes on the non-moral.

The empirical conception of naturalism seems to me to answer to the fundamental intuition behind naturalism. The primitive intuition is that the natural world is the world around us, the world we are immersed in. The key problem is to explain the sense in which we are 'immersed' in it. My proposal is to explain this on the basis of the nature of our epistemic access to the world.<sup>25</sup> The natural world is the world we know empirically. In moral theory, the empirical conception of naturalism seems to be assumed in recent work defending naturalistic forms of moral realism. For example, the debate about moral explanations that took place in the 1980s was animated by Gilbert Harman's account of empirical inference as consisting in inference to the best explanation. In arguing that there are genuine moral explanations of empirical phenomena, Nicholas Sturgeon was supporting a kind of naturalistic moral realism.<sup>26</sup> Similar conceptions of

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<sup>23</sup>One might object that if there are facts about the way the world actually works that could not be believed with warrant by beings who are equipped the way humans are actually equipped, not even in principle, they still should be counted as natural facts. But if we suppose there are such facts, the question to ask is whether, if we had knowledge of them, it would be empirical. I owe this objection to Jeffrey King. It is avoided by the preferred formulation of my view, which I present in the next section of the paper.

<sup>24</sup>Jackson (1998, p. 125).

<sup>25</sup>Compare Kitcher (1992, pp. 57–59).

<sup>26</sup>Harman (1977, chapters 1 and 2), Sturgeon (1984).

naturalism are found in the work of Richard Boyd (1988), David Brink (1989), Richard Miller (1985), and Peter Railton (1989).

#### 4. THE SYNTHETIC *A PRIORI*

Given the traditional contrast between the empirical and the *a priori*, the naturalist's thesis that all of our knowledge of synthetic moral truths is empirical commits the naturalist to denying the synthetic *a priori* in ethics. The naturalist is committed to rejecting the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of synthetic moral truths while the non-naturalist is committed to embracing this possibility. The non-naturalist is therefore allied with Moore and Kant while the naturalists are lined up on the other side. The pivotal issue is whether there can be synthetic *a priori* knowledge in ethics.

Unfortunately, both the analytic/synthetic distinction and the distinction between the empirical and the *a priori* are contested. A half century ago, Quine famously argued against both the analytic/synthetic distinction and the idea that there can be *a priori* knowledge. More recently, from the side of a neo-rationalism, Laurence Bonjour has argued that no significant empirical knowledge is possible unless we have synthetic *a priori* knowledge of fundamental logical and epistemic principles.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, there is no need to enter into the deepest of the controversies. We can set aside Quinean worries, for I do not want to rest my case for naturalism on Quinean considerations. Moreover, even if we agree with Bonjour's views about empirical knowledge, it does not follow that there can be synthetic *a priori* knowledge in *ethics*. So the central issue remains untouched.

The most interesting questions are about the distinction between the empirical and the *a priori*. Perhaps some will follow Quine in denying that there are any analytic propositions. But then, on the usage I will employ, they hold that all propositions are synthetic, and it still remains to consider whether there can be *a priori* knowledge in ethics.

There are, unfortunately, different ways of drawing the distinction between the empirical and the *a priori*, and I see no reason to think that there is only one *correct* way of drawing it, or to think that the same way of drawing it will be most useful in every issue in philosophy.<sup>28</sup> This means there are many different conceptions of natural properties, each of which construes a natural property as 'empirical'. I need to draw the line between the empirical and the *a priori* in a place that corresponds cleanly to the

<sup>27</sup>Quine (1961, pp. 20–46), Bonjour (1998, pp. 1–6).

<sup>28</sup>A similar point is made in Boghossian et al. (2000, p. 3).

line of controversy between naturalism and non-naturalism in ethics. Of course, the issue of what to *call* the line is unimportant. I will continue to speak of the empirical and the *a priori*, but nothing turns on this.

