

Ethics and Naturalism

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between naturalism and morality and to assess their compatibility. Naturalism is defined as respect for science, for its methods and results. From this respect for science, one can infer two distinct philosophical naturalisms: the methodological and the metaphysical. The relationship between these forms of naturalism and morality depends on the correct conception of morality. This paper differentiates between objectively realistic conception and all other conceptions and argues that while other conceptions can easily fit morality into a naturalistic worldview, objectively realistic conception faces theoretical challenges, including the challenge of explaining how moral facts and concepts play an explanatory role and the challenge of bridging the is/ought gap. The paper focuses on Railton's ethical naturalism as a prominent naturalistic theory of morality and evaluates its ability to overcome these challenges. The conclusion is that, so long as we consider a theory like Railton's, naturalism and realistically conceived morality are incompatible.

KEY WORDS: Ethical naturalism, metaethics, moral knowledge, morality, naturalism, science.

Introduction

The first section, “Respect for Science,” explores the motivations for adopting naturalism, defines the term, and differentiates between methodological and ontological naturalism. The following section, “Naturalism and Morality,” investigates the relationship between naturalism and morality by differentiating the objectively realistic from other conceptions of morality. The argument is that other conceptions are compatible with naturalism, while objective realism faces several challenges, mainly

a) explaining how moral facts can be natural facts and b) bridging the is/ought gap. The final section, “Railton’s Ethical Naturalism,” describes Railton’s theory and assesses its ability to solve these challenges. The conclusion is that Railton’s theory of morality is not compatible with naturalism.

1. Respect for Science

Philosophy and science aim to answer some of the same questions. For instance, physics attempts to describe the functioning and the beginning of the world, chemistry, and biology give insights into the nature and origins of life, and anthropology, psychology, and others into the nature of the human species. Given the success of science in explaining and predicting observations and developing technological applications, philosophy faces the problem of defending its place among the disciplines that pursue genuine knowledge. In contrast to the armchair philosophical methodology, scientific methodology is conducted in an a posteriori fashion by being rooted in observation and experiment. I think it is safe to say that this approach dominates, for so far as the pursuit of knowledge and technological application is concerned, it is unmatched by philosophy, religion, or any other cognitive project. Science seems so successful that nowadays, its results can hardly be contradicted by philosophical analysis, no matter how conceptually appealing or elaborate. The problem for philosophy, then, given its coincident aims but differing methods, is to find a place and use for itself in the science-dominated pursuit of knowledge.

Crucially, the problem of philosophy is also a problem of ethics. Philosophers and ethicists in particular have traditionally expressed and defended views on what is good, right, and virtuous. If ethics is a cognitive discipline, so that by doing ethics, one discovers truths about what is good, right, and virtuous, then how can philosophers and others explain their access to moral knowledge? Given that ethics have been mostly conducted in an a priori fashion, one would suppose that moral knowledge, if there is any, should be a priori accessible. However, science, the modern paradigm of knowledge, advances thanks to its a posteriori methodology.

As Tvrđý (2018) wrote, there are at least three philosophical responses to the trouble that philosophy and ethics face. The first response is to reject the idea that science is as cognitively or practically successful. The milder phenomenological branch of this response would claim that

there are certain existential questions that science is unable to answer, but philosophy can (Heidegger 1977; Husserl 1970). The more assertive postmodern and post-structural branches would contend that scientific methods and outcomes are flawed (Latour and Woolgar 1986). The challenge for the former is to provide a viable philosophical alternative to the scientific method that can also produce moral knowledge, while the challenge for the latter is to consistently deny the validity of science in a modern, science-dominated world.

The second response is to defend a particular a priori method as a legitimate source of philosophical clarification or understanding, if not knowledge. Conceptual analysis, reliance on thought experiments, and intuitions have been proposed for this purpose. In ethics, this kind of response is primarily associated with ethical non-naturalism and intuitionism, a kind of view that there are moral facts that are not natural facts and can be discovered by rational intuition or reflection (Enoch 2011; Huemer 2007; Parfit 2011; Shafer-Landau 2003). According to this set of views, ethics falls outside the purview of science, and there is a unique form of knowledge inaccessible through scientific inquiry. These people, however, need to explain how one could gain moral knowledge and why we differ in our moral opinions as much as we do.

