Naturalism, Ethical

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What Is Ethical Naturalism?

On its most common characterization, ethical naturalism is the thesis that ethical properties exist and are natural. This makes the thesis metaphysical and realist. (Roughly, *ethical realism* is the thesis that genuinely ethical properties exist; *see* REALISM, MORAL; NON-COGNITIVISM; PRESCRIPTIVISM; PROJECTIVISM.) Importantly different ethical views have been categorized by their champions as naturalist, however. Some see ethical naturalism as primarily involving a metaphysical commitment (e.g., Gibbard 1990; Brink 1989; Boyd 1988), others as involving methodological commitments (e.g., Copp 2003). Some see ethical naturalism as requiring commitment to the existence of ethical properties (e.g., Brink 1989; Boyd 1988), others don't (e.g., Gibbard 1990; Blackburn 1988).

Here I begin with an overview of the various proposals on offer and a brief defense of one of my own. I then turn to a brief survey of arguments for and against ethical naturalism in the sense reserved below.

What Is It for a Property to Be a Natural Property?

It is widely accepted that being naturalist confers an important advantage on a metaethical theory. Most philosophers accept global or near-global metaphysical naturalism, the thesis that everything or nearly everything that exists is fundamentally natural. So, it is clear why positing only natural properties in some areas gives a theory an advantage over one that doesn't do this. Given this theoretical advantage, it is somewhat surprising, then, that so little has been written on what it takes for a property to be natural. Without such an account, it becomes unclear which theories possess that advantage and which do not. Here I assess what has been written on this topic within the metaethical literature and then offer a brief suggestion of my own that overcomes some of the drawbacks of rival views.

In the literature on the philosophy of mind, there are two widely accepted ways a property may be countenanced as physical, either by being fundamentally physical or by being shown to be "nothing over and above" what is fundamentally physical. The task then becomes to say what it is for a property to be fundamentally physical and what it is for one to be "nothing over and above" such fundamentally physical properties (Dowell 2006a). Following this lead, we might say more generally that to be a natural property is to be either a primarily natural property or to be one that is secondarily natural by bearing some sort of important relation (e.g., reduction) to the former (*see* REDUCTIONISM IN ETHICS).

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The latter task I leave to the philosophers of mind and their debates about the different ways of understanding how lower-level properties might constitute higher-level ones, focusing instead on the former. Here I relax the requirement that the primary or basic properties are fundamental. It's enough for the purposes of defining ethical naturalism that we identify a class of clearly natural properties as basic or primary and then allow a theory to count as naturalist about ethics, so long as it doesn't posit evaluative properties that are over and above those.

There are four broad strategies for defining basic, natural properties: ostensive, deferential, metaphysical, and epistemological. According to the ostensive method, a property is natural if it is of the sort instantiated by paradigmatically natural objects, for example "tables, chairs, mountains, and the like" (Jackson 1998: 7). On the deferential method, we defer to what is posited by natural scientists in their development of scientific theories (see Jackson 1998 for discussion). A drawback of each of these views is that they don't clearly get right the extension of "basic, natural property," as measured against the intuitive notion that seems to be in play in the metaethical literature. In the case of the ostensive definition, it seems open to the non-naturalist to hold that human beings are paradigmatically natural objects and that some of them instantiate the (*sui generis*, non-natural) properties of goodness and badness (see Copp 2003: 183 for a similar suggestion). In the case of the deferential method, there seems to be no guarantee that paradigmatically non-natural properties will not be among the properties natural scientists will one day in fact posit.

What would be nice is an account that not only got the extension of our notion right, but *explained* what it takes for a property to be a basic, natural one. Two metaphysical accounts promise to do that. According to the first, natural properties are descriptive or factual properties (see Hare 1952: 82, 145; Moore 1968: 591; Jackson 1998). On the second, they are properties with causal powers (see Gibbard 1990: 9). A problem with the second is that it seems perfectly possible for objects with paradigmatically non-natural properties to have causal powers; angels, if they exist, would seem to have (miraculous) causal powers. So, that view also fails to coincide with the intuitive extension of "natural property." A problem with the descriptive account is that it fails to categorize properly the metaethical theories we want the notion of a natural property to help categorize. It seems perfectly coherent for a theorist to allow that there are *sui generis*, non-natural ethical properties the attribution of which to a person or act describes it, or that it is a fact that some persons or acts possess such properties. But if our first metaphysical account is correct, such a theory should be incoherent.

