

Varieties of Moral Naturalism¹

Variedades do naturalismo moral

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Abstract

The present text aims to make an examination of the varieties of moral naturalism, and for this it will examine some anti-naturalist and anti-realist arguments. It will also argue that existent theories can be considered on two dimensions, the metaphysical and epistemological dimension, and the dimension of motivation and normativity. In the first dimension, there is non-reductive naturalism and reductive naturalism of the non-analytic variety. Turning to the second dimension, the dimension of normativity and moral motivation, we find internalist naturalism, simple externalist naturalism and externalist naturalism with the standard-based account of normativity. At the end, the text will say something in favor of moral realism and to a kind of naturalism in specific.

Key words: moral naturalism, normativity, moral realism, moral non-realism.

Resumo

O presente texto pretende fazer um exame das variedades de naturalismo moral, e para isso examinará alguns argumentos anti-naturalistas e anti-realistas. Irá também arguir que teorias existentes podem ser consideradas em duas dimensões, a dimensão metafísica e epistemológica e a dimensão da motivação e da normatividade. Na primeira dimensão está o naturalismo não redutivo e naturalismo redutivo da variedade não analítica. Quanto à segunda dimensão, a dimensão da normatividade e da motivação moral, encontramos o naturalismo internalista, o naturalismo externalista simples e naturalismo externalista com o tratamento padrão da normatividade. Ao final, o texto dirá algumas palavras em favor do realismo moral e de um tipo de naturalismo em específico.

Palavras-chave: naturalismo moral, normatividade, realismo moral, anti-realismo moral.

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Introduction: Two Puzzles

We all have moral beliefs. We take it to be true, for example, that torture is wrong, that compassion is a virtue, that there is a right to freedom of expression. These beliefs are *normative* or *evaluative*; they concern what we ought or ought not to do, or what is valuable or worthy of our choosing, or what we must ensure, regardless of what we ourselves value. If eating meat is wrong, for example, its wrongness does not depend on what we enjoy eating or on what we value in life. Yet its wrongness means that we must avoid eating meat.

There is a puzzle here. For our moral beliefs concern what we ought to do or what we ought to choose or value, not what we are actually inclined to do or how we actually act or choose or what we actually value. The question is, what in the world could make such beliefs be true? There does not seem to be room in the natural world for facts of the kinds that would need to exist in order to make our moral beliefs be true. Say that the natural world consists of everything we could learn about through the senses, including what we can learn of by means of science as well as what we can learn in less sophisticated ways. Science is very powerful. But it does not seem to have the power to discover normative facts, facts about how things ought or ought not to be. It does not seem to have the power to reveal that torture is wrong or that compassion is a virtue. It does not seem to have the power to reveal whether eating meat is wrong. Indeed, it would seem misguided to propose that science could settle whether eating meat is wrong, or that to decide whether eating meat is wrong, what we need to do is to carry out ever more sophisticated empirical enquiries. In short, there does not seem to be room for normative facts in the picture we have of the natural world. If there are normative facts, it seems they could not be natural facts.

A second puzzle is related to the first one, but it is perhaps more subtle. The first puzzle is whether a moral fact could be a natural fact. It is the problem of explaining what could possibly make a moral belief be true. The second puzzle begins with the idea that our moral beliefs are normative and that a moral fact would be a normative fact. That is, our moral beliefs have an important characteristic, the property of being normative. It is because moral beliefs are normative that it seems impossible that any natural fact could make such a belief be true. A fact that would make a moral belief be true would itself have to be normative, and the picture we have of the natural world seems to leave no room for normative facts. But this leads us to a second puzzle. The question is, what is it for a belief or a fact to be normative? The first puzzle is, in effect, that it seems impossible for any natural fact to be normative, so it seems impossible for any natural fact to make a normative belief be true. The second puzzle is the problem of explaining normativity. If the normativity of moral beliefs and facts is not a naturalistic feature that they have, then what kind of feature is it, and what does it consist in?

Moral Naturalism

Despite the intuitive force of these two puzzles, a moral naturalist maintains that moral facts are natural facts and that their normativity is a natural feature that they have. Moral naturalism is accordingly an optimistic position. It sees moral truth and normativity as natural phenomena.

To be clear about just how optimistic moral naturalism is, let me set out the central doctrines that distinguish it from its competitors. To begin, moral naturalism is a kind of moral realism, so it must be distinguished from all forms of moral

anti-realism. There are four central doctrines that are shared by moral realists, as I understand the position, and that distinguish moral realism from anti-realism. Moral naturalism must also be distinguished of course from anti-naturalistic forms of moral realism. There is a fifth doctrine that is shared by moral naturalists and that distinguishes moral naturalism from non-naturalism.