The traditional view is that whatever we know empirically, or are warranted empirically to believe, we believe on the basis of experience; *a priori* knowledge and warranted belief is said to be ‘independent’ of experience – except for the experience required to understand the proposition in question. Different ways of drawing the distinction between the empirical and the *a priori* interpret this traditional formulation in different ways. Most important is that there are different ways to understand the notion that empirical belief is ‘based’ in experience. The naturalist needn’t hold that all significant ethical knowledge or warranted belief is based in any *direct* way in experience. Instead, what she ought to say is that all ethical knowledge or warranted belief is ‘answerable’ to experience.

This idea can be clarified using definitions proposed by Hartry Field. He says,

Let’s define a *weakly a priori* proposition as one that can be reasonably believed without empirical evidence; an *empirically infeasible* proposition as one that admits no empirical evidence against it; and an *a priori* proposition as one that is both weakly *a priori* and empirically infeasible.<sup>29</sup>

For clarity, I will call Field’s third kind of proposition “strongly *a priori*”.

Now there is a dispute in the literature as to whether any genuine *a priori* knowledge or warranted belief could be undermined by experience.<sup>30</sup> In Field’s terms, the debate turns on which of the two notions, that of a weakly *a priori* proposition or that of a strongly *a priori* proposition, is theoretically more useful or closer to the traditional conception of the *a priori*.<sup>31</sup> This issue is not important for our purposes. I will argue that the notion of the strong *a priori* is the one we need to explicate the debate between naturalists and non-naturalists in ethics.

Accordingly, I will propose understanding the ethical naturalist to deny that any synthetic proposition about the instantiation of a moral property is *strongly a priori*. As I will explain, a naturalist can agree that some substantive moral propositions can reasonably be believed *without empirical evidence*, so she can say that some such propositions are *weakly a priori*.

<sup>29</sup>Field (2000, p. 117). In a footnote, Field emphasizes that by “reasonable” he means “epistemically reasonable” (p. 117, fn. 2).

<sup>30</sup>See Kitcher (1992, p. 77, fn. 79), Bonjour (1998, pp. 10–11). Boghossian et al. (2000, pp. 4–5) provide a very brief overview of the dispute.

<sup>31</sup>Field (2000, pp. 117, 119, 120–124).

However, she will hold that all substantive moral propositions are *answerable* to experience. They are empirically defeasible, and so they are not *strongly a priori*. In the next section I will explain why I say this, but before doing so, I need to tinker with my formulation of the empirical conception of naturalism and to attend to the idea of empirical defeasibility.

On the formulation I proposed before, the naturalist holds that a moral property is a natural property in the sense that synthetic propositions about its instantiation can only be known empirically. If we define an *a priori* proposition to be one that can be known *a priori*, we could say that, according to the naturalist, no synthetic proposition about the instantiation of a moral property is *a priori*. Armed with Field's distinctions, however, we now can distinguish between strongly and weakly *a priori* propositions, and this suggests a corresponding distinction between conceptions of a natural property. I will be using the idea of a natural\* property, where

A property N is natural\* if and only if (a) it is possible for N to be instantiated and (b) there are propositions about the instantiation of N that are both synthetic and possibly true, and, (c) no such proposition is strongly *a priori*.

Accordingly, I propose understanding the naturalist to hold that moral properties are natural\* properties; that is, she denies that any synthetic propositions about their instantiation are strongly *a priori*.

Strongly *a priori* propositions are empirically indefeasible in that, as Field says, they "do not admit empirical evidence against them." As Field points out, however, the idea of empirical indefeasibility needs to be interpreted with some caution because of issues raised by testimonial evidence.<sup>32</sup> Issues of this kind will be important in what follows. Suppose, for example, that a mathematician, Matty, discovers what she takes to be a proof in system S of a new theorem T. In this case, the proposition that T is a theorem in S qualifies as weakly *a priori* since it is reasonably believed by Matty even though she has no empirical evidence that it is true. Suppose, however, that Matty is very insecure and her colleagues are skeptical of her proof. The skepticism of her colleagues eventually leads her to think that the proof is unsound. In this case, it seems, she would no longer be reasonable to believe that T is a theorem. And if the skepticism of her colleagues counts as empirical evidence against the proposition that T is a theorem, then the proposition is not strongly *a priori*. Something has gone

<sup>32</sup>Field (2000, p. 118). Field refers to arguments about mathematics in Kitcher (1983).

wrong, however, for propositions of this kind surely ought to count as empirically indefeasible if any do.

