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ANALYTICAL DESCRIPTIVISM REVISITED

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Abstract

Analytical descriptivism purports to identify the meaning of ethical sentences with that of the descriptive sentences that capture the clauses of mature folk morality. The paper questions the plausibility of analytical descriptivism by examining its implications for the semantics, epistemology and metaphysics of morals. The discussion identifies some of the reasons why the analytical descriptivist fails to deliver a reductionist account of normativity.

One of the things we desire of our ethical theory is that it make good metaphysical sense. Assuming that our metaphysics is naturalistic, it would be nice if we could locate ethics in the natural order of things. The 'location problem' for ethics has been the topic of a sophisticated project that comes under the heading of 'analytical descriptivism'. The theory purports to define words of value by words of fact, and to identify the meaning of ethical sentences with that of descriptive sentences. The aim of analytical descriptivism is to create a space for evaluative discourse in a purely descriptive habitat.

Analytical descriptivism draws upon the doctrine of 'moral functionalism', according to which moral concepts can be fully analysed by unpacking their role in the network of opinions, principles or intuitions that constitute the core of folk morality. To be exact, folk morality is composed of three parts: the input of the world to the system of ethical thought, the elements that comprise ethical thought, and the output of ethical thought in affecting through our actions the train of social events.

Folk morality is a vibrant and complex organism. Its conceptual centre, though, cannot be easily portrayed as the realisation of a fully elaborated and ideally harmonious system of ethical reasoning. The moral system that would be free from the limits and inconsistencies of contemporary ethical thought is called 'mature folk morality'. Moral functionalism aspires to identify ethical properties with descriptive properties by mapping ethical sentences to the descriptive sentences that capture all the clauses of mature folk morality.

I shall argue that the combined effort of functionalism and descriptivism to provide a reductionist account of ethics is unsuccessful. I examine the analytical approach to mature folk morality (section 1) and immature folk morality (sec. 2). Then, I address the functionalist approach to relativism (sec. 3), realism (sec. 4) and reductionism (sec. 5), before I conclude with a discussion of the main assumption of the descriptivist program (sec. 6). My remarks will identify some core issues about which the analytical descriptivist has to improve his argumentation.

1. Analysis and mature folk morality

According to analytical functionalism, 'the identification of rightness . . . depends on offering an analysis in the sense of an a priori story . . . that proceeds entirely in descriptive terms.'[1] Against the prevalent mood in meta-ethics, the analytical functionalist is confident that we can provide an analysis of the form:

(1) Rightness = maximising expected hedonic value.[2]

Any attempt to sustain this type of analysis of ethical terms needs to provide some answer to familiar Moorean objections. In particular, it has to explain why it is legitimate to ask whether rightness is indeed maximising expected hedonic value, but it does not make much sense to ask whether rightness is rightness, although 'rightness' *means* 'maximising expected hedonic value'. Jackson attempts to solve this difficulty by drawing an analogy between ethics and arithmetic:

> Just as we can sensibly doubt the result of a long, complex numerical addition by virtue of its making sense to doubt that the addition was done correctly . . . so we can make sense of doubting the result of the complex story that moral functionalism says leads from the descriptive to the ethical.[3]

The analogy invites us to treat the sentence 'rightness is identical to maximising expected hedonic value', as similar to sentences of the type:

[1] Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: a defence of conceptual analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 146.

[2] Jackson *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 145. We may note that, on pain of circularity, the reference to 'hedonic *value*' should be read in a quantitative rather than evaluative manner.

[3] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 151.

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(2) $145 = 9 + 38 + 11 + 35 + 1 + 12 + 8 + 6 + 3 + 5 + 17.$

The analogy invites us to understand the reduction of the ethical to the descriptive on the model of an equation between a series of numbers and their sum. The point of the analogy seems to be that, in both examples, it is not immediately *obvious* whether the left-hand side equals the right hand side. However, with sufficient care, we can prove that in the arithmetical case the long addition of the right hand side equals the number of the left-hand side – the right hand side designates exactly what is designated in the left-hand side. Thus, with equal care we may answer any worries we have about the identity of 'rightness' with the 'maximising of expected hedonic value'.

Jackson's attempt to rebut the 'open-question' argument through the analogy between ethics and arithmetic has been generally greeted as successful. This is rather unfortunate since, as I will now argue, the analogy is deeply flawed.

The notion of 'doubt' can be applied to a variety of things for a variety of reasons. I may have doubts about my neighbours, especially when they bear gifts. I may have doubts about Russell's account of empty names, even though it promises a neat solution to a complicated problem. And I may know all the options left for me, but still be in doubt about what to do.