First, a moral realist holds, as I shall say, that there are moral *properties*. The actions that are wrong have something in common in virtue of which they are wrong. They are similar in this respect. What they have in common is of course that they are all wrong; that is, they all have the property of being wrong. The states of character that are virtuous have something in common in virtue of which they are similar; what they have in common is the property of being a virtue. And so on. That is, there is such a thing as moral wrongness and there is such a thing as the property of being a moral virtue. There are moral properties.

To be sure, there are ancient philosophical debates about such similarities and about how to understand them. I say that there are moral properties, and I would say as well that there are many natural properties, such as the property of being deciduous, the property of being a rubber tree, the property of being a hallucinogen. But for present purposes I do not take any particular position in the metaphysical debates about the nature of so-called properties. There is no need for a moral realist to take any particular position in these debates. She needs to insist merely that moral properties have the same basic metaphysical nature as any other properties, whatever that nature might be.

Second, a moral realist insists that some moral properties are instantiated. This is just to say that some kinds of action are wrong and that some traits of character are virtues. People have done wrong things and they have done right things. Some people are good and some are vicious. The actual world includes persons, events, and states of affairs that have moral characteristics, such as that of being wrong or of being vicious or of being unjust. In short, there are moral facts.

Third, moral predicates are used to ascribe moral properties. The predicate "wrong" is used to ascribe wrongness; the predicate "just" is used to ascribe justice. And so on. Our moral language is used to pick out respects in which things are morally similar and to describe things in terms of these similarities. Of course, a realist would not deny that there may well be moral subtleties that we have not yet understood. A moral realist would concede that people have been morally obtuse during various periods of history and she would readily concede that there has been moral progress and that there might well be moral progress in our future. This third point is simply that moral language does not work in any special way that distinguishes it fundamentally from ordinary descriptive language. Moral predicates ascribe moral properties just as ordinary descriptive predicates ascribe descriptive properties. The sentence, "Torture is wrong," ascribes to torture a similarity to other wrong kinds of action just as the sentence, "Torture is widespread," ascribes to torture a similarity to other kinds of action that are widespread.

Fourth, moral assertions express moral beliefs. I began by saying that we have moral beliefs. We believe that certain kinds of action are wrong and we believe that certain traits of character are virtues. This fourth point is simply that moral assertions do not work in any special way that distinguishes them fundamentally from how ordinary assertions work. Ordinary assertions express ordinary beliefs. If I assert that torture is widespread, I express the ordinary belief that torture is widespread. And, the realist holds, if I assert that torture is wrong, I express another ordinary belief, the belief that torture is wrong. It is worth insisting on this since some moral philosophers hold that the states of mind we express in making moral assertions are not beliefs, or that they are metaphysically different in some crucial way from

the states of mind expressed by ordinary nonmoral assertions. On this view, the assertions that torture is wrong and the assertion that torture is widespread express different kinds of states of mind. A moral realist denies this. She insists that moral beliefs have the same basic metaphysical nature as other beliefs.

Fifth, and finally, moral naturalism adds that the moral properties are *natural* properties. That is, they have the same basic metaphysical and epistemological status as ordinary natural properties such as redness, deciduous-ness, and the property of being a railroad car. There is room to debate exactly what this comes to, of course. Elsewhere I have contributed to the debate (Copp, 2007, ch. 1). For present purposes, the important point is simply that, in committing herself to this fifth doctrine, the moral naturalist commits herself to addressing the two puzzles I set out in the preceding section. She commits herself to explaining how it could be that moral facts are facts of the same kind as ordinary natural facts and she commits herself to explaining, in naturalistic terms, what the normativity of such facts consists in.

Given the intuitive force of the two puzzles, one might naturally wonder why anyone would take such an audacious view. Do we have any reason to be optimistic that moral naturalism might be true?

Why Naturalism?

Some moral naturalists are motivated by metaphysical and epistemological concerns. The idea that an ordinary human being or an ordinary event or action might have a property that is “non-natural” can seem puzzling and spooky. The very idea that there are such properties can seem extravagant. Moreover, it can seem puzzling how we could know that any such property is instantiated. I am assuming here that if our basic knowledge about the nature of a property and about its instantiation is empirical, then it is a natural property. So if moral properties are non-natural, our knowledge as to which actions are right or wrong and as to which traits of character are virtuous and which vicious would have to be acquired in some non-empirical way. It is not clear how this could be. For reasons of this kind, many philosophers hold that we should avoid burdening our metaphysics with the hypothesis that there are any non-natural properties unless there is no alternative.

There is the further point that the hypothesis that moral properties are non-natural does nothing to explain their nature and nothing to explain what their normativity might consist in. So it leaves the two puzzles in place, understood now as puzzles about how there could be moral properties and not merely as puzzles about how moral properties could be natural properties. Naturalism might seem to offer at least a strategy for explaining the nature of moral properties and their normativity, the strategy of somehow assimilating moral properties to ordinary properties of familiar kinds. Hence, if we accept the four doctrines of moral realism, it can seem that we have explanatory reasons to try to develop a satisfactory version of moral naturalism as well as metaphysical and epistemological reasons.