We cannot avoid the problem simply by ruling out testimonial evidence. The testimony of others clearly can count as empirical evidence against beliefs about many things. I take it that epistemic norms are justified in light of the fact that conformity to them contributes to achieving the epistemic goals of gaining truth and avoiding falsehood in belief. These goals would be well served by conformity with a norm requiring that we assign less credibility than we otherwise would to propositions we believe, with which we see that others disagree, in cases in which we have no independent reason to think we are in a better epistemic position than they are.<sup>33</sup> Such a norm is therefore justified. And this means we cannot avoid our problem by the strategy of ruling out testimonial evidence altogether.

Field suggests a more subtle strategy. Intuitively, if Matty had the courage of her convictions, and if she were ideally competent, her confidence in the proposition that T is a theorem of S would not be affected by the skepticism of her colleagues. If her proof is sound, she would see this clearly, and if her proof is not sound, she would not have been tempted by it in the first place. Field suggests, then, that we should ignore “computational limitations” in interpreting the empirical indefeasibility requirement.<sup>34</sup> However, a thinker with no computational limitations might nevertheless lack relevant concepts or lack some formal knowledge required in order to generate a given proof.<sup>35</sup> We need, therefore, to say something like this. Empirical considerations do not count as *empirical evidence* against a proposition if they would not undermine the credibility of the proposition to an “ideal thinker” – a thinker with no psychological weaknesses, with no computational limitations, and with a full conceptual repertoire.<sup>36</sup>

Intuitively, after all, if her proof is sound, Matty can defeat the warrant-undermining effect of the skepticism of her colleagues on the *a priori* ground that she had to begin with, namely on the ground of the proof. Intuitively, the skepticism of her colleagues is perhaps reason for her to reconsider her proof, but it is not empirical evidence against her theorem. Intuitively, then, considerations that could themselves be defeated on a strongly *a priori* basis do not count as empirical evidence against a proposition.

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<sup>33</sup>In some cases, we have reason to believe we are in a better epistemic position than others because we know that we are in an unusually good position.

<sup>34</sup>Field (2000, p. 118).

<sup>35</sup>Kitcher (2000, pp. 67–68) discusses similar issues.

<sup>36</sup>We might need to add that the beliefs of an ideal thinker are logically consistent and closed under entailment.

5. ETHICAL NATURALISM AND THE STRONGLY *A PRIORI*

With all of this being clarified, I am finally in a position to explain why I think that moral naturalism is best understood in terms of the strongly *a priori*. To understand this, we need have before us a naturalistic picture of morality and of moral epistemology. I will attempt to sketch such a picture.

The underlying idea is that moral truths reflect empirical facts about human nature, the needs of societies, and the like. These facts vary from possible world to possible world, and so the moral truths also might vary from possible world to possible world. This is why we need to have experience of our world in order to have moral knowledge. Through our experiences early in life we come to have a particular moral perspective. We come to have moral concepts, both 'thick' and 'thin', and, beyond that, we come to have a substantive normative 'theory' as to which things are right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous and vicious. Assuming that this perspective or theory is correct or approximately correct, we can come to be reliable in 'detecting' moral facts. We can also come to have (synthetic) moral beliefs that are warranted without the input of any empirical evidence beyond the experience that led to our initial acceptance of our basic moral perspective.

