

Immoral realism

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Abstract Non-naturalist realists are committed to the belief, famously voiced by Parfit, that if there are no non-natural facts then nothing matters. But it is morally objectionable to conditionalise all our moral commitments on the question of whether there are non-natural facts. Non-natural facts are causally inefficacious, and so make no difference to the world of our experience. And to be a realist about such facts is to hold that they are mind-independent. It is compatible with our experiences that there are no non-natural facts, or that they are very different from what we think. As Nagel says, realism makes scepticism intelligible. So the non-naturalist must hold that you *might* be wrong that your partner (for example) matters, even if you are correct about every natural, causal fact about your history and relationship. But to hold that conditional attitude to your partner would be a moral betrayal. So believing non-naturalist realism involves doing something immoral.

Keywords Ethics · Metaethics · Moral realism · Non-naturalism · Non-naturalist realism · Moral nihilism

1 Introduction

Moral Realists think that some moral claims are true, and that's not a matter of what anyone happens to think. It's a "judgment-independent" fact. According to a prominent version of Realism, supported by Parfit, Scanlon, Nagel, Enoch and many others, it's not a *natural* fact either. True moral claims state beliefs that correspond with irreducible, purely normative facts.

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Parfit pointed out a dire implication of this view. Non-naturalists don't just think that moral claims *happen* to be made true by corresponding to non-natural facts. That's the only way that moral claims *could* be true. Other theories of moral truth *miss* something that matters. So Parfit claimed that if naturalism is true then nothing matters. There is nothing you ought to do (Parfit 2011). And this isn't just about Parfit: as I argue, it is simply implicit in the view. For the non-naturalist, naturalism entails nihilism.

For this reason, Parfit accused his philosophical opponents, such as Bernard Williams, of accepting an objectionable moral nihilism. In similar spirit, Dworkin (1996) once argued that anti-realists like Blackburn held something *immoral* when they denied objective truth to ethical claims.

Williams (2006) once said that those who accused him of "scientism" for denying ethics and aesthetics a place alongside physics in the "absolute conception" of the world were actually themselves *counterfactually scientific*—why assume ethics and aesthetics need to belong to any absolute conception in order to matter?

We can respond similarly here. The *real* problem is the claim that, if naturalism is true, then nothing matters. Why think that ethics needs non-natural, mind-independent, objective truthmakers to be authoritative? It is morally wrong to accept this conditional. It is *counterfactual* nihilism. Even if there were no non-natural truths, every other fact about, say, your partner and your relationship would be the same. It would be a betrayal to them to abandon your moral commitments just because you thought naturalism was true.

The plan is as follows. First, I outline my argument against non-natural moral realism. Realists of this stripe make us *conditionalise* our world-directed moral commitments on the wrong things. Questions about how to conditionalise our moral commitments are normative questions, and hence my objection is a normative objection. My target is primarily non-naturalism, but I'll briefly suggest that my arguments may extend to implicate other views. And then I'll work through a set of objections to the form of argument that I offer.

2 Loomings

As Dworkin's (1996) piece exemplifies, the notion that there is something morally offensive in rejecting realism is one of long standing. Indeed, it's not uncommon to hear philosophers make jokes to this effect in casual conversation—the sort of joke that belies a widespread assumption. Nevertheless, there are forebears to my inversion of the realists' accusation. Blackburn, for example, in his (1996) response to Dworkin's attack, points to the unsavory note of stridency in the exhortation that one had "better believe" that ethics admits of Objectivity and Truth. In his (1993) Blackburn argued that the non-naturalist showed a corrupt sensibility, and Bedke (forthcoming) develops the claim that there is something objectionable in the psychology of the non-naturalist. Nowell-Smith (1954) asked why we ought to care about *sui generis* properties of rightness and wrongness, and more recently, Dasgupta (2017) has asked what *authority* non-natural facts have over us. All these arguments share a common thread—they challenge non-naturalism on normative,

and in many cases, normative ethical, grounds. My argument is not identical to any of these, but it belongs in this tradition. The problem with non-naturalism is that, to the extent that one believes non-naturalism, one believes something immoral. This is because non-naturalism implies that we must conditionalise all our world-directed ethical beliefs on the existence of non-natural facts.

3 Conditionalisation

We have all sorts of moral beliefs whose objects are located in the world around us. I ought to comfort my partner who is in pain, or to keep the promise I made to my friend that I wouldn't speak too fast at my APA presentation.

To understand the totality of a person's moral outlook, it's not enough just to know their directly world-directed moral attitudes and beliefs. Our moral outlooks are revisable. There are circumstances where we think we ought to change our views. So we also have higher-order moral judgments about the conditions in which we ought to change our moral judgments.

These higher-order judgments form a major part of everyday morality. I have a special duty to my partner, for example, to comfort her in distress. But it's a familiar view that I ought to change my sense of what I owe to my partner if I discover that she has been, say, cheating on me for the past 5 years.

