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# Nomic moral naturalness

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## ABSTRACT

Moral realists often disagree about the nature of moral properties. These properties can be natural (as per naturalistic moral realism) or non-natural. But it is unclear how we should understand the notion of naturalness employed in these discussions. In this paper I propose a novel account of moral naturalness. I suggest that a property F is natural iff F falls within the scope of a natural law. In turn, a law is natural when it figures in a nomic nexus involving the laws of physics.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to propose a taxonomy that distinguishes between naturalist and non-naturalist versions of moral realism. The demand for such a taxonomy arises from the curious fact that there is no apparent consensus on what exactly differentiates these views. In this sense, the debate between different moral realists is compromised. It might turn out that many moral realists talk past each other given that they do not operate under a common set of definitions.<sup>1</sup>

I will take moral realism to be a view about the metaphysical status of the truthmakers of moral truths. The moral realist argues that at least some first-order moral judgments are true, and their truth holds independently of the stances of moral agents. In this context, stance-independence is to be understood (crudely) as independence from the

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<sup>1</sup>It is plausible that the relevant notion of naturalness would also apply to non-realist views. But I will focus on moral realism as this is how the discussion is usually framed in the literature (see, e.g., McPherson 2015).

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epistemic situation, interests, beliefs, and theories of moral agents. The way a moral realist proceeds in characterizing the nature of the entities in virtue of which these truths hold determines the version of realism they adopt. The most straight-forward way of articulating that difference seems to be in terms of properties. For example, a non-naturalist moral realist would claim that at least some moral judgments are true independently of our stances, in virtue of instances of non-natural properties.

Of course, little progress would have been made without a theory that distinguishes natural from non-natural properties in a useful and substantive way. In this paper I propose a novel view according to which a property is natural when it falls within the scope of a natural law (roughly, a law that figures in a nomic nexus involving the laws of physics). In section 2, I present and defend three key desiderata that should constrain a theory of moral naturalness. Specifically, I argue that a taxonomy based on such a theory should be as metaphysically interesting, non-revisionary, and non-parochial as possible. Then, I propose a schema according to which a natural moral property is either identified with some appropriately defined *base-type* property, or it is defined *indirectly* in terms of its relation to these base-properties. In section 3, I consider several candidates that would serve as base-properties and conclude that a plausible candidate is the set of physical properties. In section 4, I consider a grounding-based version of this schema and argue for its inadequacy. Finally, in section 5, I develop my proposed notion of nomic naturalness. In section 6, I develop further my account by tackling some potential objections.

## 2. Desiderata and motivation

An intuition shared by many philosophers (e.g. Enoch 2011, 363; McPherson 2012, 6; Leary 2017, 78; Rosen 2017a, 151; Väyrynen 2021, 506, 511) is that the debate between different versions of moral realism is not merely linguistic. On the contrary, it is supposed to be a distinction which identifies a metaphysically interesting fact about different classes of properties. For example, according to the non-naturalist, moral properties form an autonomous class of properties that is discontinuous from the class of natural properties (Väyrynen 2017, 171).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the naturalist argues that the class of moral properties is continuous with the class of

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<sup>2</sup>From now on I will refer to naturalistic moral realists as naturalists (ditto for non-naturalist moral realists). Arguably, supernaturalism would also be a distinct kind of non-naturalism (Adams 1999). I will bracket this complication (although see fn. 25).

natural properties given that the former is a subset of the latter (Sturgeon 2003). Hence, the first desideratum is the following:

**(Metaphysical)** The distinction between natural and non-natural properties should be cashed out in a metaphysically substantive way (and not, for example, in a merely linguistic way).

Non-natural properties should be understood as metaphysically different from natural properties in a way which justifies calling them discontinuous with the latter. After all, non-naturalists often claim that moral properties are *sui generis*, radically different from other kinds of properties.

Arguably this result is not delivered by purely methodological accounts of moral naturalness. Cuneo (2007) argues in favor of a methodological taxonomy drawing influence from similar views outside metaethics (cf. Ney 2008). According to such a taxonomy one of the distinctive features of naturalism is its commitment to the so-called *external accommodation project*. This project aims to integrate or subsume ethical theory under our best scientific theories (Cuneo 2007, 854). On the other hand, non-naturalists are supposed to only be concerned with the accommodation of ordinary moral practice (2007, 854). But from the mere fact that two properties figure in projects with different methodological commitments it does not follow that they are discontinuous in any deep metaphysical sense. The internal accommodation project could still be true even if it turned out that there are no non-natural properties.<sup>3</sup>

If some version of moral realism is true then the truth of that proposition should reflect a substantive truth about the fabric of reality, not a simply a fact about our conceptual apparatus or our methodology. These remarks are also supported by Moore himself who explicitly described non-naturalism as a substantive metaphysical view (Moore 1903, chap. IV; Gibbard 2003, 31). This indicates another desideratum. The taxonomy should take into serious consideration the current metaethical debate:

**(Revision)** An account of the distinction between natural and non-natural properties should be constrained, as much as possible, by how moral realists categorize themselves.