I focus on the third philosophical response to the challenge of science—naturalism. Despite its notorious ambiguity, it remains the prevailing metaphilosophical view among philosophers. Rather than attempting to sift through numerous definitions of naturalism and select the “correct” one, it is, I think, more useful to adopt a minimal understanding of the term. In this minimal sense, naturalism can be understood as a respect for science, for its methods and results. Then, by inferring various philosophical implications of this basic attitude of respect, one can arrive at two formulations of philosophical naturalism.

The first formulation is methodological and concerns the way knowledge is acquired. Methodological naturalism holds that the scientific method is the best or the only way to acquire knowledge about the world and ourselves. For Quine, a prominent naturalist, “it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described” (Quine 1986: 21). Knowledge is not to be gained by a priori theorizing, based on conceptual analysis, intuition, or common sense, but by a posteriori investigation. The way to know the world and ourselves is to propose a hypothesis, deductively infer its consequences, and empirically test it. Naturalists like Quine claim that philosophy is somehow continuous with science and engages in the same, a posteriori

project. Science also provides a way to understand the process of acquiring knowledge itself. The truth of methodological naturalism itself is not to be established by some prior philosophical argument but by the very scientific methods themselves.

The second and more ambitious variety of naturalism is metaphysical and concerns what exists. Metaphysical naturalism is here defined as the view that all that exists is natural. The inventory of the world consists exclusively of natural entities. However, given the difficulty of defining “natural,” it is easier for a naturalist to say which things, in her view, do not exist. Hence, the core of metaphysical naturalism is the claim that there are no supernatural entities or entities that are non-natural by definition. This means that some objects of common belief like gods, spirits, ghosts, spells, curses, demons, angels, paranormal phenomena, etc., do not exist, and it also means that some objects of philosophical belief like Plato’s forms, Kantian noumena, Cartesian mental substance, and other do not exist.

Although the negative interpretation of “natural” is more readily accepted, it is not sufficiently informative, as it does not state which entities are natural. As I have just mentioned, it is harder to state positively what things, according to metaphysical naturalism, do exist. The most common interpretation of “natural” is disciplinary and reflects Sellars’ motto that “science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, of what is not that it is not” (Sellars 1956: 303). Natural entities are therefore those that the best theories of natural and social sciences refer to.

This interpretation, like others, is not without its problems.¹ It is not, however, my goal here to try to resolve this debate. To discuss morality, it is important to note that psychological entities like pleasure, desire, approval, motivation, intent, and others are agreed by both sides of the debate, the naturalist and the non-naturalist, to be natural, no matter the correct interpretation of “natural.” It is also not controversial that various functional properties related to psychological entities like being pleasure maximizing, being desire satisfying, being approval generating, and similar are natural.

The argument for metaphysical naturalism proceeds as an inference to the best explanation. If positing a particular entity is required to explain and predict observation, then the entity exists. All additional entities that are not required to explain the world should be, in the spirit of Occam’s razor, disregarded. A secondary argument for this view con-

¹ For a critique of these interpretations, see Shafer-Landau (2003: 58–65).

sists of claiming that if we disbelieve in God for reasons independent of naturalism, then there is no alternative and plausible picture of the world. Some would say that “Naturalism is the only game in town” (Clark 2016: 8). This can be formulated as a challenge to a non-naturalist; “If you are not a naturalist and you are unable to justify belief in God, then what is your worldview?”

How does morality fit into this naturalistic picture of the world? Some would argue that their naturalistic beliefs are compatible with ethics as a cognitive discipline that aims at moral knowledge. I will discuss one such prominent view in the section on Railton’s theory. Other authors would stress that since there is no extra-scientific knowledge, all there is to know about morality is known by science. It then seems there cannot be moral knowledge because science does not deal with questions of moral value. To be precise, although moral psychology, neuroscience, and some other disciplines can describe what we judge to be good, right, and virtuous and how we make these judgments, science, as it is now, does not even attempt to determine what is good, right, and virtuous. So, moral knowledge is ruled out, ethics is not a cognitive discipline, and morality should be viewed as a kind of myth (Rosenberg 2012).

Rosenberg’s view is an illustrative example of how naturalism can lead to eliminativism in ethics. Rosenberg is both a methodological and metaphysical naturalist. In his view, which he aptly calls *disenchanted naturalism*, the scientific description of the world is essentially correct and entails the falsity of several of our strongly held beliefs. Physics accurately describes the nature of reality as composed of fermions and bosons, and biology explains away the appearance of design in living organisms by way of evolution. Several objects of our strong beliefs are either not required for this description of the world or are excluded by it. In consequence, there is no God, no soul, no free will, no meaning of life, no purpose to the universe, love is a mere trick, and nothing is right or wrong, good or bad. Our strong beliefs in these things are evolutionary adaptations. They are useful to the propagation of our genes into future generations, but not true and therefore are useful illusions. To not believe in God, the meaning of life, etc., may not be adaptive (nor pleasant), but that is how things are. If we care about knowledge and truth, we should not believe in them.

