Ethical Naturalism

Current Debates

Edited by

SUSANA NUCCETELLI
AND GARY SEAY

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Ethical naturalism is narrowly construed as the doctrine that there are moral properties and facts, at least some of which are natural properties and facts. Perhaps owing to its having faced, early on, intuitively forceful objections by eliminativists and non-naturalists, ethical naturalism has only recently become a central player in the debates about the status of moral properties and facts which have occupied philosophers over the last century. It has now become a driving force in those debates, one with sufficient resources to challenge not only eliminativism, especially in its various non-cognitivist forms, but also the most sophisticated versions of non-naturalism. This volume brings together twelve new essays which make it clear that, in light of recent developments in analytic philosophy and the social sciences, there are novel grounds for reassessing the doctrines at stake in these debates.

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Introduction

This collection offers new perspectives on ethical naturalism, narrowly construed as the conjunction of two core theses. One holds that there are moral properties and facts, the other that at least some such properties and facts are natural properties and facts. Thus understood, ethical naturalism is distinct from, though usually motivated by, philosophical naturalism, a more general metaphysical outlook according to which all there *is* is the world as conceived by science. Clearly, philosophical naturalism does not entail ethical naturalism, for it is compatible also with eliminativist accounts of morality that either reject the ethical naturalist's core theses altogether (as in the error theory) or deflate them substantially (as in quasi-realism). But while eliminativism, especially in its various non-cognitivist forms, was a driving force through much of the twentieth century, ethical naturalism fell out of favor among philosophical naturalists until near the century's end, perhaps as a result of having faced, early on, intuitively forceful objections such as G. E. Moore's 1903 open question argument. In the last thirty years, however, increasing doubts about the cogency of those objections, together with some key developments in philosophy of mind and language, have contributed to a widespread renewal of interest in ethical naturalism.

For many philosophical naturalists now, one appeal of ethical naturalism is its core thesis that there are moral properties and facts, especially when read as claiming that such properties and facts are *mind-* and *language-independent*. On this, ethical naturalists compete with non-naturalists, who also hold a thesis with a realist gloss, in conjunction with their defining claim that at least some such moral properties and facts are irreducible, non-natural properties and facts. But the latter claim appears to commit non-naturalists to a moral ontology and an epistemology that are at odds with philosophical naturalism. Thus non-naturalism, in spite of its initial influence, has appeared less attractive to naturalistically minded philosophers for whom the very notion of a non-natural property or fact seems

metaphysically extravagant. Moreover, although it is now widely accepted that the moral supervenes on the natural, critics doubt that non-naturalists can explain how irreducible moral properties and facts could supervene on natural properties and facts (see Ridge, this volume). These and other apparently compelling objections to non-naturalism are among the factors that have contributed indirectly to the current attraction of ethical naturalism for philosophers inclined toward moral realism.

But the appeal of ethical naturalism is undoubtedly also owing to its apparent ability to accommodate both a general philosophical-naturalist outlook and a representationalist account of moral language. On the one hand, ethical naturalism promises to deliver a non-eliminativist account of morality that might resolve the problem of locating moral value in the world as conceived by modern science. If ethical naturalism is correct, the philosophical naturalist's puzzle of how to place morality in the natural order simply dissolves. For then, at least some moral properties and facts are supervenient on, and perhaps identical to, natural properties and facts. On the other hand, ethical naturalism promises to dissolve that puzzle without abandoning another attractive thesis in metaethics, representationalism about moral terms and sentences. For realist ethical naturalism can capture the common intuition that at least some moral terms denote legitimate natural properties, and some moral sentences represent how things are morally. This follows from the ethical naturalist's view that at least some moral sentences have truth conditions of the sort countenanced by a robust moral realist theory.

Beyond the two core theses mentioned above, however, ethical naturalists find much to disagree about. Some read those theses with a realist gloss. Others favor a relativist interpretation. Ethical naturalists are also divided on whether moral properties and facts are reducible without normative remainder to purely natural properties and facts. A further disagreement among them concerns whether moral terms and sentences are semantically equivalent to natural terms and sentences. What is sometimes called "analytical naturalism" holds that they are, while "metaphysical naturalism" maintains that the relevant relationship between the moral and the natural involves properties and facts exclusively.