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<sup>3</sup>Enoch (2011, 362) suggests that even though Cuneo fails to meet (Metaphysical) he is still, sociologically speaking, 'on to something'. But I do not think that even this weaker claim is true. For one, some naturalists (if not all of them) seem eager to accommodate moral practice and phenomenology (Railton 1986, 171). On the other hand, non-naturalists seem to accept that our moral beliefs (up to some extent at least) should cohere with widely accepted scientific facts.

(Revision) is motivated by the plausible claim that the metaethical debate between different moral realists so far has not been entirely misplaced or misconstrued by most of its participants. Even if the final verdict about the correct characterization of these properties is still out, I will assume that there is an interesting phenomenon at hand which metaethicists have been tracking in a non-trivial manner. For example, it would be suspicious if my taxonomy classified Peter Railton as a non-naturalist and G. E. Moore as a naturalist. The way the current metaethical landscape is organized should count as *evidence* for the development of my taxonomy, even if such a taxonomy is ultimately underdetermined by such evidence. This is not to say that revisions are to be avoided at all costs. For example, some claim that Shafer-Landau, a self-proclaimed non-naturalist, can be interpreted as a non-reductive naturalist.<sup>4</sup> Still, when (Revision) acts as a constraint one should expect that the final taxonomy will accommodate to some extent the current landscape of metaethics (for a similar demand see Rosen 2017a, 153).

There are some taxonomies that plausibly accommodate both desiderata. For example, McPherson defines reductive naturalism as the view that there are some moral properties that are elite (roughly, a special type of properties that ground objective similarity between entities that have them) and that these properties are reduced to uncontroversial natural properties (which means that there is 'an elite (non-identity) function of only natural properties' which backs their 'real definition') (McPherson 2015, 17). On the contrary, non-naturalism is the view that some moral properties are elite but not a part of the class of natural properties.

Even if McPherson's taxonomy correctly captures what is really at stake in the debate between different moral realists it does so at a great cost: philosophical parochiality. I understand the parochiality charge in the sense of Sturgeon (2009) (cf. Väyrynen 2009, sec. 6). A theory is parochial insofar as it can be accepted only by those who share some specific (and often controversial) background assumption. McPherson's background assumptions are clear. They include a commitment to neo-Lewisian metaphysics (Lewis 1983) as well as a theory of reduction in terms of real definition (Rosen 2015). This is not to say that these assumptions are not viable (or even plausible) on their own. The problem is that it seems plausible that someone could be a moral naturalist independently of her specific beliefs about metaphysics and reduction. In this sense, an

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<sup>4</sup>For discussion see McPherson (2015, 224) and Väyrynen (2017, 177).

ecumenical taxonomy which does not rely on any such assumptions will be clearly superior:

**(Parochiality)** The taxonomy of natural and non-natural properties should avoid relying on parochial assumptions.

Someone might claim that such a constraint is overly demanding. After all, Sturgeon's own conclusion about moral supervenience is that there is simply no way of articulating such a view in a completely non-parochial way. This result seems to support the idea that every taxonomy will necessarily rely on some assumptions if it has any aspirations of even taking off the ground. However, it seems implicit in Sturgeon's discussion that parochiality is a *graded* phenomenon. Low degrees of parochiality are acceptable (for example, everyone agrees that a theory should be logically coherent). Higher levels of parochiality, on the other hand, occur when these assumptions start to get more controversial. To my mind, it is obvious that neo-Humean metaphysics marks a high degree of parochiality.

The taxonomy that I am looking for should highlight what is at stake in the debate between moral realists from a neutral standpoint. For instance, if someone aspires to be a non-naturalist my taxonomy should help her make more salient the ways in which she can defend or vindicate her thesis (or, in negative terms, the ways in which she can attack her rivals). I will now turn to the evaluation of some suggested taxonomies in the literature and argue that they fail to meet the desiderata specified above.

### 3. A general schema

As already noted, the most natural way of developing a taxonomy of different versions of moral realism is to rely on an independently motivated distinction between natural and non-natural properties. An initial thought would be to define natural properties as the properties that are tracked (i.e. discovered) by some naturalistically acceptable field of inquiry. Physics is a plausible contender:

**(Physical)** F is a natural property iff F is a property that is tracked by physics.

But such a result is too strong. If what is necessary for moral properties to be identified as natural is for them to be tracked by physics then this renders naturalism trivially false. A way to remedy this would be to introduce a second, recursive, clause:

**(Physical)** F is a natural property iff

- (1) F is a property that is tracked by physics, or,
- (2) F is (or can be) appropriately related to such properties.

