

Article

Yes to Realism! No to Non-naturalism!

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According to contemporary *moral realism* a *moral property*, like *goodness* or *badness*, is either a natural (descriptive) property or a non-natural (non-descriptive) property of actions or situations. Contemporary moral naturalists like Richard Boyd, Nicholas Sturgeon, and David Brink are a group of philosophers who are often referred to as *Cornell realists* because of their connection with Cornell University.¹ Frank Jackson is another contemporary moral naturalist who is one of the leaders of *The Canberra Planners*² at the Australian National University with which he is connected. Jackson defends “the most extreme form of naturalism.”³ Jackson’s view is considered extreme by those who disagree with him because he believes that moral properties are reducible or identical to natural properties. This view of Jackson is opposed by contemporary non-naturalists like Jonathan Dancy, Derek Parfit, and Russ Shafer-Landau for reasons which in my view are not successful. Despite Jackson’s reductionism about the ethical, the Cornell realists, nevertheless, agree with him that moral properties are natural properties.

Supervenience is a logical platitude that is shared and used commonly by moral naturalists and moral non-naturalists to explain the nature of moral properties. Supervenience is the logical truism (i) that moral properties are dependent for their realization and emergence on natural properties: “an act’s non-moral properties do determine without remainder an act’s being right”⁴, and (ii) that actions and situations which are exactly alike in their non-moral or descriptive properties cannot differ in their moral properties: “two actions that share all their non-moral properties to the same degree must share all their moral properties to the same degree, and that no object can change its moral properties without changing its non-moral properties.”⁵

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the metaphysical plausibility of the non-naturalist view of moral properties. I will mainly concentrate my evaluation on the views of Shafer-Landau (henceforth just S-L) whose defence

¹ Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2003), 1-9.

² Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.

³ Jonathan Dancy, “Nonnaturalism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. by David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 122-145.

⁴ Frank Jackson, “What Are Cognitivists Doing When They Do Normative Ethics?” in *Philosophical Issues*, 15 (2005), 98.

⁵ Jonathan Dancy, “On Moral Properties”, in *Mind*, 90 (Jul 1981), 374-375.

of moral non-naturalism is the most lucid and vigorous so far. I shall try to show its metaphysical problems and defend Jackson's Occamist naturalism about moral properties which I consider to be more consistent with the supervenience platitude.

Moral Non-naturalism

In his book, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, S-L lucidly and vigorously defends a non-naturalist metaphysical view of morality in the tradition of Moore. Like the Cornell realists, S-L advances a non-reductive explanation of the existence and nature of moral properties like goodness and badness. But unlike the Cornell realists who think that moral properties are natural (descriptive) and knowable *a posteriori*, S-L believes that they are *sui generis*, non-natural, and knowable *a priori*. Moral properties *necessarily* supervene on descriptive properties. To S-L moral properties can be constituted by descriptive properties but cannot be identical to them. Thus, moral properties cannot be reduced to descriptive properties.

S-L's moral metaphysics is like certain *nonreductive* views in the philosophy of mind. Although he does think that moral properties supervene on descriptive properties, he denies that moral property types are identical to descriptive property types. I will argue, however, that S-L's dependence on the metaphysical notion of *supervenience* casts some doubts on the integrity of his adherence to non-naturalism because the supervenience platitude is a no gratuitous extra view of moral properties. His metaphysical view of moral properties can be taken as a moral naturalist view for some basic reasons without losing anything that is explanatorily significant.

As a metaphysical realist view of moral properties moral non-naturalism has been with us since Plato. But it was G. E. Moore who gave us its modern articulation in his *Principia Ethica*. Briefly, Moore asserts that an ethical property term is not synonymous with a natural property term. Hence, if M stands for a moral property and N for a natural property, it is not analytic but synthetic that

$$(1) M = N.$$

If property terms M and N have the same meaning or are synonymous, then they can be taken to apply interchangeably to the same property or set of properties of which they are true. Otherwise, they do not. Ethical naturalists would say that they do apply to the same property or set of properties, while Moore and his followers would say otherwise.⁶ (1)'s being synthetic and non-synonymous is the reason why it is an open question whether a natural property is a moral property. If Moore denies that ethical properties are identical to natural properties, not only is (1) not analytic, it is

⁶ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89-110.

false. But I take it that all Moore is saying is that statements of the form (1) are synthetic, leaving open whether they are true or false. Moore took his Open Question Argument to show that ethical and natural properties are not identical. But all it really shows is that moral and natural terms are not synonymous.⁷ S-L claims that

(2) moral properties are *sui generis*, and not identical to any natural properties.⁸