Such controversies are the subject of extended treatment in the present collection. The first set of chapters focuses on epistemic and metaphysical problems thought to arise for a number of ethical naturalist doctrines. Among them is a well-known epistemic challenge to reductive ethical naturalism: namely, that no empirical methods can be invoked to decide among rival ethical theories. This challenge is one of Gilbert

Harman's concerns in his contribution. On Harman's view, although the naturalistic reduction associated with normative functionalism cannot meet what he regards as the main epistemic challenge facing ethical naturalism, the response-dependent and social convention theories have the resources to avoid that challenge. Other concerns in his essay include the prospects of naturalistic approaches current in moral psychology that attempt evolutionary debunking accounts, a possible parallel between morality and language, and the roles (if any) of guilt and character in morality.

David Copp's contribution considers a recent objection to ethical naturalism by Derek Parfit (2011) that is now attracting considerable attention. According to this objection, ethical naturalism is unable to account for the normativity of moral properties and facts. But Copp sees no normativity problem for ethical naturalist doctrines that, like his, are reductionist, non-analytic, and realist. He sets out to substantiate this claim by looking closely at five attempts to raise the normativity problem for ethical naturalists, most of them by Parfit and some by Jonathan Dancy (2006) and by David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (2003). On Copp's assessment, none of these attempts succeeds in showing that no natural property or fact could also be normative.

Roger Crisp's essay questions the common assumption that all versions of ethical naturalism are incompatible with non-naturalism. Given his argument, at least some forms of ethical naturalism might be consistent with non-naturalism of the sort recently defended by Parfit. This conflicts, of course, with a widely held view of ethical naturalism as being incompatible with non-naturalism. Crisp himself begins his essay by noting that there seems to be an irresolvable disagreement between realist, non-analytic naturalists and their non-naturalist opponents. Their disputes often lead to a dialectical standoff, which Crisp illustrates by considering how ethical naturalists could respond to Parfit's recent attempt to raise a normativity problem for ethical naturalism. *Contra* Parfit, there seems to be logical space for naturalists to vindicate their central claim that normative facts and properties are nothing over and above natural facts and properties, a thesis roundly denied by non-naturalists. The main difference between the two parties, Crisp thinks, concerns their goals: naturalists seek to anchor normativity in the natural world, while non-naturalists aim at accounting for the distinctiveness of normative properties (by contrast with those of science). But there is room for a compromise, for if Crisp is right, ethical naturalists and non-naturalists could both embrace a non-reductive, supervenience account of normative properties couched

in terms of emergentism – which he conceives as amounting to the meta-ethical analogue of emergentism in the philosophy of mind.

Frank Jackson's contribution addresses what he regards as an old challenge for ethical naturalists who are also cognitivists: can they accommodate *both* substantial agreement about how moral language represents things to be and also widespread dissension over any attempted identifications of ethical properties with natural properties? To do that, ethical naturalists must draw on a plausible semantics for moral terms, one that can account for their informative role among competent users of moral language. To Jackson, although a currently popular, externalist semantic theory fails to meet this condition, his own "network account" satisfies it. Given the network account, ethical terms/concepts form an interlocking system about whose informative role there is substantial agreement among competent users, even though the network itself is in part under negotiation. The possibility of such an agreement is consistent with there being widespread dissension about the identification of moral properties with natural properties.

Richard Joyce's essay addresses a different sort of issue that might be a problem not only for ethical naturalism but also for moral skepticism (i.e., the error theory and non-cognitivism): namely, that these apparently contrary accounts are based exclusively on conceptual reasons that might be equally indeterminate. For there might be no fact of the matter as to which of these apparently rival accounts is correct. That is, if Joyce is right, such apparently contrary accounts might both be affected by indeterminacy of the sort claimed by Quine in the case of theories of meaning. To support a radical claim along these lines, Joyce draws on early work by David Lewis, together with some evidence stemming from the ambiguity of notions, such as "assertion," commonly invoked in the dispute between ethical naturalists and moral skeptics. To make matters worse, no pragmatic reasons seem available for any attempt to resolve the indeterminacy problem facing ethical naturalism and moral skepticism.

To say that moral naturalism and moral skepticism might both be affected by Quinean indeterminacy commits Joyce to a kind of meta-ethical pluralism. But elsewhere Joyce (2001, 2006) has offered reasons for preferring the error theory over rival views, including ethical naturalism. Terence Cuneo's essay takes issue with one of Joyce's arguments for that conclusion, the so-called categoricity argument. On Cuneo's view, this argument suffers from an "arbitrariness problem," since it arbitrarily counts certain features of ordinary moral practices while discounting others. In addition, if Cuneo is right, Joyce's defense of the error theory

faces another problem: moral naturalism seems to square better than the error theory with Joyce's own standards for the acceptability of a moral theory.

