

Ideal Desires Naturalism; Functionalism; Introduction to Non-Naturalism

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- 1 Summary of last week
- 2 Hypothetical desires subjectivism
- 3 Moral Functionalism
- 4 The cognitivist alternative: Non-naturalism
- 5 The strangeness challenge for non-naturalism
- 6 Preview: Two key challenges for non-naturalism

Metaphysical vs. Semantic Naturalism

- 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 goodness and rightness are identical to.
- For metaphysical naturalism to be tenable, we need to find natural properties that are good candidates for being identical to goodness and rightness.

Actual desires subjectivism

- Being in fact desired by individuals, groups, or God do not seem to be promising candidates for being identical to rightness.
 - Except (maybe) for some theology:
 - It is a brute fact that God only desires certain actions, but that just is what rightness is. Alternatively: That God desires some things is conceptually part of what it is for God to be God.
 - If the buck of explanation has to stop somewhere, then God is at least as good a place as anywhere else.
 - And maybe we can by natural theology, or through some revelation, know these brute facts about God.
- This week:
 - Hypothetical desires: “rightness=being such that s would desire it if ...”
 - Introduction to non-naturalism.

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From divine desires to hypothetical desires

Hypothetical divine desires subjectivism

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

- this works even if God does not exist
- necessary existence and omnipotence do no normative work here

Hypothetical ideal self desires subjectivism

rightness = would be desired by an ideal self

- ideal:
 - Fully informed
 - Fully rational
 - All-loving

Michael Smith's new school subjectivism

- Expresses a platitude we all seem to accept: “suitably idealized, we are in fact the best people to give ourselves advice.” (Michael Smith)

Michael Smith's subjectivism

- x is right for S to do in circumstances $C =_{\text{def}}$ x is a desirable thing for S to do in C .
- x is a desirable thing for S to do in $C =_{\text{def}}$ we would desire that S does x in C , *if we were fully rational*.
- Hence: x is right for S to do in $C =$ we would desire that S does x in C , if we were fully rational.

Being fully rational

- Fully rational = Fully informed + has desires of a Maximally Unified and Coherent Kind (MUCKy desires).

You acquire MUCKy desires by

- deliberating from true beliefs
- imagining outcomes
- making your desires coherent

Identifying the property of rightness

- Rightness = to be such that we would desire it if we were fully rational
- What kind of property is this?
 - There is property F about S doing x in C that we would desire.
 - F is what the desirability and hence rightness of S doing x in C consists in.
 - If F is a natural property, then metaphysical naturalism is true.
 - Example: x maximizes happiness.

Benefits of Michael Smith's subjectivism

- Captures why we should follow the requirements of morality: quasi self-given law.
- Explains how we can know moral facts: Reasoning from our desires.
- Does not claim that we know what is right by mere introspection.
- Our actual desires do not determine what is right.

Problems for Michael Smith's subjectivism

- Ideal selves start from our actual selves, plus a process of improvement.
 - Different starting points → possibility of diverging MUCKy desires.
 - Nothing would be desirable, since something is desirable only if we would *all* desire it, if we were fully rational.
- Immoral advisors can have MUCKy desires.

Possible response to the problem

- Do not rely on idealizations of our own selves, but on an ideal self, period.
 - e.g.: add all-loving as a separate requirement of the ideal self.
 - Kantian ethics *might* be construed along these lines.
- Problems:
 - harder to know what the ideal self is.
 - harder to see why we should care about what the ideal self desires.
- Better response: We have only used one platitude about rightness (about advice) to define and identify rightness.

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The core idea of functionalism

- Task: Identify which natural property “right” refers to.
- Approach: Collect information about how rightness behaves, use that information to go “property-hunting” in the natural world.
- Assumption: If we find a unique property that behaves just like the property that “right” refers to, then that property *is* rightness.

Functionalism formalized

- Premise: rightness = the property that plays the rightness role (conceptual truth).
- Find a property F such that F plays the rightness role (empirical truth).
- If F_{ness} is the unique property that plays this role, we can conclude that rightness = F_{ness} .
- If F_{ness} is a natural property, then metaphysical naturalism is true.

Analogy: Platitudes as the detective's cues

- You know there is only one person guilty of the murder of Professor Plum, but you do not know who the guilty party is, so you refer to the person as X.
- Your clues:
 - X is a female,
 - X is under 6 feet tall,
 - X has red hair,
 - X lives in London,
 - X has black belt in Karate,
 - X has birthmark on her right cheek.

(continued)

- If you find a unique person who satisfies this description, you have identified the murderer.
- If Miss Judges is the only person who fits the description, then we can conclude that the murderer = Miss Judges.
- Analogy: Looking for the murderer who fits the description is like looking for the property that plays the rightness-role.