We frequently evaluate the correctness of one another's moral views on the basis of whether they accept the right "change conditions." You and I may have just the same commitments to our partners. But if you conditionalise these, not just on fidelity, but also on your partner maintaining a certain body mass index (BMI), then our moral viewpoints are different. Even if I also think that my partner *should* maintain a given BMI for health reasons, the fact that I don't conditionalise my other moral beliefs on this fact, and you do, is part of the reason why I am a good partner and you are a nasty brute.

Likewise, a certain kind of rule-utilitarian and Kantian may agree about what immediate, world-directed moral beliefs and attitudes are appropriate, given how the world actually is. But they will take entirely different considerations to count in favour of changing their views. The utilitarian will drop her opposition to lying if she discovers that holding a more flexible principle will deliver more utility. This is why, despite superficial agreement, the Kantian views her utilitarian colleague as believing something morally objectionable.

There are some plausible norms for widespread higher-order conditionalisation, which legislate situations where we should radically revise our moral views, or stop having any world-directed moral attitudes at all (although we would retain higher-order views). If there is no external world, and all the other people I think I interact with are mere figments of my imagination, then it seems like I should have no world-directed moral beliefs at all—at least, no other-regarding moral beliefs—and concern myself only with the requirements of self-interest or prudence. Moral nihilism—in the sense of abandoning all world-directed moral commitments—

might seem appropriate in this situation (if we accept that morality is a distinct form of normativity from prudence). But in other cases we *must not* become nihilists. Some conditionalisations are wholly reprehensible.

4 What is non-naturalist realism?

Why do I think that Non-naturalist realism forces us to conditionalise moral commitment on something objectionable? I think we can identify three general claims, in virtue of which such theories are realist, non-naturalist, and involve claims about normativity, respectively. These minimal claims will be all I rely upon in my argument.

4.1 Realism

Philosophers sometimes speak as though there were no more to the issue of Realism than the question of whether some ethical claims are true. This is unhelpful. Almost all metaethical theories allow us to call certain ethical claims “true” in some sense—constructivists, quasi-realists, even fictionalists and subjectivists all use the language of truth at various points. It would both render Realism largely useless as a term of art, and poorly follow accepted usage, if we counted constructivism, quasi-realism, fictionalism and subjectivism as forms of realism.

Realists don’t just think that some people get things right. They also say that some people—even entire communities and cultures—have got things *wrong*. Perhaps, once upon a time, the entire human race was morally mistaken. Realists have a particular way of explaining how this is possible. When people get things wrong, they’re not just wrong about what they want, or about what they *would* want if they were more sympathetic, or about what would be a good solution for their shared problems, or about what moral ideas it would be useful to invent. When we call them wrong, we’re not “merely” expressing our own critical attitudes. These people are *wrong* about the moral facts—and that’s not a matter of what anyone happens to think. These facts are “judgment-independent”.¹ Of course, by symmetry, this means that we, too, could in principle be entirely wrong about the purportedly judgment-independent moral facts. As Nagel once said “Realism makes skepticism intelligible” (Nagel 1986, p. 90).

¹ Some philosophers use “mind-independence” to characterise realism. But this gives the unfortunate suggestion that the realist cannot identify constituents of minds—such as pleasures and pains—of being the fundamental objects of normative significance. Better terms include “judgment-independence”, “stance-independence” or “response-independence,” although selecting between these terms would take further argument. Certainly, realists will want to say that at least some moral truths are independent of *all* of these things—the judgments, stances and responses of humans. For convenience, I will talk mainly of “judgment-independence.”

4.2 Non-naturalism

What makes judgment-independent facts *non-natural*? Again, the literature here is complex. Some “naturalist” realists think that there are judgment-independent moral facts, because moral concepts refer to natural facts, which are judgment-independent. These are discovered through empirical investigations.

But, non-naturalists object: couldn't some people have the *wrong* moral concepts? There has to be some deeper fact about what natural facts matter morally. And that *couldn't* be discovered through empirical investigations they say. These deeper moral facts are supposed to be *non-natural* facts. Parfit writes:

The most fundamental normative facts are not...empirically discoverable facts (Parfit 2011, Vol. II, p. 307).

Similarly, Scanlon frequently contrasts “empirical” discoveries and judgments with normative ones.

What distinguishes these two kinds of facts? Causal facts *are* empirically tractable—they are open to perceptual and experimental detection, and can enter into natural-scientific explanations. Hence almost all non-naturalists agree that irreducible normative facts must be *non-causal*. Parfit writes:

When some fact has the property of *being* or *giving us* a reason, we cannot be causally affected by this normative property (Parfit 2011, Vol. II, p. 493).

