

Naturalist Cognitivism: The Open Question Argument; Subjectivism

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- 1 Introducing Naturalist Realist Cognitivism (a.k.a. Naturalism)
- 2 Three Arguments against Semantic Naturalism
- 3 Metaphysical Naturalism and the Open Question Argument
- 4 Conclusion: Naturalism and the Open Question Argument
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Naturalist Realist Cognitivism

Moral psychology

Moral semantics

Moral metaphysics

Moral epistemology

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false.

There are moral facts and properties. These are natural facts.

We can have knowledge of moral facts just like we can have knowledge of natural facts.

Specifying Naturalism

- 1 What natural property of actions is rightness?
- 2 Where does naturalism come in: metaphysics and/or semantics?

Metaphysical and Semantic Naturalism

- All naturalists are **metaphysical naturalists**:
 - Moral *properties* are natural properties: e.g. the property of rightness is identical to the property of maximizing happiness.
 - Moral *facts* are natural facts: e.g. the fact that killing the innocent is wrong is the same fact as the fact that killing the innocent would be disapproved of by God.
- Question: Should naturalists also be **semantic naturalists**?
 - Moral *terms* mean the same as natural terms.
 - e.g. the term “right” means the same as the term “maximizes happiness”

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Context

- G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 1903, §1–14.
- vs. the “Naturalistic Fallacy”: Identifying goodness with some natural property.
- Contains several related arguments against the naturalistic fallacy.
- “*The*” open question argument is in the same spirit, but not explicit in the text (see Feldman “The Open Question Argument”).
- All arguments can be put in a two-question form.

The first two-question argument

Target

- X is good $=_{df}$ we desire to desire X .

Two questions

- Q1: Is it good to desire to desire A ?
- Q2: Are [we desiring to desire] [to desire to desire] A ?

Observation

- Q1 is much more complicated than Q2.
- Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same.

The first two-question argument (continued)

Add: Compositionality of meaning

- **Compositionality**: The meaning of sentences is a function of / determined by the meaning of the component terms.
 - Moore leaves this implicit.
 - Support: Explains how we can understand the meaning of new sentences.
- Since Q1 and Q2 only differ in “good” and “we desire to desire”, the two terms must differ in meaning.

Conclusion

- “X is good” does not mean the same as “we desire to desire X”.



Limitations of the first two-question argument

- Not all naturalist definitions of “good” lead to overly complicated questions:
 - X is good =_{df} X is pleasant.
 - Is it good that X is pleasant?
 - Is it pleasant that X is pleasant?

The second two-question argument

Target

Any naturalist definition like: X is good $=_{df}$ X is

- desired
- approved
- pleasant
- ...

Two questions

- Q1: Is this pleasant?
- Q2: Is this good?

The second two-question argument (continued)

Argument

- Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same (Moore thinks this is evident).
- by Compositionality: “pleasant” and “good” do not mean the same. □

Scope of the argument

- Does not rely on the complicatedness of terms.
- Applies to every naturalist analysis.

The third two-question argument: The Open Question Argument

Target

Any naturalist definition like: X is good $=_{df}$ X is

- desired
- approved
- pleasant
- ...

Two questions

- Q1: Is it the case that every pleasant thing is good?
- Q2: Is it the case that every pleasant thing is pleasant?

The Open Question Argument (continued)

Observation

- Q1 is an **open question**:
 - You can fully understand the question and its component terms and still be in doubt about the correct answer.
- Q2 is not an open question:
 - Once you understand the question (or just its form), you know that the true answer is the affirmative.

Argument

- Q1 and Q2 cannot mean the same, since they differ in whether they are open.
- By compositionality, “pleasant” and “good” do not mean the same.



Summary: Semantic Naturalism and Two-Question Arguments

- The second and third two-question argument show that “good” does not *mean* the same as any natural *term*.
- So *any* form of semantic naturalism is false.

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What the Open Question Argument does not show

- Just because “good” does not mean the same as “pleasant”, “desired”, ..., it does not follow that the *property* of goodness cannot be identical to the property of pleasantness, being desired, ...
- Why? Enter the difference between sense and reference. (Gottlob Frege in *Sense and Reference* (“Über Sinn und Bedeutung”), 1892.)

Informative and uninformative identity statements

- Compare:
 - S1: The morning star is [identical to] the evening star.
 - S2: The morning star is [identical to] the morning star.
- S1 is informative, S2 is not.
- Put into questions:
 - Q1: Is the morning star [identical to] the evening star?
 - Q2: Is the morning star [identical to] the morning star?
- Q1 is open, Q2 is not open.

