

Recent Faces of Moral Nonnaturalism

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Abstract

Despite having occupied a peripheral position in contemporary metaethics, moral nonnaturalism has recently experienced a revival of sorts. But what is moral nonnaturalism? And what is there to be said in favor of it? In this article, I address these two questions. In the first place, I offer an account of what moral nonnaturalism is. According to the view I propose, nonnaturalism is better viewed not as a position, but as a theoretical stance. And, second, I critically engage with three recent arguments for moral nonnaturalism offered by Russ Shafer-Landau, Kit Fine, and Jean Hampton, respectively.

Moral nonnaturalism was catapulted to philosophical fame by the force of one argument. The argument is, of course, G. E. Moore's 'Open Question Argument', and its history is well-known to those familiar with ethical theory in the 20th century.¹ In his argument, Moore asked us to consider the property *being good*. He then asked whether it could be identical with a naturalistic property – one, as he put it, that pulls its explanatory weight in the sciences broadly conceived. His conclusion was that it could not be identical with any such property. For it certainly seems possible, Moore claimed, that something could be good and not, say, fitness enhancing, pleasurable, or desired by a given society. Between goodness and natural properties there is, thought Moore, too much 'ontological distance'.

Many philosophers viewed Moore's position as extravagant. True enough, expressivists found the conclusion of Moore's argument irresistible: Goodness is not a natural property. But what they found entirely resistible was the further assumption that there is a property of goodness as Moore described it. Naturalists, for their part, were driven underground for some time by Moore's argument. When they emerged, however, they were armed with new insights from Kripke and Putnam. These new insights, they claimed, help us see why Moore's argument is deeply and irredeemably flawed. Nonnaturalism went into a precipitous decline, its fame transformed into notoriety.

Recently, however, moral nonnaturalism has begun to show signs of new life.² While I won't speculate on the causes for this, recent proponents of nonnaturalism have repeatedly made the point that their view has been

unfairly characterized: Nonnaturalism is not, as its critics have often charged, committed to extravagant claims about moral reality or our cognitive capacities. But nonnaturalists haven't settled for simply defending their view against objections of various kinds. They have offered new arguments for their position, pressing on perceived weak points of the views of their naturalist rivals. The main aim of this essay is to engage with several arguments recently offered in favor of nonnaturalism. More specifically, its aim is twofold: First, I want to explore the issue of how we should understand nonnaturalism, identifying those issues that divide nonnaturalism from its rivals. Second, I wish to engage with three arguments for nonnaturalism developed by Russ Shafer-Landau, Kit Fine, and Jean Hampton, respectively.³ It will probably come as no surprise that I regard each argument to depend on some very controversial claims. So, although I am sympathetic with nonnaturalism, I will not be arguing that these arguments provide strong evidential support for the position. Rather, I shall try to indicate where there is further work for nonnaturalists to do.

1. *What Nonnaturalism is*

Disagreement about how to understand philosophical terms such as 'naturalism' and 'nonnaturalism' is to be expected. It is, after all, difficult to locate any term that purports to designate a substantive philosophical view whose meaning is not subject to disagreement. Still, the variety of incompatible ways in which philosophers understand the term 'moral nonnaturalism' is striking. One can't help but wonder whether the term is empty or – more cynically – if it is primarily a term of disapprobation reserved for a range of positions that some philosophers find disagreeable. In light of this lack of agreement, is there a way to understand the term 'moral nonnaturalism' that captures a substantive metaethical view that philosophers in the lineage of Moore would recognize as their own?

Strictly speaking, I think that the answer to this question is 'no'. While this is not an answer for which I am going to offer an extended argument, I do want to say something in favor of it. So, in this section I am going to consider one of the few attempts in the literature to offer an informative account of moral nonnaturalism, arguing that it is unsatisfactory. I am then going to present the hypothesis that nonnaturalism is best understood not as a theory or position, but rather as a certain type of metaethical stance.⁴

1.1. COPP ON NONNATURALISM

According to the 'standard definition', moral naturalism is the view that there are things that display moral properties and that all such properties are natural. Moral nonnaturalism, by contrast, is the position that there are things that have moral properties, at least some of which are not natural.⁵ Clearly, if the standard definition is to be informative, we need

some understanding of what it is for a property to be 'natural'. In his article, 'Why Naturalism?', David Copp advances an epistemological characterization of a natural property, one that has certain affinities with what Moore says.⁶ Roughly put, Copp's suggestion is that natural properties are ones that can be known empirically, while nonnatural properties cannot.