Consistent with Mooreanism, (2) is not necessarily incompatible with Cornell realism because it also insists on the non-identity of moral and non-moral terms, but would nevertheless maintain that moral properties are natural properties because of the distinction that Cornell realists make between *properties* and *concepts*.⁹ With (2), S-L denies naturalism for he believes that moral properties are non-natural properties. This is the difference between him and the Cornell realists.¹⁰ He could be taken to claim something like

(3) $M = Nn$.

in which a moral property M is metaphysically and conceptually identical to a non-natural property Nn. This makes sense because if he believes that M is not a natural property, then he believes that M has a property of being non-natural which is Nn. This could be a possible interpretation of what he means when he characterizes his moral metaphysics as “a non-naturalistic view of moral properties.”¹¹

I will take “natural” and “non-natural” as diametric characterizations of two distinct properties here because (a) it is not clear (and I have no idea) what make(s) a non-natural property non-natural, (b) to say that a moral property is non-natural (period) seems to beg the question against moral naturalists that the moral is non-natural, (c) to say that what really makes a moral property non-natural is essentially its being normative¹² is controversial since normativity can also be accommodated by naturalists,¹³ and (d) to say that what a non-naturalist really means by a “non-natural” property is simply that it is “not-natural” does not explain anything because it is a circular definition. (a), (b), (c), and (d) are also the reasons why base property P is needed to make sense of the supervenience relation between M and Nn.

⁷ This has been pointed out to me by Mark Timmons.

⁸ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 66.

⁹ Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” in *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, ed. by David Copp and David Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1984), 59.

¹⁰ Shafer-Landau, *op cit.*, 64

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115

¹² Dancy, “Nonnaturalism,” 133-136.

¹³ David Copp, “Moral Naturalism and Three Grades of Normativity,” in *Normativity and Naturalism*, ed. by Peter Schaber (Frankfurt: Ontos-Verlag, 2004), 7-45.

Some Problems about S-L's Moral Non-naturalism

I can think of two (there maybe more) ways by which we can grasp S-L's attitude towards (1) and (3). First, he can be taken to hold that whereas (1) is synthetic, (3) is analytic. So it appears that Moore's open question argument applies to (1) but does not apply to (3). But I don't think so. I think that like (1), (3) is also susceptible to the open question argument. We can always sensibly doubt whether a moral non-natural property (whatever that is) is good. But I think that he is clever enough to see this. So I doubt if he would agree to be taken like this. But if he would have no complaint about being taken this way, it would appear that S-L is a reductivist of a different sort after all for he could be taken to reduce the moral to the non-natural. And even if this is what he is saying, the burden of explaining what makes a non-natural property non-natural, and why a moral property should be reduced to it, is on him and not on anyone like myself who has no idea what would that mean.

The second way to take him is by saying that on his view (1) is susceptible to the open question argument but (3) is not for he does not hold that (3) expresses analyticity or interdefinability. As already noted earlier, for this to make sense we would have to motivate or invoke subvenient property P that could serve as a base property upon which M and Nn would depend for their realization, for neither M nor Nn could serve as a base property for each other. What needs an explanation cannot be itself the explanation. But is it not possible for (3) to express a supervenience relation between M and Nn? That is, could M supervene on Nn? Even the converse is possible,¹⁴ but I doubt whether S-L would allow it since on his view M would only supervene on P.

There was no mention of the possibility of M supervening on Nn in his work. In any case, it is left to the one who will countenance a supervenience relation between M and Nn to explain how it is possible. To some philosophers it is already obscure why the moral should supervene on the natural.¹⁵ They would surely consider the supervenience relation between M and N to be more obscure than between M and P. So (3)'s being metaphysically and conceptually necessary would be by virtue of something like Leibniz's *law of indiscernibles* or the covariance principle of supervenience. By this law or principle, M and Nn would be identical if, for any property P, M has P if and only if Nn has P. In other words, properties M and Nn are identical only by virtue of another property P that realizes them necessarily in all possible worlds. But (3) alone does not show this. So a revised version of (3) would be needed, and it will be like

¹⁴ Jaegwon Kim, "Supervenience as a Philosophical Concept," in *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, edited by Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 540-556.

¹⁵ See Stephen Schiffer, *Remnants of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 153-154.

(4) $M = N_n$, if and only if necessarily M has P and N_n has P .

