

Non-Naturalism: The Challenges of Supervenience and Moral Knowledge

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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.

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.

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, 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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Supervenience in general

- Individual supervenience: A-properties supervene on B-properties if no two things can differ with regard to A-properties without also differing with regard to B-properties.
- Global supervenience: A-properties globally supervene on B-properties if no two worlds can differ in the distribution of A-properties without also differing in the distribution of B-properties.

Non-moral examples

- Temperature supervenes on mean molecular energy: No two objects can differ in temperature without also differing in mean molecular energy.
 - This is because temperature just *is* mean molecular energy.
- Colour supervenes on wavelength: No two impulses of light can differ in colour without also differing in wavelength.
 - Note that this can hold even if it is not the case that colour just *is* wavelength (but e.g. a secondary quality).

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.
- Global thesis: Two worlds with the same natural facts also contain the same moral facts.

Illustration of moral supervenience

- Consider two actions that have the properties of
 - being an utterance towards a friend,
 - being an instance of not telling the truth,
 - not producing any significant increase in [whatever is the good].
- It seems that there is no way for the one action to be right and the other wrong.
 - If there is, then this must be due to a difference in some other natural property.
 - Add this property to the list of shared properties, and the moral properties are fixed.

Naturalism and explaining supervenience

- Question: Why do moral properties supervene on natural properties?
- The *naturalist* answer:
 - Every property supervenes on itself.
 - Moral properties are identical to some natural properties.
 - So a given moral property supervenes on the natural property that it is.
 - Hence moral properties supervene on natural properties because they *are* natural properties.

Non-naturalism and explaining supervenience

- 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.
 - Moral properties are *sui generis*, i.e. properties of their own kind.
- Supervenience:
 - Moral properties cannot “behave” independently from natural properties, but are “chained” to them.
- Problem: Non-naturalists cannot explain supervenience.

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Shafer-Landau's explanation of supervenience

- Moral properties are distinct from natural properties.
- Each instantiation of moral properties is fully constituted by a conjunction of natural properties.
- Hence if you get the same natural properties, you get another instantiation of the same moral property. Conversely, if another moral property is instantiated, there must be a difference in natural properties.

Analogy

- The property [being cold or being wealthy] supervenes on the properties of [being cold] and [being wealthy].
- Explanation: Something [being cold or being wealthy] is constituted by it being cold or by it being wealthy.
- The property of [being cold or being wealthy] is of its own kind: it is neither a physical nor a social property.
- (controversy: Are there be disjunctive properties, and if so, what is their metaphysical status?)

Example of Shafer-Landau's constitution thesis

- The permissibility of you stroking a cat on the street is constituted by the natural properties of this action:
 - creating pleasure,
 - not having any negative effects on anyone's well-being, and
 - being in accordance with all the promises you ever made.

(continued)

- Because of the constitution, any other action which creates pleasure, does not have any negative effects on anyone's well-being, and is in accordance with all promises the agent ever made, must be permissible as well.
 - This is because another instance of permissibility will then be constituted.
- Hence another action cannot be impermissible without also differing in some permissibility-constituting natural properties.
- So the non-naturalist can explain supervenience of moral properties on natural properties.

Objections to the constitution thesis

- The constitution thesis is a metaphysical claim.
- It is hence subject to metaphysical objections beyond the realm of metaethics: e.g. controversy about the ontological status of property instances (“tropes”). See the SEP article “Moral Non-Naturalism”.

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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?

Importance of the epistemological challenge

- Non-naturalists should explain how we can have moral knowledge
 - 1 to make sense of our common knowledge ascriptions: “You *know* that this is wrong!”
 - 2 to avoid scepticism about non-naturalism itself: If we cannot know these supposed non-natural moral facts, why suppose that they are there in the first place?
 - 3 to better meet the explanatory inertness objection: If we can know moral facts, then moral facts play a role in explaining our moral beliefs.
- Naturalism seems to have a much easier time meeting the challenge: If moral properties are natural properties, then they can have causal powers and affect us, and we can know about them in the same way we know about other natural properties.

Non-naturalist answer: Moral intuitions

- Moral Intuitionism: We know some moral facts by intuition.
- Particular intuitions:
 - In the Transplant Case, it is intuitively impermissible to kill one patient to save five.
- General intuitions:
 - If you could not have predicted certain consequences of an action, then intuitively you cannot be morally responsible for them.