It may seem that what began as a benign respect for science resulted in a constricted and emptied-out view of reality, devoid of many things we hold dear. So, as one can imagine, there are serious objections to the path of naturalism. These typically fall into two categories: those that

point to entities that do not neatly fit into the natural inventory of the world and those that point to alleged legitimate fields of inquiry in which the scientific method is not applicable. Moral values and consciousness fall under the first category, while our knowledge of mathematics and possibly morality fall under the second. In the following section, I explore the relationship between naturalism and morality.

2. Naturalism and Morality

Is morality compatible with naturalism? The answer depends, of course, on how we conceive of morality. Specifically, it depends on the correct conception of moral semantics and ontology. Thus, to answer the question, we have to relevantly distinguish different conceptions of morality.

The dividing line is, I believe, between objective realism, called “robust” realism by some and all other views (Sayre-McCord 1988: 14–15). First, let us define objective moral realism as consisting of the following four claims:

- a) moral judgments are descriptive and express beliefs,
- b) moral facts exist,
- c) moral judgments are true or false in the sense of corresponding to moral facts, and
- d) moral facts are objective.

Objective moral realism views moral language and thought as analogous to ordinary factual statements expressed in the indicative mood. While the sentence “Snow is white” describes an entity—snow—as having the property of being white, the sentence “Climate action is right” similarly describes a type of act—climate action—as having the property of being right. The judgment *Climate action is right* is true iff it is a fact that climate action is right. The totality of moral facts then constitutes moral reality. Crucially, this moral reality is objective in the sense of being mind-independent, i.e., independent of what anyone thinks, wants, or creates.² There are, therefore, objective moral truths, and it is possible to gain objective moral knowledge. In the current metaethical taxonomy, only ethical naturalism and non-naturalism are views of this kind.

As for other views, whether subjective realist or anti-realist, we can categorize them according to which of the four claims they deny.

² There is a caveat. Objective realists may believe that some less important moral facts are mind-dependent, as they may be dependent on human decisions and institutions. Objective realists do believe, however, that there are some important mind-independent moral facts.

Subjectivists and relativists deny that moral facts are objective (Harman 1975). Error theorists deny that moral facts exist (Olson 2017). Earlier non-cognitivists denied all four claims (Ayer 1990; Hare 1963). Their more modern followers, expressivists and quasi-realists, deny that moral judgments are descriptive and express beliefs and that moral truth is a matter of correspondence to facts (Blackburn 1993; Gibbard 2012).

Now that the realist and the anti-realist conceptions are delineated, what is the relation between these two conceptions and naturalism? First, consider subjective realism and anti-realism. Naturalism is compatible with morality when it is conceived their way, provided that the assumptions made by these conceptions about human psychology and society do not contradict empirical evidence. According to subjectivism, the moral judgment “Donating to charity is good” expresses belief, but only self-describing belief of donating to charity inducing an approving attitude or emotion in the speaker. According to cultural relativists, “Donating to charity is good” is true just in case one’s culture approves of donating. According to error theory, the judgment is simply false, as there are no moral facts to make it true. Moreover, according to non-cognitivists, expressivists, and quasi-realists, the judgment expresses some conative state, like emotion, command, approving attitude, norm acceptance, or similar. Naturalism is consistent with these views because all entities to which moral values and judgments are reduced or explained in terms of—approval, emotion, desire, etc.—are natural entities with causal powers and subject to sociological, psychological, and neuroscientific investigation. These views, however, cannot make sense of objective moral truth and knowledge.

The alternative is to adopt an objective realistic conception of ethics. In combination with naturalism, the position is known as ethical naturalism. Before I explain its relation to naturalism, I describe it in further detail.

What makes an objective realist naturalistic is the claim that moral facts are natural facts. Since moral facts are natural facts, we discover truths about them in the same way we discover truths about other natural facts, that is, empirically. These are the two great advantages of ethical naturalism—in theory, at least. First, it is metaphysically sensible as it does not postulate any non-natural entities, and second, it non-mysteriously explains our access to moral knowledge as being essentially empirical.