Consider cases of two kinds. First, it might be reasonable for us to believe that friendship is good, for example, even without empirical evidence that it is good. We might have acquired the concept of goodness while our parents were vainly encouraging us to form friendships, with the result that we came to think of friendship as good. In such a case, even if we have not experienced any friendships, we might be reasonable to believe friendship is good. In this way, it might be "default reasonable" for those in our culture to believe that friendship is good. Second, there can be cases in which we come to have moral beliefs after reflection, where our beliefs are warranted only in light of such reflection. Perhaps, for example, it is only after careful thought that we come to accept that there is no morally relevant difference between doing harm and allowing harm. In this case too, our belief might qualify as reasonable even though it is not based on empirical evidence beyond the experience that led to our initial acceptance of our basic moral perspective. In both kinds of case, the proposition we believe is such that it is reasonably believed by us, given our moral culture, without empirical evidence beyond the experience that led to our initial acceptance of our moral perspective. Such propositions are therefore weakly *a priori* even though it is perhaps only someone who shares our perspective who can reasonably believe these propositions without em-



pirical evidence. The naturalist has no reason to deny the possibility of weakly *a priori* moral propositions of these kinds, for, of course, she would view our perspective as empirical in the sense at least that it could be undermined by empirical evidence.

The discussion already suggests that ethical naturalists can agree with non-naturalists that we can have non-inferential moral knowledge. That is, we can have knowledge of synthetic moral truths that is not based in any overt or conscious inferential reasoning. The dispute between naturalists and non-naturalists therefore is not over the truth of *intuitionism*, at least not if we understand intuitionism to be the doctrine that we can have non-inferential moral knowledge or warranted belief.<sup>37</sup> For example, a naturalist can agree that we might have a non-inferential warranted belief that friendship is good. In some cases, our warrant might qualify as non-inferential even if it depends on reflection, if, as Robert Audi has argued, the relevant kind of reflection is best seen as involving a response to a set of considerations rather than an inference from premises.<sup>38</sup> For example, our belief that there is no morally relevant difference between doing harm and allowing harm might qualify as non-inferential in the relevant sense.

What has emerged, then, is that to distinguish ethical naturalism from non-naturalism in the way I am proposing, on the basis of a distinction between the empirical and the *a priori*, we need the strong reading of the *a priori*. We need to construe the moral naturalist as holding that moral properties are natural\* in the sense that no synthetic propositions about their instantiation are strongly *a priori*. That is, no such proposition is such that both, it can be reasonably believed without empirical evidence, and it admits no empirical evidence against it.

## 6. WHY NATURALISM?

The upshot, on my account, is that the naturalist is committed to denying that there are strongly *a priori* synthetic moral truths. Now, then, we face the question, Why naturalism? Here I will discuss only one argument, an argument from epistemic defeaters. The argument is not decisive, but I think it captures an underlying motivation for naturalism, and it addresses the central issue.

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<sup>37</sup>This characterization of 'intuitionism' is from Audi (1998, p. 19). Audi (1998, pp. 25–28) agrees that naturalism is compatible with the existence of intuitive moral judgment.

<sup>38</sup>Audi (1998, pp. 19–20, 22–23).



We can narrow down the issue. The most plausible candidates for synthetic strong *a priori* status are moral generalities, such as the proposition that slavery is unjust, which I assume to be synthetic, or the Kantian thesis that we ought to treat humanity as an end in itself. For example, it would not be plausible to think it is strongly *a priori* that the slavery practiced in the 1850s in the United States was unjust unless it is plausible to think it strongly *a priori* that slavery as such is unjust. Otherwise, evidence about the circumstances in the 1850s could in principle undermine the reasonableness of our belief about the injustice of slavery in the United States. And I think the status of other specific moral judgments is relevantly similar. Hence, I think, the nub of the dispute between naturalists and non-naturalists concerns the status of synthetic moral generalities, such as the proposition that slavery is unjust or the Kantian thesis I mentioned.