Cues about how rightness behaves

- Advice (Smith): Other things being equal, the more you know about the facts, the more reason we have to trust your verdicts about what it is right to do.
- Content: Actions that are right are often other-regarding.
- Moral supervenience: If an action is right, then any other action with the same natural features must also be right.
- Motivation: If one judges that x is right, then one is typically motivated to do x .
- Objectivity: When I say x is right and you say x is not right, one of us must be mistaken.

Applying the cues about rightness

- Advice: The more you know about the relevant facts, the better is your position to determine which action is [right].
- Motivation: If one judges that x is [right], then one is typically motivated to do x .
 - Guess: Rightness = to be such that we would desire it if we were fully rational and informed.
 - Problem: This cue can point to different properties, e.g. the desires of an idealised evil self.
 - Solution: collect more cues.
- Content: Actions that are [right] are often beneficially other-regarding.
 - Guess: Rightness = to be such that we would desire it if we were fully rational and informed, and cared for the well-being of others.

Problems for functionalism

- The above cues do not yet identify a unique property that plays the rightness role:
 - 1 the property of rightness = to maximize overall happiness
 - 2 the property of rightness = to be done out of a motive of love
- Analogy: More than one suspect satisfies the description of the murderer.
- Solution: Find more cues.

Substantive moral claims as cues

- Substantive moral claims can serve as cues:
 - Actions which sacrifice one for the benefit of many are never right.
 - Actions which promote happiness are always right.
- Problem: these cues are controversial e.g. between deontologists and consequentialists.
- “Solution:” Allow for different properties to be rightness depending on which cues you accept.
 - Problem: Dissolves disagreement into miscommunication: Using the word “right” for different properties.

Naturalism and moral theory

- Observation: On the functionalist account, moral theory becomes a matter of moral metaphysics.
 - e.g. [rightness] = maximizes overall happiness
 - Utilitarianism would then be true as a matter of metaphysics.
 - Assessing Utilitarianism is then a matter of metaphysical investigation into the property of rightness.
 - This is to be expected for naturalists: Once you know what natural property rightness is, then you already know a whole lot about which actions are right or wrong.

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Non-naturalist realist cognitivism

Moral psychology

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral semantics

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

Moral metaphysics

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

Moral epistemology

We have some special kind of knowledge of moral facts.

Specifying Non-naturalism

- Non-naturalism is a conjunction of *metaphysical claims* about moral facts and properties.
 - 1 Moral properties are not natural properties, i.e. they are not empirically observable properties that feature in the natural and social sciences (denial of naturalism).
 - 2 Moral properties are not identical to other non-natural properties, e.g. mathematical properties (e.g. divisibility by 3), logical properties (e.g. logical validity).
 - 3 Moral properties are *sui generis*, i.e. properties of their own kind.
 - 4 Moral properties supervene on natural properties (see below).

Relations between non-natural moral properties

- Core moral properties: Rightness (of actions), goodness (of objects or states of affairs), virtue (of persons).
- How do different non-natural moral properties relate to each other, i.e. what is the structure of the non-natural moral realm?

Different relations of non-natural moral properties

- Goodness is basic (simply, without parts, undefinable), rightness is defined in terms of goodness: the property of bringing about more goodness than alternative actions. (Moore's position)
- Rightness is basic, goodness is defined in terms of rightness: the property of being right to favour.
- Virtue is basic, goodness is the property of being what the virtuous person would desire, rightness is the property of being what the virtuous person would do.
- Reasons are basic, goodness, rightness, and virtue are defined in terms of what you have (most) reason to desire, do, or become.
- Goodness, rightness, virtue, and reasons are all basic and distinct from each other.

Challenges for the Non-Naturalist

- 1 Aren't non-natural facts metaphysically strange ("queer"), and hence suspect?
- 2 How can we explain the supervenience of moral on natural properties?
- 3 Given their strangeness, how can we know non-natural facts?

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Idiosyncrasies of non-natural moral facts

Charge: non-natural moral facts have the following strange properties that are not shared by any other “normal” kind of facts.

They

- motivate necessarily,
- provide categorical reasons,
- are causally inert,
- are explanatorily inert.

Necessarily motivating facts?

Necessary motivation vs. non-naturalism

- 1 If moral facts exist, then they are necessarily motivating.
 - 2 No fact can be necessarily motivating.
 - 3 Hence there are no moral facts.
-
- 1) is false: Just because something is right does not mean that I am motivated to do it.
 - Instead: If I *judge* that something is right, this necessarily motivates me (internalism).
 - Internalism is a problem for cognitivism in general (moral judgments are beliefs), but not for any metaphysical claim about moral properties.

Facts providing categorical reasons?