It is, however, questionable whether naturalism is compatible with ethical naturalism, as there are several challenges that an ethical naturalist has to overcome if she is to espouse her position successfully. These

challenges include Moore's open question argument (Moore 2004) and the normativity objection (Paakkunainen 2017; Parfit 2011: 324–27). In this paper, however, I narrow my focus on ontological and epistemological challenges. Specifically, I am interested in ethical naturalists showing that moral facts can be natural, that they play an explanatory role in theoretical accounts, and dealing with the is/ought gap.

Thus, the first challenge for an ethical naturalist is to show that moral facts can be natural. What ethical naturalists want to avoid, however, is to postulate the existence of a specifically moral substance or force. As Dworkin put it:

The idea of a direct impact between moral properties and human beings supposes that the universe houses, among its numerous particles of energy and matter, some special particles—morons—whose energy and momentum establish fields that at once constitute the morality or immorality, or virtue or vice, of particular human acts and institutions and also interact in some way with human nervous systems so as to make people aware of the morality or immorality or of the virtue or vice. (Dworkin 1996: 104)

There is no need to explain, I believe, the implausibility of such a view from the point of view of modern physics.

What, then, could ethical naturalists say about the metaphysics of moral facts? Ethical naturalists typically believe that moral facts supervene on natural facts. That is, there can be no change in moral facts without a change in natural facts. Moral facts are constituted by or built out of natural facts. There is room, then, for moral facts and properties even though there is no moral substance or force, and all that exists is made out of fundamental physical particles or fields.

The metaphysical problems, however, don't stop there. Metaphysical naturalism seems to have an issue accommodating objective moral truths. Harman (1977: 3–10) argued that we do not have to refer to moral properties to explain our moral beliefs. In his famous example, a physicist observes a vapor trail in a cloud chamber. She then makes the judgment, "There goes a proton." It seems that the best explanation for her judgment is that there is a proton in the cloud chamber. Contrast this with a moral case. Suppose you witness several hoodlums catching a cat, pouring gasoline on it, and then lighting it on fire. Suppose further that you make the judgment "What they have done is wrong." What's the best explanation for this judgment? Harman claims that the judgment is best explained by your psychological dispositions—your upbringing, personal attitudes, emotional state, and so on. The best explanation need

not refer to moral wrongness itself. Therefore, there's no reason to assume moral wrongness exists.

Subjectively and anti-realistically leaning thinkers might claim that moral properties not only play no explanatory role in explaining our moral beliefs but that they play no role in explaining any natural phenomena. It would seem there is no explanandum for a moral explanans because goodness, evil, rightness, and wrongness have no place in our best theories of natural and social sciences. Furthermore, it is *prima facie* puzzling how values could explain facts. How could facts about how things ought to be explain facts about how things are? It seems it would require that the universe evolves to fulfill a kind of purpose. However, such teleological thinking is hardly plausible today, as science, and particularly evolutionary biology can explain the natural world without reference to purposes. A stringent naturalist would conclude that since moral values are not explanatory, they are non-existent. The first challenge for a naturalistic moral realist is to show that moral properties figure in the best explanations of the natural world.

The second challenge is the so-called *is/ought* gap. There is an apparent difference between normative claims and claims stating natural facts. Statements of natural facts seem to have a common feature of being descriptive. Both common statements of natural facts like "The Moon is made of cheese" and scientific statements like "In 2022, the average global surface temperature was 1,1° Celsius higher than in the pre-industrial period" are descriptions of how things are or are not. In contrast, normative statements like "Climate action is right" prescribe how things should or should not be. Hume famously wondered how one could infer *ought* statements from *is* statements. One interpretation of his thinking is logical and amounts to the thesis that no normative conclusion could be logically inferred from purely descriptive premises. Consequently, arguments with purely descriptive premises and normative conclusions like the following are invalid:

1. Erik caught a cat and lit it on fire.
2. The cat was in immense pain.
3. What Erik did was wrong.

Some take it that the *is/ought* gap establishes an ontological difference between facts and values, that no *ought* could be constituted by an *is*. This would be damning for ethical naturalism, which identifies moral facts with natural facts. However, the fact that there is a logical differ-

ence between *is* and *ought* statements does not imply that there is an ontological difference between facts and value. Pigden (1991) pointed out a counterexample:

1. Erik is a small, four-legged mammal.
2. Erik has spines on his back.
3. In children's books, Erik's kind is depicted as bearing an apple on his back.
4. Erik is a hedgehog.