One might suggest that we should instead abandon moral realism. But I want to resist going in this direction since we do have moral beliefs – we take there to be moral truths – and these beliefs give every appearance of being ordinary beliefs about ordinary states of affairs. Moreover, moral states of affairs seem to be part of our ordinary experience. For instance, it is part of our ordinary experience that there are bad people as well as good people, that people commit horrible wrongs and that, in addition, from time to time, people do wonderfully praiseworthy things. We are aware of these facts in ordinary ways. We read about them in history, for instance. And sometimes we can understand and explain people’s actions on the basis of their

moral character just as sometimes we can understand and explain people's actions as responses to injustices.³ All of this is part of the natural world of our experience. For reasons of this kind, the naturalist is loath to abandon moral realism and loath to embrace the unhelpful idea that moral properties are non-natural.

Varieties of Naturalism

The challenge facing moral naturalism is to answer in some way the two central puzzles by explaining how moral facts can be part of the natural world of our experience and by explaining what their normativity can consist in, in a way that is compatible with their being natural facts. We can organize our examination of the kinds of strategies available to naturalists by looking in some detail at four main objections to moral naturalism. These objections can be seen as attempts to make the two puzzles more precise. The main varieties of moral naturalism can be seen in turn as arising from responses to the objections.

The four main objections are the objection from the Is/Ought Gap or the Fact/Value Gap, the Open Question Argument, the Objection from Queerness, and the objection that naturalism cannot accommodate normativity. I will discuss them, briefly, in order.

The Objection from the "Is/Ought Gap" or "Fact/Value Gap"

The fundamental idea behind this objection is that there is a logical gap between non-normative claims about how things are in the world and normative claims about what ought to be. The idea is suggested by David Hume in a famous passage in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, III 1.1. Hume writes:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new revelation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it (Hume, 2007, T3.1.1.27).

The issue we are addressing, however, is whether normative moral facts can be natural facts. The problem with the objection is that even if there is a logical gap between non-normative claims and normative moral claims, it does not follow that moral facts are not natural facts.

The way to see this is to notice that there are similar gaps between kinds of natural claims. As Nicholas Sturgeon (2006) has pointed out, there is a similar gap between physical claims and biological claims (Sturgeon, 2006, p. 102-105). No

³ For arguments on this point, see Sturgeon (1985, p. 49-78). See also Railton (1986). For arguments to the contrary, see Harman (1977, p. 3-10).

matter what complex conjunction of purely physical propositions you might like to construct, no biological proposition follows. But it obviously does not follow from this that biological facts are not natural facts. One might even deny that it follows that biology cannot be reduced to physics. According to the moral naturalist, the is/ought gap is not relevantly different from this physical/biological gap. We understand the existence of the physical/biological gap as compatible with its being the case that physical and biological facts are simply different kinds of natural facts. Similarly, the naturalist holds, we should understand the gap between non-normative natural propositions and moral propositions as compatible with its being the case that non-normative natural facts and moral facts are simply two kinds of natural fact.

The “Open Question Argument”

This argument was first proposed by G.E. Moore in section 13 of *Principia Ethica* (Moore, 1993 [1903]). It is one of the most famous and influential arguments in twentieth century philosophy. To understand the form it takes, we need to understand that, for Moore, the fundamental issue in ethics is the nature of goodness. In section 5 of *Principia*, he says that ethics is “the general inquiry into what is good” and that its fundamental question is, What is good? Or better, we might say, his question is, What is *goodness*? Moore argues that it is not possible to provide a “definition” or “analysis” that gives the nature of the property goodness by specifying some property or complex of properties that goodness is identical to. As the Open Question argument purports to show, goodness is indefinable or unanalyzable.

The argument is commonly construed, however, as an argument against moral naturalism. Understood in this way, the underlying idea is presumably that if goodness were a natural property, then it would be *analyzable*. For it would be possible to provide an analysis of it that showed it to be identical to some natural property or complex of natural properties. The argument can be represented as follows:

- (1) Suppose “good” denotes a natural property R
 - (2) Then to be good is to be R. (Perhaps to be good is to be that which we desire to desire. Or perhaps to be good is to be pleasant.)
 - (3) Therefore, the question “Is it good to be R?” is equivalent to “Is it R to be R?”
 - (4) But the question “Is it good to be R?” is significant (and open) whereas the question, “Is it R to be R?” is not significant.
 - (5) Therefore, the questions are not equivalent.
 - (6) The conclusion expressed by (5) contradicts the conclusion expressed by (3).
 - (7) Therefore, the supposition in (1) is false.
- Therefore, (8) “Good” does not denote a natural property.

This is the open question argument. When generalized, it might seem to show that moral naturalism cannot be true.