Another non-naturalist, Christian Coons, writes:

It seems like a category error to claim that facts about what we ought to do somehow explain or cause particular events that happen in the world (Coons 2011, p. 85).

This is not to say that causality is the defining mark of the natural. If there were a God, he or she would presumably have causal effects on the world (notwithstanding the old puzzle of how a perfect, unchanging, eternal being *could* cause changes in the movement of objects through space over time). But divinities are supernatural, not natural. And this portrayal can be agnostic as to whether *all* natural facts are causal or empirically discoverable. Rather, the claim is more minimally, that, so long as normative facts are understood as non-natural, they are understood as non-causal.

This may seem strange. But non-naturalists still think that non-natural, moral facts still reliably *supervene* on certain natural facts. So by tracking the relevant natural facts, we can still be responding to the non-natural, moral facts. This might sound epistemologically obscure, but realists in mathematics and other domains say similar things; so non-naturalists can, and do, appeal to a “companions in guilt” argument.²

So, when non-naturalists say that people could be entirely wrong about morality, they don't just mean that they could be wrong about the natural facts. For them, not

² The problem of giving an epistemological story for knowledge of non-causal facts is a major theme in much of the “debunking” literature, such as Benacerraf (1973), Field (1989), Street (2006) and Clarke-Doane (2012). Notable responses are given in Parfit (2011, Vol. II Ch. 32), Scanlon (2014, Ch. 4), Enoch (2011) and Clarke-Doane (2016).

only does scepticism make sense in principle, but this kind of scepticism is *independent* from any scepticism about the natural world.

4.3 Normativity

What is at stake in making these claims? Why does it *matter*? Non-naturalists don't typically think that the above claims simply describe how we *happen* to think about morality. They don't think that moral claims could, just as well, be made true just by natural facts or by our judgments and attitudes. After all, they want to claim that people can be wrong about ethics even if they're right about what they want, about all the natural facts, and so on.

So they normally suppose that *only* non-naturalism captures what is necessary for something to count as a genuinely moral truth. Scanlon writes:

To identify a reason with a naturalistic property seems immediately to destroy its normativity (Scanlon 2014, p. 46).

And Parfit makes such claims on many occasions, for example:

Normativity is either an illusion, or involves irreducibly normative facts (Parfit 2011, Vol. II, p. 267).

similarly:

If there were no such [non-natural] truths, there would be no point trying to make good decisions. Nothing would matter, and there would not be better or worse ways to live. (Parfit 2011, Vol. II, p. 425).

According to these philosophers, a discourse that simply attempted to express widely held sentiments or to identify solutions to shared practical problems would lack a special kind of *normative authority*. It is only because moral language and practice attempts to track non-natural, judgment-independent truths that it counts as genuinely normative. If theorists think that, then they should agree with Parfit's claim that if there were no truths of the relevant sort, moral talk and practice would lack genuine normative force. Nothing would matter.

5 What is non-naturalist realism: summary

We can summarise the claims of the preceding sections as follows. According to Non-naturalist Realism:

- (A) Some moral facts are independent of what anyone happens to think.
 - > Moral scepticism at least makes sense.
- (B) Moral facts are causally inert.
 - > Moral facts make no difference to the experienced world.

- (C) Only non-naturalist realism explains how things matter in the normative sense.
- > If there are no facts of the sort defined in A&B, nothing matters in the normative sense.

6 Three objectionable conditionals

What is wrong with this? As I mentioned before, we frequently criticise one another for the conditionalisations we make. It's wrong to conditionalise your commitments to your partner on him or her maintaining a certain BMI.

Furthermore, there are some conditions in which nihilism, in the sense of abandoning any world-directed moral attitudes or beliefs, makes sense. If there were no external world, or it had none of the relevant objects of moral concern, then in a moral (as opposed to prudential) sense, I should conclude that nothing would matter. But there are some cases where it seems entirely reprehensible to accept a nihilistic conclusion.

1. The Mets Fan's conditional

Some people really love the Mets. A Mets fan might exclaim:

If the Mets lose tonight, nothing matters.

Of course, no one really means this. It's just said for dramatic effect. But if anyone did, it would be morally reprehensible. The Mets losing just isn't a good reason to abandon all one's moral beliefs and attitudes.

2. Ivan's conditional

Some people think that morality needs a God to give it a special kind of authority. Ivan, in the Brothers Karamazov, voices such a sentiment:

If God is dead, then everything is permitted.

There are those who find this sentiment entirely acceptable. I do not. Even if I thought a God would matter enormously for morality, were there such a being, I should still realise that, God or no, there are real people with real needs and real pains down below.³ It scorns them if I am prepared to abandon my sense that there

³ James appears to have had such a view:

Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. And the first reflection which this leads to is that ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well. "The religion of humanity" affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does. (James 1956, p. 198)

For James, God, if he exists, has a moral standing, but it is not different *in kind* from that of any human person - the response to God is simply that of "Life answering to life." James' ethics does not conditionalise moral commitment on anything that I object to.

are some things I may, and some things I must not, do to these people, just because I find out there is no God.