Methodological accounts fare better, but require careful formulation. Such accounts attempt to identify basic natural properties for the purposes of metaethical theorizing by our characteristic methods for acquiring knowledge of their instantiation. The most natural such suggestion ties being a basic, natural property to being the sort of property posited by the natural sciences (see, e.g., Darwall et al. 1992: 126, 165). David Copp suggests a broader such strategy by tying being a natural property

to being a property such that our knowledge of its instantiation is empirical. Applied to the ethical domain, this amounts to the claim that our belief in substantive moral propositions is ultimately answerable to experience (Copp 2003: 189). Copp's thought is that we may have knowledge of clearly natural properties that is based on empirical, though not scientific, evidence. The reason to define naturalism in terms of what can be known through scientific inquiry is that "we take science to be our most reliable source of empirical knowledge" (2003: 185). Our justification for deferring to science, then, is really a justification for a broader view that ties our notion of what is natural to any genuine source of empirical knowledge. This means we need some independent "rationale for tying our understanding of naturalism to science rather than the empirical" (2003: 185).

One such rationale is that any proposal, like Copp's, that ties being natural to what can be known empirically gets the extension of "natural property" wrong. To see this, consider a theistic hypothesis. On this hypothesis, God exists and exercises a causal influence over the world. Further, our knowledge of God's existence and of the instantiation of the properties in virtue of which he has his miraculous causal powers is empirical. Imagine that it turns out that this hypothesis is true. On Copp's definition, this would be its turning out there are properties in virtue of which God exercises his miraculous causal powers that are natural properties. But, pre-theoretically, if there is anything clearly ruled out by our notion of a natural property, it is the properties in virtue of which supernatural beings are able to contravene natural law.

We can improve on Copp's proposal if we develop in the right way the idea that science is our best guide to the natural world. The trick is not to tie being a natural property to being the sort of property posited by the theories of actual scientists, as on the deferential proposal, but to being the sort of property posited by theories that bear the hallmarks of genuinely scientific theories. These hallmarks include at least:

1 The inclusion of a set of explanatory hypotheses from which empirically testable implications may be derived.
2 Confirmation by the obtaining of a number and variety of such testable implications.
3 The provision of a unified explanation of a number and variety of empirical generalizations.
4 Fit with what is antecedently known and independently observable. (See Dowell 2006b for the development and defense of such a proposal.)

One virtue of this proposal is its fit with our pre-theoretical notion of a natural property. This allows it to avoid the counterexample to Copp's proposal (a second virtue), since properties in virtue of which miracles might occur would not be capable of being integrated into a highly unified theory bearing these hallmarks.

Ethical Naturalism: Reasons Against

Perhaps the most famous challenge to naturalism in ethics is Moore's open question argument, which targets any attempt to define "goodness" in terms of any natural property or properties. His idea is that, if our notion of goodness could be analyzed in naturalistic terms, there should be some, perhaps complex, predicate, N, that denotes a natural property, such that the question, for any object x that is N, "x is N, but is it good?" would be cognitively closed. But, he argued, for any N you take, that question will always be open. So, there can be no definition of goodness in naturalistic terms (Moore 1903: 5–21; *see* OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT).

One response to Moore's argument begins by noting that ethical naturalism needn't take the form of offering an analysis of our concept of good or a definition of the term. Peter Railton defends such a response by likening the ethical naturalist's aim to attempts to reduce higher-level kinds to lower-level ones in science. To take a standard example, chemical experiments have shown that water just is H_2O, though our concept of the former might be quite different from our concept of the latter. Because the concepts are not the same, the question, about some liquid L, "L is H_2O, but is it water?" will be cognitively open for someone who possesses both concepts, but does not know that there is only a single property (Railton 1989; see also Brink 1989: Ch. 6). A second response notes that if we allow that there are unobvious conceptual truths, the openness of Moorean open questions looks less significant. Perhaps some questions are closed by our concepts, but are nonetheless cognitively open to us (Smith 1994: 37–9).

Connie Rosati (2003) defends an alternative way of viewing the significance of Moore's argument, taking up a point made by Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (Darwall et al. 1992: 116). They argue that the openness of Moorean questions reveals something about our evaluative concepts, namely, their action-guiding force. Rosati suggests that Moore's argument does not defeat ethical naturalism so much as "set it the task" of developing an account of evaluative properties that fits with our agency (2003: 496–7) – i.e., our capacity "to engage in autonomous evaluation and action" (2003: 506). Rather than serving as a test for synonymy or analyticity, Moorean questions serve as a test for detecting the contours of our ethical concepts. The significance of the openness of some open questions is not in revealing doubt about its answer. Rather, it lies in its potential for exposing some feature a property, P_1, would have to have, according to our concept of some evaluative property, P_2, in order to count as being P_2.