Even if, as Cuneo contends, ethical naturalism can meet the challenge raised by Joyce's categoricity argument, it may still need to respond to other objections before it can get its two core theses off the ground. Prominent among them is G. E. Moore's "open question argument," which he famously offered together with the "naturalistic fallacy" charge. Although there is consensus that this extended inference fails to undermine *all* varieties of moral naturalism, the open question argument is often vindicated as having some intuitive force against analytical moral naturalism. By contrast, the charge that analytical naturalism commits the naturalistic fallacy usually finds no takers at all. In their essay here, Nuccetelli and Seay revisit each of these Moorean arguments with an eye to showing that analytical naturalism of the sort recently proposed by Frank Jackson (1998, 2003) and Michael Smith (2000) does after all rest on a mistake – though perhaps not the one Moore had in mind when he made the naturalistic fallacy charge.

The non-naturalist opponents of ethical naturalism, of course, face problems of their own, not least of which is their seeming inability to account for the supervenience of the moral on the natural, a widely accepted relation sometimes invoked by the slogan, "Necessarily, no normative difference without descriptive difference." In his contribution to this volume, Michael Ridge reconstructs the supervenience objection against non-naturalism. Standardly construed, the objection points to the non-naturalist's apparent inability to explain how irreducibly non-natural properties and facts could supervene on entirely natural properties and facts. To Ridge, the objection can be sharpened so that it covers also the non-naturalist's apparent inability to explain why there should *be* any such irreducible non-natural properties at all. Although a recent non-naturalist account by Ralph Wedgwood (2007) might be beyond the reach of the supervenience objection standardly construed, on Ridge's view it does not escape it when sharpened in the way proposed in his contribution to this volume.

Another problem for non-naturalism that arose early on, at least for Mooreans, is that the doctrine appears incompatible with a plausible moral epistemology. But that wouldn't be so if a perception-based epistemology for moral properties and facts, of the sort outlined by Robert Audi in his essay included here, could get off the ground. For Audi's project amounts to a naturalistic epistemology for moral properties and

facts that seems available to non-naturalists. One building block of Audi's project is the claim that at least some judgments ascribing moral properties are epistemically grounded in a kind of perception, though not of a representational sort. If so, such perceptions afford a type of perceptual knowledge, and this is the "naturalistic anchor" which is available not only to ethical naturalism but also to "non-reductive realism." Audi's non-reductive realism is a "consequentiality" doctrine holding that there are irreducible moral properties that are consequential upon natural properties. Thus construed, the thesis is consistent with the non-reductive realist view of classical non-naturalists such as Moore (e.g., in his "Conception of Intrinsic Value" [1922a]). If Audi's proposal is found compelling, then non-naturalism, cast as non-reductive realism, might after all avoid the epistemic version of the "queerness" objection often taken to undermine it.

Yet recent work in experimental philosophy and some branches of empirical psychology might undermine the epistemology of non-naturalism by pointing to its extreme dependence on unreliable methods based on thought experiment and intuition. Robert Shaver explores some consequences of this work for non-naturalism. His paper looks closely at whether the argumentation strategy of non-naturalists could succeed in supporting their views, given that the strategy is often heavily dependent on thought experiments, as charged by experimentalists. He also considers the empirical strategies of experimental philosophers. Close examination of the strategies used by each of these parties appears to show that there is logical space for skepticism about any across-the-board advantage to be found in the experimentalist strategies over the a priori strategies of non-naturalists. But Shaver's paper invokes some recent results of empirical tests that appear to undermine one of the two types of a priori argument preferred by non-naturalists, the so-called wrong-reasons argument.

Sergio Tenenbaum's contribution asks whether certain varieties of realist moral naturalism are compatible with an externalist, Humean theory of motivation. Given Michael Smith's 1994 "fetishism objection," argues Tenenbaum, they are not. For virtuous agents must have non-derivative motivations to pursue *specific* ends they believe to be morally right, and externalist theory ascribes to the virtuous agent only a direct *de dicto* desire to do what is morally right. After reconstructing Smith's objection, Tenenbaum contends that there is an understanding of virtuous motivation, available to realist moral naturalists, that is immune to Smith's objection.

