

Naturalistic Moral Realism, Rationalism, and Non-Fundamental Epistemology^{*}

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Introduction

Naturalistic moral realism is an influential research program concerning moral thought, talk, and reality. The naturalistic realist's guiding hypothesis is that there are moral facts and properties, and that these are of a kind with the facts and properties discovered by the natural and social sciences. This research program is powerfully motivated. On the one hand, it promises to straightforwardly vindicate the objectivity of morality: on this view, moral facts can be objective in just the same way as facts discovered by the sciences. On the other hand, by seeking to fit morality into the naturalistic picture of the world, this view promises to vindicate our moral commitments without ontological profligacy.

One important challenge to the naturalistic realist is that her commitments conflict with the most plausible view about the epistemology of morality. According to this *rationalist* view, the investigation of fundamental moral principles is more a matter of armchair reasoning than of experience. This appears to suggest a striking contrast between the epistemology of morality and that of the sciences. But if moral properties were of a kind with the properties discovered by the sciences, we should seemingly expect the epistemologies of these two types of properties to be broadly similar.

This paper clarifies the strongest form of this rationalist challenge, and illustrates how it can be answered by a form of naturalistic moral realism that I dub *joint-carving moral realism*. Both the framing of the challenge and the answer advertise the methodological significance of what I call *non-fundamental epistemological theorizing* for metamoral enquiry. Such theorizing seeks to identify and defend epistemological claims that do not purport to tell us the most fundamental epistemological facts. I begin by introducing and motivating this project.

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1. Non-fundamental epistemology

The project of non-fundamental epistemological theorizing is best motivated against the background of an appealing epistemological aspiration that a philosopher could have for her work. I thus begin by distinguishing three such aspirations.

At one extreme, a philosopher might have what I will call *Cartesian* aspirations: she might aim to produce arguments that are so powerful that they would compel assent to their conclusions by any reasonable person capable of fully understanding them. I take such aspirations to be largely and rightly rejected by contemporary philosophers. The problem is that this aim misunderstands what can ordinarily be achieved by using philosophical tools to address most of the sorts of questions that interest philosophers.¹

At the other extreme, she could aim modestly at working out a hypothesis in enough detail to illuminate an interesting and significant bit of “logical space.” Call this the *substantial coherence* aspiration. Much valuable philosophical work can be understood as having this aim.² Enriching our sense of the space of theoretical possibilities makes a crucial contribution to the collective advance of philosophical understanding.

The most appealing aspiration for systematic philosophical work, however, lies between the extremes just sketched. Here, the aim is to develop and defend a theory to such an extent that the central claims of that theory deserve a non-trivial proportion of our credences. Call this the *credibility* aspiration.

Suppose, then, that we adopt the credibility aspiration. It then becomes crucial to attend to the fact that we often both have more direct epistemic access to, and should be more confident in, theses that are *less* explanatorily fundamental. To take one obvious example, we typically have *much* better epistemic access to non-fundamental physical facts about macroscopic phenomena than we do to the more fundamental microphysical facts that ground them.

The methodological significance of this observation can be made vivid by contrasting two approaches to applied ethics. One way to proceed in applied ethics is to apply one’s favored systematic moral theory. For example, one could begin with Scanlonian contractualism and consider what implications it has for whether we should eat meat.³ Such work can be illuminating: notably, it can help us to better understand the implications of contractualist moral theory, which is an important accomplishment itself.

¹ Philosophers often write in a confident style that suggests that they take their arguments to be dispositive. However, this style should not mislead us into thinking that many contemporary philosophers are in the grip of Cartesian fantasy. As Wedgwood (2007, 12) points out, this style is often adopted by those with much more modest aspirations for their views.

² One important metaethical example of theorizing that explicitly adopts this goal: Gibbard claims that the aim of much of his (2003) is not to defend expressivism as a hermeneutic thesis about actual ethical thought and talk, but rather to spell out how an expressivist theory *could* explain certain features of a system of recognizably ethical-ish thought and talk.

³ See for example Scanlon (1998, §4.8) and Talbert (2006).

Suppose, however, that one's goal is to defend the credibility of a conclusion about the morality of eating meat. In this context, applying one's favored systematic moral theory is a poor strategy for at least two reasons. First, each of the broad systematic frameworks within moral theory is highly controversial, with powerful arguments on all sides. In light of this, the idea that one should apportion even 0.5 credence to one such framework (e.g. contractualism) is highly dubious. Second, for any such theoretical framework there are many substantively coherent ways of implementing it. This point is most familiar in the context of consequentialism, which has arguably received the most careful attention to its many moving parts.⁴ However, the point generalizes smoothly to most other plausible systematic moral frameworks. In light of this, even if you were highly confident that a certain normative ethical framework – like contractualism or consequentialism – were correct, you would be far from being able to draw credible conclusions about food ethics solely on that basis (compare my 2014, 693).

In light of this, it is no surprise that much excellent work in applied ethics seeks to ignore or finesse central debates in systematic moral theory, and works instead to identify highly plausible *non-fundamental* moral principles. Such principles are often compatible with plausible versions of competing frameworks in systematic moral theory. And even when these non-fundamental principles appear incompatible with some fundamental framework, they could often be amended to make them compatible without impugning their significance in the applied context.

The aim of this discussion is not to cast aspersions on systematic moral theory. Systematic moral theories aim to provide something that philosophers (myself included) often crave: *fundamental explanations*. Instead, my point is that there can be *non-fundamental* moral principles that bear straightforwardly on a question in applied ethics, and are more credible than any candidate fundamental moral theory that might be brought to bear on the same question. Where these conditions are satisfied, someone attempting to defend the credibility of a view in applied ethics should typically appeal to such non-fundamental principles rather than a controversial fundamental moral theory.

The same point carries over to epistemological theorizing. Philosophers are often intrinsically interested in the fundamental nature of epistemic relations like knowledge, evidence, or epistemic justification. However, we can also be interested in defending the credibility of claims about *whether* and *on what basis* we have knowledge (e.g.) of a certain kind. And here, the analogy suggests that we should take non-fundamental epistemological theorizing seriously, just as we take non-fundamental moral theorizing seriously when doing applied ethics. In the next section, I begin to adapt this lesson to our case.