A more complex challenge to ethical naturalism is posed by judgment or motivational internalism. According to judgment internalism, someone who sincerely uses a declarative sentence containing a piece of moral vocabulary such as "abortion is wrong" is *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal) motivated appropriately. "Motivated appropriately" means, roughly, that sincere speakers are somewhat disposed to avoid those actions "judged" to be wrong and to perform those "judged" to be right. (The use of scare quotes here is to avoid begging any questions against a pure, expressivist view, according to which the use of unembedded, declarative

sentences containing moral vocabulary does not express judgments, in the traditional, Fregean sense.) Internalism does not require that sincere speakers will perform actions they "judge" to be right, since it allows that one's inclination to perform the action deemed right may be outweighed by countervailing desires. It also does not require that all sincere speakers will be so motivated or that they will always be motivated. What it does require is that most sincere speakers are such that, at least when they are psychologically healthy, they will feel some inclination to perform those actions they deem right, and avoid those deemed wrong. (For discussion of judgment internalism, see Darwall 1983; Brink 1989; Svavarsdottir 1999.)

Why would the truth of judgment internalism pose a problem for substantive ethical naturalism? To see why, suppose some substantively naturalist theory is true. If so, there are moral properties that are identical to (or perhaps constituted by) some (no doubt complex) natural properties. Call the natural property that is or constitutes rightness "N." To keep clear of any of the cognitive puzzles that arise in connection with unknown, *a posteriori* identities, imagine a sincere speaker, S, who is competent with the terms "is right" and "is N" *and* who accepts the substantive naturalist's identity claim "rightness = N-ness." Suppose also that S is psychologically healthy; she is not suffering from some mental illness that deprives her of interest in life and action. According to such a naturalist, when S sincerely assents to "donating to famine relief is right," her utterance is no more than a garden-variety assertion; the only psychological state she sincerely expresses is belief. But beliefs, fans of internalism argue, are not by themselves motivational. So, though S is psychologically healthy and sincere, she may genuinely judge that donating to famine relief is right, though she feels no inclination at all to donate. Note that there is nothing special about S. So, if this story is right, we should be able to imagine a linguistic community made up entirely of speakers just like her. And this, fans of internalism argue, is just what we can't do (Dreier 1990; Lenman 1999).

R. M. Hare (1952) offers a similar challenge to the semantics for any substantively naturalist moral theory. There he argues that no theory on which the use of declarative sentences containing moral vocabulary is purely assertive could explain the ability of such sentences to fulfill one of their primary functions, that is, to regulate conduct. Only if such sentences have an imperatival use can that function be explained. But if they have an imperatival use, the substantive naturalist's linguistic claims are false.

One response to challenges of this kind is to question the assumption that the intuitive attractions behind internalism and Hare's thought must be captured straightforwardly in the best semantics and "near-side" pragmatics for moral terms, rather than in their "far-side" pragmatics (Copp 2001; Finlay 2005) or in psychological generalizations about human beings (Svavarsdottir 2006). (I borrow "near-side" and "far-side" pragmatics from Korta and Perry [2008]. Put simply, near-side pragmatics is concerned with what is said or expressed by the use of a sentence in consequence of its semantics and the context in which it is used. So, the content of a sentence on an occasion of use will be part of its near-side pragmatics, as will the psychological state or attitude such a use expresses. In contrast, far-side pragmatics is concerned

with the additional information the use of such a sentence communicates, in virtue of its semantics and that the speaker said what she said when she said it. Conventional and conversational implicatures are examples of far-side pragmatic phenomena.) According to Copp and Finlay, the pro-attitude of someone who judges an action to be morally right isn't part of what is expressed by her utterance, but a part of what is implicated by it.

A third challenge to ethical naturalism is to explain the categoricity of moral judgments. Intuitively, the normativity of moral judgments is categorical, not hypothetical. We think moral truths, if there are any, give rise to genuine requirements on all rational or human beings, regardless of the contents of their contingent desires and preferences. Some have argued (e.g., Parfit 2011) that no natural property could give rise to such categorical normativity and so that acceptance of ethical naturalism requires giving up on this feature that moral truths intuitively have. (See below, however, in the discussion of possible responses to Mackie, for a variety of ethical naturalist views that aim to preserve the categoricity of moral judgment.)