This brings us to the argument from empirical defeaters, which has three premises. First, no strongly *a priori* proposition admits of empirical evidence against it; any putative evidence against such a proposition would fail to undermine its credibility to an ideal thinker. Second, any synthetic moral generality M is such that there are possible experiences that, if they were actual, would at least *prima facie* constitute empirical evidence against M. And third, the undermining effect of such experiences on the credibility of M for a thinker need not be due to psychological weaknesses or computational limitations or to the thinker's lacking a full conceptual repertoire. It need not be due to the thinker's being less than ideal. It follows, the naturalist claims, that there are no strongly *a priori* synthetic moral propositions. And this is the central thesis of ethical naturalism as I understand it.

I have already explained the first premise in the argument and I have explained why I want to understand the naturalist as denying that there are any strongly *a priori* synthetic moral propositions. I turn now to the second premise, the claim that any synthetic moral proposition is such that there are possible experiences that, if they were actual, would at least *prima facie* constitute empirical evidence against it. The main argument for the premise is an argument from disagreement.

We should note in passing that particularists seem to be committed to the premise. Particularists hold that any general claim about the extension of a moral property can in principle be undermined by further experience.<sup>39</sup> An example is the proposition that lying is morally wrong, which I assume to be synthetic. Particularists would argue that no such proposition is true,

<sup>39</sup>For a discussion of particularism, see Dancy (2001).

unless it is multiply qualified. For example, a particularist would argue that there can be circumstances in which lying is permissible, and that there can even be circumstances in which the fact that an action would be a lie might count in its favor. It appears, moreover, that particularists should agree that synthetic moral generalities of this kind are empirically defeasible, since experience can provide evidence that they are not true. And this means that they should agree that such propositions are not strongly *a priori* unless they would argue that the considerations that undermine them do not strictly speaking qualify as *empirical evidence* against them.<sup>40</sup> But then, to avoid naturalism, particularists must rest their case on subtleties about the notion of empirical evidence. And they would need to argue either that certain synthetic moral generalities – propositions that they view as false – are nevertheless strongly *a priori*, or that particular moral judgments can be strongly *a priori*. I have already suggested that this latter claim is implausible. Of course, the idea that particularism would push us in the direction of naturalism goes against conventional wisdom, and particularism is controversial. Let me therefore turn to the argument from disagreement.

The key idea is that our warrant for believing a proposition can be undermined or weakened by the disagreement of others in cases in which we have no independent reason to think we are in a better epistemic position than they are. I argued earlier in support of this thesis. If it is correct, then moral disagreement can weaken our warrant for our moral beliefs, and since disagreement is an empirical phenomenon, this supports the naturalist's thesis that synthetic moral generalities are not strongly *a priori*. Moral disagreement qualifies as empirical counter-evidence against our moral beliefs – unless such disagreement would not undermine the credibility of the beliefs to an ideal thinker.

The thesis that moral disagreement qualifies as empirical counter-evidence will seem plausible to the naturalist, of course. For she will say that since human nature and the needs of societies are, by and large, constant in our world, the moral beliefs of other people, when we cannot identify an error in their thinking and when we have no independent reason to think we are in a better epistemic position than they are, have a bearing on the

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<sup>40</sup>A particularist might argue that the mere fact that evidence *could* crop up is sufficient to show it is not the case that lying *as such* is wrong; it is not necessary that the evidence *actually* crop up. The particularist might then claim that considerations that would count as *empirical* counter-evidence must actually obtain in order to do their work. This objection raises issues about a variety of matters that go well beyond the scope of this paper, including issues about thought experiments in science.

reasonableness of our own moral beliefs. The naturalist will view people as detectors of moral facts, and she will view the disagreement of people who seem to be just as well placed as we are to detect the moral facts as evidence against our own beliefs.