What intuitionism does not say

- Not: We have a capacity of moral intuition that allows us to directly know all moral truths.
- Not: Our moral intuitions are infallible. When we have a moral intuition that x is good, then it must be true that x is good.

What a good form of moral intuitionism says

- We do not know all truths through moral intuition. Some moral truths are derived from other truths, e.g.
 - Particular moral truths (Setting the cat on fire is wrong) is derived from general moral truths (Causing needless suffering is wrong).
- Some truths are known by intuition:
 - Causing needless suffering is wrong.
 - Pleasure is better than displeasure.
- Moral intuitions are fallible. We can have a moral intuition that p and p is nonetheless false.

But what are intuitions?

- Intuitions are a form of “seemings”:
 - I have a moral intuition that x is good = it seems to me that x is good.
- Intuiteds and intuitings: I have an intuition that p :
 - the intuited: p .
 - the intuiting: the fact that it seems to me that p .
- Seemings are not beliefs. Something can seem to you to be F and yet you believe that it is not F (straight stick that looks bent in water).

Intuitionism generalised

Intuitionism

- If it seems to you that p , then barring defeating evidence to undermine trust in your seeming, you are justified to believe that p .
- Example of defeating evidence: you have evidence that your faculties are not working properly (drugs, illnesses, hallucinations etc).

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The suspectness objection

The suspectness objection

- Seemings are a strange kind of thing to give you any justification to believe anything.
- Given the causal inertness of non-natural moral facts, it is not clear how seemings (apparently a natural, psychological fact) could track moral facts.

Responses to the suspectness objection

- 1 In other areas, we are fine with seemings, even of causally inert facts:
 - Memory: I seem to recall that I had dinner yesterday.
 - Perception: This line seems longer than that line.
 - Introspection: It seems to me that I have a headache.
 - Logic: q seems to follow logically from p and *if p then q* .
 - Modal: It seems impossible for an object to be both red all over and green all over.
- 2 The suspectness objection itself relies on an epistemic intuition about a causally inert fact: Seemings do not seem to give you justification to believe anything.

The independent calibration objection

The independent calibration objection

- P1: One is justified in believing the contents of a putative source of evidence only if one has independent justification for the belief that the putative source is reliable. (cf. scientific instruments)
- P2: We lack independent justification for the belief that moral intuitions are reliable.
- C: We are not justified in believing the contents of moral intuitions.

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- In other words: We can never check whether a moral intuition is correct without relying on other moral intuitions.
- For example, I can check my utilitarian intuitions only if I rely on intuitions about particular cases (that it is wrong to kill the innocent in order to save five).

Response to the independent calibration objection

- Faculties other than intuition lack independent calibration: If you doubt that you see a chair you can try to touch it. But then you must assume that you can rely on your touch, etc.
- P1 is inprinciple unsatisfiable:
 - We are justified in believing what source *A* tells us only if evidence from another source *B* justifies belief in *A*'s reliability.
 - We are justified in believing what *B* tells us only if evidence from another source *C* justifies belief in *B*'s reliability.
 - *ad infinitum*
- Hence: P1 is demanding too much.
- The buck needs to stop somewhere to avoid an infinite regress. Why not with seemings?

The insufficiency objection

The insufficiency objection

- Even if our moral intuitions give some justification to our moral beliefs, this need not be enough for knowledge.
- Hence intuitionism does not guarantee that there is moral knowledge.
- Note that this objection does not attack intuitionism, but only holds that intuitionism is not enough to answer the epistemological challenge for non-naturalism.

Replies to the insufficiency objection

- 1 There are further sources of justification.
 - Prime candidate: Coherence: the more coherent your moral beliefs are the more justified you are in holding them.
 - Start with your moral beliefs about particular and general moral facts.
 - If your particular and general beliefs do not cohere, give up at least one belief.
 - Continue this mutual adjustment until you acquire a coherent system of moral beliefs, a reflective equilibrium.
- 2 We do not need knowledge, but only (at least partially) justified moral belief to make sense of our moral discourse and of non-naturalism.

The defeating evidence objection

Intuitionism

- If it seems to you that p , then barring defeating evidence to undermine trust in your seeming, you are justified to believe that p .
- Charge: We have reason to think that our moral intuitions are unreliable.
- Note that this objection does not attack intuitionism in general, or all intuitions, but only holds that the supposed justificatory power of moral seemings is defeated.

