

Non-Naturalism: Evolutionary Debunking; Mixed Views; Overview over Metaethics

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103 Ethics: Metaethics, University of Oxford, Hilary Term 2015

- 1 Non-naturalism
- 2 Evolutionary debunking of moral knowledge
- 3 Summary: Non-Naturalism
- 4 Overview: From most “subjective” to most “objective” theories
- 5 Mixed Metaethical Views
- 6 Review of the lecture series

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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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.

Against tracking non-natural properties

Matthew Bedke's argument from cosmic coincidence:¹

- 1 Suppose Ethical Non-Naturalism is true, i.e., that ethical facts or properties are non-physical.
- 2 The physical world is causally closed, so physical events and states are fully physically caused.
- 3 Ethical intuitions are physical events or states.
- 4 So, ethical intuitions are fully physically caused. (2,3)
- 5 So, ethical facts or properties do not causally affect ethical intuitions.(1,4)

¹Argument outline courtesy of Ben Goldstein.

(continued)

- 6 If ethical facts or properties do not causally affect ethical intuitions, it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties. (the need for cosmic coincidence premise)
- 7 So, it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties. (5,6)
- 8 If it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties, there is a defeater for these intuitions: the defeater from cosmic coincidence. (cosmic coincidence as a defeater)
- 9 So, on the hypothesis that Ethical Non-Naturalism is true, there is a defeater for our ethical intuitions. (7,8)

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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 at least some answers to 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)

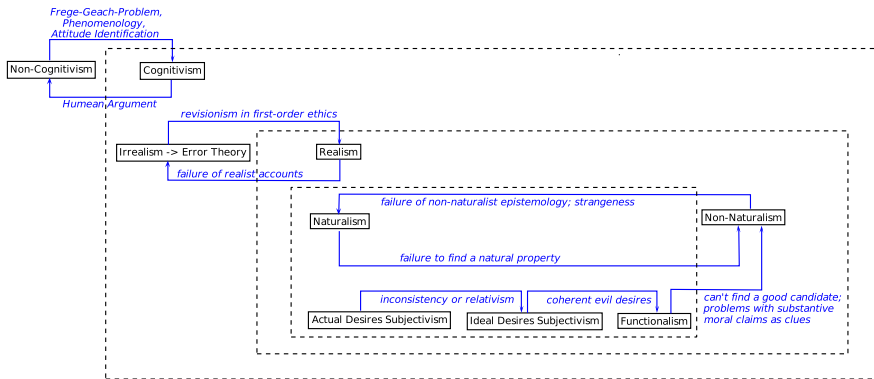
- The challenge of explaining how moral knowledge is possible:
 - Answer: Intuitionism: If something seems to be the case, this is *prima facie* reason to believe that it is the case.
 - Suspectness objection: Seemings are strange sources of justification.
 - Reply: We accept seemings elsewhere, and 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.

(continued)

- 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.
- Cosmic coincidence: It would be a cosmic coincidence of our moral intuitions tracked non-natural moral facts. Response?
- Note: Even if not all responses are successful, non-naturalism may still be superior to other metaethical views. “The least implausible.”

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Overview (template!)



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Quasi-Realism

Moral psychology

Moral judgements are not beliefs. They are non-cognitive mental states, like desires, intentions, approval and disapproval.

Moral semantics

Moral sentences behave as if they were descriptive sentences, and can be true or false. (Minimalist theory of truth.)

Moral metaphysics

There are no moral facts or properties.

Moral epistemology

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

Hybrid Expressivism

- Any moral sentence about action ϕ expresses *both*
 - a general attitude about actions insofar as they have a certain property F , *and*
 - a belief that F applies to ϕ .

Examples for Hybrid Expressivism

- A utilitarian who utters “ ϕ -ing is wrong” expresses
 - A general disapproval of actions insofar they fail to maximize total happiness.
 - A belief that ϕ -ing fails to maximize happiness.
- A Kantian who utters “ ϕ -ing is wrong” expresses
 - A general disapproval of actions insofar as they are based on maxims that cannot be universalized.
 - A belief that ϕ -ing is based on a maxim that cannot be universalized.