⁴ For a superb (though both simplified and now dated) introduction to some of these moving parts, see Kagan (1998).

2. Understanding the rationalist challenge

This section clarifies the rationalist challenge to naturalistic moral realism that motivates this paper, and argues that this challenge is best framed in non-fundamental epistemological terms. I begin by introducing the metamoral project, and explaining the metamoralist's central epistemological task.

The rationalist challenge focuses on theories about *morality*. I take the domain of morality to be narrower than that of ethics, when the latter is understood as theorizing about how to live. The ethical question "what ought I do?" can be pressing and substantive even in cases that appear morally equivalent. Consider, for example, the choice between two careers that are similarly morally acceptable, but will lead the agent down radically different paths. We can flesh out this contrast by pointing to certain paradigmatically moral considerations, such as typical reasons or requirements to keep promises or refrain from harming others. Beyond this, however, I will not address the controversial question of how precisely to characterize morality (for an introductory discussion, see e.g. Darwall 2017).

Next consider the project that aims to explain how actual moral thought and talk, and what – if anything – that thought and talk is about, fits into reality. I will call this the *metamoral* project.⁵ The epistemology of morality constitutes a part of this project. However, this paper centrally concerns the relationship between the epistemology of morality and other metamoral claims. In light of this, I will use 'metamoral' in this paper in a way that *excludes* the epistemology of morality, in order to simplify discussion.

The metamoral project can be contrasted with the project of *systematic moral theorizing*, which aims (roughly) to explain in maximally general terms what we *morally ought to do*, or which things are *morally good*, or what features are *moral reasons*, etc. The systematic moral theorist has a straightforward reason to be interested in the epistemology of morality: an informative epistemology of morality will tend to shed light on how best to construct and justify moral claims and theories.

Because the metamoralist need not aim to do systematic moral theorizing, she can lack this sort of reason to care about the epistemology of morality. She has a different reason to attend to the epistemology of morality that arises because informative metamoral theories tend to have implications *for* the epistemology of morality (for defense of this claim, see my 2012, esp. §4). The (im-)plausibility of these epistemological implications can in turn affect the credibility of a candidate metamoral theory.⁶ The rationalist challenge this paper addresses can be helpfully framed as an instance of this phenomenon. The

⁵ Compare the analogous metaethical project discussed in McPherson and Plunkett (2017). Note that although the focus of this paper is metamoral theory, the main arguments could be straightforwardly adapted to metaethics.

⁶ This point is close to being an application of what Peacocke (1999, 1) dubs the 'integration challenge': to vindicate the simultaneous plausibility of the *metaphysics* and *epistemology* of a domain. The important difference is that the metamoral includes more than the metaphysics of ethics, and this can make a difference: many accounts of moral thought and talk themselves have implications for the epistemology of morality, so the scope of my challenge is in this way broader than Peacocke's.

challenge alleges that naturalistic moral realism has rationalism-unfriendly epistemological implications, and that these implications undermine the credibility of this metamoral theory.

Note that the credibility aspiration, as introduced in the previous section, is a crucial presupposition of this challenge. To see this, consider the substantial coherence aspiration. It is absurd to imagine that any substantially coherent moral epistemology must be rationalistic: there is nothing *incoherent* about a thoroughgoing empiricist moral epistemology. More generally, suppose that a metamoral theorist embraces the substantial coherence goal, and notices an epistemological objection to his theory. All he needs to do to answer the objection is to identify a live epistemological theory that would allow him to undercut that objection. So the rationalist challenge only appears significant when applied to metamoral theorists who have at least the credibility aspiration.

Consider next the question of whether the rationalist thesis at the heart of the challenge should be framed in fundamental or non-fundamental terms. To develop the challenge in fundamental terms, one would need to do two things. First, argue for a fundamental epistemological theory about the nature of *a priori* knowledge or justification. Second, argue that some fundamental moral principles are knowable in ways that satisfy this conception of the *a priori*.

Both of these tasks will be very difficult, if we hold fixed the credibility aspiration. First, just as it is unlikely that any systematic moral theory is highly credible, it is doubtful that any theory about the fundamental nature of the *a priori* can be highly credible. The very existence of the *a priori* as an important epistemological category has been powerfully contested from multiple directions (e.g. Quine 1951, Williamson 2007). And among those prepared to accept the existence of significant *a priori* knowledge, there is rampant seemingly reasonable disagreement about both its nature and its scope.

Second, many accounts of the nature of the *a priori* will dramatically reduce the credibility of the claim that we have *a priori* access to fundamental moral principles. This will be true on many accounts on which *a priori* knowledge is narrow in scope or somehow ‘insubstantial’ in character. But it will potentially also be true on more ambitious accounts. Consider one example: according to John Bengson (2015), in order to deliver *a priori* knowledge, an intuition must be partly constituted by the fact (not merely the proposition) that it is about. There are several reasons for doubting whether we ever have moral intuitions that are so grounded. Thus, if we interpret the rationalist challenge as wedded to a fundamental epistemological theory, it is unlikely that the crucial premise of the challenge can be made plausible enough to significantly impugn the credibility of naturalistic moral realism.

It is much more straightforward to frame an initially credible challenge in non-fundamental epistemic terms. To do this, step back from these theoretical controversies, to focus on the way that moral enquiry *appears* strikingly rationalistic. Everyone can agree that in answering certain moral questions, it will be important to acquire empirical information. For example, if you are contemplating which political candidate it is morally right to support, you will likely want to know a host of facts about both the candidates and the office. However, it is a painfully familiar point that you and I might share a rich and uncontroversial body of such information, and still disagree about which

candidate it is right to support. An apparently plausible explanation is that the empirical evidence just imagined is morally relevant in light of the way that it interacts with certain (general or even maximally specific) *moral principles*.⁷ And it seems initially plausible that there is at least a non-empirical *ingredient* of our knowledge of such principles. For example, it is at least initially unclear what empirical information could suffice to adjudicate the hypothesis that a certain form of utilitarianism is the fundamental moral principle.