- You have a categorical reason to do x = You have a normative, justifying reason to do x , no matter whether you want to do x .
- Example: If you morally ought to keep your promise, then you have a reason to do it, no matter whether you want to keep your promise.

Categorical reasons vs. non-naturalism

- 1 If moral facts exist, then they provide categorical reasons.
- 2 No fact can provide categorical reasons.
- 3 Hence there are no moral facts.

Counterargument: Epistemic reasons are categorical reasons as well

- The doctor's diagnosis of an illness gives you reason to believe that you have the illness, whether or not you want to believe this.
- If no fact provides categorical reasons, then the notion of evidence does not make sense.
- So the argument proves too much. Response: Reject 2).

Causally inert facts?

- Causally inert = lacks the power to cause anything.

Causal inertness vs. non-naturalism

- 1 Moral facts are causally inert.
 - 2 Only facts that have causal powers exist.
 - 3 Hence there are no moral facts.
-
- Response: Reject 2): mathematical facts, logical facts, and abstract philosophical facts like (2) also do not have causal power, but are facts nonetheless.
 - Rejecting causally inert facts assumes naturalism and begs the question against the non-naturalist.

Explanatorily inert facts?

Explanatory inertness vs. non-naturalism

- 1 Moral facts do not feature in the best explanations of our experiences and observations, including our moral beliefs.
- 2 We have no reason to believe in facts that do not feature in such best explanations.
- 3 Hence we have no reason to believe in moral facts.

Illustration: Harman's disanalogy

The scientist

A scientist sees a trail in a cloud chamber and comes to believe that a proton just went through. The best explanation for the scientist's belief is that a proton just went through the chamber. The best explanation thus features the property of being a proton.

The hooligans

A group of hooligans pours gasoline over a cat and sets it on fire. You observe the incident and come to believe that they act wrongly. The best explanation of your belief is that you observe a cat getting tortured, see that it is in pain, and have certain moral sensibilities. The (supposed) non-natural fact that it is wrong to torture the cat does not feature in this explanation.

Disanalogy Moral facts – other non-natural facts

- Logical facts feature in scientific explanation:
 - Why did the haystack burn?
 - It reached temperature θ and was then exposed to oxygen.
 - If hay reaches temperature θ and is exposed to oxygen, it ignites.
 - From the above, it follows that the hay ignited.
- Mathematic facts feature in scientific explanation:
 - Why did the three monkeys quarrel over the nuts?
 - Because there were 7 nuts, and 7 is not divisible by 3.

Replies to Harman's disanalogy

- The scientist's belief can be explained without reference to the fact that a proton went through: She comes to believe that a proton went through because she observes the trail and believes that the trail indicates protons.
- Improve the example: Explain not the scientist's belief, but simply the observation of the vapour trail.

Further replies to explanatory inertness

- If “natural” is defined as “appears in scientific explanation”, then the non-naturalist cannot maintain, vs. 1), that non-natural properties *do* feature in scientific explanation.
- Alternative: reject 2): “We have no reason to believe in facts that do not feature in such best explanations.” For example, this fact about epistemic reasons (if any) itself does not feature in scientific explanation.
- If there can be knowledge of non-natural moral facts (see next lecture), then moral facts provide a good explanation for why moral beliefs are similar across people and cultures.

Summary on Strangeness

- Moral facts are different from natural facts and other non-natural facts.
- But they are not strange in any problematic sense on grounds of
 - being necessarily motivating (they are not),
 - providing categorical reasons (other facts do),
 - being causally inert (other facts are), or
 - being explanatorily inert (other facts are, and maybe moral facts are not).

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The challenge of explaining moral knowledge

- If moral facts are causally inert, then they cannot causally impact us.
- Hence we cannot know them by some perceptual mechanism, a sort of “moral vision”.
- Our beliefs about moral facts seem totally disjoint from the moral facts. So even if true, how can our moral beliefs be justified? And how could they be truth-tracking?
- In a nutshell:
 - How can we know moral facts?
 - How can we be in touch with them if not via a causal link?

The challenge of explaining moral supervenience

Moral supervenience:

- No two actions can differ in their moral properties (rightness, wrongness, praiseworthiness) without differing in their natural properties.
- Conversely, two actions with identical natural properties also have the same moral properties.
- Moral properties cannot “behave” independently from natural properties, but are “chained” to them.

Non-naturalism:

- Moral properties are not natural properties. They are not identical to any natural property, nor reducible or explainable in terms of natural properties.

Problem:

- How come that non-natural moral properties are then “chained” to natural properties?

7 Notes

Discussion seminar week 7

“We clearly can have knowledge about mathematical facts, which are not natural facts. Hence there is no reason to assume that there is any problem with acquiring moral knowledge on a non-naturalist account of moral facts.” Is this a good response to the epistemological challenge to non-naturalism?