The point is that the mere fact that we have doubts about two different things does not, on its own tell us anything interesting about the relation between the two cases. We may draw an analogy between the doubting of *x* and the doubting of *y* only if there are grounds for assimilating what we doubt about *x* with what we doubt about *y*.

However, a careful examination of Jackson's account shows that there are two reasons why the assimilation between the doubting in the ethical example and the doubting in the arithmetical example cannot work. Both reasons stem from two crucial disanalogies among the ethical and the arithmetical case.

First, it is obvious that in the arithmetical case the left hand side and the right hand side refer to things of exactly the same sort, namely numbers (however controversial it is to state exactly what numbers may be). Any ontological commitment we might make with regard to the things denoted on one side of the equation will carry across to the other side. However, it is a major philosophical issue whether normative properties are of one and the same kind as natural properties – it suffices here to recall the wide

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range of meta-ethical positions about the status of ethical properties, founded on a common background of realism about natural properties.

Secondly, it is clear that the numerals occurring in both sides of the arithmetical equation function in the same way, i.e. they *denote* numbers. By contrast, it is highly contestable whether normative words, such as 'right' and its derivatives, *pick out*, *denote*, *ascribe* or *refer to* anything, in the manner of descriptive words.

If Jackson's analogy were to work, it would have to be drawn between ethics and an area where we encounter correct identity statements among items that we initially, but mistakenly, regarded as semantically and ontologically distinct. However, an appeal to the fact that a number is indeed identical to the sum of some other numbers does not address any crucial question; hence, it cannot rationally assuage our worries about the proposed equation between the ethical and the descriptive. What in the arithmetical example is trivially the case, in the ethical is a substantive philosophical issue. Failing to appreciate this point may only obscure our understanding of normative discourse.

Nevertheless, given the popularity of Jackson's move it is worth considering whether it can sustain analytical descriptivism. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the analogy between ethics and arithmetic is correct and, hence, that it is appropriate to enquire for unobvious but informative analyses of ethical terms. The question becomes: 'What will this inquiry show about the function of ethical terms?'

The analytical functionalist cannot prejudge the results of semantic inquiry. Rather, he has to show that we are correctly disposed to use moral terms if, and only if, we intend to issue a natural description. He must establish that ethical notions concerning how something 'ought to be' play exactly the same role in our conceptual economy as descriptive notions of how something 'is'. The analytical descriptivist's response to the Moorean argument (even if it were successful) could not discharge the task of offering some argument for the claim that the ethical is identical to the descriptive.

2. Analysis and immature folk morality

We have focused on a problem for the analytical account of an ethical statement that supposedly belongs to mature folk morality.

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It seems, though, that a similar problem arises in explicating the meaning of sentences of our adolescent morality.

Assume that when our morality matures it will be revealed that rightness is indeed maximising expected hedonic value and that some different claim to the effect that:

(3) 'Rightness is identical to protecting your friends and harming your enemies',

is not justifiable by mature folk morality. Whatever else we might think about the latter sentence, I suggest that it is perfectly meaningful. However, if analytical descriptivism is correct, and the content of an ethical sentence cannot be rendered compatible with a central doctrine of mature folk morality, it follows that the speaker of that sentence is misusing moral language, since he employs a term in a way that contradicts its proper meaning.

We may recall that, according to Jackson, the relation between the ethical and the descriptive is analytic – it is determined by the meaning of the words involved. Therefore, employing an ethical term in a way that contradicts its supposed descriptive meaning should count as a violation of the rules that determine the linguistic expression of the relevant concept.

Analytical descriptivism implies that a substantial part of contemporary moral discourse might be, not simply erroneous, but rather conceptually confused. Should this implication worry the analytical descriptivist? It depends.

Analytical descriptivism can be seen as a project for improving our conceptual habits, with the view to create a moral discourse that represents the right way for things to be. This project may have no patience with views that define rightness as protecting the people that happen to befriend us. If any of our judgements clashes with the principles of mature folk morality, it is bad news for the judgement. As a revisionist account, analytical descriptivism is secure.

Alternatively, the analytical descriptivist account can be read as a systematic description of contemporary moral discourse. In the present and the previous section, I argued that the analytical account is in conflict with our linguistic intuitions. On the one hand, it fails to acknowledge that our linguistic intuitions point to a gap between 'rightness' and its supposed descriptive meaning. On the other hand, analytical descriptivism renders a number of ordinary ethical views not false but, properly speaking, meaningless. Hence, it fails to save the linguistic phenomena that it

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purports to explain. As a descriptivist venture, analytical descriptivism is problematic.