In my view, this non-fundamental epistemological claim is markedly more plausible than any attempt to refine it in fundamental epistemological terms could be. And it suffices to underwrite the rationalist challenge, which we can now restate more precisely:

At the level of *non-fundamental* epistemological phenomena, there appears to be a strong contrast between the rationalist character of moral enquiry, and the character of paradigmatic forms of enquiry into naturalistic phenomena, such as the familiar sciences. Unless this can be appropriately explained, it threatens the credibility of naturalistic moral realism.

In my view, this is the version of the challenge that should give the naturalistic realist pause.

3. Generalizing the epistemological challenge

The rationalist challenge just refined is an instance of the broader phenomenon characterized early in the last section: that epistemological implications have consequences for the credibility of metamoral theories. This section begins my reply to this challenge. I identify two further highly plausible non-fundamental epistemological claims about morality, and show that together with the rationalist appearance, they present a significant apparent challenge to all moral realists. I then argue that in replying to this more general challenge, the naturalistic realist should herself engage in non-fundamental epistemological theorizing.

The first further epistemological claim is simply that we have moral knowledge. Notice that this claim says nothing about the nature of moral knowledge; it only emphasizes that we have it. This claim is powerfully motivated by example. It is hard to believe that we don't know that it is morally wrong to slaughter innocents in order to make art, or that it is morally good to be kind to strangers.

The second further epistemological claim is that moral enquiry is strikingly *difficult*. This can be brought out in several ways. Moral disagreement is widespread and deeply entrenched. Professional philosophy suggests further that such disagreement continues to flourish in contexts where the disagreeing parties meet high standards for reasonableness, informedness, and shared

⁷ The 'maximally specific' locution here is intended to signal compatibility with particularistic views (e.g. Dancy 2004). I take it that most particularists would agree that – even if one knew every non-moral fact about a given circumstance, one would need a further substantive moral inference to determine what morality requires in that circumstance.

intellectual standards. Less admirably, professional philosophers arguably tend to have a strikingly uniform socioeconomic profile, which we might expect to be conducive to convergence of opinion. Further, while I take there to have been substantial progress in ethical enquiry in the past century, we have not seen the uncontroversial accumulation of important discoveries that can be witnessed in other fields. Nor do we expect, or even seriously entertain such discoveries: imagine how you would react to a newspaper headline that proclaimed that moral theorists had finally discovered (e.g.) that abortion is morally permissible under thus and such conditions. Your first reaction would likely be to regret the evident journalistic incompetence that allowed the headline to be printed.

We can make the texture of the difficulty of moral enquiry more vivid via further contrasts. Mathematics is another discipline that appears to involve broadly rationalistic enquiry. But the body of accumulated significant mathematical knowledge is vast and growing.⁸ It might be thought that perhaps this contrast can be explained by the fact that morality is *normative* while mathematics is not. But this cannot be right. For moral enquiry appears *in principle* difficult in ways that contrast with other fields that traffic in normative claims. Questions about whether a certain chess move is the *best* in a position are often beyond our grasp, but we know how they can be settled in principle, for example given sufficient computing power. Or consider normative frameworks like etiquette or the law. It is plausible that an enormous range of central politeness facts and legal facts could in principle be discovered via empirical enquiry. This range may not be exhaustive, but it marks a striking apparent contrast with morality. Conversely, it is not difficult to find non-normative domains whose epistemological texture plausibly resembles that of morality. For example, philosophical metaphysics appears to share the three epistemic features that I have identified.

We thus have three non-fundamental epistemic appearances: the appearance that we have moral knowledge, that it has a rationalist ingredient, and that moral enquiry is strikingly difficult. I now want to suggest that the rationalist challenge taken in isolation is potentially misleading, because together, these three appearances underwrite a generalized epistemological challenge to both naturalistic and non-naturalistic versions of moral realism.

In sketching this challenge, I do not assume that these appearances are indefeasible. One could attempt to convincingly debunk one or more of them.⁹ However, such debunking will be a large and difficult task. Notably, it will likely need to appeal to fundamental theorizing – especially fundamental epistemic theorizing. It is thus unclear how credible such a debunking explanation can be. Absent ingenious argument, it appears significantly more appealing, if possible, to explain how one's favored metamoral theory can vindicate these appearances.

⁸ Mathematics appears to include more robust clusters of Lakatosian 'progressive research programs' (Lakatos 1977) than moral theory does. It is instructive to contrast these sorts of flat-footed differences with the dimensions of comparison between morality and mathematics discussed by Clarke-Doane (2014).

⁹ Notice, for example, that standard error theoretic views about morality are inconsistent with the appearance that we possess moral knowledge. For discussion of whether this inconsistency is a decisive consideration against such views, see McPherson (2009).

The generalized epistemic challenge for moral realists – to account for these three appearances – reflects one of the central sorts of puzzlement that can motivate metamoral enquiry. Briefly, this puzzlement concerns what moral thought, talk, and reality *would have to be like* in order to vindicate the central apparent features of moral knowledge. To see the force of this generalized epistemological challenge, consider a pair of very brisk examples.

First consider classical *non-naturalistic* moral realism (e.g. Moore 1993 [1903], Enoch 2011). Very roughly, according to the classical non-naturalist, moral facts are (part of) a *sui generis* part of reality, that is distinct from both the natural and the supernatural, and causally inefficacious (for a more careful discussion, see McPherson 2015). The classical non-naturalist famously faces a challenge to account for the appearance of moral knowledge: if moral properties are causally inert, how can we come to know about them? The usual answer is to posit intuitive reflection as a distinct rational capacity. This has the advantage of straightforwardly accommodating the apparent rationalistic nature of ethical enquiry. However, even if this sort of epistemology can be adequately developed (which is far from clear), the third puzzle remains. Presumably our access to mathematics also comes via intuitive reflection. But if our mode of epistemological access to morality and to mathematics is identical, why is there a striking contrast between our track records of theoretical progress in these fields?