3. Parfit's conditional

Derek Parfit said that, if Naturalism is true, then nothing matters. I think this claim is objectionable for just the same reasons that Ivan's conditional and the Mets Fan's conditional are objectionable. And I don't think this was an eccentricity of Parfit's. Rather, I think the objectionable conditional simply follows from non-naturalist realism.

As stated in C, non-naturalists are committed to the view that, if there are no non-natural facts, then nothing matters. If naturalism is true, then nothing matters. And, as stated in A, moral realists think that moral scepticism makes sense – since moral facts are supposed to be entirely independent of what we think about morality, we could be wrong that there are any such facts. And, according to B, we could be wrong about the existence of moral facts without being wrong about the causal world that we experience. Everything could be just the same in the perceptible aspect of my relationship with my partner, our attitudes and emotions could be just the same, and yet it be false that I ought to comfort her in pain. She might not matter.

This might sound strange. The denial that anything matters is, after all, the purview of the Error Theorist, not the Realist. Realists *do* think that things matter, and that I ought to comfort my partner if she is in pain. But my point is that there is a basic structural similarity between these two positions:

CONDITIONAL PREMISE: Only if there are non-natural moral truths do some things matter.

EXISTENTIAL PREMISE: There are non-natural moral truths.

REALIST CONCLUSION: Some things matter.

Error theorists and realists disagree about the second premise and hence the conclusion. But they agree about the first. And it is this *conditional* to which I object.

Of course, most theories allow for the possibility of moral error, and will therefore conditionalise obligations to (say) my partner on *something*. But my objection is not to the very fact of conditionalisation, but to its content. As I've argued, questions about conditionalisation are naturally understood as normative ethical questions. So we can ask whether the things upon which any given theory conditionalises morality are *really* the sorts of things that need to be the case for it to be right for us to have any world-directed moral attitudes. Perhaps there are some situations where it really does make sense not to have world-directed moral attitudes, but to identify them as such is to make a moral claim.

It seems clear to me that the conditionalisation implicit in non-naturalist realism is morally unacceptable. Whether or not naturalism is true would make no causal difference to the world that we—and those we have moral relations with—live in.

There might be no non-natural moral truths, and yet the rest of our beliefs about the natural world, and about the desires and attitudes of my partner and the commitments I have made to her, could all be correct. If I were to drop my commitment to my partner, but every aspect of our history, every fact about her feelings and concerns stayed the same, that, I think, would constitute as deep a betrayal to her as abandoning my commitment because the Mets lost or because God is dead.

The case of non-naturalism is particularly vivid, because the existence (or not) of non-causal *sui generis* purely normative facts is *clearly* isolated from the things we *should* conditionalise world-directed moral commitments upon. But it seems plausible to me that similar objections might be run against other kinds of realist views, especially those that closely resemble non-naturalism. The more stringent the demands the metaethicist places upon moral truth or correctness—that it must exhibit mind-independence, objectivity, universality, it must be compelling to rationality and so on—the easier it is to object: would a world in which nothing matched this description *really* be a world in which nothing matters morally?

This concludes my direct argument. The rest of this paper returns to the case of non-naturalist realism, and focuses on objections to the argument I have just given.

7 One and the same?

My argument is that the non-naturalist must, objectionably, conditionalise one kind of thing—things mattering, or, more specifically, me having obligations to my partner—on another kind of thing—the truth or falsity of naturalism.

But many will object that these are not two different kinds of thing, but rather one and the same. “I ought to comfort my partner in distress” entails that “there is at least one non-natural truth” since the former just *is* a non-natural truth. So *of course* any time the latter fails to obtain the former would fail to obtain. But that’s not objectionable; it’s trivial. It’s nothing like saying that my partner doesn’t matter if the Mets don’t win. It’s much more like saying that “my partner doesn’t matter if the person with whom I’m in a relationship doesn’t matter,” or “my partner doesn’t matter if no one in my family matters.”

However, this response begs the question against those who reject non-natural realism, or, as Shamik Dasgupta says, those who advance this objection are not “playing fair” (Dasgupta 2017). Borrowing an argumentative strategy from David Lewis, Dasgupta urges that the non-naturalist is free to posit any *sui generis* non-natural whatnots she likes, but she must play fair in *identifying* these whatnots with goodness (or any other normative property). He challenges the non-naturalist: “Don’t call any alleged feature of reality ‘goodness’ unless you’ve already shown that you have something we should promote” (Dasgupta 2017, p. 301)—or, as I would say, shown that it’s the sort of thing upon which we should conditionalise moral commitment.