But what is this P that makes supervenient properties M and N_n identical? To avoid double counting, a naturalist would say that P is a natural property, depending of course on whether she is a reductivist or a non-reductivist about the ethical. S-L who is also a non-reductivist about the ethical would go with the latter. But unlike the non-reductive naturalist, he will not consider M a natural property. What about N_n ? If (4) is true, then N_n will turn out to be a natural (or another distinct) property, which is inconsistent since it is non-natural. Surely N_n is not supervenient on P on this interpretation. Why would a non-natural property be natural? Naturally, naturalists would reject this view because it is utterly obscure and inconsistent. Besides, naturalists can be satisfied with the identity of moral and natural properties expressed by (1). It is this kind of obscurity and inconsistency which I would like to be noticed here because it will cast doubt on S-L's (and that of another moral philosopher's) non-naturalism. A moral non-naturalist also owes us an explanation as to why M , being supervenient on P , would also be identical to a *sui generis* N_n which is not supervenient on P .

These interpretations however can easily be dismissed on the ground that the predicative claim in (3) simply predicates the higher-order property of non-naturalness, (an extra property) to a moral property and not that a moral property type is identical to a non-natural property type. S-L need not accept (3) since it expresses the *is* of identity rather than the *is* of predication. But I think that such interpretations are possible and not entirely confused and mistaken. They will not go away because what makes a non-natural property non-natural is not clear. What is the explanatory advantage of predicating a higher-order property of non-naturalness to a moral property? What is the causal explanatory power or advantage of a non-natural property if it is not identical to a natural property? We will see later that it has none at all.

In a number of passages on the supervenience relation between the moral and the non-moral (natural) properties, S-L appears to be tilting towards naturalism, which makes me wonder why he considers his view non-naturalist. Consider the following passages:

(5) moral properties will be realized exclusively by instantiations of descriptive properties, though moral and descriptive properties are non-identical. Non-naturalists (and non-reductive ethical naturalists) will cite this relation as the basis for explaining the supervenience of the moral on the descriptive. Covariance is explained by means of constitution: something possesses the moral status it does in virtue of its descriptive constituents.

These latter [the descriptive constituents] *exhaustively* constitute the former.¹⁶

(6) necessarily, if property M is instantiated, so too is property N, and, necessarily, if N is instantiated, so too is M. Non-naturalists can accept the necessary coextensiveness of moral and descriptive properties, on the assumption that properties can be necessarily coextensive without being identical. I think that this assumption is true.¹⁷

A number of important things can be said about (5) and (6). The first one is that S-L's refusal to identify moral properties with descriptive properties, despite the *a priori* dependence of the moral on the natural, is due to his claim that the property of *necessary coextension* is distinct from the property of *identity*.¹⁸ But even if this conceptual distinction succeeds, still, it is not clear why his commitment to the necessary coextension between the natural and the moral will not count as naturalism even if coextension does not entail identity. Moreover, moral properties and natural properties might still be identical even if the moral property terms and natural property terms that pick them out are not synonymous. It is already known that two terms can be coextensional or coreferential without being synonymous.

The second one that can be said is that invoking coextensive relation between the moral and the natural can be a strong supervenience argument for reductive naturalists like Jackson with whom S-L disagrees. Now, (5) and (6) are non-reductive naturalistic supervenience claims which he accepts "in all essentials."¹⁹ In fact, according to him the only difference between him and the non-reductive naturalists is "whether or not one is willing to count moral properties as natural ones."²⁰ This to me is quite jarring and confusing. Why is he not willing to accept them as natural? I guess the answer is because he thinks that ethics is not a science. Since, in his view, ethical properties are not among the natural properties which are properly studied by science, ethical properties are not natural.

But this is misleading since ethics might still be natural even if it is not a science.²¹ His non-reductive supervenience claim is no different from that of the non-reductive naturalists. His conceptual distinction between coextension and identity might even be acceptable to them. I cannot help but be mystified and confused as to why he would refuse to accept that moral properties are natural even in the weak sense (i.e., in the non-reductive sense). How strong or

¹⁶ Shafer-Landau, *op cit.*, 86. Italics mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁹ Shafer-Landau, *op cit.*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64

²¹ See Copp, *op cit.*, 7-45.

weak really is his notion of the dependence of the moral on the natural in the light of (5) and (6)?

Moral Naturalism

Analytic naturalists like Jackson²² and Peter Railton²³ claim that (1) signifies analytic equivalence or sameness of meaning between M and N. According to analytic naturalism M and N are identical because they share the same extension. On this view, the extension of M and N is the set of particular descriptive properties d1, or d2, or d3, and so on, which can only be individuated empirically, and which also serve as multiple realizers of M and N. There can be no M and N without extension. Jackson claims that membership of this set is “possibly infinitely disjunctive descriptive properties.”²⁴ This is *moral functionalism*, which is “the view that to be right is to have the property that fills the rightness role, and so *mutatis mutandis* for all the moral properties. The analogy is with functionalism in the philosophy of mind, where to be in pain, say, is to be in the state that plays the pain role.”²⁵ The essential metaphysical claim (a platitude in my view) of analytic naturalism is:

(7) there is no ethical nature over and above descriptive nature.²⁶

This means (a) that there can be no ethical nature without descriptive nature, (b) that a difference in what is ethical is entailed by a difference in what is descriptive or natural, and (c) that no difference in the ethical feature of an action or event without difference in its descriptive or natural feature(s). This is perfectly consistent with (i) and (ii). This Occamist view of moral properties has the conceptual advantage of not making a double count of relevant moral making properties. That is, the moral making properties themselves are natural and not non-natural due to the supervenience platitude.