Faced with the choice between the two models, how would the descriptivist proceed? I think that he would not wish to abandon either the descriptivist or the revisionist agenda. My worry is that he cannot have them both.

3. The question of relativism

The process of personal maturity might be a rather long and difficult one – not to think of the scenarios when it is never achieved. What is the nature of the process of moving towards a mature moral system? The moral functionalist states that:

> we modify folk morality under the constraint of reconciling the most compelling general principles with particular judgements. In this way we hope to end up with some kind of consensus. . . . [mature folk morality] is where folk morality will end up after it has been exposed to debate and critical reflection.[4]

This paragraph raises a number of questions. To begin with, it is not made clear whether the functionalist offers this picture as a statement of how we in fact operate or as a recommendation of how we ought to proceed if we are to mature morally. The tension between the descriptivist and the revisionist model arises again; is the functionalist offering a description of what we do, or he is issuing a prescription for the correct thing to do?

In either case, his account leaves open the possibility that where we shall end up might be very different from where our neighbours will; and this is not simply the problem of irresolvable moral disagreement. In order to have a disagreement the debating parties should at least be able to communicate their moral differences. This in turn presupposes that they draw from a common reservoir of relevant terms, so as to understand, rather than to talk past each other. However, if each party's mature morality is determinant of the very meaning of the ethical terms they use, we are left with no intelligible means of voicing disagreement; or rather, we are left with no disagreement at all.

The analytical functionalist might respond to this criticism by drawing a distinction between sentences that capture the core platitudes of mature folk morality, and sentences which express a

[4] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 133.

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judgement on a particular ethical problem. He may then locate disagreement at the level of the particular judgements, without compromising the functionalist analysis of ethical concepts in terms of the descriptively identified platitudes.

This response requires that the functionalist come clean on the following question: what exactly is to be included in the core of mature folk morality? The functionalist might answer that he needs to include only those views that form the common denominator among all systems that we may recognise as moral. In this way he may ensure that his analysis guarantees the intelligibility of ethical disagreement between proponents of opposing ethical systems.

The problem with this answer is that it deprives mature folk morality of its unique status as the reductive basis of ethical concepts. The analytical functionalist often tries to explain away the counterintuitive implications of his programme, by stressing that his analysis reduces the ethical not to any old system, but to the, unachievable as yet, system of *mature* folk morality.[5] However, if the reductive basis is made up only of the core of mature folk morality, and this core includes only what is common to any ethical system, then whatever worries one might have about reducing the ethical to what happens to be the currently prevalent folk morality, the same worries should arise with the reductive analysis in terms of mature folk morality.

Furthermore, the emphasis on a limited set of platitudes invites the possibility that the functionalist is left with very little by the way of a descriptive basis that would support an accurate and informative analysis of the ethical. It is likely that the conceptual 'common denominator' of various ethical systems would include only trivia of the form: 'The virtuous person does the morally right thing', 'The just person does the morally right thing', 'It is morally right to act as the virtuous person would act' etc. It would not, for instance, include any substantive views about justice or virtue, since the inclusion of such views would lead to a reductive analysis that would favour only certain ethical systems, thus generating once more the threat of removing other systems from the space of ethical intelligibility. The problem for the functionalist is whether such incontestable trivia have enough descriptive content for sustaining a reductive analysis of the ethical.

Jackson is not unaware of the difficulties that the issues of

[5] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 146, p. 151.

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relativity and moral disagreement might generate for his programme. However, he 'assumes what he hopes and believes is the truth of the matter, namely, that there will (would) be convergence' in ethics.[6] Assuming that Jackson's assumption is correct, it is worth considering how the prospect of convergence can support the realist aspirations of his program.

4. The question of realism

Analytical functionalism purports to sustain a form of ethical realism, understood as the view 'that the relevant truth-apt sentences are on occasion true'.[7]

I should think that an appeal to truth does not suffice to define a position as realist, unless it is supported by, at least, the following two principles. First, what is true, and what we think is true are *in principle* two different things. Secondly, the truth of the matter is not determined by what we think about it – rather it is how things are that determines whether our thoughts are true. Accordingly, ethical realism asserts that the truth-value of a moral proposition is not determined by our attitudes about the proposition, or the states it represents; rather, it is moral reality that determines whether a moral proposition is true or false.