This argument is also invalid because the premises do not explicitly contain the term "hedgehog." Hence, it is not possible to infer statements about hedgehogs from purely non-hedgehog premises. The point is that based on this logical difference, it is implausible to assume that there is an ontological difference between hedgehogs and the rest of existence.³

Nonetheless, it seems that Hume touched on something important about the difference between facts and values. To better capture the gist of Hume's reasoning, Maguire suggests the epistemic autonomy thesis (Maguire 2017: 438). The thesis is that no non-normative evidence is relevant to the epistemic justification of any purely normative principle. Admittedly, non-normative evidence could be relevant to the justification of some mixed normative principles. For example, *that there is a lion in the room* will likely be relevant to the justification of the principle that *you should get out of the room*. However, it seems that non-normative evidence is irrelevant to the justification of a purely normative principle like utilitarianism: An act is right iff it maximizes expected happiness. If the thesis holds, then it is hard to see how ethical naturalism, relying on empirical evidence, could establish the possibility of moral knowledge.

In the face of these challenges, at least two initial responses are available. On the one hand, one may think that the challenges cannot be met. For instance, concerning the challenge of moral facts serving an explanatory function, Nagel wrote:

... it begs the question to assume that this [scientific] sort of explanatory necessity is the test of reality for values. To assume that only what has to be included in the best causal theory of the world is real is to assume that there are no irreducibly normative truths. (Nagel 1989: 144)

³ To make the argument valid, one would have to add the premise that "Whatever is a small, four-legged mammal, has spines on his back, ... is a hedgehog," but that would mean that the premises would contain the term "hedgehog."

If one thinks that there cannot be objective moral truth in a naturalistic world, then one can either reject objective moral truth and settle for an anti-realistically conceived morality or hold on to objective moral truth and reject naturalism. In the second case, naturalism cannot accommodate morality.

On the other hand, one may attempt to meet the challenges and show that there can be objective moral truth in a naturalistic worldview. This could be a widely held belief among philosophers, as both moral realism and metaphilosophical naturalism represent the majority views among contemporary analytic philosophers (Bourget and Chalmers 2023: 9). In the next section, I will look at one such prominent theory.

3. Railton's Ethical Naturalism

Peter Railton, a leading ethical naturalist, espouses a reductive kind of theory (Railton 2003b). In his view, moral facts are natural facts. They not only supervene on natural facts but are also reducible to them. Moral terms are defined in terms of non-normative natural terms. Moral concepts like “good for someone” and “right” refer to natural properties. Moreover, moral knowledge is “of a piece with empirical inquiry” (Railton 2003b: 5). To cut to the chase, Railton defines “goodness” and “rightness” as follows:

(G)

Non-moral goodness is what one would want for oneself if one were fully informed and rational.

(R)

Moral rightness is what a fully informed and rational agent considering the question “How best to maximize non-moral goodness from the point of view in which every individual’s interest counted equally?” would want.

It is important to recognize that these definitions are meant as proposals and thus are meant to be reforming (Railton 2003b: 32). As such, Railton notes that they cannot be proven or disproven. In his view, they should be evaluated according to several theoretical criteria, which, he believes, (G) and (R) meet. The definitions should be:

1) intelligible and functional:

a) clear,

- b) non-circular,
 - c) capture the normative force of the evaluative terms by roughly fitting our moral intuitions and permitting a connection between good and right on the one hand and motivation on the other,
 - d) permit the evaluative concepts to participate in their own right in genuinely empirical theories by us having appropriate epistemic access to these concepts and by showing that generalizations employing these concepts, among others, can figure in potentially explanatory accounts, and
- 2) such that empirical theories constructed with the help of these definitions are reasonably good theories.

This is the core of Railton's theory. Given the challenges of ethical naturalism, we can ask: How does it fare?

Let's call Railton's overall theory "R-theory" and the reformed morality, as captured in definitions (G) and (R), "R-morality." Railton presents R-theory as a kind of moral realism, and my first and preliminary comment relates to this point. At first glance, Railton's proposal straddles the divide between objective and subjective morality. Non-moral value and moral rightness are objective in his sense because what is non-morally good for me is independent of what my actual self believes and desires, while what is morally right is not wholly determined by what any single individual believes or desires. The value of this kind of objectivity, I think, is that it is possible to be mistaken about questions of value and because it avoids relativism. For example, I can believe that a philosophy career is good for me because that is what I presently want, but I can be mistaken about this because a philosophy career may not be what my idealized self would have wanted for me. Moreover, rightness is not relative because it may be true that I should be more modest despite that modesty does not fulfill my actual desires nor the desires of my idealized self. Thus, in matters of value and morality, not everything goes.