Peer disagreement as defeating evidence

- Analogy to visual seemings: If the chair seems red to me, but green to you, then I have reason to doubt my faculties.
- People with the same empirical information sometimes find different moral claims intuitive.
- We should then be doubtful of our intuitions.
- Response: Disagreement warrants scepticism only about intuitions about which there is disagreement after careful reflection. cf. the analogy: The disagreement about the colour of the chair should not make us doubt all visual seemings.

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Evolutionary debunking of moral claims

Debunking moral claims

- P1: The content of human systems of morality (intuitions and moral convictions) is pervasively shaped by evolutionary processes.
- P2: These processes shape our systems of morality solely with regard to fitness for survival, and not with regard to non-natural moral truths (as these are causally inert and cannot harm anyone).
- C: We have no reason to believe that our moral systems reflect any non-natural moral truth.

Response to debunking moral claims

- If we have access to non-natural moral facts, e.g. via intuition and reasoning, then the evolutionary influence may not be strong enough to distort our systems of morality beyond being reliable.
- So the objection only works if we assume that next to being shaped by evolutionary forces, our systems of morality do not also (more or less) reliably track non-natural moral facts.
- But this is precisely what the argument was meant to establish!
- So the argument is circular.

Evolutionary debunking of moral concepts

Debunking moral concepts

- P: Evolutionary theory provides a complete non-moral genealogy of moral concepts like justice and fairness.
- C: There is no reason to assume that these concepts also track some non-natural moral properties.

Response to debunking moral concepts

- If our moral concepts track some non-natural moral properties, then we have no reason to believe P.
 - Non-natural moral properties can then play a role in explaining the genesis of our moral concepts.
 - There is then no guarantee that an evolutionary genealogy of our moral concepts is complete.
- So P is a convincing premise only if we already accept C. So the argument presupposes its own conclusion, and is circular.

8 Summary: Non-Naturalism

9 Notes

Summary

- Non-naturalism: Moral properties are not natural properties, but *sui generis*.
- Strangeness objection: Non-natural moral properties are alien and strange.
- Supervenience challenge: Non-naturalists must explain why *sui generis* non-natural moral properties supervene on natural properties.
- Epistemological challenge: Non-naturalists must explain how we can have any justification for our moral beliefs about causally inert non-natural moral facts.
- Non-naturalists can provide answers to all of these challenges.
- Think for yourself if these answers are convincing!

Overview over responses to the objections to Non-Naturalism

- Strangeness objection: Non-natural moral properties are alien and strange.
 - Moral facts are different from natural facts and other non-natural facts.
 - But they are not strange in any problematic sense.
- The challenge of explaining supervenience of non-natural moral properties on natural properties:
 - If moral properties are *sui generis*, why do they supervene on natural properties?
 - One answer: Shafer-Landau's constitution thesis: Each instantiation of moral properties is fully constituted by a conjunction of natural properties.

(continued)

- The challenge of explaining how moral knowledge is possible:
 - Answer: Intuitionism: If something seems to be the case, this is *prima facie* reason to believe that it is the case.
 - Suspectness objection: Seemings are strange sources of justification.
 - Reply: We accept seemings elsewhere, and the objection is a seeming itself.
 - Independent calibration objection: We have no independent way of knowing that our moral intuition tracks moral facts.
 - Reply: At some point, any justificatory chain needs to stop. So why not with intuitions?
 - Insufficiency objection: Seemings may give justification, but are not enough for knowledge.
 - Reply: There are other sources of moral justification, e.g. coherence.
 - Reply: Justification would be enough to answer the concern of the epistemological challenge.

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- The defeating evidence problem: Even if intuitionism is true, we have reason to believe that our moral intuitions are unreliable.
- Peer disagreement: This problem is restricted to those areas where we do disagree.
- Evolutionary debunking: The sweeping claim of overwhelming evolutionary influence on, or exclusive evolutionary explanation of our moral intuitions presupposes that we cannot have any access to non-natural moral facts. The objection is hence circular.

8 Summary: Non-Naturalism

9 Notes

Discussion seminar this week

“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?

Discussion seminar next week

Need all ethicists also do metaethics?

Feedback

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