Consider next naturalistic moral realism (e.g. Boyd 1997, Jackson and Pettit 1995, Railton 1997). These views vary widely in their relevant commitments, so I focus on a single paradigm to illustrate these issues. According to Richard Boyd, moral kinds like *goodness* are to be understood as *homeostatic clusters*: groups of features unified by non-accidental causal mechanisms that tend to keep those features in certain stable relations to each other. Such a view can explain the possibility of moral knowledge by appealing to the fact that we are all in causal commerce with goodness. However, it has far less satisfying explanations of either the difficulty of moral enquiry, or its apparently rationalistic character. On Boyd's view, moral methodology should be essentially that of those sciences whose target objects are homeostatic property clusters that involve groups of human beings. Consider two such sciences: economics and sociology. On the one hand, armchair reflection appears to play a much more central epistemological role in systematic moral enquiry than it does in these sciences. On the other hand, both of these sciences feature a large and growing body of accumulating knowledge.¹⁰

My aim here is not to argue that either classical non-naturalism or Boyd's naturalistic realism are to be rejected in virtue of their apparent struggles with the generalized epistemological challenge. A great deal more would need to be done to make such a case. (Notably, it is open to proponents of either such view to seek to debunk the troublesome appearances.) The aim of my too-quick sketch is to bring out the way that the generalized challenge is a significant *prima facie* challenge to realist metamoral views, and hence constitutes a helpful way of

¹⁰ The recently notorious 'replication crisis' might seem to put this contrast into question. However, much of the accumulated apparent knowledge in the social sciences will survive retesting, even if a shocking proportion does not. In normative ethics, there is no such body of apparent knowledge to start with.

organizing the epistemological part of our assessment of the overall plausibility of such views.

It is instructive to consider whether this sort of challenge should best be addressed at the *fundamental* or *non-fundamental* epistemological level. It is common for excellent works in systematic metamoral theorizing to commit themselves to a fundamental (or near-fundamental) epistemological theory. And many salient options have been considered: a form of epistemic coherentism (Brink 1989 Ch. 5), reliabilism (Shafer-Landau 2003, Ch. 12), or competing ways of grounding a foundationalist theory of epistemic justification (Wedgwood 2007 Ch. 10; Enoch 2011, Ch. 3). The examples just cited are all superb – indeed, canonical – metamoral or metaethical texts. However, it is doubtful that the epistemological elements of such works can convincingly address the generalized challenge. The problem is just the one suggested in the previous section: these fundamental epistemological theories are individually not particularly credible. It is thus hard to see how wedding a metamoral theory to one of them could constitute a compelling reply to the generalized epistemological challenge.

One way to attempt to finesse this problem would be to argue that the challenge can be met given a range of the most plausible fundamental epistemological hypotheses. However, there is a much more natural alternative strategy: given that the challenge is aptly framed at the non-fundamental level, seek to answer it using non-fundamental epistemological resources. This is the strategy that I adopt in the rest of this paper.

It is important to clarify that, in adopting this strategy, I will *not* seek to restrict myself to non-fundamental *metamoral* theorizing. This is for two reasons. First, naturalistic moral realism has been implemented in a wide variety of ways, and it is not plausible that the challenge can be answered in a way that abstracts from all of these relatively fundamental debates. Second, even if this were possible, this strategy would risk being unhelpfully abstract. I will thus argue by example: I will lightly sketch one version of naturalistic normative realism, and show how that version can address the generalized challenge.

4. Joint-carving moral realism

This section introduces the form of naturalistic moral realism that I defend against the generalized epistemological challenge. I call this theory *joint-carving moral realism*. As I will explain, the joint-carving theory involves significant ontological commitments that might seem especially inhospitable to rationalistic epistemology. So it will be especially instructive if the joint-carver can be shown to have a compelling reply to the generalized challenge.

The joint-carving approach to metaphysics can be introduced by considering a disagreement about whether some *green apple flavored nonsense in a martini-shaped glass* constitutes a martini. Depending on one's views about thought and talk, this might be a genuine (as opposed to merely verbal) disagreement, and there might be a fact of the matter about what constitutes a martini (Bennett 2009). Even if this is so, this disagreement contrasts strikingly with a disagreement over what constitutes an electron. It seems plausible that the contrast between electrons and protons, say, constitutes a *joint of nature*,

while the contrast between martinis and whatever is the latest fad in mixed drinks does not.

Consider next the contrast between a scientific community who includes ELECTRON as a central concept in their physical theorizing, and a community who instead included what we would describe as a gerrymandered, grue-like variant of this concept, SCHMELECTRON. Suppose that the second community also posits appropriately gerrymandered laws, such that their best overall theory predicts all of the same observations that the first community's theory does (so: this is *not* Nelson Goodman's 'new problem of induction' (1955)). It still seems like the second community's theories are *worse* scientific theories. These theories could be criticized on purely pragmatic grounds: they will be more complicated and hence harder to use and understand. The joint-carver's complaint is different: she thinks these theories exhibit *reality-matching failure*. Intuitively put, the concept ELECTRON maps on to a crucial bit the *structure* of reality, while SCHMELECTRON does not: it carves reality across its joints.

This complaint suggests an attractive account of the aims of metaphysical and scientific theorizing. According to the joint-carver, a metaphysical or scientific theory can be better or worse than another not merely in including more or fewer true sentences (e.g.), but also in virtue of the degree to which its theoretical terms match the structure of reality. In a slogan, our theories should carve nature at its joints. The joint-carver can then explain why a disagreement about the nature of martinis is not metaphysically significant: unlike with electrons, nothing in the vicinity of martinis is part of the deep structure of reality. Instead, it is either a fact about human tastes or (more likely) a mere historical accident that we happen to organize part of the world into martinis and non-martinis, as opposed to any of a variety of alternative carvings.

