Moral non-naturalism: Moore's intuitionism[1]

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are?

In this handout, we discuss moral non-naturalism, which is a form of moral realism, which in turn is a form of cognitivism.

MORAL REALISM
From cognitivism to moral realism
Cognitivism is the view that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. Cognitivists argue that moral judgements can be true or false, and so aim to describe the world. Furthermore, we can be mistaken about whether a moral judgement is true or false. Our thinking it is true does not make it true.

Here are three quick arguments in favour of cognitivism:

1. We think we can make mistakes about morality. Children frequently do, and have to be taught what is right and wrong. If there were no facts about moral right and wrong, it wouldn't be possible to make mistakes.
2. Morality feels like a demand from 'outside' us. We feel answerable to a standard of behaviour which is independent of what we want or feel. Morality isn't determined by what we think about it.
3. Many people believe in moral progress. But how is moral progress possible, unless some views about morality are better than others? And how is *that* possible unless there are facts about morality?

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they? Moral realism claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgements are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person or situation actually has.

Moral realism in the last 150 years has focused on trying to clarify the precise nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties. This has

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 351-4, 357-62

led to two positions: moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism. Moral naturalism claims that moral properties are natural properties; moral non-naturalism claims that they are a distinct, non-natural kind of property.

The debate is important because it has significant implications for our understanding of both philosophy and morality. Philosophy, first. Moral claims are not analytically true. That a particular action of killing someone, say, is morally wrong is not something that is true by definition of the concepts involved. So if moral claims are true at all, they must be synthetic propositions. Now, if we think that empiricism is correct, then we could only gain knowledge of moral judgments through empirical investigation, i.e. sense experience and scientific investigation. If that is possible, then moral properties must be natural properties. But is it possible? Could we really learn the difference between right and wrong through sense experience? Could science improve or correct our ethical views? Perhaps this sounds rather odd, and we don't learn about morality in these ways. Then if realism is true, we must gain moral knowledge in some other way, and that would mean that empiricism is false. It would also mean that moral properties are not natural properties, and so then there is more to the world than what can be investigated by science. So the debate between moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism has significant implications for the debate between rationalism and empiricism and for our view of what exists.

If we can show that moral naturalism is false and that moral non-naturalism is false, then we have shown that moral realism is false. That means that we face the question of whether there are *any objective moral truths*. If morality isn't objective, we may think that has serious implications for how we live our lives. For instance, why bring up children not to steal and not to lie if it is just a subjective matter whether these things are wrong or not? We don't force children to play particular sports – which sports they enjoy and pursue is up to them. If there is no objective morality, shouldn't we do the same with stealing and lying? We can draw similar implications for the criminal law and punishment. If there is nothing objectively wrong with murder, should we imprison someone for committing it? Some of the technical debates in metaethics can seem distant from our everyday concerns, but issues such as these lie behind them.

MORAL NON-NATURALISM

Moral non-naturalism claims that moral properties are not natural properties. There are different kinds of moral non-naturalism. We will look at just one, Moore's intuitionism. Moore understands 'natural property' to mean a property that we can discover through sense experience and the sciences, including psychology.

The naturalistic fallacy

Reductive moral naturalism claims that moral properties are identical to natural properties (of the kind that can be discovered by sense experience and science). In *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore argued that moral properties are not natural properties. Moral properties may be correlated with certain natural properties, but they are not identical. Correlation is not identity. For example, having a heart is correlated with having kidneys – every animal that has a heart has kidneys and vice

versa. But hearts and kidneys are not the same thing! Or again, having a size and having a shape are correlated – everything that has a size has a shape and vice versa. But size and shape are distinct properties. So even if goodness is correlated with happiness or pleasure, say, that does not show that they are the same property.

Moore called the attempt to identify goodness with any natural property the naturalistic fallacy. To see this, we need to think more about goodness. Goodness, Moore argued, is a simple and unanalysable property. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else. Of course, we can say how people use the term 'good', what they apply it to or again, what has the property of goodness. For instance, it makes perfect sense to say that pleasure is good in this sense. But this is to accept that there are two things here, not one. There is the pleasure, and pleasure has this additional property, goodness. Compare: when we say 'You weigh 60 kilos', we attribute you with the property of weighing 60 kilos. We don't think that you are the same thing as that weight – you are a person, not a weight! Likewise, we can meaningfully say that pleasure is good if we distinguish between pleasure and goodness. But we can't give a definition that defines goodness in terms of its parts that together 'make up' goodness.