S-L’s moral non-naturalism is an extra property view of moral properties which is anti-Occamist and is guilty of double counting. He also admits that moral facts might lack causal powers. He boldly acknowledges that his “preferred story,” is “one that involves property dualism and the claim that moral facts are invariably constituted by sets of descriptive facts,” and that “this lack of independent causal power should be entirely unsurprising.”²⁷ But this view of his is incompatible with the total dependence of moral properties on non-moral properties. Jackson believes correctly in my view that “supervenience tells us that an act’s non-moral properties do determine *without*

²² Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 144-146.

²³ Peter Railton, “Reply to David Wiggins,” in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. by John Haldane and Crispin Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 315-328.

²⁴ Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, 124.

²⁵ Jackson, “What Are Cognitivists Doing When They Do Normative Ethics?”, 104.

²⁶ Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, 146.

²⁷ Shafer-Landau, *op cit.*, 111.

remainder an act's being right. Nothing more needs to obtain."²⁸ S-L's extra property is an epiphenomenal one. This obscure property does not play any causal explanatory role whatsoever. Only a few people will have the stomach to swallow it in contemporary metaethics.

Moral realists believe correctly that moral properties like goodness and badness play some causal explanatory role in the world. This fact is perfectly acknowledged by S-L himself.²⁹ A politician's generosity can causally explain why he has been elected the last election. A scientist's discovery of penicillin causally explains why he has been given the Nobel Prize for medicine. His having committed murder causally explains why he is in jail. His having received bribe money causally explains why the former President has been ousted by a peaceful revolution. You will notice that in each of these examples an extra non-descriptive property does not play any causal explanatory role at all. In fact, it is not even needed to explain anything in these examples and nothing is significantly lost if we do away with it. What now is the causal and explanatory relevance of an extra property view that S-L endorses? None at all in my view. The non-moral properties alone can independently explain the causal role and efficacy of moral facts and properties simply because they are natural facts and properties.

In my view, S-L's supervenience claim is better understood as a naturalist one since, as in mind-body supervenience, it does not allow for a free floating moral/mental world unconstrained by the physical world as implied by both (5), (6), and (7). It is not also clear what makes his supervenience claim different from that of non-reductive naturalists. (5) and (6) are not even necessarily opposed to or inconsistent with naturalism. If (5) and (6) are not necessarily inconsistent with naturalism, then his metaphysics about the ethical can be considered a naturalist one, similar to the non-reductionism of the Cornell realists. There must be a good reason for his unwillingness to count moral properties as natural ones. What that reason is has not been clearly argued.

Like S-L, I also consider Moore's challenge to be relevant because it inspires contemporary ethical naturalists to explain, with all the philosophical wits they could muster, why a moral property and a natural property can be identical. But unlike Moore, S-L, and other non-naturalists, I am not bamboozled by the naturalistic fallacy because I consider moral naturalism to be the only palatable view that can explain the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties. Analytic moral naturalism is Occamist and avoids double counting. This virtue is a good reason why analytic naturalism is a more preferable position in contemporary metaethics.

²⁸ Jackson, "What Are Cognitivists Doing When They Do Normative Ethics?" 98. Italics mine.

²⁹ Shafer-Landau, *op cit.*, 100.

Conclusion

With the above discussion, we could conclude that Shafer-Landau appears more to be a naturalist than a non-naturalist. It is puzzling why he keeps himself from being the former. I understand that the difference might be just epistemological as he intimated himself.³⁰ He thinks that moral truths can be known a priori, and naturalists think that they are known a posteriori. Now if the difference is simply epistemological, then he and the naturalists are in the same metaphysical boat. His realism about ethics is no less naturalistic than that of the naturalists. There is, therefore, nothing significant about S-L's extra property view. It is obvious that his non-naturalist view of moral properties has no causal explanatory advantage and has no important role to play in explaining the nature of moral properties. The extra property he invokes is an epiphenomenal property and is explanatorily impotent. Nothing is significantly lost if we take his metaphysics a naturalist one. Analytic naturalism or moral functionalism has the conceptual virtue and advantage of being parsimonious because it avoids double counting.*

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

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