Clause (2) makes (Physical) more viable. Even though moral properties are (obviously) not tracked by physics perhaps they can be related to properties that are. But problems remain. Naturalism and physicalism do not necessarily go together. It would be nice, for example, if naturalism could still be true in non-physical worlds.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is by no means a knock-down argument against (Physical) since it might, given a plausible construal of clause (2), be the only way to meet the desiderata set in section 2. Still, I will briefly review some alternatives.

One option involves broadening the scope of (1) so that it doesn't include merely physics but other paradigmatic scientific fields as well:

**(Empirical)** F is a natural property iff

- (1) F is tracked by the empirical sciences, or,
- (2) F is (or can be) appropriately related to such properties.

Even though this proposal fares better than (Physical) it is still problematic for it violates (Metaphysical). Natural properties are defined indirectly in virtue of their second-order property to be tracked by the appropriate sciences. Even if we are lucky enough and the empirical sciences do, in fact, successfully track the relevant natural properties, (Empirical) would be (at best) a heuristic. This is evident when we realize that we need an independent account of what deems a science as empirical, and thus apt for tracking natural properties. But if this is so, then why not skip directly to *that* characterization instead of relying on (Empirical)? (Copp 2003, 182; Väyrynen 2009, 288).

Another option would be to adopt an epistemological and not a merely disciplinary version of (1) (Copp 2003, 189):

**(Epistemological)** F is a natural property iff

- (1) (a) it is possible for F to be instantiated and (b) there are propositions about the instantiation of F that are both synthetic and possibly true, and, (c) no such proposition is strongly a priori. Or,
- (2) F is (or can be) appropriately related to such properties.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, see the ghost-world example in Sinhababu (2018, 35) (cf. Copp 2003, 180).

<sup>6</sup>This option (or some of its variants) is quite popular (Moore 1903, 91; Smith 1994, 212; Copp 2003; Rubin 2015, 389–390; Väyrynen 2009, 289; 2017, 171).

A proposition P is strongly a priori iff (a) P is known a priori, and, (b) P is empirically indefeasible, which means that from the point of view of an ideal thinker, there can be no empirical defeaters against it. First, we should note that there are paradigmatic non-naturalists who deny that they are committed to the view that moral propositions are known strongly a priori (Cuneo 2007, 852); contra (Revision). Secondly, supernatural properties like the properties of miracles can plausibly meet (Epistemological) and would be falsely characterized as natural. Simply imagine the causal influence of angels: even though we could have empirical access to them, 'being an angel' is a paradigmatic non-natural property.<sup>7</sup> Finally, (Epistemological) is compatible with mutually exclusive metaphysical bases; contra (Metaphysical). Non-natural properties could still be sui-generis even though they are discovered in the manner of (Epistemological).

Unfortunately, not much progress has been made since (Physical). It seems that despite its problems (Physical) is the option with the least number of problems. However, not much hangs upon this. If someone is not happy with (Physical) then they are welcomed to use their favorite 'base-level' property sacrificing some parochiality points accordingly.<sup>8</sup> Still, I will stick to the current formulation of (Physical) for present purposes. The following section will examine the content of clause (2).

#### 4. Grounding

An obvious candidate for clause (2) is the relation of grounding. Roughly, the view would be that a property F is natural iff it is either identical to some base-property, or it is appropriately *grounded* by base-properties (more on this later). Grounding is a non-causal determination relation that has recently gained a lot of traction in the literature. If a fact P grounds another fact Q, then Q exists, in some sense, in virtue of P. As a first pass, I will assume a 'standard' theory of grounding according to which grounding is a primitive, asymmetric, transitive, and irreflexive, relation (Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010; Audi 2012).

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<sup>7</sup>I should also note that this is a reason why purely causal accounts (e.g. Lewis 1983; Sturgeon 2003, 538) fail as well. Another reason is that they violate (Revision) since there are non-naturalists who deny that moral properties are causally inert (Wedgwood 2007; Oddie 2018) and there are naturalists who accept the possibility of causally inert natural properties (like quantum states or certain biological properties). Similar remarks seem to apply to proposals that identify the natural with the spatiotemporal (Shafer-Landau 2003, 59; Sturgeon 2003, 38–39).

<sup>8</sup>Some other proposals include 'descriptive' (Jackson 1998), 'non-normative' (Rosen 2017a), and 'non-normatively involving' (Ridge 2019). I do not have the space to fully evaluate these options but it seems that they beg the question against naturalists (like Sturgeon) who claim that moral properties could be normative (or captured only by normative concepts) but still natural in virtue of some other feature (for discussion see Väyrynen 2021).