However, the moral functionalist defines truth in terms of 'some kind of consensus'.[8] Thus, he builds a reference to our cognitive or conative attitudes into the definition of truth. It is hard to see how he can also endorse either of the realist principles, which entail the existence of a conceptual distinction between ethical thought and ethical truth, and which give priority to the latter.[9]

It might be thought that the occurrence of consensus is a safe indicator that the interested parties have established contact with reality. But, unfortunately, this is not always the case. In a philosophical discussion over realism, what matters is not *that* people agree, but *why* they do so. The functionalist needs to explain how and why the proposed consensus reveals ethical reality.

The moral functionalist might retort that his definition appeals

[6] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 137.
[7] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 128.
[8] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 133.
[9] In discussion, Frank Jackson argued that his theory is immune to this difficulty, since he holds a realist view about our cognitive and conative attitudes. In my opinion, this only shows that he is a *psychological* realist, not a realist about *normative* facts.

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not to our present thoughts or attitudes but to their refined descendants, which will have been exposed to fair debate and critical reflection. I believe that this response creates more problems than it solves. However, it does offer the opportunity to address a central question.

5. The question of reductionism

The descriptivist states that the sentences of the morally mature folk are descriptive. The functionalist states that these sentences are constitutive of ethical truth. And the realist states that these sentences are true because they correctly represent moral reality. Can these three characters express complementary aspects of the same person?

What links the three positions is the claim that mature folk morality is the product of a reflective consensus. However, this claim does not explain what it is about such a consensus that makes it sufficient to reveal moral reality.

If 'reflective consensus' is itself defined as that which reveals how things really are, then the functionalist point would be correct but vacuous.

If 'rational' discussion, 'open and fair' debate, or 'critical' reflection are seen as playing a substantial role in discovering moral truth, then the functionalist should at least ensure that these notions bear no moral or normative significance. Otherwise, he would be in the unenviable position of trying to bake his reductionist cake with normative ingredients.

The analytical functionalist might take up the challenge to provide a fully reductionist account of each and every normative notion that might crop up in the philosophical analysis of moral reality and ethical truth. For our part, we retain some reservations about how one could even begin making some progress towards offering an accurate analysis of normative concepts, without introducing some other normative terms along the way.[10] If our reservations are justified, then it seems that the moral functionalist occupies an unstable position. He can honour his commitment to a realist conception of ethical truth only by appealing to the normativity of notions, which, according to analytical descriptivism, are not normative but descriptive.

[10] Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 85–89.

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The last point brings us to the question of the overall plausibility of the analytical descriptivist attempt to sanitise ethical practice of its normative components. For Jackson, anything we say using ethical terms can be said in terms that belong 'to the 'is' side of the famous 'is-ought' debate.'[11] I shall now address the main line of reasoning offered by the descriptivist in support of this position.

6. The descriptivist assumption

The analytical descriptivist wishes to offer an account of the opening gestures in mapping ethical onto descriptive terms, by taking its lead from the past:

> The history of ethical theory is full of attempts to identify, out of the mass of moral opinions we find appealing, a relatively small number of fundamental insights from which all of what we find most plausible under critical reflection – that is, what we . . . call mature folk morality – can be achieved.[12]

Leaving our worries about realism aside, I find the thought expressed in this paragraph very attractive. It urges us to embark on a reflective journey taking on board what we find appealing, and, I suppose, leaving ashore what we find appalling.

However, it invites a rather basic question: *what is it to call something 'appealing'*? Is it to add to the list of natural properties an additional item, or is it to express an attitude, voice a commitment, invite others to share a moral or aesthetic outlook? Unless analytical descriptivism provides an answer to this question, the whole project hangs in the air. My point is not that such an answer could not be given. My objection is that in order to provide such an answer the descriptivist has first to show that evaluation is pure description. What we are offered, instead, is just the assumption that valuing is describing, and on the basis of that assumption the rest of the moral functionalist story is to follow.

Jackson tries to make good of this assumption by drawing extensively on the notion of supervenience:

(i) The most salient and least controversial part of folk moral theory is that moral properties supervene on descriptive

[11] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 113.
[12] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 134.