The argument has been widely discussed over the past century and by now there are standard responses to it. I will discuss three lines of response.⁴

First, as Nicholas Sturgeon (2006, p. 98-99) has pointed out, the argument seems to depend on the assumption that the term “goodness” does not denote a

⁴ Nicholas Sturgeon rehearses the responses in an admirably clear way and adds his own responses (Sturgeon, 2006, p. 95-99).

natural property. To be successful, the argument must show that goodness cannot be identical to *any* natural property. That is, the argument must go through no matter what term denoting a natural property is substituted for "R" in the above schematic representation of the argument. But of course a naturalist holds that goodness is itself a natural property. Hence, for a naturalist, the term "goodness" or the predicate "good" can be substituted for "R" in the argument. But with this substitution, the question "Is it good to be R?" just is the question "Is it good to be good?" And on this understanding, of course, premise (4) is obviously false. For on this understanding, the question "Is it good to be R?" and the question "Is it R to be R?" are one and the same question, namely the question, "Is it good to be good?" So it cannot be true that one of them is significant and open while the other is not. A naturalist can therefore deny premise (4).

This response points the way to a *Non-Reductive Naturalism* of the sort that Sturgeon has proposed. Non-reductive naturalism maintains that the moral properties are natural properties but does not aim to defend any reductive analyses of the moral properties. According to reductive forms of naturalism, for each moral property M, there is some natural property N such that to be M is to be N, where "N" is an expression couched in wholly naturalistic terms, no predicate in which is normative and every predicate in which refers to some property that is independently taken to be a natural property. A naturalist who proposes a non-reductive theory must of course defend the proposition that the moral properties are natural properties, but she must do this without relying on any such reductive analyses.

I turn now to the second response to the argument. It has often been noted that property identities can be non-transparent in the sense that it can be true that a property M is identical with a property N even if this is not obvious or transparent to those who are familiar with M and N and competent in identifying M and N. For example, the number 796 is identical to the difference between 12,231 and 11,435 even though this is not immediately obvious. This claim entails a claim about property identity, for it entails that the property a collection can have of having 796 members is identical to the property of having 12,231 less 11,435 members. Yet this equality is not obvious. Since this is not obvious, the question, "Is 796 equal to 12,231-11,435?" is significant and open. Of course the question "Is 796 equal to 796?" is trivial, but this does not undermine the fact that $796 = 12,231 - 11,435$. Similarly the question, Does a set that has 796 members have 12,231 less 11,435 members? is significant although the question, Does a set that has 796 members have 796 members? is trivial. But this does not undermine the fact that to have 796 members is to have 12,231 less 11,435 members. The fact that the one question is significant while the other is trivial does not undermine the equality.

This response shows that a naturalist can deny premise (3) in the argument, or perhaps the inference from (4) to (5). She can certainly deny that the argument supports (7) and the rejection of moral naturalism. This approach shows that there room for *Analytic Reductive Naturalism*. According to a view of this kind, it is possible to provide analytic reductive analyses of the moral properties, analyses that identify, for each moral property M, some natural property N that is identical to M, where the proposition that M is identical to N is analytic, or is a conceptual truth. The claim would be that even if it is analytic that M is identical to N, or even if this is a conceptual truth, it is not transparently so. The Open Question argument therefore does not go through.

The third response to the argument begins from the point that property identities can be a posteriori. Consider, for example, the proposition that heat is mean molecular kinetic energy. This proposition is true yet it is not an analytic or conceptual truth. It is a posteriori in the sense that one cannot know it to be true

without empirical evidence that gives one information beyond the information one must already have just as a matter of having the concept of heat. Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam pointed out that reductive definitions in science need not be analytic or conceptual truths (Putnam, 1981, p. 205-211; Kripke, 1980). There is therefore room for a naturalist to hold that the true propositions that identify, for each moral property M, some natural property N that is identical to M, are a posteriori. But if the proposition that M is identical to N is a posteriori, then its truth is compatible with there being an open question whether things that are M are also N.

This response shows, again, that the naturalist can deny premise (3) in the argument, or perhaps the inference from (4) to (5). She certainly can deny that the argument supports (7) and the rejection of moral naturalism. This approach shows that there is room for *Non-analytic Reductive Naturalism* according to which, for each moral property M, there is some natural property N such that M is identical to N, but the proposition that M is identical to N is in each case a posteriori. Theories of this kind have been proposed by Richard Boyd (1988, p. 181-228) and also by me (Copp, 1995a, 2007).

Where did Moore go wrong? Moore was apparently assuming that nothing counts as a natural property unless we have non-moral terminology that represents it. So if a moral property M is a natural property, there must be a predicate "N" couched in wholly naturalistic terminology such that M is identical to N. And he was apparently assuming that the truth of such a proposition would require that it be an analytic or conceptual truth that M is N. Sturgeon has pointed out, however, that a naturalist can deny both ideas (Sturgeon, 2006, p. 95-99). Naturalism is the metaphysical thesis that moral properties are natural. It need not presuppose a thesis about language.