Call the entities, properties, kinds, etc. that constitute the deep structure of reality *elite* entities, properties, etc. (cf. Lewis 1983, 1984; in the post-Lewis literature, the more common term is 'natural,' but especially in the metaethical context, this has tremendously misleading implications.) Eliteness should be thought of as *gradeable*: it is plausible that *cell* and *species* are highly elite kinds, but that it is an open question whether they are equally elite as *electron*.¹¹

I follow the leading proponents of the joint-carving approach to metaphysics – David Lewis (1983, 1984) and Ted Sider (2011) – in treating eliteness as a theoretical primitive. Lewis and Sider argue persuasively that we should accept this primitive in light of the theoretical work that it can do. Consider several examples: Eliteness can explain facts about *genuine similarity*: any two electrons are genuinely similar to a degree that two schmelectrons or two martinis need not be. And this can be explained by the relative eliteness of the property – electronhood – that the electrons share, in contrast to the less elite similarities necessarily shared by the schmelectrons or the martinis. Eliteness can explain facts about *reality*: it is easy to think that – while there are martinis, martinis are not 'real' or 'objective' in the way electrons are.¹² This contrast can

¹¹ This means that I must reject the toy account of relative eliteness that Lewis proposes. This is for good reason. See for example Hawthorne (2006).

¹² The word 'realism' is of course used in many ways; my aim here is not to criticize those who think that, (for example) the combination of cognitivism, descriptivism, and at least occasional successful

be explained by the relative eliteness of electrons and martinis. This gloss on reality has a methodological corollary already mentioned: we think that metaphysical or scientific theories are *better* (other things equal) to the extent that their central theoretical terms pick out elite entities. Another famous application of eliteness is *reference magnetism*: Lewis proposed that elite properties are *easy to refer to*. And with this in hand, Lewis (1984) was able to explain – against the backdrop of an important anti-realist challenge from Hilary Putnam – how we are able to so much as successfully talk about reality, as opposed to being (as one might say) trapped in our own idiosyncratic carving of it. My aim here is to deploy the joint-carving picture, not to defend it. So I will assume that at least many of these claimed virtues survive critical interrogation.¹³

We can next ask: what significance might the joint-carving account have for the moral realist? First, many moral realists will find the joint-carving accounts of similarity, reference, and realism attractive when applied to morality.¹⁴ But there are more distinctive motivations in the moral case. To see this, consider moral permissibility. This standard is normative, in a generic sense shared by (e.g.) etiquette and the rules of chess: you can fail to act permissibly, thereby violating the norm.¹⁵ Suppose next that ‘morally permissible’ satisfies the following realist assumptions: this term is semantically non-defective, and its semantic treatment is similar to that of other relation-terms. Moreover, the relation is sometimes exemplified in the actual world: there are *facts* about what is morally permissible. Further, we are not epistemologically hopeless in this context: when we think “It is morally permissible to...”, we often thereby have *true beliefs* about those facts. Finally, our permissibility-beliefs are not practically inert: we often non-accidentally *act* in ways called for by those beliefs. What more could the moral realist want?

To get at one thing she might want, imagine another linguistic community that uses a term – “schmorally permissible” – which picks out a different relation from moral permissibility. Their schmoral discourse has all of the other characteristics just mentioned for our moral discourse. And, just as English lacks a term which picks out schmoral relations, so they lack terms which pick out moral relations.¹⁶ Many realists will be unhappy admitting that both linguistic communities’ practices are non-defective. This can be brought out via a contrast

reference is sufficient for realism. See Dunaway 2017 for defense of a joint-carving conception of realism.

¹³ For important challenges, see e.g. Dorr and Hawthorne (2013) and Eddon and Meacham (2015).

¹⁴ See van Roojen (2006), Edwards (2013), and Dunaway and McPherson (*forthcoming*) for applications of reference magnetism in the context of moral realism. The joint carving framework also provides a helpful way of characterizing the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism (McPherson 2015). Roughly, the idea is that the natural properties form an elite similarity class among properties, and naturalistic moral realism is the thesis that the moral properties are a part of that class.

¹⁵ Compare Foot (1997) on the normativity of etiquette, and especially the similar characterization of generic normativity in Copp (2005).

¹⁶ Note that on some view of normative content and semantics (including the ones I favor), it will be impossible for there to be another such linguistic community as described. Even if this example is impossible in light of the facts about reference, it helps to dramatize the idea that the normative realist wants reality-matching. For discussion of related issues, see McPherson (2011), Enoch (2011), and Eklund (2012, *forthcoming*).

with the rules of chess. The rules of chess are also generically normative: it is possible to play an incorrect chess move. For example, moving one's Knight diagonally is incorrect relative to the norms of chess. Next consider an extremely similar game which I shall dub *schmess*. Schmess is identical to chess except that in schmess one is permitted to move one's Knight diagonally. Like chess, schmess is generically normative: for example, moving one's Knight along a rank or file violates both the rules of chess and those of schmess. Notice that if we encountered a community of schmess players, we would not be tempted to criticize them as making a mistake. However, it is very tempting to think that the schmorals are making a mistake. A very natural *realist* diagnosis of this mistake is that the schmorals – like the schmelectron-scientists imagined above – are exhibiting *reality-matching failure*. Worse, the moral realist will say, they are *guiding their behavior* by norms that fail to match reality. By contrast, it is implausible that chess carves the space of possible games at an important joint, so the schmess players are not at risk of reality-matching failure.

This realist diagnosis can also be motivated from the deliberative perspective. Suppose that you are deliberating, and conclude that you are morally required to do something that will be costly, unpleasant, or otherwise difficult. Suppose that you also think that another linguistic community could have a term – “schmorally required”, whose extension does not include the difficult action. And suppose that you thought that “schmorally required” is as good a way of carving normative reality as our term “morally required.” Then it is hard to see what, besides a fetish for one's own normative words or concepts, would make intelligible doing what one takes oneself to be morally required to do.

With this discussion, in hand, consider the view that I call *joint-carving moral realism*:

Joint-Carving Moral Realism The actual moral properties are relatively elite naturalistic properties.

This section has aimed to motivate why a naturalistic moral realist might be attracted to Joint-Carving Moral Realism. I now consider the generalized epistemological challenge, as applied to this view.