Grounding has two important features that make it a plausible candidate for clause (2). First, grounding seems like the ideal relation to explain moral supervenience. Secondly, in doing so, grounding accommodates the naturalistic intuition that moral facts obtain *because* of some non-moral natural facts. There seems to be a consensus among metaethicists that the set of moral properties supervenes on some set of non-moral properties (in our case, physical properties).<sup>9</sup> Q-properties supervene on P-properties iff (crudely) it is not possible for there to be a difference in P-properties without some corresponding difference in Q-properties. In its strongest formulation this modal covariation holds even when these two sets of properties are ascribed to entities which inhabit different possible worlds.

Even though strong supervenience is widely accepted, not everyone agrees about its implications. For example, Jackson (2017, sec. 4) argues that this sort of necessary covariation provides a strong reason to take P-properties to be *identical* to Q-properties. On the other hand, some non-naturalists accept moral supervenience but resist such identification (e.g. Shafer-Landau 2003, 105; Enoch 2011, 141). It seems that mere supervenience cannot distinguish between naturalism and non-naturalism. This is where grounding comes into play.<sup>10</sup>

**(Grounding)** F is a natural property iff

- (1) F is a physical property, or,
- (2) F is fully grounded by such properties.

Given (Grounding) the key difference between natural and non-natural properties is that the latter are not fully grounded in physical properties although they may supervene upon them. A grounding relation between two entities is supposed to establish a tighter metaphysical connection than mere modal correlation. If moral properties are grounded by natural properties then this indicates an explanatory relation. This is a result of the fact that standard grounding is asymmetric (in contrast to supervenience which is non-symmetric).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>There are exceptions. Some naturalists think that moral supervenience is in some sense trivial (see Sturgeon 2009), whereas some non-naturalists deny that it yields in every possible world (Fine 2002; Rosen 2020).

<sup>10</sup>Here's a list of philosophers who appeal to a grounding-based definition of naturalism: Rosen (2010); Väyrynen (2013); Dasgupta (2014); Maguire (2015); Atiq (2018, 10–13); Jackson (2017, 196–197); Bohn (2018); Wygoda Cohen (2020, 17); Hattiangadi (2018, 606); Berker (2019, 28); Morton (2020).

<sup>11</sup>Many of the features I am appealing to are by no means uncontroversial. Still, I will make some assumptions to get the discussion going. For a challenge against the features proposed by what I call the 'standard' view of grounding see Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015). I assume for now that properties can figure into grounding relations (Schaffer 2009). I also assume a distinction between full and partial

I want to resist adopting (Grounding) for at least two reasons. First, grounding itself is very controversial and a highly contested relation. Some argue that it is incoherent or that it does not exist at all (Daly 2012). Other claim that even if it exists it is not evident that it can do any useful metaphysical work (Wilson 2014; Koslicki 2015). Finally, even among grounding proponents there is great disagreement about many of its features with no clear prospects for a consensus. It should be possible to be a moral naturalist independently of one's commitment to grounding.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, and relatedly, (Grounding) has an awkward implication for naturalism. If naturalism is the view that there are only natural facts then, arguably, this should also include facts about grounding itself. But under the present formulation, for facts about grounding to come out as natural it must either be the case that they are physical facts, or that they are grounded upon facts that are. The first option seems unlikely, and the second option generates a regress. Of course, it might be the case that they are formidable ways to rescue the naturalness of grounding.<sup>13</sup> But it would be weird if it turned out that moral naturalists have to deal with obscure issues about the metaphysics of grounding in order to defend their view. Both points go against (Parochiality).<sup>14</sup>

A possible way forward would be to give up on using grounding altogether and use less controversial tools. Wilson (2014) famously argues that there is a family of relations that makes grounding obsolete. These are relations like composition, constitution, realization, set-formation etc., which are less controversial and share many of the features of grounding like asymmetricity and being explanatory. Also, their non-

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grounding (more on this later). Finally, I adopt a *separatist* view about the relation between grounding and non-causal explanation. This is, roughly, the view that grounding *backs* non-causal explanations instead of being *identical* to them (Raven 2015).

<sup>12</sup>Berker (2019) has recently suggested that it is hard to make sense of moral discourse without appealing to grounding since moral claims do not indicate mere modal covariations between moral and non-moral properties. Rather, the goodness of some action holds *in virtue of* some non-moral feature of that action. This latter claim is true, but it doesn't follow that the *only* way to capture the hyperintensionality of these contexts is by appealing to a grounding-based ideology.

<sup>13</sup>For example, the naturalist could argue (in some way) that grounding-facts are physical after all, or she could deny that grounding facts are apt for grounding (Dasgupta 2014), or that they are grounded in way that does not generate a vicious regress (e.g. by appealing to zero-grounding) (Litland 2017). But these moves involve a commitment to *further* parochial assumptions. For a similar objection along these lines see Melnyk (2016).