The "Argument from Queerness"

In the first chapter of his 1977 book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J.L. Mackie claims that there are no "objective values," and he describes this view as a skeptical view about morality. Indeed it is a skeptical view, since it entails, as he understands it, that there are no moral rights and wrongs, goods or bads. He offers several skeptical arguments, but the most important and interesting is his "argument from queerness" (Mackie, 1977, p. 95-96). The argument depends on two key premises:

- (1) Any moral property M would be "intrinsically prescriptive"; that is, it would be constitutive of the nature of M that, necessarily, for any person P, if P believes that X is M, then P is appropriately motivated at least to some degree.
 - (2) Any moral property M would be "categorical"; that is, M is not a psychological property or relation and, for any X, if X is M, the fact that X is M does not depend on anyone's contingent attitudes or motivations.
 - (3) It is not possible that a property is both intrinsically prescriptive and categorical.
 - (4) Therefore, there are no moral properties.
 - (5) If there are no moral properties, then no moral judgment that predicates a moral property of something is true.
- Therefore, (6) No (basic) moral claim is true.

Hence, there are no moral rights or wrongs, goods or bads. It is not the case that torture is wrong, for instance.

Mackie's argument is an all-purpose argument against moral realism. It is not specifically directed against naturalism. Yet we can better understand the options available to moral naturalism by examining problems with the argument.

Mackie's argument has been much discussed over the past thirty-five years, and, as we saw in the case of Moore's argument, by now there are standard responses. There are two main lines of response, corresponding to the two main premises of the argument. Each denies one of the premises.

The first response denies premise (1), which is a version of "moral judgment internalism." Many naturalists find internalism of this kind highly doubtful and are inclined to accept the externalist position, according to which there is no necessary connection between moral belief and motivation, at least not a connection of the kind assumed by Mackie.

Imagine an amoralist, a person who has moral beliefs but is completely unmoved. Such a person might agree that torture is morally wrong but yet be unmoved by its wrongness; such a person might contend that torture should be willingly used by the state in pursuing its interests. Or such a person might be persuaded by the moral arguments against eating meat and yet experience no change in his willingness to eat meat, happily partaking of Brazilian grilled beef and New Zealand lamb without any feeling of guilt. His amorality might be selective or global. If selective, he would be moved to avoid some actions he deems wrong, but the explanation for this would presumably not simply be that he deems the actions wrong, since he is not at all moved to avoid other actions that he deems wrong. Such a character seems entirely conceivable, as David Brink (1984) has argued.⁵ If we can imagine an amoralist without any obvious incoherence, then modal judgment internalism seems doubtful at best, and if it is doubtful, then Mackie's argument is in trouble.

A variety of other philosophers have also argued against moral judgment internalism, including Sigrun Svavarsdottir (1999) and myself. Svavarsdottir points out that people differ in the degree to which they are moved by moral considerations and that the degree to which a person is moved by moral considerations can change with time, depending on a variety of psychological factors. She contends that the simplest explanation of this is that one's motivation to be moral depends on the existence of an independent desire to be moral, which can vary in strength (Svavarsdottir, 1999). I argue that a person's disposition to be moral can be undermined and defeated by certain metaethical beliefs about morality (Copp, 1995b). For example, one might be persuaded that it is completely irrational to be moral, and this belief might cause one to lose all motivation to be moral. Or one might believe that morality is based in the commands of a jealous and exacting God whose commands undermine human happiness and require unreasonable sacrifices. A person with such a belief might feel sufficiently alienated from morality and from God that he lacks all motivation to be moral.

There are arguments on the other side, of course, including persuasive arguments by Michael Smith (1994). Smith contends, very plausibly, that we would doubt a person's sincerity if she claimed to think that she ought to give to charity but never made a contribution and showed no tendency whatsoever to make a donation when someone asked her to contribute to Oxfam. And he contends that a change in moral motivation is connected so closely with a change in moral belief that the change in belief plausibly guarantees the change in motivation. These arguments are well worth attention, but they can be resisted.⁶ So there remains the strategy of resisting Mackie's skeptical argument by resisting his moral judgment internalism.

⁵ See Brink (1986, 1989, 1984, p. 111-125).

⁶ See, for example, Copp (1997).

The second response to the argument from queerness denies premise (2). Denying premise (1) leads to an externalist form of moral naturalism, but denying premise (2) leads to a kind of internalist psychologism. According to such a view, moral properties are “response-dependent” properties in something like the way that colors are response-dependent properties. It is sometimes suggested that for something to be red is for it to be such that a person with normal vision would experience it as being red, or would experience it as being relevantly similar to fire engines, for example. One might propose, similarly, that for an act to be wrong is for it to be such that people with normal psychologies would tend to disapprove of it. Such a view has been proposed by Bruce Brower (1993). On this kind of view, moral properties are in a way psychological relations between types of actions and human psychology. On such a view, the fact that something has a moral property depends on contingent human psychological reactions.