However, according to our definition of subjective, Railton postulates only subjective moral properties, as both non-moral value and moral rightness are based on the wants of idealized agents, and wants are human psychological responses. Morality is thus dependent on the contingent wants of idealized agents, and there is no reason, rational or moral, to have a particular basic want. Thus, in our definition, R-theory is not objectively realistic.

My point is more than terminological because it is telling that R-theory, just like subjectively realist and anti-realist views of morality, has little problem with being compatible with metaphysical naturalism. Goodness and rightness are ultimately reduced to wants, desires, and satisfaction. These are non-problematically real and natural entities studied by psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and other disciplines.

My second comment concerns the reforming nature of (G) and (R). As with any proposal for a change of meaning of a term, the worry is that it changes the subject. We aim to talk and think about genuine morality, not something else that, confusingly, bears the same name. The definitions, therefore, cannot be arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Since they cannot be arbitrary, there must be some standards for their assessment. Railton's response is the postulation of the set of theoretical criteria for the definitions. Moreover, since the definitions cannot be idiosyncratic, the requirement that the definitions must roughly fit our existing moral intuitions seemingly aims to avoid it being the case.

However, it seems to me that by relying on an unprovable proposal, R-theory is effectively no longer methodologically naturalistic. Notice that by accepting the definitions (G) and (R), one accepts the most fundamental pieces of moral "knowledge," where most, if not all, of moral truths follow from (G), (R), and the non-normative facts. However, these fundamental pieces of moral "knowledge" are not subject to empirical proof. Instead, they are established by philosophical reflection and intuition. The definition "Water is H₂O" is, I believe, a counterexample. In the case of "Water is H₂O," there was a good empirical basis for the reforming definition. It took an empirical discovery to say that the tasteless, odorless liquid that falls from the sky is a molecule made of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. Definitions (G) and (R) are different. Empirical evidence and scientific research were mostly irrelevant in their formulation. Therefore, to the degree that we resort to philosophical reflection and intuition and do not resort to empirical findings, we are losing one of the main advantages of ethical naturalism. The advantage was that it could non-mysteriously explain our access to moral facts by claiming that moral knowledge is essentially empirical.

To drive the point further, consider that definition (R) concerns the point of view in which every individual's interest counted equally. When definition (G) asserts that good is what one would want for oneself if one were fully informed and rational, we could ask, "Who exactly are we

talking about?” Specifically, are we talking about humans only or about a wider set of beings, including conscious animals and other conscious life? Talking about what one would have wanted if one were fully informed and rational indeed suggests talk of humans or at least beings with higher cognitive capacities. The way I read Railton, including his examples of moral concepts playing an explanatory role in society’s evolution, which I present shortly, strongly suggests a human-centric interpretation as well. If that were the case, then R-morality would not be normatively neutral because it would beg an important normative question, namely, whether animals have intrinsic value.

However, suppose we read R-morality vaguely as not stating clearly who exactly counts as a moral subject and conceive of informed and rational agents so widely that we encompass non-human animals. Say that according to one interpretation, R-morality concerns only humans, and according to another, it concerns some non-humans as well. According to an ethical naturalist, which interpretation should be preferred? It seems there is no way to choose between them other than by an appeal to more philosophical reflection and intuition. I mean, in line with the epistemic autonomy thesis explained previously, I cannot imagine how the question of intrinsic animal value, for instance, could ever be determined by empirical research. Ethical naturalists, however, are committed to the view that normative facts are natural. Therefore, normative questions like these should be resolvable empirically. But how could they be?

A related objection concerns another way in which R-theory may be normatively biased. Definition (G) is stating what is good—namely, what would satisfy the wants of an idealized agent. Definition (R), meanwhile, states how should we approach the good—namely, maximize it. As Philip Pettit argued, the deontological approach to the good can be viewed as that of honoring it instead of maximizing it (Pettit 1989). Maximizing and honoring the good are two normatively distinct approaches that produce different judgments in some of the same cases. For example, say that one has to be involuntarily sacrificed to save ten. It could be that the preference of an idealized agent concerned with maximizing non-moral goodness from the point of view in which every individual’s interest counted equally is to sacrifice. However, a deontological idealized agent might prefer not to sacrifice because he or she chooses to honor or respect the good of the one to be sacrificed and not to maximize the good. For this reason, R-theory is a kind of preference-utilitarianism. I am not claiming that a metaethical theory cannot have implications for normative ethics. I am claiming that a proposal cannot beg a controversial

normative question. Moreover, if such an issue cannot be resolved with a proposal, how could it be resolved empirically?