The non-naturalist realist seemingly makes substantive claims when he or she posits non-natural moral truths and describes what it takes to discover them. And it isn’t obvious that these seemingly substantive claims apply to first-order moral

claims. By comparison, as Dasgupta points out, water *cannot* be the chemical element Hg (mercury), because water is a clear, colourless liquid and can be detected by seeing if it boils at a 100 °C, and mercury is a silvery and opaque liquid that boils at 356.73 °C. Likewise, even the non-naturalist will admit that parsimony considerations and questions about the explanatory properties of moral facts are at least *in principle* relevant to the question of whether moral naturalism is false. But I've been arguing our norms of moral evidence legislate that these considerations could not in principle be relevant to the question of whether I ought to comfort my ailing partner, or whether anything matters.

Of course, someone who had antecedently accepted that water is Hg would insist that boiling at precisely 356.73 °C *can* be evidence that a substance is water, since it is evidence that a substance is Hg. But that's not playing fair—you can't call your substance "water" unless you have something that is clear and colorless and boils at 100 °C. Similarly, someone who had accepted non-naturalism will be able to insist that parsimony considerations are at least in principle relevant to the question of whether anything matters. Now, as we all know, one philosopher's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*. But I hope my audience will agree that, on the face of it, the claim that *my partner's mattering is not dependent on the existence of some non-causal, judgment-independent state of affairs*, is at least as plausible as the proposal that *"I ought to comfort my partner" states a non-natural fact*.

8 The practical life of nihilists

Another response attempts to counter the accusation of betrayal by questioning the connection between moral beliefs and practical stances. Arguably, coming to believe that my partner "doesn't matter" would only be a betrayal of her if that belief had some practical implications, as it would were it actually to erode my commitments to her.

But maybe that is not the case. After all, ceasing to accept my former moral judgments needn't motivate me to act *contrary* to them. It's entirely conceivable that someone might come to judge that nothing matters, but still be motivated to act in an ostensibly moral way most of the time. Accepting moral nihilism doesn't force someone to behave immorally.⁴

But this response can only take us so far. Even if a moral nihilist continued to go through the motions of the moral life, it's hard to see how her motivational profile would be entirely unchanged. After all, even if I have myriad motivations for behaving decently towards my partner, at least one of those motivations stems from the judgment that *she matters*. Though abandoning that judgment needn't lead me to

⁴ I thank Matt Bedke and Veronique Muñoz-Darde for pointing out to me the possibility of responses along these lines. Bedke draws a parallel with Camus, who famously argued that life could still be worth living, even though it is meaningless. But Camus recognised that denying meaning to life had wide-ranging practical implications. Life *could* still be worth living, but only a very particular kind of life - many otherwise attractive forms of life would indeed be undermined by the denial of meaning (Camus 1955/1942).

treat her contemptuously, it would change my practical stance towards her for the worse. She could rightfully complain that this eroded commitment is a repulsive response to the mere fact that there are no non-natural truths.

Even the most hard-boiled “externalists” about the relation between moral judgment and motivation generally admit that there is at least a strong connection between moral judgment and practical motivation in ordinary, decent, rational agents.⁵ So even if moral nihilism doesn’t force us to become monsters, it surely does make a practical difference. It makes a difference in my relationship with her whether or not I judge that my partner matters. And we should not, morally, conditionalise that practical difference on the truth or falsity of naturalism.

9 Normativity and necessity

I have objected to the conditional premise—that if there were no non-natural normative truths, nothing would matter. But the non-naturalist will object that she denies the antecedent because there are non-natural normative truths. And, furthermore, she claims that this is a *necessary* truth—not a logical necessity, admittedly, but a metaphysical one.⁶

Why worry that some conditional has an unpalatable consequent if its antecedent is necessarily false? Parfit’s conditional looks bad, because it looks rather like the Mets Fan’s conditional. But it is in reality very different, because the antecedent of the Mets Fan’s conditional can be realised! Such conditional propositions are trivially true, but non-nihilistic conclusion follows, and my partner has nothing to fear.

But this misunderstands what we do when we criticise people for the way they conditionalise their moral beliefs. Remember the example of the Kantian and Act-Utilitarian. The Kantian objects to the Utilitarian not because the latter *actually* endorses lying, but because he *would* endorse lying were things different.

This example goes beyond the actual, but it does not take us beyond the realms of possibility. But I submit that we can quite sensibly judge people for their conditional attitudes towards impossible scenarios.

As everybody knows, unicorns are supposed to have certain magical powers. So they are at least nomically impossible. But it bespeaks a brutish mentality if you are prepared to torture a captive unicorn. Our attitudes towards *metaphysically* possible scenarios are also morally significant. Laurie Paul has argued that a philosopher’s assessment of the moral status of zombies indicates whether she properly appreciates the moral significance of phenomenal experience—if you think that zombies deserve just the same moral status as normal agents, you undervalue phenomenology.⁷ But philosophical zombies are metaphysically impossible. Even

⁵ Rosati (2016, §3.2) contains an excellent overview of the debate on this point.

