Moral naturalism[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 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. 351-7

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 NATURALISM

Moral naturalism claims that moral properties are natural properties. But what counts as natural? Because there is disagreement on the answer to the question, there is more than one type of 'moral naturalism', which we can call 'reductive' and 'non-reductive'.

Many philosophers accept the definition of 'natural properties' that was given by G. E. Moore, namely properties that we can identify through sense experience and science. On this definition, moral naturalism is a form of reductionism. It claims that the things in one domain – moral properties of goodness and rightness – are *identical* with some of the things in another domain – certain properties that we can identify through sense experience and science. The most plausible natural properties that might be moral properties are certain psychological properties, e.g. happiness. The identity claim is a reduction because we have 'reduced' moral

properties – which we might have thought were a different kind of thing – to psychological properties. I.e. there is *nothing more* to moral properties than being a certain kind of psychological property.

Non-reductive moral naturalism argues that morality is an expression of the natural capacities of human beings, the capacities we have as a species of animal, part of nature. This kind of naturalism wants to reject 'supernatural' explanations of morality, e.g. that what is right or wrong is determined by God (as some theories in religious ethics claim) or that when making moral judgments, we use some 'non-natural' faculty of reason (as Kant thought). Moral properties are a kind of natural property, but they can't be reduced to some other kind of property, such as the properties that science investigates.

The difference between reductive and non-reductive moral naturalism may become clearer as we look at examples of each.

Utilitarianism as naturalism
The normative ethical theory utilitarianism claims that the only good is happiness. This can be interpreted, in metaethics, as a form of reductive claim. We can interpret this to mean not simply that happiness is the only thing that is good, but that happiness is what goodness is. They are the same property. Happiness is a natural (psychological) property, and therefore, so is goodness. Because happiness is a natural property, so is maximising happiness. Whether an act maximises happiness is a (complex) natural property. According to utilitarianism, an act is right if it maximises happiness. Therefore, rightness is also a natural property. On this interpretation, utilitarianism is a form of reductive moral naturalism.

Bentham appears to understand utilitarianism in these ways. For example, he opens *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* by saying that pleasure and pain not only determine what we *ought* to do, they determine what we *shall* do. This is a psychological claim: we only ever motivated by pleasure and pain. Utilitarianism starts from recognising this natural fact, and builds on it.

This is how Moore in *Principia Ethica* interprets Bentham as well as Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism. In his 'proof', Mill argues that what is good is what is desirable. We can find out what is desirable by finding out what people desire. He then argues that happiness is desired. From this, he infers that happiness is good. This only works, says Moore, if Mill thinks that what is good is the same as what is desirable, and that what is desirable is the same as what is desired. So Mill must be thinking that goodness is the natural property of what is desired.

Moore goes on to argue that, in making the argument, Mill commits the fallacy of equivocation in this argument, confusing two meanings of a word. The word 'desirable' has two meanings. Its usual meaning is 'worthy of being desired'. Anything desirable in this sense is good. But another meaning could be 'capable of being desired'. To discover what is capable of being desired, look at what people desire. Mill links what is desirable to what people desire. But what people actually desire is not the same as what is worthy of being desired (good). People want all sorts of rubbish! Mill has assumed that what people desire just is what is good; he hasn't spotted that these are distinct meanings of 'desirable'.

But Moore's objection misinterprets Mill's argument. Mill is asking 'What evidence is there for thinking that something is worthy of being desired?' He argues that people in general desire happiness. Unless people in general desire what is not worth desiring, this looks like good evidence that happiness is desirable. Is there anything that everyone wants that is not worth wanting? If we look at what people agree upon in what they desire, we will find evidence of what is worth desiring. Everyone wants happiness, so it is reasonable to infer that happiness is desirable (good).

Mill takes what people desire (which is a natural property) as *evidence* for what is desirable (good). He does not say that goodness is the same property as being desired. And when he claims that what is good is what is desirable, nothing he says implies that he thinks that 'being desirable' (as opposed to being desired) is a natural psychological property. So we simply can't say whether Mill is a reductive naturalist or not.

However, there is some evidence of reductive naturalism in Mill's claim, at the end of the proof, that 'to think of an object as desirable ... and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing'. So for something to be good is for it to be desirable, which is the same as being pleasant, which is for it to contribute to happiness. This sounds very much like what Bentham says as well – to say that something is good and to say that something produces happiness is to say the same thing. If the words 'good' and 'produces happiness' have the same meaning, goodness and (producing) happiness are the same property (just like 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' mean the same and being a bachelor is the same property as being an unmarried man).

Whether or not Bentham and Mill are reductive naturalists, a reductive naturalist interpretation of utilitarianism can argue that it solves some of the issues facing cognitivism. If goodness is just happiness, then there is no puzzle about what kind of thing goodness is. Furthermore, we can discover what creates happiness empirically. So we have an answer to the question about how we find out what is morally right and wrong: through experience. We can explain how morality can be objective in terms of what, objectively, contributes to people's happiness.

It is true that *if* reductive moral naturalism is true, we can discover moral properties through experience. But this fact won't help show that reductive moral naturalism *is* true. Given the different normative ethical theories that exist, claiming that goodness *is* happiness (or any other natural property) is obviously contentious. Such a claim isn't something that we can demonstrate by empirical reasoning – no scientific experiments will show that goodness is, after all, just happiness. So from the psychological facts *alone*, we cannot deduce any moral knowledge. We have to defend the identity claim philosophically.

Naturalism in virtue ethics
Some philosophers have read Aristotle's virtue ethics is a naturalist theory. They argue that he analyses eudaimonia in terms of the 'characteristic activity' (or 'function') of human beings as rational beings. The facts about human nature, in particular psychological facts about our desires, our needs and our ability to

reason, are the basis for moral truths. There are facts about what our characteristic activity is, there are facts about what traits enable us to perform our characteristic activity well. And so it turns out to be a psychological fact whether a character trait, such as courage or being short-tempered, is good or bad.

In her article 'Virtue ethics', Julia Annas rejects this and argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics is a form of non-reductive moral naturalism. Morality is *based on* natural facts about human nature. The sciences of biology, ethology and psychology can help us to identify the patterns of flourishing for each species, and so help us understand what eudaimonia involves for us. Furthermore, it is a *natural* fact about human beings that we are rational animals. Rationality is a natural capacity of human beings, it characterises us as the species of animal that we are. However, virtue ethics can't be *reduced* to claims about natural facts. The rationality involved in practical wisdom is not just a matter of knowing and applying facts that we can discover through sense experience and science. As rational animals, we create and evaluate ways of living, rather than simply live according to a set pattern. We look at the *reasons* for living a particular way. The person who has practical wisdom is not simply able to grasp some psychological fact about a situation that someone without practical wisdom cannot grasp. Instead, they understand the *reasons* for feeling, choosing or acting a certain way in a certain situation. This is why virtue is in accordance with 'right reason'.

For Aristotelian virtue ethics to be a form of reductive moral naturalism, we would have to claim that whether some consideration is a reason or not is itself a natural property.