What the open question argument cannot establish

- S1 and S2, and Q1 and Q2, do not mean the same.
- By Compositionality: “morning star” and “evening star” must have different meaning.
- But: The morning star *is* [identical to] the evening star!
- Explanation: Frege’s two components of meaning.

Frege's two components of meaning

- **Reference (Bedeutung)**: That which the term refers to.
 - “morning star”, “evening star”: the planet Venus.
- **Sense (Sinn)**: The way in which the referent is presented to us by the term:
 - “morning star”: “the object appearing like a bright star in the morning”
 - “evening star”: “the object appearing like a bright star in the evening”

Sense and reference of properties

- Again two identity claims:
 - S1: Water is H_2O .
 - S2: Water is water.
- And again an open and a non-open question:
 - Q1: Is water H_2O ?
 - Q2: Is water water?
- But water *is* H_2O !

Sense and reference of properties (continued)

- Reference of “water” and “H₂O”: the property of being water.
- Sense of “water”: “the stuff we call ‘water’”, “the stuff that comes from the tap and from the sky” etc.
- Sense of “H₂O”: “the stuff whose molecules are made up of two atoms hydrogen and one atom oxygen”.

Consequences for naturalism

- Difference in meaning does not imply difference in reference.
- So the open question argument does not rule out metaphysical naturalism.
 - i.e. the property referred to by “good” and the property referred to by some natural term can still be the same.

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- Semantic naturalism is false: “good” and “right” do not mean the same as some natural term.
- Metaphysical naturalism is not ruled out by the Open Question Argument.
- If metaphysical naturalism is true, then it is an open question which natural property (if any) goodness and rightness are identical to: just like with the morning and evening star, and water and H₂O.
- For metaphysical naturalism to be tenable, we need to find natural properties that are good candidates for being identical to goodness and rightness.

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Introducing Subjectivism

- Core question for the metaphysical naturalist: What natural property is identical to rightness? (analogous: goodness)
- The subjectivist answer in general: Rightness is identical to some psychological property.
- Attractions of subjectivism:
 - “Morality is simply a matter of taste.”
 - “What’s right for you need not be right for me.”
 - “If no one ever had psychological states, there couldn’t be moral facts.”

Introducing Subjectivism

Actual desires subjectivism:

- (the property of) rightness = (the property of) actually being desired by subject s .
- Who is s ?
 - An individual.
 - A group.
 - God (supernaturalism).

Ideal desires subjectivism:

- (the property of) rightness = (the property of) being such that it *would be* desired by subject s in idealised circumstances c .

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Individual actual desires subjectivism

Individual actual desires subjectivism

rightness = being desired by individual subject s

- NB: Individual actual desires subjectivism \neq Expressivism
 - Consider: “Lying is wrong.”
 - Individual actual desires subjectivism: describes a (supposed) psychological fact that the speaker desires that no one lies.
 - Expressivism: expresses a desire that no one lies.
 - Cf.: “I am angry at you for not doing the dishes.” vs. “You lazy xzy!”

The inconsistency problem

- Individual actual desires subjectivism leads to inconsistency if any subject is allowed.
 - I desire that you give money to Oxfam, and you desire that you do not to give money to Oxfam.
 - It is then both right and not right for you to give money to Oxfam!
- It's not plausible to single out a privileged (human) individual subject to determine all rightness.

Response to inconsistency: relativised rightness

Relativised individual actual desires subjectivism

rightness relative to s = being desired by *s*

- *s* is typically the speaker of a moral utterance
- Nothing is both right and not right relative to the same subject.
 - You giving money to Oxfam is right relative to me.
 - You giving money to Oxfam is not right relative to you.
- explains why (true) moral judgments motivate
- entails individual moral relativism

Problems with relativised rightness

Relativised individual actual desires subjectivism. . .

- . . . entails that we cannot morally disagree.
 - I: “You ought to give money to Oxfam.” is true if I desire you to give money to Oxfam.
 - You: “I ought not to give money to Oxfam.” is true if you desire not to give money to Oxfam.
 - We can both be right.
- . . . entails that moral knowledge is gained by introspection into our desires.
 - If you know your desires, you cannot be morally mistaken.
 - Moral error is reduced to being out of touch with your desires.
 - But: Introspection only tells us what we think is right, not what *is* right.

(continued)

Relativised individual actual desires subjectivism. . .

- . . . cannot account for the phenomenon of desiring what is intuitively wrong.
 - Sadism: desiring to inflict pain.
 - Misinformation: desiring to treat a racial group as inferior due to false empirical views.
 - Immoral / evil character: desiring what one thinks is wrong
 - This does not even make sense for relativised rightness subjectivism.

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Group actual desires subjectivism

Group actual desires subjectivism

rightness = being generally desired by members of group G

- Avoids inconsistency and relativism between members of the same group.
- Faces the inconsistency problem between groups.