Suppose, for example, that I witness a bullfight and observe that many thousands of people who seem to be good-hearted and fair-minded see nothing wrong in the treatment of the bull that takes place. As a result, I might begin to doubt that bullfighting is wrong, despite the “harsh treatment” of bulls that is involved in bullfighting. But whether or not I begin to have doubts, if I cannot justify on independent grounds the claim that I am better placed epistemically to judge bullfighting than the people who attend bullfights, then the fact that so many people disagree with me about the wrongness of bullfighting would appear to constitute evidence against my belief that bullfighting is wrong, undermining or weakening my warrant for the belief. If this is correct, then the proposition that bullfighting is wrong is not strongly *a priori* – unless the undermining effect of the disagreement on the credibility of the proposition is due to psychological weaknesses or computational limitations or to the lack of a full conceptual repertoire such that the disagreement would not undermine the credibility of the proposition to an ideal thinker.

One might object that, even though I am aware that many decent people disagree with me, I would not be guilty of any kind of epistemic fault if I were to continue to believe that bullfighting is wrong. Disagreement is a two-way street. If I would be epistemically at fault to continue to believe that bullfighting is wrong, given the disagreement of the fans of bullfighting, then, by parity of reasoning, they would be epistemically at fault to continue to believe that bullfighting is permissible, given the disagreement of the opponents of bullfighting. But if they are epistemically at fault to believe this, then how could the fact that they believe it mean that I am epistemically at fault to believe what I believe? It is important, however, to distinguish between the issue whether a belief is warranted and the issue whether a person is epistemically at fault to have it. The claim I am defending is that my warrant for believing that bullfighting is wrong is weakened by the disagreement. It is a separate issue whether I am epistemically at fault – perhaps, given my background, I am psychologically unable to take seriously the idea that bullfighting is permissible.

It is important to understand that it is no part of my argument that the possibility of well-meaning disagreement shows all synthetic moral generalities to be *false*. Moreover, I am not saying that the mere *possibility* of such disagreement is sufficient to show that I am not *actually* warranted to believe any moral generalities. The claim is rather that if there *were* to

be disagreement of the kind I am imagining, and if I were aware of it, my epistemic warrant *would* be undermined.

We can provide examples involving disagreement about more basic moral principles than the thesis that bullfighting is wrong. Consider the Kantian thesis that we ought to treat humanity as an end in itself. Suppose one were to meet a group of well-meaning people, the 'Insiders', whose culture is, such that, although they know that those from outside their society are human, they view themselves as owing nothing to outsiders. The fact that the Insiders have this view would, I submit, undermine or weaken the reasonableness of believing that every human must be treated as an end in himself. It would be *prima facie* evidence against it, and so it would show that the proposition is not strongly *a priori* – unless, again, the disagreement would not undermine the credibility of the proposition to an ideal thinker.

To this point, the argument suggests that the reasonableness of believing a synthetic moral generality would be undermined by disagreement on the part of people whom there is no independent reason to believe to be in a less favorable epistemic position than we are. Of course, in any actual case of disagreement regarding a moral generality, it might be possible to show that we are actually in the better epistemic position for judging the truth than those who disagree with us. However, the argument is addressed to cases in which we have no independent reason to think that we are in the better epistemic position. The fact that some people disagree with us obviously is not an *independent* reason to think they are in a worse epistemic position. It might be a reason to think they are morally worse than we are, but that is not the issue.

Naturalism does not yet follow from the argument. For it remains possible that there are certain moral generalities such that the fact that people disagreed with us regarding those generalities would not qualify as *empirical evidence* against them. Recall the idea we canvassed before, following a suggestion by Field, that putative evidence against a proposition is not genuinely *empirical* evidence if it would not affect the credibility of the proposition to an ideal thinker – a thinker who had no psychological weaknesses or computational limitations and who had a full conceptual repertoire. This brings us to the final premise in the argument from epistemic defeaters, the claim that in no relevant case of disagreement regarding a moral proposition M must the undermining effect of the disagreement on the credibility of M be due to psychological weaknesses or computational limitations or to the lack of a full conceptual repertoire, such that the disagreement would not undermine the credibility of M to an ideal thinker. If this premise is correct, then moral disagreement counts as empirical counter-evidence.