There are both relativist and non-relativist views of this kind. Jesse Prinz (2007) offers a relativistic view, according to which an action’s being wrong in relation to a given person depends on that person’s tendency to disapprove. Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2006) offer a non-relativistic version.⁷ On their account, just as the fact that certain foods are disgusting is a function of the human tendency to react to those foods with disgust, so perhaps, the fact that certain actions are wrong is a function of the human tendency to react with disapproval.

The Objection that Naturalism cannot Account for the Normativity of Moral Judgment

The final objection I will discuss maintains that moral naturalism cannot account for the normativity of moral judgment. This objection is found in recent work by Derek Parfit (2011),⁸ but it can perhaps be seen as the underlying motivation for all the arguments we have discussed so far. Why would the is/ought gap seem to have more significance than the physics/biology gap? Perhaps because “ought judgements” are normative whereas biological judgments are ordinary descriptive judgments just as physical claims are ordinary descriptive judgments. Why would one find the open question argument to be persuasive despite the fact that its central premises seem to be falsified by examples of the kinds we discussed from mathematics and physics? Perhaps because these examples do not involve normative judgments whereas the target of the argument is the idea that a normative judgment could have non-normative truth conditions. The argument from queerness rests on moral judgment internalism, but why do so many philosophers find moral judgment internalism to be plausible despite counter-examples and the lack of a decisive argument in its favor? Perhaps because it seems the best available account of what the normativity of moral judgment comes to. One might think, for instance, that moral judgments are normative precisely in the sense that moral belief entails moral motivation. Moral beliefs are relevant to action and choice precisely in the sense that they entail an inclination to act and choose appropriately. Perhaps, then, the underlying reason that many philosophers think moral naturalism is implausible is that they think moral naturalism cannot plausibly account for the normativity of moral judgment.

In a highly influential paper, “Internal and External Reasons,” Bernard Williams (1981) raised doubts about the normativity of morality. To understand these

⁷ They advocate such a view in places in several papers. See, for instance, D’Arms and Jacobson (2006).

⁸ Parfit (2011, sections 24-27). I have discussed Parfit’s anti-naturalist arguments in “Normativity and Reasons: Five Arguments from Parfit Against Normative Naturalism” (n.d.).

doubts, we first need to understand Williams's thesis that there are only "internal reasons," reasons grounded in agents' subjective motivational sets. On Williams's view, one has a reason to do something only if one could be motivated to do the thing by sound reasoning given one's existing motivations and given accurate non-normative beliefs. To support this view, Williams argued as follows:

(1) A fact F is a reason for someone to do something only if that fact could be *the person's* reason to do the thing – only if it could be the reason for which the person does the thing.

(2) If a fact F could be a person's reason for doing something, then it must be that the person could be led to do the thing by reflecting on F, given her existing motivations, assuming at least that she had accurate non-normative beliefs.

(3) Hence, a fact F is a reason for someone to do something only if the person's existing motivations are such that the person could be led to do the thing by reflection on F, assuming that she had accurate non-normative beliefs.

As Williams says, there are only "internal reasons."

Williams's thesis that there are only internal reasons poses a challenge to the normativity of morality. To see why, note first that it is widely assumed that the normativity of morality depends on whether moral considerations are a source of reasons for action.⁹ This assumption can be challenged, but it is surely plausible, so let us assume it is correct for the sake of argument. Now if Williams is right that there are only internal reasons, it follows that moral considerations are a source of reasons for a person to act only if the person has appropriate antecedent motivations such that reflection on moral considerations could motivate him to act, given accurate non-moral beliefs. That is, moral considerations just as such are not a source of reasons for action. Moreover, nothing would seem to guarantee that a person's antecedent motivations are such that reflection on her moral duties would lead her to be motivated to do her duty. Hence, it would seem, nothing guarantees that a person has any reason to be moral. A rational person could ignore morality in deciding how to act. But if so, one might think, there is nothing normative about morality. Or, more cautiously, either morality is not necessarily normative, or the content of morality depends somehow on the psychology of agents.

Some philosophers respond to this challenge by denying that morality is necessarily a source of reasons for action, and so they deny that morality is necessarily normative. This is a kind of deflationist view about the normativity of morality. So-called Cornell moral realists, including Nicholas Sturgeon (1985), Richard Boyd (1988), David Brink (1986), and Peter Railton (1986), have proposed a kind of naturalism according to which whether morality is normative depends on whether people care about what is morally good or morally required. People with normal psychologies do care, so morality is a source of reasons for them to act appropriately, and morality is normative for them. But it is not necessarily normative. Moral facts are simply ordinary natural facts and they have no essential or necessary link to motivation or to reasons for action. Neither is moral belief necessarily linked to motivation, so the view denies moral judgment internalism. But given what is involved in acting wrongly, and given what injustice involves, anyone with an ordinary concern for her fellow human beings would of course be motivated to avoid wrongdoing and injustice. The connection between morality and motivation on such a view is contingent, but it is not accidental. It is due to the nature of morality together with the nature of normal human concern.