A fourth challenge to the ethical naturalist's realism is directed at the naturalist's claim that we have some reason to suppose that there are any genuinely moral properties. If moral properties are natural, our grounds for thinking that they exist will likely be abductive: positing their existence will figure in the best explanation of what we observe. Gilbert Harman (1977) provides one of the most influential challenges to this claim. He argues that the best explanation for our moral observations, such as the thought, upon seeing a group of children burning a cat alive, that what they are doing is wrong, does not posit the existence of such properties. So, we shouldn't posit their existence.

Cornell realism is a type of naturalist, moral theory that is well poised to respond to such challenges. What unites such theories is two ideas. The first is the idea that moral observation is theory-laden. The second is the idea that the theory-ladenness of moral observation is compatible with realism about evaluative properties. Different theorists have developed these core ideas differently. In his elegant paper "Moral Explanations," Nicholas Sturgeon (1988) argues that Harman's argument is question-begging, in that it assumes, rather than shows, that moral explanations differ from scientific ones in not needing to posit properties of the kind the discourse appears to presuppose. There is a positive and negative component to his argument. On the positive side, he suggests several examples of intuitively plausible moral explanations that appeal to moral properties, for example that Hitler's moral depravity explains his vicious acts. On the negative side, he argues that there are two, importantly different ways to read Harman's thought experiment and that Harman's argument trades on the assumption that his moral example receives a different reading from his scientific comparison case. But that is not what's needed. What is needed is an argument that the two cases are genuinely different.

To see the force of Sturgeon's argument, consider Harman's (1977) illustration of a scientific explanation. Imagine an appropriately trained physicist who observes a vapor trail in a cloud chamber. In order to explain her judgment that there is a proton in the chamber, Harman argues, we must posit the existence of a proton moving through the

chamber. This involves a counterfactual claim: had there been no proton, the scientist would not have thought there was a proton. There are two importantly different ways, though, of thinking about this counterfactual claim, depending upon which features of the actual world we hold fixed to determine which counterfactual worlds are relevant for assessing Harman's claim: either the approximate truth of the theory upon which the observation relies or the perception which gives rise to that observation.

> Case A: In a world that is as much like the actual world as possible compatible with our scientist's theory being badly mistaken, there is a vapor trail in the cloud chamber, albeit one not made by a proton, but by a different particle. Since she accepts the mistaken theory, though, she still believes that there is a proton in the chamber.
> Case B: In a world as much like the actual world as possible compatible with there being no proton in the chamber, there is no vapor trail. (Here we are assuming that the scientist's theory is largely true of the actual world. So, when we duplicate the relevant features of the actual world, but take away the proton, the vapor trail disappears, just as the theory predicts.) And, since she accepts her theory, had there been no vapor trail, our scientist would not have judged there to be a proton in the chamber. So, it's because there is a proton that the scientist makes her observation "there is a proton in the cloud chamber."

Harman, in discussing his scientific case, assumes Case B. It's because Case B is true that the best explanation of our scientist thinking the thought that there is a proton in the chamber requires positing the existence of the proton. In his moral example, though, he assumes the parallel Case A:

> Case A: In a world as much like the actual world as possible, compatible with our observer's moral theory being false, our observer still observes a group of children burning a cat alive. Because she accepts a mistaken moral theory, one according to which wantonly inflicting pain on any sentient creature is wrong, she still has the thought that what the children are doing is wrong.
> Case B: In a world as much like the actual world as possible, compatible with the children's not doing something wrong, our observer does not see the children burning a cat alive. That is because to get to a world that is most like the actual world but in which the children aren't doing something wrong requires that we change what they are doing, since burning a cat constitutes wrongness. In that world, one in which the children aren't doing wrong, but our observer still accepts her (approximately true) moral theory, she doesn't have the thought that what the children are doing is wrong.

Assuming Case A in the moral case, though, amounts to assuming that there is no property of wrongness for cat burning to instantiate. That's because in Case A, the children are still burning a cat alive, but their doing so does not constitute wrongness. So, in assuming Case A, Harman is assuming the very claim he aims to establish.

(In a later exchange with Sturgeon [1986], Harman [1986] emphasizes not the pressure that naturalism puts on moral realism, but the need it reveals for a reduction of moral to natural properties.)

Harman's challenge is similar, in some respects, to Blackburn's (1988) quasi-realist challenge or Hume's (2000) challenge, that to find what is distinctively evaluative in our evaluative discourse, we need to look to human sentiments, not the natural, external world. Instead of assuming that moral facts don't figure in the best explanation of what we observe, though, Blackburn provides a deflationary explanation of our practice of making moral judgments. We make moral judgments, he argues, not because we are responding to the instantiation of genuinely moral properties, but rather because doing so has conferred an evolutionary advantage on our ancestors. So, since we needn't posit the existence of moral properties in order to explain our practice, we shouldn't posit them.