Colours are similar. We can say what things are yellow, e.g. the sun, ripe lemons, etc. but these things don't define the colour yellow. Yellow is a simple property, and no one can explain what yellow is to someone who doesn't know. You have to see it for yourself to understand what it is. (For instance, we can't define yellow – which is part of our visual experience of the world – in terms of wavelengths of light. It might be correlated with these, such that seeing yellow is always caused by certain wavelengths of light. But it is a mistake to think that they are one and the same thing. Unlike wavelengths of light, colours are conceptually related to vision.)

Unlike colours, goodness is not a natural property. It cannot be investigated by empirical means. It is real, but it is not part of the natural world, the world of science. So, because goodness cannot be analysed in terms of any other property, it is a mistake to think that the property of goodness is identical with any natural property.

The 'open question' argument
Moore supports his view that a definition of goodness is impossible by the 'open question' argument. An open question is a question to which the answer could be more than one thing, for instance, it could be 'yes' or 'no'. If goodness just is pleasure, say, then it wouldn't make sense to ask 'Is pleasure good?' This would be like asking 'Is pleasure pleasure?' This second question isn't an open question, because the answer has to be 'yes'. It cannot, logically, be 'no' Put another way, we can say that asking 'It is pleasurable, but is it pleasurable?' is a closed question, rather like 'He is a bachelor, but is he an unmarried man?' Now, if goodness is the same thing as pleasure, then 'It is pleasurable, but is it good?' is also a closed question. But, says Moore, this isn't a closed question – the answer can logically be 'yes' or 'no'. The same is true of 'Is pleasure good?' And so goodness cannot be pleasure, or any other property. 'Is x good?' is always an open

question while 'Is x x?' is not. And so goodness cannot be defined as any other property.

Is the 'naturalistic fallacy' a real fallacy?
Moore's open question argument doesn't work. Here is a similar argument. 'The property of being water cannot be any other property in the world, such as the property of being H_2O. If it was then the question "Is water H_2O?" would not make sense – it would be like asking "Is H_2O H_2O?" So water is a simple, unanalysable property.' This is not right, as water just is H_2O.

The reason the argument doesn't work is because it confuses concepts and properties. Two different concepts – 'water' and 'H_2O' – can pick out the same property in the world. Before the discovery of hydrogen and oxygen, people knew about water. They had the concept of water, but not the concept of H_2O. So they didn't know that water is H_2O. 'Water is H_2O' is not analytically true. However, water and H_2O are one and the same thing – the two concepts refer to just one thing in the world. Water is identical to H_2O.

Likewise, the concept 'goodness' is a different concept from 'happiness'. 'Happiness is good' is not an analytic truth. We can accept that Moore has demonstrated this. But perhaps the two concepts refer to exactly the same property in the world, so that goodness is happiness. Moore's open question argument does not show that they are different properties.

INTUITIONISM
If moral properties are not natural properties, then how do we discover them? How do we know what is good? In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill claims that we cannot prove what is good or not. To prove a claim is to deduce it from some other claim that we have already established. Moore agrees. But unlike Mill, he does not think that we can argue inductively from evidence either. All we can do is consider the truth of the claim, such as 'pleasure is good', itself. Moore calls such claims 'intuitions'.

What does this mean? The claim that some truths can be known by rational 'intuition' is made by rationalism. But what is a moral intuition, and how can we tell if it is true? Moore leaves these questions open: 'when I call such propositions Intuitions, I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them'. However, he has already said more than this. He has argued that these claims are not analytically true. And he has argued that we cannot know them through empirical investigation. So they must be some variety of synthetic a priori knowledge. He claims that we can know propositions about what is good to be true (or false) by considering the proposition itself. Intuitions are 'self-evident' propositions.

A self-evident judgement rests on the 'evidence' of its own plausibility, which is grasped directly. This doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. 'Self-evident' is not the same as 'obvious'. Our ability to make a self-evident judgement needs to develop first, and we need to consider the issue very carefully and clearly. Because moral intuitions are not known through the

senses, the self-evidence of a moral intuition will be more like the self-evidence of a necessary truth, such as mathematics or claims about what is logically possible, than the self-evidence of a perceptual truth, such as the claim that there is a table in front of me.

So, intuitionism does not need to claim that we have a faculty of intuition that 'detects' whether something is good or not, a bit like a supernatural sense. Intuitionism is simply a form of ethical non-naturalism that claims that some of our moral judgements are synthetic yet self-evident.