5. Naturalism and the epistemology of elite properties

I have argued that moral realists face what I have called the generalized epistemological challenge: to show how their metaphysical views put them in a position to account for the appearances that we have moral knowledge, that moral enquiry is distinctively hard, and that it has a noticeably rationalist flavor. I have argued that insofar as one aims to defend the plausibility of one's metamoral views, one should meet this challenge by engaging in *non-fundamental* epistemological theorizing. This section aims to show how joint-carving moral realism can meet this challenge.

This task requires that we consider how non-fundamental epistemic theorizing interacts with relatively fundamental commitments concerning the metaphysics of ethics. As a model for this interaction, consider a familiar non-fundamental epistemic fact often emphasized by methodological naturalists:

many familiar sciences are paradigms of epistemically successful theoretical enquiry. In considering how this claim interacts with the joint-carving account, we should consider how proponents of that account will understand ‘success’. The joint-carving account suggests that success in serious theoretical enquiry – whether in philosophy or in science – consists centrally in accurately representing the joints of nature. In other words, the joint-carver will tend to accept the following *optimistic methodological conjecture*: familiar sciences provide us with epistemic access to (some of) the elite naturalistic properties.

Let me clarify how I am thinking of ‘epistemic access’ here, in two ways. First, it is a familiar point that many of our best-supported scientific theories may not be wholly correct: many realist philosophers of science hope to spell out an idea of *better and worse approximations* to reality. We can think of a theory as providing epistemic access to elite naturalistic properties to the extent that the theory approximates a match with the relevant fragment of reality.¹⁷

Second, the possessors of this epistemic access are *communities of enquirers*, not individuals. Flourishing scientific communities are characterized by ever-increasing specialization. In light of this, the scientific success of those communities will be poorly characterized by the epistemic properties of individuals, each of whom may only grasp a small fragment of what the community has accomplished. In light of these clarifications, epistemic access should not be understood in terms of what individuals *know*, or *justifiably believe*. It should instead be understood as concerning the ability of communities of enquirers to develop theories that (adequately and/or increasingly) approximate the structure of reality.

The optimistic conjecture suggests that if a method or a source of evidence plays a significant role in one of our paradigms of successful scientific theorizing, this gives us provisional reason to think that it is conducive to providing us with epistemic access to relatively elite naturalistic properties. This should be understood as a *non-fundamental* epistemic claim. I am not advancing an indispensability argument of the kind famously offered in defense of mathematics by, e.g. Putnam 1979. Rather, I take the credentials of mathematics to be presumptively established: it *is* one of our paradigms of theoretical success.¹⁸ Instead, my claim is that the fact that a method or source plays a role in one of our scientific paradigms gives us strong reason to treat that method or source as credible.

My argument appeals to a central consequence of this claim. Even if we exclude mathematical elements, paradigmatic scientific methodology includes what can naturally be read as *rationalistic* ingredients. To see this, think of the ubiquity of ampliative scientific inferences. For example, consider inferences

¹⁷ The usual way to do this is by offering an account of truth-likeness (see Oddie 2016 for discussion). However, for reasons explained in the previous section, the joint-carver will find this way of thinking about reality-matching to be too narrow.

¹⁸ It is unclear whether mathematics should be understood as a *realist* paradigm, however. It is familiar that certain logical and mathematical pluralisms reject the idea that there is one correct logic, or one correct mathematics. Rather, on these views there are *many different* formal structures with interesting properties which can be rigorously explored (e.g. Beall and Restall 2006). On the joint-carving picture, such views can be articulated via the denial that any specific formal system ‘carves at the mathematical joints.’ (for a related view, see Balaguer 1998).

which move from the past to the future, from the particular to the general, from the observed to the unobserved, and from the actual to the counterfactual. Famously, such inferences are *underdetermined* by relevant evidence, at least by a standard of logical compatibility. And yet, many such inferences both seem – and are treated within scientific practice as being – *prima facie* reasonable. In many cases, the relevant inferential skills are context-specific and carefully trained, but it is a familiar thought that these skills function by refining our basic inductive tendencies, as opposed by being created *ex nihilo* on the basis of experimental evidence.

It is again crucial that here I am advancing a non-fundamental epistemic claim. I am *not* claiming that the best fundamental epistemological theory will draw a distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, and that inference to the best explanation is an *a priori* justified method of inference (for this latter idea, see e.g. Russell 1959 [1912] and Enoch 2011). Rather, the point is that when we engage in non-fundamental epistemological theorizing, the appeal to inference to the best explanation or something like it is naturally grouped among the apparently rationalistic ingredients of our epistemic practices; it is hard to understand how we could come to be justified in accepting and deploying these methods *purely* on the basis of observation.

This conclusion, together with the optimistic methodological conjecture, supports the conclusion that *the fact that we deploy partly apparently rationalistic methods* in our investigations is no barrier to achieving epistemic success, where that is understood in joint-carving terms. Perhaps surprisingly, then, I take it that reflection on recognizably naturalistic non-fundamental epistemological considerations should lead us to think that the rationalist appearance of the epistemology of morality is no principled barrier to epistemic access to morality, on a joint-carving account of the metaphysics of morality.

This cheerful conclusion needs to be substantially mitigated, however. To see this, we need to add more detail to our naturalistic non-fundamental epistemology. I do this by sketching four marks of high-quality scientific research. Attention to these marks explains the appearance that moral enquiry is distinctively *difficult*.

First, consider that some hypotheses about reality are intuitively *closer to the data* than others. To illustrate this idea, suppose that one takes a large random sample of 2014 tax returns, and averages the reported income from that sample. A hypothesis about *the average reported income* in 2014 tax returns is very closely related to that data: the data is a random sample of the facts that directly ground the fact this hypothesis is about. A hypothesis about *the average actual income* in 2014 is less closely tied to this data (for some people will underreport their income). A hypothesis about *what average actual income will be next year* is still less closely tied to it. And a hypothesis about *average levels of well-being* is farther still from the data. In general and other things being equal, scientific claims will be better supported the more closely tied they are to carefully measured data. Call these considerations together the degree of *empirical disciplining* of one's theory.