⁶ Fine (2002) and Rosen (MS) are exceptions—they argue that normative necessity is distinct from metaphysical necessity. For a criticism of this view, see Lange (2018). For an important argument against the idea that metaphysical modality deserves a privileged or “absolute” status, see Clarke-Doane (forthcoming).

⁷ Cutter (2018) makes a similar claim.

attitudes towards the logically impossible are morally assessable. Doctor Who is not only unreal, he is logically impossible, since he is a Time Lord and one of the defining features of Time Lords is that they can travel in time and change the past. But it's still an indicator of wickedness if someone is prepared to torture the Doctor—and, of course, we do take the Doctor's enemies to be wicked.

More importantly, we should get clear about the modal force of the non-naturalist's claim. She says that certain non-natural normative facts are metaphysically necessary, and I agree that her construal of what non-natural normative facts *are* entails this conclusion—if *there are* any non-natural normative facts. Likewise, it follows from the theist's notion of God that, if there is a God, then God exists necessarily. But in neither case does this admission force me to conclude that God, or non-natural facts, actually exist. Just saying of a claim, that *if* it is true, then it is necessarily true, should do nothing to reassure us that it is, indeed, true.

This is significant, because both the theist and the non-naturalist should concede that it is possible that they are wrong in the sense that they might rationally come to change their minds. Their rejection of naturalism is, or should be, taken as defeasible. After all, many rational people have made the transition, and converted to atheism and naturalism. The non-naturalist and the theist need to plan for the situation where they become naturalists and atheists, just as I plan not to sacrifice Isaac on God's say-so even if I become a theist. I think we should judge these theorists negatively if they were to conclude that they *ought* to become nihilistic and abandon their moral commitments were they to realize this epistemic possibility by coming to accept naturalism.

10 Reasons to act and reasons to change

My arguments bear some resemblance to the famous “wrong reasons” objections made by Williams and other anti-theorists against Utilitarianism (and “moral theory” more generally) (Williams 1973 and elsewhere). According to that objection, utilitarianism requires us to take the wrong considerations to count as our reasons for action. I ought to comfort my distressed partner because she is my partner or perhaps simply just because she's in distress; but according to the Utilitarian, the correct reason is that so doing will maximise utility. According to the Utilitarian, we only really have reason to be partial to our family and friends because we are especially good at making them happy.

Railton (1984) responds to Williams' objection by claiming that utilitarianism *doesn't* require us to take utility considerations as our *reasons* for action—at least not as our motivating reasons. A good utilitarian can still be motivated by the thought that *she is my partner*. Utility considerations are taken into account only inasmuch as I regard it as a *counterfactual condition* on my taking the partnership relation as a reason, that partiality towards partners does in fact maximise utility in general or over the long term. But this thought can be placed to one side in everyday deliberation. As I've argued, this kind of conditionalisation is endemic in moral life.

My objection may look similar—the *fact* that there are non-natural truths is surely not the reason I ought to comfort my partner. The fact that she is my partner

is the reason! But a response analogous to Railton's is available to this objection as well. Non-naturalists have insisted that non-natural truths are not reasons. Scanlon would say, in the case discussed, the *reason* is my partner's distress. What is *non-natural* is the relation of *reason-giving* or *counting in favour of* that stands between her distress and my acting.

However, my objection is *not* analogous to Williams' objection. I don't think that the non-naturalist is identifying the wrong reason *to act*. Rather, my claim is that she is identifying the wrong reason *to change her mind about what counts as a reason*. Scanlon says that the reason for my comforting my partner is a natural fact, but it only *counts* as a reason in virtue of standing in the non-natural reason-giving relation. If there are no non-natural facts, then, according to Scanlon, I would be mistaken to count it as a reason. So discoveries about the existence or not of non-natural facts *are* still being taken as a reason to change one's view about what reasons there are. I don't think commitment to my partner should be even counterfactually conditionalised on the question of naturalism, and the non-naturalist thinks that it should.

11 Robust and relaxed

Some will object that my arguments only tell against *one* kind of non-naturalist realist. "Robust" realists, like Enoch (2011), accept substantive ontological commitments. But many prominent defenders of non-naturalism, such as Nagel (1986), Scanlon (2014), Dworkin (1996) and Parfit (2011), have asserted that their claims carry no positive ontological weight—they are "relaxed" realists. Asserting the existence of a non-natural, judgment-independent moral truth does not, apparently, involve any ontological claims.

This is murky territory. Expressivist quasi-realists have long urged that talk of moral truth can be detached from ontological commitment. And I have a lot of sympathy for expressivism. Pragmatists make similar claims (indeed, expressivists are sometimes called "local" pragmatists). And I have a lot of sympathy for pragmatism. Peace having thus, apparently, broken out, what is there left to object to in non-naturalism?