In his own essay for the volume, Michael Smith challenges Gilbert Harman's (2000a) contention that moral relativism is favored by philosophical naturalism over its competitor, "moral absolutism." On Smith's view, not only is naturalism silent about whether moral relativism or absolutism is right, but Harman has failed to identify the real source of disagreement between these doctrines. As reconstructed by Smith, moral absolutism is a version of moral rationalism, a set of doctrines attractive to many current theorists inspired either by Kant or by Brentano and Ewing. To Smith, Harman's argument appears sound only if we assume certain principles that supposedly govern the formation of an agent's intentions. But there are rival assumptions equally compatible with naturalism that may be available to moral absolutists. Once those assumptions are taken into account, the disagreement between absolutists and relativists (and among the absolutists themselves) can be seen to turn *not* on naturalism but instead on whether it is the relativist characterization of the functional roles of beliefs and desires that is the correct one or that offered by the absolutist. Thus, if Smith's response to Harman is on the right track, Harman's argument for the claim that naturalism favors moral relativism would be unsound, for it would rest after all on a claim in need of support: namely, a certain disputed assumption about the connection between moral demands and sufficient reasons.

CHAPTER I

Naturalism in moral philosophy

Gilbert Harman

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Narrow and wide conceptions of philosophy and philosophical method

Naturalism in philosophy is a special case of a more general conception of philosophy. In this conception there is no special philosophical *method* and no special philosophical *subject matter*.

Consider some of the ways in which philosophy interacts with and is continuous with other disciplines.

Aesthetics is obviously pursued in philosophy departments and in departments of literature, music, and art. Monroe Beardsley, who wrote the most important survey of aesthetics in the twentieth century, was one of the authors of an important statement of a central aspect of the "New Criticism."

More recently, Richard Wollheim (who may have invented the expression "minimal art") and Arthur Danto have had a significant influence on art theory and criticism. They themselves have been important critics. Alexander Nehamas is another important contemporary example.

Anthropology. Anthropologists are often involved with philosophy and philosophers have sometimes acted as anthropologists to study the moralities of one or another culture. Richard Brandt lived with the Hopi in order to study their ethics. John Ladd lived with the Navaho in order to study their ethics. The anthropologist Dan Sperber is the same person as the philosopher Dan Sperber.[1]

Economics. Recent figures include Robert Nozick, Amartya Sen, maybe John Rawls, David Gauthier, Allan Gibbard, John Broome, Philip Pettit,

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[1] For example, Brandt (1954); Ladd (1957); Sperber (1973); and Sperber and Wilson (1986).

and many more. *Political theory* is of course a related example with many of the same players.

Linguistics is another very clear case. Philosophers were involved early in the development of generative grammar (e.g., Jerry Katz and Jerry Fodor). Many more wrote about Chomsky's ideas and argued with them (e.g., Paul Ziff, Hilary Putnam). Famously, at the end of the first chapter of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls suggested that generative grammar might be a good model for moral theory.[2] Earlier Robert Nozick tried to sketch how that might work.[3] John Mikhail has been developing this idea in some detail.

In recent years there has been philosophical interest in and interaction with developments in linguistics. And there has been much interdisciplinary research in semantics involving philosophers and linguists.

Psychology is another clear case. In his *Theory of Justice* Rawls suggested that an adequate moral theory had to be sensitive to developmental psychology, especially in Piaget. Rawls' early work on justice in turn influenced the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) adaptation of Piaget.

Donald Davidson more or less regularly discussed rationality with psychologists like Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, trying to get them to accept that there were limits on how irrational people could be interpreted to be.

J. L. Austin's (1956–57) study of excuses was influential on psychological studies of children's development by John Darley and his colleagues.

In recent years there has been considerable back and forth between psychologists and philosophers on many issues. Relevant philosophers include Daniel Dennett, Stephen Stich, and many younger people working in the general area of (real) moral psychology.[4]

One important issue has concerned whether social psychology undermines ordinary conceptions of character traits and threatens certain forms of virtue ethics. But there are many other issues too.

Computer science. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and related topics have been considered highly relevant to philosophy of mind. For example, the philosopher John Pollock (1995) studied epistemology by designing computer programs to simulate reasoning in accord with one or another set of epistemic principles.

[2] Rawls (1971: section 9).   [3] Nozick (1968).
[4] Doris (2010); Sinnott-Armstrong (2008a).