In reply, one could claim that the traditional philosophical methods of armchair reflection and intuition, ones used to arrive at definitions (G) and (R), are empirical and “of a piece” with the standard scientific inquiry. Hence, the reliance on philosophical theorizing and intuitions would count as a genuine scientific investigation.

If that were so, then it would blur the difference between armchair and empirical modes of inquiry. There would be in principle no difference between the way that ethical naturalists and non-naturalists justify their theories and the belief in the most fundamental pieces of moral knowledge. What would be the point, then, of being a methodological naturalist and stressing the exclusivity of a posteriori and empirical methods of inquiry? If we were to accept this reply, I think it would not be clear what exactly would a methodological naturalist be denying.

An alternative defense would be to argue more generally in favor of the reliability of philosophical intuitions, such as those that stand behind (G), (R), and the theoretical criteria for evaluating the plausibility of (G) and (R) that Railton proposed. In more recent work, Railton (2014) argues in this vein, although in a limited fashion:

With the help of anecdotes, supplemented by some evidence from genuine research done by others, I have made a few tentative suggestions about when intuitive moral assessments might be expected to have greater credibility—even when they oppose one’s own considered judgment: for example, when individuals have wider and more representative experience, a better-developed ability to imagine what things would be like from the standpoints of others, a better “feel” for the underlying dynamics in personal and social situations, or greater foresight in imagining alternatives. These are also, I think, characteristics of those people whose intuitive moral responses we especially value or trust. (Railton 2014: 858–59)

As is clear from the quote, Railton has not actually defended the specific intuitions that are now in question, nor his ethical and metaethical intuitions in general. Furthermore, if his anecdotes, reasoning, and the research he cites in that paper applied to the sorts of intuitions that we are interested in here, then, according to his argument, it would be the case only on the condition that we would consider Railton himself a person with characteristics typical of morally trustworthy people (Railton 2014). I do not see how a fact like that would help advance metaethics.

My second comment regards a) and b); the criteria of clarity and non-circularity. I grant that R-theory is clear enough to be critically evaluated. I also grant, with a qualification, that it is not circular. It is

not circular on the condition that the criteria used to evaluate R-theory are normative in the epistemic sense only. To explain, we could ask, “Is R-theory a *good* theory?” or “*Should* R-morality be accepted?” Here, the normative terms “good” and “should” cannot be about what is non-morally good for us or what is morally right. If they were, R-theory would be either circular or incomplete. For example, one could be tempted to think that R-morality should be accepted because it serves the goal of people getting along well. However, we could pose a question reminiscent of Moore’s open question argument: Is the goal of people getting along a good goal? Either it is good according to the R-morality, or it is not. If it is good according to the R-morality, then the argument for the R-morality is circular. Moreover, if it is not good according to the R-morality, then according to what standard can it be evaluated? It cannot be an epistemic or aesthetic standard because the goal of getting along is clearly not a matter of what should be believed and what is beautiful but rather of what is good and what should be done. It would have to be a moral or rational standard, one that R-morality misses. Thus, R-theory would be incomplete.

I think it can also be granted that criterion c) is met. If my ideal self would want X, it could motivate me to want X. There is, then, at least the potential for motivation, although not a necessary connection between fact/judgment and motivation.

Criterion d) is in my view crucial for the evaluation of R-theory. If non-moral goodness and rightness had no explanatory role in explaining the phenomena of the world, then, according to the naturalistic standard, they would not be part of the inventory of the world. Railton argues that non-moral value and moral rightness, as defined in (G) and (R), have explanatory power. Specifically, whether subject S acts in accordance with his own good can help explain his measure of life satisfaction, assuming that those who lead a better life in the sense of (G) will be more satisfied. He further claims that there is a wants/interest mechanism by which S could, mostly by trial and error, filter through her actual wants and desires and in time choose more of those that better fulfill her interests. Non-moral goodness can then help explain this gradual evolution of wants and desires. Something analogous applies to moral rightness (R). If some societal policies do not reflect the interests of all members of a given society equally, then this can help explain why the disadvantaged population feels dissatisfaction and is inclined to protest. In time, policies could evolve and approach the equal consideration of

everybody's interest. Moral rightness (R) could help explain this evolution. Since (G) and (R) play genuine explanatory roles, they are natural and real properties.