In truth, "relaxed realism" is rather confusing. The philosophers flying under the banner of "relaxed realism" are insistent that they *reject* the very aspects of expressivism and pragmatism in virtue of which talk of truth without ontology makes sense. And they do not seem to offer anything to take the place of these expressivist and pragmatist theses. So I'm inclined to doubt that relaxed realism is a coherent position at all. But this question is by the way. After all, my objection has nothing to do with the ontological cost of non-naturalism.

However relaxed realists interpret the existential claim "there are non-natural facts," so long as they want to remain recognisably non-naturalist and realist, that existential claim will be the wrong thing upon which to conditionalise moral commitment. Whatever non-natural facts are supposed to be, they must be entirely independent of what anyone happens to think—otherwise positing them is not yet realism. Even if we perfectly follow the norms of investigation implicit in our moral

outlook, the resulting view might still fail to correspond to non-natural reality—after all, our moral outlook might have been false from the start. Even “relaxed” realism makes sense of scepticism. I could be entirely correct about all the relevant natural facts concerning my relationship with my partner and yet quite wrong about whether there is a non-natural relation of reason-giving between her distress and my comforting her.

This is precisely the kind of skepticism that, I claim, makes no sense from within our moral perspective. According to the non-naturalist, if the All Seeing Oracle told us that there are no non-natural moral facts, *whatever* those are, then we ought to drop all our commitment to morality as groundless. But so construed, non-naturalism is a morally objectionable position to adopt. On any available characterisation of the “non-natural facts,” learning they don’t exist could not be a good reason to abandon commitment to our partners.

12 Metaethics versus ethics

My arguments against non-naturalist realism are *normative ethical* arguments. I think we shouldn’t accept a key premise in that view—the conditional premise—because it is morally unacceptable. But, some philosophers will argue, this gets the order of priority the wrong way around. Non-naturalist realism is a metaethical view, and metaethics is a theoretical discipline, prior to, or independent from, normative ethics. We argue for the truth of non-naturalist realism on linguistic or metaphysical grounds—from the fact that moral claims appear to be cognitive, assertoric descriptions of states of affairs or whatever.

However, this descriptive project cannot force us to accept Parfit’s conditional. Even if non-naturalist realism did capture the metaethical presuppositions of ordinary moral talk (which I doubt), there are other metaethical views available. A “revolutionary” metaethics would propose that we *cease* speaking as though we were describing an order of non-natural facts, and start speaking as though we are expressing practical attitudes, or identifying solutions to practical problems and so on. Clearly, such a language could *in principle* be used for the regulation of conduct. Indeed, if familiar moral language and practice does attempt to describe a non-natural reality, then that practice is inconsistent, since it also seems to prohibit us, morally, from conditionalising our commitment to morality on such *outré* facts. The revolutionary’s proposal allows us to preserve our ideas about what counts as a good reason to change our minds in ethics.

This reasoning is, of course, an instance of the is-ought proscription. The fact that we *do* speak one way does not entail that we *should* continue to speak that way. If metaethics has a normative upshot, as I have argued that it does, then no metaethical claim can be substantiated on purely descriptive or theoretical grounds (Väyrynen 2018). The best that can follow from such arguments is an anthropological claim—that some humans happen to speak and think in such-and-such a way—but that is not a claim about how *ethical talk as such* has to be.

One argument that attempts to show we *must* accept a form of non-naturalism appeals to authority. If ethical language “merely” expressed our attitudes, or

pointed out the solutions to practical problems we happen to have, or tracked the goals that animals like us happen to have, then it would lack some special kind of normative authority. But claims about who or what has authority are, of course, themselves normative claims, and criticisable as such.

When a bratty child complains that his teacher or guardian cannot tell him what to do because “you’re not my dad,” he is marking out fatherhood as a basis for authority. The bratty child can (and surely will) be criticised for this because fatherhood is *not* the only legitimate source of authority in this context.

Likewise, if a philosopher insists that expressions of distinctively human and humane emotions, or identifications to the solutions of shared practical problems, *lack authority*, I think she should be criticised. Why *should* we hold out for some other source of authority? I think it denigrates the human, natural, affective world to say its claims lack authority. Why should we care more about what a non-natural order of judgment-independent facts happens to support than we care about what we want, need and feel? To the extent that our morality is humanistic, I think we can reject the argument from authority.

13 Dodging the conditional

David Lewis once suggested that while non-naturalist realism seems to be a default assumption in ethics, if we found out that there were no non-natural facts, we might, rather than succumb to nihilism, adopt naturalism, fictionalism or expressivist quasi-realism as “second best” accounts (Lewis 2005). I suspect that this is an accurate description of the psychology of many non-naturalists. If they discovered that naturalism were actually true, they would not become nihilists. They would simply adopt another metaethical theory. What basis do I have for criticising such philosophers?