Relativised group actual desires subjectivism

rightness *relative to* G = being desired by most members of G

- G may be e.g. the group to which the agent whose action we evaluate belongs

Problems with relativised group actual desires subjectivism

Relativised group actual desires subjectivism. . .

- . . . has implausible normative implications, since we can collectively desire what is intuitively wrong.
 - cf. e.g. Nazism, racism, violent nationalism.
- . . . entails that different groups or cultures cannot morally disagree.
 - Execution by stoning can be right according to desires of culture A, but wrong according to desires of culture B.

Related view: Cultural norms subjectivism

Cultural norms subjectivism

rightness relative to G = being condoned by the moral code of G

- problems:
 - Again no disagreement between groups.
 - Entails that a groups' moral codes cannot be wrong; has implausible normative implications.
 - Entails that moral progress reduces to cultural change. Any evaluation whether the change is for the better or worse makes no sense on this view.

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Finding privileged desires

- Problem with actual desires subjectivism so far: Lack of a single privileged individual or group requires relativisation in order to avoid inconsistency.
- Possible solution: Find a single privileged group or individual.
- Suggestion one: Humanity at large, rightness = being desired by most humans.
 - Avoids synchronous inconsistency.
 - Does not avoid inconsistency over time, since desires change: Moral facts are then time-relative.
 - Problem: Cannot make sense of moral progress, and has implausible normative implications.
 - Entails that the majority of humans always desire what is right.
- Conclusion: Singleing out a privileged group is not promising. We need to look for a privileged individual.

The most privileged individual: God

Divine actual desires subjectivism

rightness = being desired by God (necessarily existing, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving creator)

- Problem: If there is no God, there is no morality.
 - Response: If you believe that there are moral facts, just become a theist.
 - But even theists should pause before adopting divine actual desires subjectivism: Enter the Euthyphro Dilemma.

The Euthyphro Dilemma

- Divine actual desires subjectivism entails a form of divine command theory in first-order morality:
 - The right action is the action desired by God.
- Challenge: “Is the pious being loved by by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?”
Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a.
- Translated into divine desires and rightness: “Is a right action desired by God because it is right, or is it right because God desires it?”

The Euthyphro Dilemma for Divine Command Theory

First horn of the dilemma: “A right action is right because God desires it.”

- If God desired what is intuitively bad (torture, murder, betrayal), it would be right.
 - Response: God’s desires are constrained by God’s nature: God cannot desire such things.
 - Question: Why not?
- “God is morally good” just tells us that God does what he desires to do – God’s desires are beyond meaningful moral appraisal.
 - Until we know what God’s nature is, and how it constrains God’s actions, this doesn’t tell us anything.

The Euthyphro Dilemma for Divine Command Theory

Second horn of the dilemma: “God desires an action because it is right.”

- For rightness to explain God’s desires, it cannot be the same property as being desired by God (nothing explains itself).
- Divine command theory then only tells us that rightness and God’s desires correlate, but does not tell us what makes actions right: Is an incomplete moral theory.
- We need to ask what further properties make it the case that God desires something.

The Euthyphro Dilemma for Divine Actual Desires Subjectivism

- Consider again: “Is a right action desired by God because it is right, or is it right because God desires it?”
- Once we assume that “right” and “is desired by God” refer to the same property, both horns of the dilemma become unacceptable instances of self-explanation.
 - First horn: “An action is right because God desires it.”
 - cf. “There is water in the glass because there is H₂O in the glass.” But we wanted to know why it was water, rather than, say, wine.
 - Second horn: “God desires an action because it is right.”
 - Explains God’s desire for something by reference to the fact that God desires it.

The Euthyphro Dilemma for Divine Actual Desires Subjectivism

- On divine actual desires subjectivism, rightness and God's desires become brute and unexplained facts.
 - Maybe rightness (or the fact that something is a reasons to do perform some acts) are brute facts.
 - But saying that God's desires are simply brute facts, with no explanation behind them and no apparent rationale, may be hard for theists to stomach.

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Metaphysical vs. Semantic Naturalism

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Actual desires subjectivism

- Being in fact desired by individuals, groups, or God are not promising candidates for being identical to rightness.
- Next week: Hypothetical desires: “rightness=being such that *s* would desire it if ...”

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Discussion seminar this week

The term “naturalistic fallacy” is used both to refer to deriving an “ought” from an “is”, and to refer to identification of moral properties with natural properties. How do these two different (supposed) fallacies under the same name relate to each other (if at all)? (In other words: How does Hume’s claim that you cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” relate to Moore’s Open Question Argument?)

Discussion seminar next week

What's so bad about moral relativism?

Contact

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