Hybrid Expressivism and moral conditionals

A moral sentence of the form “if ϕ -ing is wrong, then ψ -ing is wrong” expresses

- a general disapproval of actions insofar as they have a certain property F ;
- a belief that if ϕ -ing has F , then ψ -ing has F .

Example: A Kantian who utters “If lying is wrong, then telling your little brother to lie is wrong” expresses

- A general disapproval of actions insofar as they are based on maxims that cannot be universalized.
- A belief that if ϕ -ing is based on maxims that cannot be universalized, then ψ -ing is based on maxims that cannot be universalized.

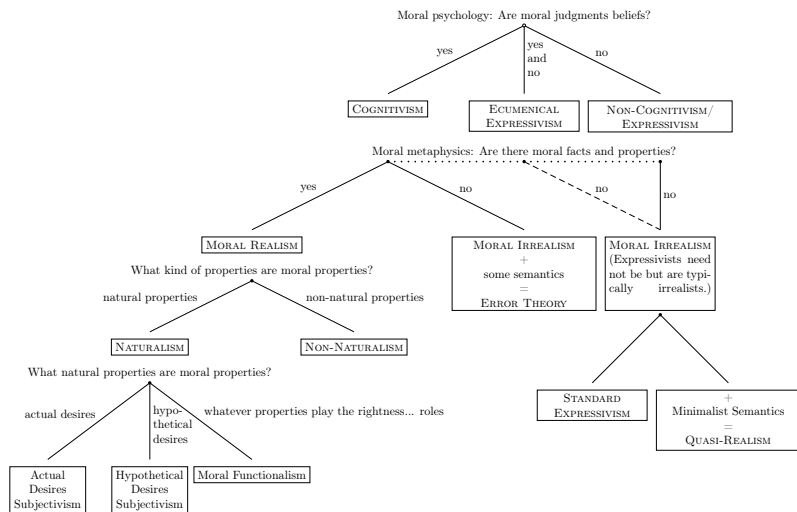
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What metaethics is about

We want to know

- What kind of mental states moral judgments are.
- What sentences with moral terms mean.
- What kind of properties, if any, moral predicates refer to.
- Whether and how we can have moral knowledge.
- How to explain different general phenomena in our ethical discourse and practice.

Taxonomy of different metaethical views



Comparing metaethical theories

- An ideal metaethical theory explains all moral phenomena, e.g. it explains
 - why moral judgments reliably motivate us to act accordingly.
 - why there are exceptions to moral motivation.
 - how moral reasoning works.
 - how we come by moral knowledge.
- An ideal metaethical theory avoids counter-intuitive implications, e.g.
 - We cannot have any moral knowledge.
 - We never morally disagree.
 - All positive moral beliefs are false.
- Different moral theories can be compared with regard to how close they get to the ideal.

Comparing metaethics theories (template!)

	Non-Naturalist cognitivism	Actual individual desires cognitivism	Actual group desires cognitivism	Actual divine desires cognitivism	Ideal desires cognitivism	Moral Functionalism	Error theory / Irrealist cognitivism	Standard expressivism	Hybrid expressivism	Quasi-Realism
explains moral motivation	no if internalism/ yes if externalism	yes	?	no/ yes	yes					
explains exceptions to moral motivation	yes							no?		
explains moral reasoning	yes							?	yes	
explains moral knowledge	?	yes	?	yes?	?	no		no?	no?	
allows for moral disagreement	yes	no	yes		yes?	yes				
can accommodate our moral intuitions	yes	no	yes		yes?	no	yes			
<i>etc.</i>	<i>etc.</i>									

7 Notes

8 Bibliography

Feedback

Please leave your feedback for these lectures:

- Go to Faculty of Philosophy Home Page
- Click on Lectures
- Click on Undergraduate Questionnaire

Discussion seminar this week

Need all ethicists also do metaethics?

7 Notes

8 Bibliography

Note on the bibliography

This bibliography is just a rough list of recommended readings for topics we covered in this lecture series. It does not replace the Faculty Reading List, and is in no way authoritative guidance for Finals examinations.