This question is based on a false presupposition. My objection was not that non-naturalists *are psychologically so disposed* that they will abandon their moral beliefs if the come to believe in naturalism.⁸ The target of my argument is not the psychology of actual non-naturalists, but rather what is implied by non-naturalism. If I argue that your theory has immoral implications, it’s no defense to respond that you are not entirely convinced in your theory anyway, and would abandon it if the circumstances were manifested in which the theory demanded immoral things. If I argue that utilitarianism is immoral because it would require you to push a fat man off a bridge if there were a runaway trolley traveling underneath a suitably populated span, it’s obviously no defense to say that you are not entirely convinced of utilitarianism and would abandon the theory if you found yourself on the fat man’s bridge. These responses miss the nature of the objection.

I’ve claimed that we *ought not* abandon our moral commitments even if we become convinced (as many of us already are) that naturalism is true. That is a highly plausible first-order moral claim. Not to accept it would be a moral failing.

⁸ This is a major point of divergence from the approach adopted by Bedke (forthcoming).

To judge that the truth of naturalism is no good *reason* to adopt nihilism is something over and above simply being psychologically disposed not to become a nihilist if convinced of the truth of naturalism. I suspect many non-naturalists would actually like to endorse this position. They would like to say that they *should* abandon their metaethics if their metaphysics is false, and become expressivists or naturalists or pragmatists or fictionalists. But they cannot, consistent with their own view, explain what moral grounds they would have for doing so. How can there be a moral basis for accepting morality in a naturalistic world, if moral claims need non-natural truthmakers, and in such a world there are, *ex hypothesi*, none available?

And there is another challenge. If one thought that naturalism or expressivism *were* able to account for the normative authority of ethics, to provide what “really matters”, why bother accepting non-naturalism in the first place? If moral claims could be “true” and authoritative even in a world without non-natural facts, why posit facts of this kind? The conditional-dodging approach robs non-naturalism of much of its motivation.

Indeed, this approach undermines a supposed strength of non-naturalism. According to the non-naturalist, cultures and societies can be radically wrong in their ethics when their views don’t correspond to the non-natural truths. That these alternative ethical systems actually track the extensions of alternative moral concepts, or help their populations solve shared problems, or are just the kinds of principles that it would be useful to invent for those people in their situation, does not, for the non-naturalist, provide a vindication of these systems if they fail to track the non-natural facts. But on what grounds can the non-naturalist then think that *her* moral views could be vindicated by a naturalistic, pragmatist or fictionalist reinterpretation of them? If a failure to correspond with non-natural moral reality falsifies the moral views of alien ethical cultures, *every* positive moral view, however central to our culture, would be falsified by the complete and total absence of non-natural facts.

14 Conclusion

I think my arguments show something about the relationship between ethics and metaethics. After all, nothing I have said does anything to show that there *are* non-natural facts. How could it, when all my arguments have been normative? My claim is that we shouldn’t really *care* whether there are such facts. That the normative question—of whether to conditionalise moral commitment on the existence of the non-natural facts—is antecedent to the existential question of whether there *are* such facts, shows how deep the is-ought divide runs. Any “metaethical” theory that makes claims about what moral talk, thought and practice *must* be like in order to be authoritative is really just a part of normative ethics.

Blackburn once said that finding some argument that would compel even the recalcitrant amoralist to be moral was “the holy grail” of Ethics.⁹ Most philosophers

⁹ Such an argument answers “a wish that the knaves of the world can not only be confined and confounded; but refuted-refuted as well by standards that they have to acknowledge...it is still, tantalizingly, there as a goal or ideal, the Holy Grail of moral philosophy, and many suppose that all right-thinking people must join the pilgrimage to find it. We sentimentalists do not like our good behaviour to

probably accept that, as a psychological fact, no argument could possibly do this. But I think the case is stronger. Even in *rational* terms, no argument can do this. Pointing to the existence of non-natural normative facts wouldn't rationally compel anyone to accept morality unless they had *already* accepted that it matters whether or not there are such facts. So nothing could argue the amoralist—even the *rational* amoralist—into morality. As Humeans, constructivists, sentimentalists, pragmatists and others have long argued, it's only possible to justify morality from *inside* morality. In that sense, realism is in no better position than any other theory. The real question, I think, is what, from the perspective inside morality, would justify *abandoning* morality—becoming nihilistic or amoral. As I have argued, there are some morally acceptable answers to this question. But the answer that non-naturalist realists must offer is not one of them.

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Footnote 9 continued

be hostage to such a search. We don't altogether approve of Holy Grails. We do not see the need for them." (Blackburn 2010, pp. 127–128).

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