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properties, that the ethical way things are supervenes on the descriptive way things are.[13]

Ethical supervenience should be understood in special terms:

(ii) the global supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive is special in that an unrestricted form, namely

(S) For all *w* and *w**, if *w* and *w** are exactly alike descriptively then they are exactly alike ethically

is both a priori true and necessary.[14]

This relation is made to deliver all that the descriptivist wants:

(iii) it is a consequence of the way the ethical supervenes on the descriptive that any claim about how things are made in ethical vocabulary makes no distinctions among the possibilities that cannot in principle be made in purely descriptive vocabulary.[15]

We can begin to see the problems in this line of reasoning by noticing first that the proposed relation between the ethical and the descriptive is not so 'uncontroversial'. Indeed, a moral antirealist – who opposes an ontologically committing talk of ethical properties – would strictly deny it. The antirealist asserts that supervenience is an important principle which requires that ethical claims held in the light of identical descriptive claims, should (on pain of practical irrationality) be themselves identical. Supervenience indicates not a metaphysical connection between ethical and natural *properties*, but a constraint on the way we tune our ethical and descriptive *judgements*.

The disagreement between antirealism and analytical descriptivism might lead one to infer that ethical realists should endorse the analytical descriptivist's account of supervenience. However, it is worth noting, here, that this inference would be mistaken. Jackson's approach to the relation between the ethical and the descriptive is in direct conflict with a subtle way of articulating realism in ethics.[16] The conflict relates directly to the notion of supervenience.

[13] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 118.
[14] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 119.
[15] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 123.
[16] See Jonathan Dancy, 'In Defence of Thick Concepts' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XX (1995), pp. 263–279.

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The moral realist argues that moral evaluation is made not *vis a vis* the object's descriptive characteristics, but in the light of features that we perceive as normatively significant. We commend a particular act as 'courageous' in responding to the fact that the agent faced the danger *in the right way* – for instance, by overcoming his fear in a *temperate, intelligent, steadfast, considerate way.*[17] Moral judgement is a response to the morally salient features of a situation; and what creates the salient shape are those aspects of the situation that we perceive as *worthy*, or *meriting* a particular response. To be sure, the goodness of a courageous act is a 'resultant' property: a property the act has in virtue of its having some other properties. However, the resultance basis is not made up of descriptively neutral properties, since the grounds for which the act is approved are themselves evaluatively determined. For a moral realist, an appeal to descriptive properties, devoid of any normative significance, is unlikely to illuminate ethical evaluation.

Ethical realists who are sceptical about the possibility of explicating value judgements in purely descriptive terms should reject Jackson's view that a purely descriptive story 'conceptually entails' the ethical character of an act.[18] Accordingly, they should deny the doctrine that indiscernability with regard to the descriptive entails indiscernability with regard to the ethical. This doctrine is but another expression of Jackson's proffered account of supervenience.[19] Hence, ethical realists may deny the analytical descriptivist account of supervenience.

All in all, the opening move of the analytical descriptivist's reasoning is uncontroversial only for those who accept that (i) there exist real ethical properties, (ii) which are identical to non-normative, natural properties. To put it bluntly, the analytical descriptivist's opening claim presupposes the correctness of the position he is at pains to prove.

More generally, I think that the appeal to supervenience for grounding analytical descriptivism is ineffective since it is based on a confusion of two standpoints. There is, on the one hand, the standpoint of the agent uttering ethical sentences, putting forward moral claims or expressing a value judgement. From that standpoint, the subject comes face to face with things that may strike him as cruel or noble, with actions that he should stop or

[17] Irish Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: RKP, 1970), p. 57ff.
[18] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, p. 151.
[19] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, pp. 119–122.

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encourage, with situations that call for careful deliberation. In all these he finds himself immersed in the domain of the normative: he may reflect on how a decent person would respond, how a rational agent would act, which plans it is right to cherish.

There is, on the other hand, the standpoint of the inquirer who attempts to describe moral practice. To be sure, the person who engages in the practice of uttering ethical sentences, may also be the person who, at other moments, wishes to describe it. However, the supposed fact that one might successfully describe all the facts pertaining to the employment of ethical sentences, does not entail that those sentences are themselves descriptive! A lot more needs to be said before we conclude with the descriptivist that the expression of ethical commitments is identical to description of facts.

Concluding remark

We began our critique of analytical descriptivism through a consideration of the claim that:

'Rightness is identical to maximising expected hedonic value.'

As an expression of a personal standard about which sort of things are right, the claim certainly deserves our attention: the maximisation of pleasure might be an eminently good thing. However, what the analytical descriptivist fails to address is the question of what it means to think of something *as right*, what is the nature of the phenomenon of perceiving something *under the heading of good*. Until the analytical descriptivist articulates an answer to this question, we may be allowed to think that ethics stands for the normative partner of the 'is-ought' pair.[20]

[20] I would like to thank Mike Martin, Peter Millican, Mark Nelson, Rowland Stout, Peter Railton, Tim Williamson, and, especially, Frank Jackson, for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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