Introduction to Metaethics

- Brink, D. O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989: Chs. 1 and 2.
- Miller, A. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003: Ch. 1.
- Smith, M. *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994: Ch. 1
- Timmons, *Morality without Foundations*, Oxford: OUP, 1999, Ch. 1

Expressivism / Non-Cognitivism

- Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth and Logic*, New York: Dover Publications, 1936.
- Blackburn, S. *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984: Pp. 189-96.
- Gibbard, A. *Thinking How To Live*: Ch. 1.
- Hare, R. M. *The Language of Morals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1952: Ch. 5

Speech act fallacy

- Soames, S., *Philosophical analysis in the twentieth century*, vol. 1, Princeton University Press, 309-315.

Expressivism: Problems

The attitude problem

- Blackburn, S. *Ruling Passions*, OUP, 1998, pp. 8-14, 59-68.
- Miller, A., *An introduction to contemporary metaethics*, Polity Press, 2003, ch. 3-4

The embedding problem

- Schroeder, M., 2008, "How Expressivists Can and Should Solve Their Problem With Negation," *Noûs*, 42(4): 573-599.
- Unwin, N. 2001, "Norms and Negation: A Problem for Gibbard's Logic," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 49: 60-75.
- Geach, P. T. (1965). "Assertion". In: *The Philosophical Review* 74.4, pp. 449-465.

Moral Motivation, Motivational Internalism and Externalism

- Smith, M. *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, ch. 3, sections 3.3-3.5.
- Brink, D. O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989: Ch. 3.
- Dreier, J., “Dispositions and fetishes: externalist models of moral motivation”, ch. 30 in *Arguing about Metaethics*, Fisher, a. Kirchin, s. (eds.), Routledge, 2006.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry “Moral Motivation”.

Advantages of cognitivism

- Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Ch. 2.
- McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics*, Chs. 1 and 3.

Naturalism

General

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entries on “Moral Naturalism” and “Moral Anti-Realism”.
- Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, Ch. 12.
- Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Ch. 6, sections 5-6.

Naturalistic fallacy

- Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, Ch. 13, Section 1.
- Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §1–14.

Open question argument

- Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Ch. 6, Sections 1-2.
- Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, Ch. 13, Section 2.
- Feldman,
“The Open Question Argument: What It Isn’t; and What It Is”,
pp. 22–43.
- Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Ch. 2.
- Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §1–14.
- Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 2, Sections 2.6, and 2.7.
- Frege, “Sense and Reference”.

Forms of Naturalism

Actual desires subjectivism

- Ross, D., *The Right and the Good*, OUP, 1930, ch. 4.
- Huemer, M., *Ethical Intuitionism*, Palgrave, 2005, Part 1, ch. 3.

Hypothetical desires subjectivism

- Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, ch. 5, sections 5.9–5.11

Moral functionalism

- Smith, M., *The Moral Problem*, ch. 2, sections 2.8–2.12.
- Jackson, F., *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, OUP, 1998, Ch. 5.

Moral non-naturalism

- Stanford Encyclopendia Of Philosophy entry on “Moral Non-Naturalism”.

Strangeness objection to non-naturalism

- Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977: Ch. 1.

The explanatory powers of moral facts

- Brink, D. O. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989: Ch. 7, section 3.
- Harman, G. *The Nature of Morality*, New York: Oxford UP, 1977: Ch. 1.

Supervenience

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Non-naturalism and Intuitionism

Intuitionism

- Huemer, M., *Ethical Intuitionism*, Palgrave, 2005, part 2, ch. 5.
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- Bedke, Matthew S. (2009), “Intuitive non-naturalism meets cosmic coincidence”, in: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.90(2), pp.188-209.

Evolutionary debunking

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- Street, Sharon (2006), “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”, in: *Philosophical Studies*, Vol.127(1), pp.109-166

Ecumenical expressivism

- Ridge, M., 2006a, "Ecumenical Expressivism: Finessing Frege," *Ethics*, 116/2: 302–336.
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