Notice that some hypotheses are such that there is more and better data available to support them than there is to support others. For example, a hypothesis about the GDP of Canada in 2014 can be better empirically disciplined

than one about the GDP of the Minoan Empire in 1500 BCE. Generalizing, any credible epistemology should grant that we are simply in a better position to construct theories that approximate reality about some topics than about others, in virtue of the availability of relevant data, and the degree to which theories about those topics are disciplined by that data.

Second, the quality of a great deal of scientific work is partly explained by the use of rigorous formal methods. Again, a given theory can be more or less closely disciplined by such formal methods. For example, we can have exemplary epistemic access to a formal *model*, while retaining reasonable doubts concerning the accuracy of its intended worldly application. Third, much scientific work is disciplined by inter-theoretic connections: consider the intimate relationships between parts of chemistry and molecular biology, for example. Finally, consider the way that experimental design has developed to include more and more robust theorizer-bias defeating mechanisms (think, for example, of double-blind research design).

Many important scientific questions cannot be addressed in ways that include all of these marks of epistemic quality. Think of the difficulty of ‘double-blind testing’ a thesis in macroeconomics or climate science. Or consider the familiar criticism that string theory – while replete with formal rigor – may simply be immune to certain forms of testing. This does not imply that macroeconomics or string theory cannot provide us with epistemic access to part of the structure of reality. But it does mean that we rightly treat many claims in these fields with more caution than more rigorously tested ones.

In summary, a naturalistic non-fundamental epistemic framework strongly suggests that the four features just sketched are significant marks of epistemic quality. And, as the examples just given suggest, certain important theoretical questions may be such that some or all of these marks are inapt.

In setting out the generalized epistemological challenge, I emphasized three plausibility constraints from non-fundamental moral epistemology. The first was the appearance that we have some moral knowledge. The second was the apparently rationalist nature of much central moral enquiry. And the third was the difficulty of that enquiry, marked by the prevalence and persistence of disagreement, the apparent lack of clear progress over time on the most central questions in the field, and the apparent in-principle nature of the lack of progress. We are now in a position to show how the joint-carving moral realist can explain these appearances.

Begin with the appearance of distinctive difficulty. In setting out this appearance in §3, I contrasted morality with mathematics, chess, etiquette and the law.

The contrast between systematic moral theorizing, on the one hand, and theorizing about etiquette and the law, on the other can partly be explained by the fact that the latter topics are – or are apt to be – *much more deeply disciplined* by empirical data. Take etiquette as an example. It is tempting to think that, with sufficient knowledge of patterns of dispositions to respond to various social behaviors, one could settle many central questions about etiquette.

This is not to deny that there could be hard cases in etiquette, for at least two reasons: (1) there are views about etiquette on which there are intimate connections between etiquette and morality, and this may lead to some

reasonable disagreement, and (2) as always when theorizing complex social facts, there can be room for reasonable disagreement concerning the best explanation of a complex pattern. This point, however, does not undercut the core explanation of the contrast between etiquette and systematic moral theorizing, where, again, it at least appears that empirical data can make relatively modest constructive contributions to the relevant theoretical questions.

Consider next the contrast between morality and math or chess. Here there is again an asymmetry, borne of how effectively the most central question can be adjudicated by formal tools. Many more central questions about chess than about morality can (actually or in principle) be authoritatively settled by formal computational means.¹⁹

I now set aside these specific contrasts, to focus on general contrasts between morality and paradigms of scientific success. Here, consider inter-theoretical connections. I am a proponent of theorizing morality in an intertheoretically attentive way. However, such connections are *less helpful* for the moral theorist than in the case of molecular biology (say), simply because many of the disciplines that relevantly ‘neighbor’ morality are themselves of relatively modest epistemic quality. For example, *metamoral theorizing* – the thing I am doing in this paper – has many relevant connections to systematic moral theorizing (McPherson 2012). However, there is a strong case that metamoral theorizing is in roughly the same epistemic boat as systematic moral theorizing. Similar contrasts can be drawn with respect to theorizer-bias defeating mechanisms. There is a long history of philosophers attempting to debunk each other’s judgments. But many robust bias-ameliorating mechanisms – such as double-blind experimental design – appear inapt to the investigation of many central questions in ethical theory.

To sum up: the relative difficulty of moral enquiry can be explained, roughly, by the apparently modest role that the four naturalistically credible marks of epistemic quality play in much systematic moral theorizing. As I noted above, many of these marks may be *inapt* to some important moral questions. If this is right, then we should expect the modest epistemic state of morality to persist. This can help to explain our confidence that the answers to controversial moral questions will not be ‘discovered’ in a way dispositive enough to be reported by journalists as fact.

If we put this case for modesty together with the previous case for the compatibility of the naturalistic appearances with epistemic access, we get the outlines of an explanation of all three of the appearances. The rationalistic appearance of moral enquiry *by itself* seems compatible with such enquiry providing epistemic access to elite naturalistic reality. This is the lesson of the apparently ineliminable rationalistic element in scientific practice. This goes some way to vindicating the first two appearances – that we have moral

¹⁹ Some questions about chess are arguably not formally tractable. For example, there are many chess positions which would conclude in draws with perfect play by both sides, where, nonetheless, certain moves are *far superior* than others, when two non-ideal players are playing. Professional chess players often have knowledge of such superiority facts, which seem not to have a purely formal basis. But these questions are likely largely *empirically tractable*: for example, the question of which of two positions is harder for a strong chess player to defend is testable in a fairly straightforward way.

knowledge, and that moral enquiry is at least often rationalistic in character. As we have just seen, however, we have strong reasons to think that moral enquiry bears very few of the marks of the sort of enquiry capable of generating the best empirical access to the joints of nature. So the appearance of distinctive difficulty is also vindicated.

One might worry that the explanation just given for the difficulty of moral enquiry undermines my ability to explain our possession of moral knowledge. However, it would be a mistake to be *monolithically* pessimistic about epistemic access to morality, on the basis of the marks of epistemic quality just sketched. For morality is relevantly epistemically heterogeneous. I will now show that there *are* parts of moral enquiry that are amenable to methods that bear some of these marks.