One could ask why it is necessary to postulate a higher level of moral facts M (goodness and rightness) that supervene on natural facts N (desires and satisfaction of idealized agents) and why it is not sufficient to refer to the reduction basis N alone to explain phenomena. As is clear from the examples of the application of the wants/interest mechanism mentioned above, there is no need to refer to non-moral goodness and rightness. Thus, why is it not enough to talk about the terms in definiens; wants, desires, their satisfaction, and the effects this satisfaction has, and why do we also have to talk about the terms in definiendum and mention goodness and moral rightness in our explanations?

Railton replies that the supervenience of M on N alone is no basis for denying the explanatory role of M concepts (Railton 2003a: 16–17). He explains that even though chemistry, biology, or electrical engineering supervene on physics, these fields have explanatory power. We would be able to explain much fewer phenomena if we couldn't refer to chemical or biological concepts in our explanations. In a later text, Railton seems to suggest that the question of whether M facts are explanatorily dispensable is meaningless given his definitions. He argued:

Because the form of the reduction of water to H₂O is that of identification, it makes no sense to ask of a causal role assigned to water (as in 'This erosion was caused by water') whether the causal work is 'really' being done by water or by H₂O. There can be no competition here: the causal work is done by water; the causal work is done by H₂O. Similarly, if a naturalist in value theory identifies value with a – possibly complex – descriptive property, then it would make no sense to ask of a causal role assigned to value (as in, 'He gave that up because he discovered that it was no good for him') whether the causal work is 'really' being done by value or by its reduction basis. The causal work is done by value; the causal work is done by the reduction basis. (Railton 1989: 161)

Hence, if the reduction basis (desires and satisfaction of idealized agents) is explanatorily indispensable, then goodness and moral rightness are also indispensable because these are, by definition, the same properties.

In response, however, one might be skeptical concerning the analogy between chemical and biological concepts on the one hand and moral concepts on the other. Although supervenience alone need not be the basis for denying the explanatory role of M concepts, supervenience plus the fact that there seems to be no explanatory loss in leaving M concepts out of the picture is such a basis. For although we would incur

a substantial explanatory loss by abandoning chemical or biological concepts, which arguably function as useful simplifications of immensely and impractically complicated physical entities, what explanatory loss would we incur if we abandoned M concepts and relied only on the desires and satisfaction of idealized agents to explain the happenings of one's life and society?

I see no loss here. It seems to me that all we need to explain the phenomena Railton refers to are the desires and satisfaction of idealized agents. In his criterion d), Railton requires that the moral concepts "can figure in potentially explanatory accounts." However, this is not exactly a question of moral concepts having the *potential* to figure in explanatory accounts. To be part of the inventory of the natural world, these concepts ought to be *indispensable* in these accounts. I believe Railton shares this view. In his more recent comment on Parfit's work, he expresses his commitment to methodological naturalism (Railton 2017: 45–46).

It seems to me that the theoretical strategy of philosophically proposing to identify moral property with a natural property allows too much. For if we did define non-moral goodness and moral rightness in this reductive fashion, would it not be possible to define into existence any number of entities that we see fit? For example, we could propose a definition of H₂O as *manna* and then go on claiming that manna is used in our best explanations of the chemistry of water. The manna chemist might then claim that it is not sensible to ask if it is actually manna or water that is causing erosion because, by definition, manna *is* water.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the key issues with Railton's ethical naturalism are, I believe, epistemological. Indeed, our non-normative beliefs influence our value judgments. If I no longer believed that vaccines for COVID-19 are safe and effective, I would not think that people should get vaccinated. However, empirical evidence seems to be relevant to our ethical beliefs only in a limited way, that is, only if we already presuppose some purely normative principle. In our moral thinking and discourse, we need to rely on pure principles, such as maximizing expected happiness, universalizing our maxims, or thinking of animals as moral subjects. Railton's definitions of non-moral goodness and rightness can also be viewed as such pure principles. However, I do not see how such principles could be ever established on an empirical basis. I do not see how scientific research into purely ethical principles could even get off the ground. Moreover,

I think that moral terms, as defined by Railton, are not indispensable in explanatory accounts of the phenomena. For these reasons, I think this particular version of ethical naturalism is not naturalistic. I also don't think it is realistic, at least not in the objective sense. Therefore, I think that naturalism and objectively real morality were not shown to be compatible in this case.⁴

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