⁹ See, for example, Parfit (2011, sec. 24(82), sec. 25(88)).

A second kind of response to the challenge accepts that the content of morality depends on the psychology of agents. Gilbert Harman (1977) proposed a relativistic view of this kind. Response-dependence theory is another view of this kind. According to response-dependence theory, normative properties are relevantly response-dependent in the sense we discussed before. For instance, on one such view, the wrongness of an action is simply the property the action has of being such that people with normal psychologies would tend to disapprove of it. As we saw, a view of this kind has been proposed by Brower, Prinz, and D'Arms and Jacobson. On this view, wrongness is a source of internal reasons for people with normal psychologies, for reflection on the wrongness of an action would tend to lead one to disapprove of it, assuming one is psychologically normal. People with normal psychologies tend to be motivated to avoid wrongdoing.

I cannot accept either of these approaches because I think that it is essential to morality's being what it is that it is normative. Moral considerations have a characteristic essential relevance to decisions and choices. The relevance of moral considerations to decisions and actions is not merely contingent.

I would respond to Williams by arguing that his argument is flawed.¹⁰ The main problem is with his premise (2). I maintain that the wrongness of an action is itself a moral reason not to perform it. I agree with Williams that this means among other things that the wrongness of an action could be an agent's reason not to perform it. And it follows that there are possible circumstances in which a person would be motivated not to do something by her belief that the action would be wrong. But this does not entail that the agent's antecedent motivations must be such that merely reflecting on the wrongness of an action could lead her to be motivated not to do it. It does not entail that the content of morality depends in any problematic way on the psychology of agents nor that all reasons are based in human psychology. All that follows is that it is possible for a person to be appropriately motivated by her moral beliefs. Williams's argument therefore does not show that there are no external reasons. It only shows that the field of reasons is limited by the field of possible human motivation. There is therefore room to reject Williams's thesis that there are only internal reasons.

If we can reject Williams's thesis, we can resist the associated challenge to the normativity of morality. Despite this, however, I take very seriously the idea that an adequate metaethics must account for and explain the normativity of morality. In my view, moral considerations are necessarily normative and they are normative in a robust sense that needs to be explained. The trouble is to provide an adequate explanation in a way that is compatible with moral realism. My own account combines my so-called standard-based account of the truth conditions of normative judgments with a pluralist and teleological account of the underlying nature of normativity.

According to pluralist teleology, normative facts concern solutions to, or ways to ameliorate, certain generic problems faced by human beings in the circumstances of their ordinary lives.¹¹ I call these, problems of normative governance, because they are problems that we can better cope with when we subscribe to appropriate systems of norms. Two of the most important and most familiar problems of this kind are the problem of sociality and the problem of autonomy.

The problem of sociality is the problem humans face because, although they need to live in societies, there are familiar causes of discord and conflict that risk undermining societies or at least making societies less successful than they otherwise

¹⁰ For discussion of the argument, see Korsgaard (1986).

¹¹ For details, see Copp (2009, 1995a, 2007).

could be at enabling people to have lives of the kinds they want to have. The currency of a moral code in a society can help to ameliorate this problem provided its content is such that people who subscribe to it are thereby motivated to cooperate, and generally to avoid discord and conflict and to act in “pro-social” ways. Of course, some moral codes would do more than others to ameliorate the problem. My “society-centered” proposal is that, roughly, the moral truth is a function of the content of the moral code the currency of which in society would do most to ameliorate the problem of sociality. Call this the “ideal code.” Given the standard-based account of the truth conditions of normative judgments, it follows that we are morally required to do something if and only if, and because, the ideal code requires us to do this. The fact that we are morally required to do something *is* the fact that the ideal code requires us to do it. We have decisive moral reason to do something if and only if, and because, the ideal code requires us to do it. On this view, morality is the solution to a problem in social engineering, the problem of equipping people to live comfortably and successfully together in societies.¹²

The problem of autonomy is a familiar problem each of us faces because of the complexity of our psychologies and because we live through extended periods of time. We have things that we value, in that we aim to achieve them and we attach great psychological significance to whether we are successful. We tend to feel enhanced or sustained when we are successful and we tend to feel shame or guilt or to feel diminished when we fail. In this sense, our values are aspects of our “identities.” An “autonomous” person does well at governing her life in accord with what she values. The trouble is that we are easily distracted by temptations and we often find our commitment to our values wavering, especially in cases in which costs to our values are uncertain or temporally remote. Our subscription to a norm that calls on us to promote the conditions of our autonomy can ameliorate this problem by enhancing and reinforcing our motivation to live in accord with our values. Call this the “autonomy norm.” On the standard-based account, it follows that the truth as to what we have most practical reason to do is a function of what is required by the autonomy norm. We are required to do something as a matter of practical rationality if and only if, and because, the norm of autonomy requires us to do this. We have decisive practical reason to do something if and only if, and because, the norm of autonomy requires us to do it. The fact that we have decisive practical reason to do something *is* the fact that the norm of autonomy requires us to do it.¹³