Consider an initial example: some questions of interest to moral enquirers are tractable by rigorous formal methods. Such methods have greatly deepened our understanding of preference-based theories of rationality, and of consequentialist theories more generally. This is genuine and important progress. However, the pessimist might reasonably protest that its significance is limited. Suppose that we aim to assess the overall credibility of some rigorously characterized form of consequentialism (e.g.) as a theory of the structure of moral facts. While formal theorizing may deliver impossibility results, it appears ill-placed to adjudicate the credibility of the consistent theories that survive such a test.

In light of this, I will answer the pessimist by arguing that the joint-carving moral realist can vindicate the assumption that we have significant epistemic access to some central claims in applied ethics. In doing so, I will vindicate the asymmetry that I used in §1 to motivate non-fundamental epistemic theorizing.

Consider the fact that it would be wrong for me to torture an innocent child (call this fact *W*). On a simple explanatory model, the ultimate explanation of this fact has a two-element structure. The first element is a set of relevant ‘non-moral’ facts (*N*) about me, the child, what torturing him would be like, what sorts of downstream effects this action would have, etc. The second element is a set of fundamental moral facts (*M*): perhaps, for example, these facts take a particular consequentialist or deontological or virtue-theoretic form. Notice a striking fact: *W would be explained* by the truth of a remarkable range of combinations of plausible values for *M* and *N*. To see this, focus on the sorts of combinations on which *W* would come out false. For example, it might come out false if a familiar sort of objective act-consequentialist theory were the correct fundamental ethical theory, *and* it turned out that my torturing the child would initiate a causal chain that led to many innocent persons being spared from unbearable suffering. That is a pretty implausible factual conjecture. The most obvious way that *W* might turn out false is if either (a) a highly heterodox fundamental moral theory (e.g. ‘disutilitarianism’) turned out to be true, or (b) some sort of metamoral error theory turned out to be true. I set aside (b), since in this paper I am considering the implications of a realist metamoral view.²⁰ When

²⁰ This assumption is potentially quite important. See McPherson (2009) for discussion.

we consider (a), it is natural to think that I can be in a far better epistemic position to reject hypotheses like disutilitarianism, and hence to accept W, than I can be to accept any relatively specific fundamental moral theory. After all, accepting the latter theory would require rejecting *all* of the competing fundamental hypotheses.²¹ The point here just adapts the point I made about the relationship between income data and a range of hypotheses: many claims in applied ethics are *more credible* than any fundamental moral hypothesis, in light of requiring *less* extensive informal armchair reasoning.

In this section, I have argued that the joint-carving moral realist can answer the generalized epistemological challenge. The ubiquity of ampliative inference within paradigms of naturalistic non-fundamental epistemology shows that apparently rationalistic ingredients are no barrier to naturalistically credible epistemic access. And attention to naturalistically credible marks of epistemic quality both allow the joint-carver to explain the (likely permanent) difficulty of moral enquiry, while also vindicating the thought that we do have epistemic access to some ethical claims, and indeed some of the claims that are the most inviting candidates for uncontroversial ethical knowledge.

Conclusions

The titular theme of this volume is that there are many moral rationalisms. Philosophers are interested both in understanding the nature of these rationalisms, and in assessing their consequences for broader metamoral theorizing. I have focused here on one instance of the second goal: to examine the significance of rationalistic epistemology for naturalistic moral realism. I argued that it is important to sharply distinguish these two goals, and – at least in this case – pursue them separately. This is because it is unlikely that any conception of rationalism as part of a fundamental moral epistemology can be made credible enough to significantly constrain our metamoral theorizing.

I thus engaged in *non-fundamental* epistemic theorizing. I developed the rationalist's initial challenge to the naturalistic moral realist into a general epistemological challenge to the moral realist. I then defended a metaphysically robust version of naturalistic moral realism – joint carving moral realism – against this challenge.

One complaint about this defense is that, while it provides reason to think that epistemic access to elite moral properties is possible, it does not really explain *how* it is possible. This is an important explanatory question. However, enquiry into this question should proceed against a clear understanding of our epistemic circumstances. I have argued that these circumstances include our having genuine but persistently limited epistemic access to morality, using methods with a significant apparently rationalistic component. My argument for this conclusion is powerful in part because it involves a convergence between striking epistemic appearances, and a plausible application of naturalistically credible marks of epistemic quality to the hypothesis of joint-carving moral

²¹ This way of putting the point is meant to be illustrative, and should not be taken to commit me to a 'relevant alternatives' account of fundamental epistemological structure à la Lewis (1996).

realism. Absent a magnificent theory of error, these conclusions should constrain our further fundamental and explanatory investigation.²²

I conclude by emphasizing three ways in which the argument of this paper is significant beyond the defense of joint-carving moral realism against the generalized challenge. First, this paper makes explicit an important dimension against which we can evaluate candidate metamoral (and potentially also metanormative) theories. This is the *generalized challenge* to account for the compelling appearances that we have moral knowledge, that our access to morality has a significantly rationalist character, and that moral enquiry is hard. It is natural to ask whether defenders of other credible metamoral and metanormative views can smoothly adapt the vindication of these appearances that was developed in §5. Views that cannot do this face pressure to develop credible alternative vindications.

Second, setting aside the generalized challenge, this paper provides a methodological model for assessing the significance of moral epistemology for metamoral theories. This model grants the striking apparent connections between the metaphysics and epistemology of morality. It then suggests that using those connections to constrain credible views about the metaphysics of ethics will likely require us to engage in non-fundamental epistemological theorizing.

Finally, we can generalize the methodology of this paper still further. Metamoral theory is just one context where we seek to apply epistemological insights. We can hope to do the same for a range of other questions, both philosophical and practical. The broadest upshot of this paper is that in many of these cases, philosophers should likely self-consciously seek to develop *non-fundamental* epistemological theories. This paper serves as one initial model of how such theorizing might proceed.

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²² Within the joint-carving framework, a natural place to start on that project would be to investigate accounts of the epistemology of eliteness. See Sider (2011, §2.3) and Jenkins (2013) for some initial proposals.

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