<sup>14</sup>There are further issues which I will not defend for reasons of space. Still, I will briefly mention one reason why (Grounding) also goes against (Revision). The standard view takes grounding to always obtain with metaphysical necessity (cf. Leuenberger 2014; Skiles 2015). But some non-naturalists reject this (e.g. Rosen 2020, 2021). If grounding is used in the definition of non-naturalism (in one way or another), then this would exclude such views (which, even though they are controversial, deserve serious consideration).

primitive nature doesn't generate problems like the ones I develop in the previous paragraph. Take realization for example. According to one influential formulation realization can be further analysed in causal terms:  $\varphi$  realizes  $\psi$  when the causal powers of the latter are a proper subset of the causal powers of the former (Wilson 2011). I will follow Wilson and call these relations 'small-g' relations.

The small-g based proposal would presumably be that a property is natural iff it is either a physical property or a property that is *small-g* related to physical properties. A problem that immediately arises concerns the *identification* of the small-g relation that is best fitted for the definition of moral naturalness. Some relations (like set-formation) are clearly not well suited for that role. So, at best, a small-g based proposal is incomplete at this point. In a sense, this proposal trades non-parochiality for lack of informativeness.

This problem can be solved by further (hopefully, non-parochial) meta-physical assumptions. Assume, for example, that there are good reasons to think that functional realization is the right relation to figure in the definition of moral naturalness. But even if that move is granted, there is *yet another* sense in which the small-g based account is incomplete. The obvious way to distinguish between naturalism and non-naturalism would be to appeal to a distinction between full and partial realization.<sup>15</sup> A property F would be a natural property given that it is fully realized in terms of physical properties, whereas non-naturalism would be stated via a realization claim involving partial physical realizers. But what is this *further* thing (other than the physical realizers) that makes a non-natural property obtain?<sup>16</sup> In the next section I propose an answer to this question.

## 5. Nomic naturalness

According to the small-g based account I sketched in the previous section, a non-natural property F is only partially realized by physical properties. If so, what other component would be needed in order to instantiate F?

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<sup>15</sup>Note that this distinction is similar but not the same as the standard distinction between core and total realization (Shoemaker 2007) (in the sense that not every partial realizer is necessarily a core realizer of a given phenomenon).

<sup>16</sup>Note that it cannot be said that a property F is non-natural when F is partially grounded in physical properties and *nothing else*. If so, it would be a mystery how F even obtains in the first place (cf. Enoch 2019, 4–5 fn. 10). To compare, if the only influence exerted upon an event E is an insufficient cause, then it would be bizarre to claim that E obtains nonetheless. Neither is this question-begging against the moral particularist (more on this later).

Perhaps, as Enoch (2019) has recently suggested, that component is a *moral law*.<sup>17</sup> The resulting picture would be the following:

- (1) A property F is non-natural when F is partially realized by physical properties, together with a moral law connecting these two kinds of properties.<sup>18</sup>

The non-naturalist can claim that the involvement of a moral law in (1) is the hallmark of the non-natural. The fact that a moral law is required in order to connect a moral property with a physical property arguably showcases that the former is *just too different* from the latter (Enoch 2011, 82; Enoch 2019) (cf. Rosen 2017a).<sup>19</sup>

However, there is no apparent reason why a *naturalist* cannot accept (1) as well. For example, the naturalist could claim that their thesis also involves a moral law in the same way special-science claims involve bridge-laws. Facts about certain states of pain obtain in virtue of facts about certain neurological states insofar as there is a general law connecting these two states. So, the *mere involvement* of a moral law in the instantiation of a property is not enough for that property to be characterized as non-natural. Instead, there must be a *principled difference* between natural and non-natural moral laws for them to do the required work. I will argue that there is such a difference. Specifically, natural laws have a feature which is not shared by non-natural laws: they figure in a particular kind of *network* of laws. That network is the one that includes the laws of physics. I will call this the *nomic nexus* (NN).<sup>20</sup>

A law figures in NN when it either is a physical law or it is dependent upon them. This is not to say that the only way to make sense of NN is to accept that the laws of (say) psychology necessarily *reduce* to the laws of physics. Accepting the existence of NN really comes down to the more modest claim that natural laws are not ‘nomological danglers’ (Smart 1959): laws figuring in NN have interesting metaphysical connections between them and they do not ‘float free’ (i.e. they are not brute).