The premise is plausible on its face. For we are assuming that the moral generalities at issue are *synthetic*. It would not help non-naturalism if we were to find an argument for a moral proposition M according to which any denial of M on the part of a thinker with an adequate grasp of all relevant moral concepts would have to issue from conceptual confusion. This would show M to be analytic, and there is no issue whether analytic moral propositions are *a priori*. The denial of an analytic moral proposition would not undermine its credibility to an ideal thinker, but this is not to the point. To be sure, there may be certain synthetic moral propositions that no *morally virtuous* person would give up, not even in the face of widespread well-meaning disagreement. There may be propositions that only a bad person or a morally confused person would deny. Indeed it seems to me that this is true.<sup>41</sup> Disagreement about such propositions would not undermine their credibility to a *morally* ideal thinker. But this also is not to the point. The ideal thinker of my argument is not guaranteed to be *morally* ideal.

I can see two ways in which one might attempt to block the argument. The first is to attempt to show, for certain synthetic moral propositions, that, despite the fact they are synthetic, any disagreement whether one of them is true must be due to the effect on one of the parties either of psychological weaknesses or of computational limitations or of an incompleteness in her conceptual repertoire. The second is to provide a strongly *a priori* argument for a synthetic moral proposition, an argument the premises of which can reasonably be accepted without empirical evidence and cannot be undermined by empirical evidence.

In pursuing the first strategy, one might invoke coherentism about epistemic warrant, for if the coherence or lack of coherence of a body of belief is an *a priori* matter, it might seem that it would be an *a priori* matter whether a person who disagrees with me about M is warranted. But what we need is a reason to think that any system of belief that includes the denial of M must be less coherent than it would be if it were changed minimally to include the acceptance of M. And this reason must be one that any ideal thinker could discern so that disagreement about M would not affect its credibility to an ideal thinker. But this means, in effect, that we need a reason to think there are certain *synthetic* moral generalities such that their denial is *incoherent*, even though it is compatible with the absence of any linguistic or conceptual confusion. I see no reason to think there are any such moral propositions.

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<sup>41</sup>A morally good person would not deny that it is wrong to torture babies for fun. Tyler Burge urged me to consider such examples.

The second way in which one might proceed would be to attempt to provide a strongly *a priori* argument for some synthetic moral generality. There are of course arguments, including Kantian arguments, that purport to show that we can have synthetic *a priori* moral knowledge or warranted belief.<sup>42</sup> I do not believe that any such argument has been successful. Unfortunately, however, I do not know how to prove this, and discussion of the arguments is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Here we reach rock bottom as far as this paper is concerned.

To summarize, I have proposed that we take naturalism to be the view that moral properties are natural in the sense that no synthetic proposition about the instantiation of a moral property is strongly *a priori*. I have not proposed a naturalistic theory.<sup>43</sup> Instead I have offered the argument from epistemic defeaters. According to this argument, the fact that there could be *prima facie* empirical evidence against any synthetic moral claim means that such claims are not strongly *a priori* – unless the putative evidence would not undermine the credibility of the proposition to an ideal thinker. Of course, the argument I gave is not conclusive, but we at least see where the central issue is to be found. If we are to be non-naturalists, it seems, we must follow something like a Kantian strategy. We need an *a priori* argument for a synthetic moral truth.

## 7. CONCLUSION

My goal has been to lay the groundwork for the development of ethical naturalism, first, by explicating its central thesis, second, by locating the pivotal issue between naturalists and non-naturalists, and, third, by giving some reasons to take naturalism seriously. I proposed that naturalism is best understood as the view that the moral properties are natural in the sense that they are empirical. I then pursued certain issues in the understanding of the empirical. The crux of the matter is whether any synthetic proposition about the instantiation of a moral property is strongly *a priori* in that it does not admit of empirical evidence against it. I think that the argument from epistemic defeaters undermines the plausibility of *a priorism* in ethics and supports the plausibility of naturalism.

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<sup>42</sup>Kant (1785, part III).

<sup>43</sup>I have offered such a theory in Copp (1995).



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