My account of the nature of normative moral facts and facts about practical reasons can be generalized to provide an account of all kinds of normative fact. I call the generalized view pluralist-teleology. It is pluralist, for it says that there are different kinds of normative fact. There are, for instance, different kinds of reasons, including moral reasons, self-grounded practical reasons, epistemic reasons, and so on. The view is teleological in that it seeks to explain normativity as “grounded in” solutions to problems of normative governance. Pluralist-teleology aims to provide a unified account of reasons of all of kinds.

Pluralist-teleology holds that morality is essentially and intrinsically normative. It holds that morality is a source of external reasons. It denies moral judgment internalism. It is a kind of non-analytic normative naturalism, for of course I do not

¹² For details, see Copp (2007), *Morality in a Natural World*, especially the introduction, and, for an early version of the view, Copp (1995a).

¹³ For details, see Copp (2007, ch. 10), “The Normativity of Self-Grounded Reason.” In that chapter, I spoke of the “values standard” rather than the “norm of autonomy.” This is because the view developed there simplified matters by setting aside reasons given us by our basic needs. I address this matter in Copp (2001). See also Copp (n.d.), “Needs, Values, and Normativity”. Also Copp (1995a, p. 172-188).

claim that the theory or its central claims are conceptual or analytic truths. This obviously is not the place to present the theory in detail. My brief account of the view raises many questions, but I will have to set them aside for present purposes.

Conclusion: Varieties of Moral Naturalism

Given our examination of the four anti-naturalist and anti-realist arguments, we can now describe the varieties of moral naturalism. The theories can be considered on two dimensions, the metaphysical and epistemological dimension and the dimension of motivation and normativity.

On the first dimension, we can distinguish three kinds of theory. There is *non-reductive naturalism*. On such a view, moral properties are natural properties yet it might not be possible to represent them in non-moral terminology. Nicholas Sturgeon has proposed a view of this kind. There is also *reductive naturalism of the non-analytic variety*. On such a view, each moral property M is identical to some natural property N, yet such identity claims are not analytic or conceptual truths. My own society-centered view is a kind of non-analytic reductive naturalism. And finally, there is *reductive naturalism of the analytic variety*. On such a view, each moral property M is identical to some natural property N and true claims of this form are analytic or conceptual truths. Frank Jackson (1998) has recently argued for a view of this kind.

Turning to the second dimension, the dimension of normativity and moral motivation, we also find three varieties of naturalism. First, there is *internalist naturalism*. On one view of this kind, moral properties are response-dependent, such that, necessarily, people with normal responses are appropriately motivated. This kind of view is a reductive naturalism, and it could be viewed as analytic or as non-analytic. Second is *simple externalist naturalism*. On this view, there is merely the contingent fact that people with normal responses are appropriately motivated by their moral beliefs. This view could be combined with any of the three metaphysical views, the non-reductive view or either of the two reductive views. Finally, there is *externalist naturalism with the standard-based account of normativity*. On this view, it is merely a contingent fact that people with normal responses are appropriately motivated by their moral beliefs, but normativity is explained otherwise, on the basis that normative facts are relevant facts about solutions to problems of normative governance. A view of this kind could be combined with either sort of reductive naturalism, the analytic or the non-analytic variety. I myself have proposed that the view is best understood as a kind of non-analytic reductive naturalism.

We obviously would like to know where the truth lies. Speaking for myself, I cannot accept any form of anti-realism. There surely are moral facts. There are moral claims that cannot plausibly be denied. And our moral convictions surely are beliefs. I cannot think otherwise. So I am led to moral realism. But if we are to be realists and if we are to explain how moral facts fit into a naturalistic view of the world, we must be moral naturalists. The question of course is whether naturalism is ultimately defensible, and if so, which variety of naturalism is the most promising? My own judgment is that the most plausible view is a kind of reductive but non-analytic naturalism. If naturalism is true, this is surely is not an analytic or a conceptual truth. But an adequate metaethical theory must provide a substantive account of what normativity consists in, so it must be reductive. And given the implausibility of moral judgment internalism, our account must be a form of externalism, but one that provides a substantive account of normativity. So, to provide a substantive account of the nature of morality and of the nature of normativity, we

must find some plausible reductionist theory, even if the theory cannot sensibly be viewed as an analytic or conceptual truth. I know of no alternative to the combined standard-based pluralist teleology that I have proposed. This explains very briefly why I am where I am.

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