<sup>17</sup>As it will become apparent, I take moral principles to be an instance of moral lawhood. Also, by ‘moral law’ I mean ‘*pure moral law*’ (in contrast to *mixed*, or derivative, ones) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>18</sup>There is a technical complication about how exactly a thesis like (1) is supposed to be formulated. In the grounding literature there are at least two ways in which principles or laws can play a role. Several philosophers (e.g. Maguire 2015; Leary 2017; Rosen 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Enoch 2019) introduce laws as parts of the grounds. Another option is to introduce laws as grounds of the grounding-fact taken altogether (Schaffer 2017; Skow 2016; Bader 2017; Berker 2019; cf. Maguire 2015, 198 fn. 22). I don’t think anything significant hangs on this and I will run my discussion according to the first reading.

<sup>19</sup>This is not to say that this is the only way to cash out the ‘just too-different’ intuition. For an excellent discussion see Paakkunainen (2018).

<sup>20</sup>I borrow the term from Hempel (1965, 488) and Railton (1986, 184). Feigl’s (1956) ‘nomological network’ is a similar idea. As it will become apparent, my way of understanding the nomic nexus is metaphysically weightier.

What would these connections be? It is hard to say without committing to a particular theory concerning the metaphysics of lawhood. For example, Lewis famously suggested that laws are a certain type of regularity, and the relation between laws is that of *subsumption* (Psillos 2014). According to this framework, the regularity describing Kepler's principles of planetary motion are *subsumed* by Newton's law of gravitation. Or, perhaps, laws are relations between universals as per Armstrong (1983) and the relation between laws is the relation of *instantiation*: higher-level laws are expressed by relations between so-called 'complex' universals which are, in turn, instantiated in terms of more basic universals.<sup>21</sup> Things get complicated depending on which theory of lawhood one adopts. But independently of which theory one chooses, it will still be the case that if a law L figures in NN there will be an interesting metaphysical connection between L and the laws of physics. *That* is the distinctive feature of non-physical natural laws.

A way to further illustrate this is by considering how typical lawlike propositions appear in the context of scientific *theories*. Moral laws are the moral analogues of bridge-laws figuring in the special sciences: they connect entities from different levels of reality (roughly, the moral with the non-moral domain). But there is a consensus in the relevant literature that bridge-laws are intimately connected with other laws figuring in other theories. To see this, consider that propositions about bridge-principles sometimes act as premises and other times as conclusions. Take, for example, the Boyle-Charles law (a law connecting pressure, volume, and temperature). It can be used as a premise to (roughly) derive the truth of the kinetic theory of gases (alongside other auxiliary assumptions, for example that molecules are point particles). But it can also be used as a conclusion (using the principles involved in the kinetic theory as a premise instead) (Ager, Aronson, and Weingard 1974, 121).<sup>22</sup>

Moral naturalists should hold that moral laws are structurally and metaphysically analogous to bridge-laws like the Boyle-Charles law. Consider the basic moral law posited by Boyd (1988, 329):

**(Consequentialism)** Something (an act, etc.) is good iff, and because, it brings about the satisfaction of some important human need (specified appropriately).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>For the intricacies of exactly how this is supposed to work see Fisher (2018).

<sup>22</sup>This feature of bridge-laws is well-established in the literature (Nagel 1961, 354; Sklar 1967, 118; Ager, Aronson, and Weingard 1974; Causey 1976, 334, 337; Horgan 1978, 231; Blachowicz 1997, 451; Boyd 2003, 519; Dizadji-Bahmani, Frigg, and Hartmann 2010, 408; Bangu 2011, 116; Shapiro 2018, 5–7).

<sup>23</sup>The exact logical form of moral law is a contentious issue in the literature (Berker 2019, sec. 2) but orthogonal to point I am trying to illustrate.

If (Consequentialism) is a natural fact then it is dependent on how the rest of the NN is organized. This is not say that (Consequentialism) cannot obtain in worlds with radically different laws. It might turn out that (Consequentialism) is highly invariant across different possible nexuses. Or it may not be invariant at all, and it might be dependent on whether some very specific physical law obtains. This is an empirical issue and a question of first-order normative ethics. The important point is that (Consequentialism) does not float-free from paradigmatic natural laws.<sup>24</sup>

To compare, non-natural laws would be laws holding in their *own* network in a way that has nothing to do with the organization of NN. This is the kind of idea that paradigmatic non-naturalists seem to want to capture.<sup>25</sup> Non-naturalists understand the metaphysical status of moral laws as something separate and insulated (so to speak) from the natural domain. Some take these principles to be analogous to mathematical facts (e.g. Ross 1930, 29–30), ante rem universals (e.g. Cohen 2003, 291; Skarsaune 2015), and other types of facts that are typically understood as holding independently of the natural domain.<sup>26</sup>

To illustrate, consider Rosen's (2020, 219) recent suggestion that non-natural moral laws are *fact-independent*. Something is fact-independent, in his sense, when it would still have been the case independently of the non-normative facts (2020, 219 fn. 21). Under my proposal, Rosen's notion of fact-independence would be qualified in the following way: Fact-independence should be understood as independence *from NN* (i.e. the network of laws involving the laws of physics). This qualification is important since, for all that I have said, the laws figuring in NN *may or may not* be non-normative. In this sense, even essentially normative

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<sup>24</sup>Sturgeon (1985, 241) argues that our posited moral laws will be vindicated by the relevant evidence in the same way reductive theories of colour are vindicated by facts about optical theory and psychology. For similar remarks see (Brink 2001, 169; Boyd 2003, 525).