Richard Boyd's (1988) version of Cornell realism offers a rival, ethically naturalist, explanation of our practice. On Boyd's view, moral judgments and theories are confirmed in the same way that scientific hypotheses and theories are. Scientific hypotheses are confirmed by experiments that presuppose the approximate truth of scientific theories that have been well confirmed. Only by relying on such an assumption is it possible to develop experiments by which we can test particular hypotheses. We should believe in the truth (or approximate truth) of scientific hypotheses and theories confirmed in this way, because it would be a miracle if their predictions over decades conformed to the data if there weren't any of the entities, properties, relations, and kinds the theory tells us there are.

That is the scientific realist's reply to the scientific anti-realist. Boyd's strategy is to respond to the moral anti-realist in the same way. Our moral judgments may be confirmed or disconfirmed by relying on the assumption that our moral theories are approximately true. If we test them over and over, under the right conditions, and people come to agree in their moral judgments, we have some reason to think that our moral theory is true or approximately true.

A core element in Boyd's theory is an externalist semantics for moral terms, modeled on the Kripke/Putnam account of natural kind terms. (For an independent development of this idea, see Brink 2001.) On Boyd's (1988) view, moral terms refer to the properties that causally regulate our use of them in such a way that more of our judgments using them become true over time. The increasing conformity in judgment between people over time indicates that our judgments are approximately correct judgments about those properties.

Ethical Naturalism: Reasons For

Those are several of the main challenges to substantive naturalism posed over the last century. What might be said in favor of it? One advantage naturalist proposals have over non-naturalist ones is the ability to avoid important challenges to non-naturalistic realism. One of these is Mackie's (1977) complaint that genuinely moral properties would be "queer" and hence unlike anything else in the universe. He arrives at this

conclusion by combining several observations about what moral properties would have to be like, in order for them to exist. On the one hand, moral judgments appear to be straightforward descriptions of the world, capable of being true or false. If they were true, it appears that their truth would be categorical, in other words not conditional upon the contents of anyone's contingent desires or preferences. On the other, moral judgments appear to be action-guiding. (We might think, for example, that saying "you ought to help others when you can" functions as a call to action, in the way that "help others when you can" does.) The "queerness" of moral properties lies in their ability to make true categorical and yet action-guiding judgments.

If ethical naturalism is true, though, there is nothing metaphysically "queer" about moral properties; they are garden-variety natural properties. Such a theory can straightforwardly accommodate the apparent truth-aptitude and categoricity of moral judgments, while explaining their apparent action-guidingness in terms of psychological generalizations about human beings (Svavarsdottir 2006), in terms of the far-side pragmatics for the use of sentences expressing such judgments (Copp 2001; Finlay 2005), or by understanding the prescriptivity of moral judgments in terms of their reason-givingness, as opposed to their having motivational force (Wallace 2006). (An alternative way for an ethical naturalist to respond to Mackie's queerness argument would be to deny the categoricity of moral judgments; see Railton 1989.)

Ethical naturalism also promises a plausible response to Mackie's (1977) epistemic challenge to realism. If there were objective values, he argues, our knowledge of them would be by some faculty distinct from our ordinary ways of knowing about the world. An ethical naturalist, such as Boyd (1988), is able to meet this challenge by saying how we could come to have moral knowledge in the same way we have scientific knowledge.

Finally, ethical naturalism is able to explain the widely accepted thesis that the moral supervenes on facts picked out in nonmoral vocabulary. How best to capture the supervenience of the moral is a subject of some dispute. One attractive formulation parallels Jackson's (1998) supervenience-based formulation of physicalism. On the resulting thesis,

> Any world that is a minimal natural duplicate of our world is a moral duplicate of our world.

Here, a "minimal natural duplicate" (MND) of our world is any world exactly like ours in its pattern of instantiation of natural properties, relations, and kinds and which contains nothing else. What MND says is that any world like that will be an exact duplicate with respect to its pattern of instantiation of moral properties, relations, and kinds. (One nice feature of this formulation is that it gives us a way of capturing one assumption realist and anti-realist ethical naturalists share, since the anti-realist, in accepting that there are no moral properties in the actual world, can still accept MND.)

A realist, ethical naturalist can easily explain why MND is true: it's true because all of the moral properties instantiated in the actual world are or are constituted by the natural properties. So, in duplicating the latter, we *ipso facto* duplicate the former.

***See also*:** error theory; non-cognitivism; projectivism; realism, moral

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