<sup>25</sup>What about *supernatural* laws? A paradigmatic supernatural law involves the *negation* of a natural law in a way that produces a miraculous event. In this sense, the distinctive feature of supernatural laws is that they *violate* natural laws. Another view about the manifestation of miracles is due to Augustine who thought that miracles were the result of the acceleration of natural laws. The direct intervention view is usually ascribed to Aquinas and Hume (Larmer 1988). There is also a complication with deistic views such as the view of Descartes according to which natural laws hold in virtue of God's immutability and are metaphysically necessary. This view implies that the laws of nature are, in a sense, supernatural since they are generated by God herself. This is not the place to settle the issue but there a sense in which, in that case, God would simply be a node in NN. This would be a version of moral naturalism under my definition. But this is not necessarily a problematic result. I take it that what is interesting about a putative account of supernaturalist moral realism is that moral goodness obtains *regardless* of the organization of the natural domain. For general discussion see Ott (2009, chap. 7).

<sup>26</sup>This characteristic of (pure) non-natural moral laws is recognized by paradigmatic and self-proclaimed non-naturalists across the board (e.g. Moore 1903, 193; Nagel 1986, 138; Hampton 1998, 105; Shafer-Landau 2003, 46; Oddie 2005, 210; Wielenberg 2009, 32; FitzPatrick 2011, 27; Enoch 2011, 146, 2019; Scanlon 2014, 121, 2017; Rosen 2017b, 287). This goes in favour of (Revision).

laws (whether moral or not) would be natural if they figure in NN. Still, the important non-naturalist intuition is captured: if a moral law does not figure in NN, then there is a clear sense in which that law is metaphysically insulated.

## 6. Fleshing out the account

According to the general schema I proposed in section 2, a property *F* is natural when it is either a physical property or it is appropriately related to physical properties. I examined an explication of the second clause of that definition by appealing to standard grounding and small-*g* non-causal determination. I concluded that standard grounding is too philosophically parochial whereas appeals to small-*g* relations are uninformative. There should be a principled way of identifying the small-*g* relation that connects the moral and the natural, as well as the nature of that *further* partial ground that makes a given moral property non-natural. Appealing to NN avoids both problems.

**(Nomic)** *F* is a natural property iff *F* falls within the scope of a law figuring in NN (i.e. the network of laws involving the laws of physics).<sup>27</sup>

(Nomic) defines moral naturalness directly in terms of subsumption under a natural law (which, in turn, is defined in terms of figuring in a network of laws involving the laws of physics). In this sense, there is no *need* to appeal to either standard grounding or some small-*g* relation. To be clear, it could be that the logical *form* of moral laws involves a grounding operator or something of the like (cf. Berker 2019, sec. 1; Emery 2019). But this is orthogonal to the issue at hand. What makes a moral law natural is whether it figures in NN, not its logical form.

I take the idea behind NN to be non-parochial. It is common ground between every major theory of natural lawhood that every natural law can be traced back to the same *source*. Lewisian metaphysics take laws to be ultimately based at the Humean mosaic (Lewis 1994). Similarly, necessitarians argue that laws do not operate in isolation (cf. Wilson 2005, sec. 2.2.2.). This could be so because they are generated by the same primitive source (Maudlin 2007, 12–15), or they correspond to

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<sup>27</sup>It should be stressed, however, that an equally effective definition could be formulated without appealing to the laws of *physics* in particular. Rather, one could appeal to some *paradigmatically* natural laws like the laws of (say) biology. In this way, even in possible worlds where the fundamental constituents are (say) non-physical sense-data, moral naturalism could still be true (assuming that there is a sufficient number of paradigmatically, non-physical, natural laws holding at such worlds) (cf. footnote 5). Many thanks to Robbie Williams and Gideon Rosen for helpful discussion on this.

some common constellation of universals (Fisher 2018), or they are a part of a single set (Lange 2009, 37–40).

Nor does the idea behind NN involve a commitment to ethical reductionism. As mentioned, the fact that a moral law figures in NN (thus making that principle, and the properties that fall within its scope, natural) does not necessarily entail that that principle *reduces* to the laws of physics. For a law to figure in NN, as mentioned, there simply needs to be an interesting metaphysical connection between that law and the rest of the laws in NN. Presumably, ethical reductionism would be true if the logical form of moral law involves the *identity* of moral properties with their non-moral base. Still, it is plausible that moral properties are multiply realizable which would entail that the relation that figures in that moral law to be functional realization. But this is still an interesting metaphysical connection which makes that moral law naturalistically acceptable.<sup>28</sup>

Another worry might concern the fact that the notion of a moral *law* is built into the definition of moral naturalness. But shouldn't moral particularism also be an option for the naturalist? I agree that moral naturalists can be particularists. But I disagree with the idea that particularists reject the existence of moral laws. What they should reject is the existence of moral *principles*. So far, I have been taking a moral law to simply be a general fact involving the connection between a moral and a non-moral entity (in this case, a physical property).<sup>29</sup> But there is no reason to think that that law will have the right features in order to be characterized as a moral principle. Moral principles (construed as standards and not mere guides) are supposed to be explanatory and counterfactually robust in a way that indicates that they are metaphysical *uniform* across a variety of different circumstances. A typical particularist response would be to deny that there are such principles given the phenomenon of reasons holism: roughly, something might be reason to  $\phi$  in one particular set of circumstances, even though it may not be a reason at all in some different set of circumstances (this is supposed to extrapolate to other normative entities like moral goodness) (Dancy 1993, 60). But even so, it would still be the case that there are general moral facts (i.e. moral *laws*, in my sense) which are highly disjunctive: an act would be

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<sup>28</sup>Note that, as mentioned in the previous section, an interesting metaphysical connection is that connection between laws which is posited by one's background theory of lawhood. For all I have said, a moral law could strongly *emerge* from laws figuring in NN (for something along these lines see Stringer 2018). Even in such an extreme case, there is still a substantive metaphysical relation at play between a moral law and the rest of NN.

<sup>29</sup>For a less minimal definition which includes these features *into* the definition of moral lawhood see Rosen (2017c, 146).

morally good under a multitude of non-moral circumstances which are not unified in any important sense.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, consider the epistemology of moral naturalness. How do we *know* whether a moral law figures in NN? Someone might worry that evaluating whether a law P figures in NN would require evaluating counterfactuals of the form ‘Had not-P been the case, the organization of NN would be different in such-and-such way’. Presumably, this would be a problem given the controversial nature of these counterfactuals: counterfactuals involving particular facts are usually evaluated by holding fixed the relevant laws of nature. But this would not apply to counterfactuals of the above form.

In response, I want to suggest that one can stay agnostic about the way these counterfactuals are evaluated.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the question of whether a moral law figures in NN ultimately collapses to the question of whether there is an interesting metaphysical connection holding between that principle and some component of NN. For example, if according to one’s background theory of lawhood the relation holding between laws is that of grounding (cf. Emery 2019) then the epistemology of moral naturalness is nothing but an instance of the epistemology of grounding. But then (Nomic) does not face a *special* epistemological problem. If P is natural then there will be a metaphysical relation holding between P and a component of NN. But how one tracks that relation concerns one’s background theory of *that* relation, not (Nomic) in particular. Under these considerations, I conclude that (Nomic) does not face any special problems in terms of its assumptions.

## 7. Taking stock

In this paper I developed and defended a novel account of moral naturalness: a property F is natural iff it falls within the scope of a natural law. In

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<sup>30</sup>I take all this to be uncontroversial since it is widely accepted that even moral particularists should accept moral supervenience. Insofar as such a supervenience thesis is not brute, moral particularists would accept a moral law of the sort I have just sketched. For general discussion see Väyrynen (2018).

<sup>31</sup>It could even be argued that these counterfactuals are not as controversial as they might appear. Tan (2017) has recently suggested that such counterfactuals are routinely used in the sciences and they can be evaluated using mundane experimental observations. Analogously, first-order moral discourse arguably appeals to counterfactuals involving moral discourse. For example, a deontologist might argue that if utilitarianism is true, then some intuitively morally abhorrent moral principle would be true. In a sense, such a deontologist takes the counterfactual ‘Had utilitarianism been the case, such-and-such moral principle would be true’ to be non-trivial. This seems to suggest that possible worlds which are governed by different (pure) moral principles are conceivable (for discussion see Hattiangadi 2018; Rosen 2021).

turn, I defined the naturalness of a law in terms of whether that law figures in a nomic nexus involving the laws of physics (what I called NN). I argued that (Nomic) is superior to its rivals in terms of the desiderata I introduced in section 2. Paradigmatic non-naturalists accept that non-natural laws are metaphysically insulated. Also, (Nomic) does not rely on any parochial assumptions (e.g. assuming a grounding-like relation) even though it identifies a deep metaphysical difference between the natural and the non-natural domain. Finally, I further defended (Nomic) by arguing that it doesn't beg the question against the moral particularist nor does it necessarily entail ethical reductionism.

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