What, however, is it to know a property empirically? In Copp's view, the best way to unpack the notion of empirical knowledge is by appeal to the concept of a *strongly a priori proposition*. A proposition is strongly a priori, according to Copp, just in case (a) it is a priori and (b) its warrant cannot be defeated empirically, at least for an ideal thinker – that is, for someone who suffers from 'no psychological weaknesses . . . no computational limitations' and has a 'full conceptual repertoire' (190). The suggestion, then, is that natural properties are ones that can be represented, but not in a strongly a priori fashion. Or more exactly, the claim is that:

A property N is natural if and only if (a) it is possible for N to be instantiated and (b) there are propositions about the instantiation of N that are both synthetic and possibly true, and, (c) no such proposition is strongly a priori. (189)

If this is correct, moral naturalism is the view that all moral properties are natural in the sense just specified. According to this specification, there are no synthetic, strongly a priori moral propositions that represent them. Moral nonnaturalism, by contrast, is the position that there are at least some nonnatural moral properties. If Copp's view is correct, according to nonnaturalists, there are synthetic, strongly a priori moral propositions that represent these features.

Copp's proposal, I think, succeeds in identifying an area about which moral nonnaturalists and naturalists often disagree. But it also suffers from a fairly substantial problem, which is this: It is difficult to see why those thinkers who identify themselves as nonnaturalists must accept the existence of strongly a priori, synthetic moral propositions. For suppose we accept Copp's characterization of the strongly a priori. Suppose, further, that nonnaturalists are committed to there being synthetic a priori moral propositions. And, suppose, finally, that Copp is correct to say that deep and pervasive disagreement among epistemic peers about the truth of a proposition counts as empirical evidence against it. Must nonnaturalists claim that synthetic a priori moral propositions are immune to counter-evidence of this sort?

I doubt it. As best I can tell, nonnaturalists needn't deny that substantial moral disagreement among epistemic peers can defeat the warrant of an a priori moral proposition. In fact, not only is it difficult to see why nonnaturalists should deny that this is possible, there is also good reason to believe that nonnaturalists have strong grounds to accept its possibility. After all, when fashioning their views, nonnaturalists will want to avail themselves of the most plausible views available regarding the a priori.

The most sophisticated views regarding the a priori, however, such as those defended by Laurence Bonjour, Albert Casullo, and Alvin Plantinga, are fallibilistic in character.⁷ According to these views, propositions that are a priori warranted needn't be warranted by empirical evidence; this is, after all, what guarantees that their warrant is a priori. But the fact that a proposition needn't gain its warrant from empirical evidence does not imply that its warrant cannot be *decreased* or *defeated* by empirical evidence. Accordingly, it follows that nonnaturalists can freely admit that the warrant of some a priori moral propositions can be defeated by empirical considerations, such as protracted moral disagreement.

The difference between moral naturalists and nonnaturalists, then, does not appear to lie with the fact that nonnaturalists commit themselves to there being strongly a priori, synthetic moral propositions, while naturalists do not. Nor, I should add, does it seem to lie in the fact that nonnaturalists commit themselves to there being synthetic a priori moral propositions (regardless of whether they are strongly a priori), while naturalists do not.⁸ For it seems as if one could be a naturalist in good standing, as Copp appears to be, and maintain not that synthetic a priori knowledge is impossible, but only that a priori methods should be, as much as possible, avoided. (It is noteworthy that few philosophers appear to think that Quine is not a naturalist because he takes a similar attitude toward abstracta.) Now, admittedly, it would be overly hasty to leap from the failure of Copp's proposal to the conclusion that we have no adequate way to distinguish moral naturalism from moral nonnaturalism. But, as Copp himself argues, other attempts to mark the distinction do not inspire confidence.⁹ For example, positions that identify the natural with the physical, the spatio-temporal, the causally efficacious, the proper subject of the sciences, or the like are all subject to telling objections. If Copp is right about this – and I think he is – we have some reason to look for an alternative way of understanding what is at issue between nonnaturalists and naturalists (assuming, of course, that there *is* something at issue between them).

In the remainder of this section, I want to offer a proposal for how to distinguish moral nonnaturalism from naturalism. The proposal is exploratory in character and takes its inspiration from recent work in the philosophy of science by Bas van Fraassen.

1.2. NONNATURALISM IS A STANCE

In the face of repeated failed attempts to characterize both empiricism and materialism, Bas van Fraassen has argued for the claim that empiricism and materialism are not theories or bodies of propositions, but rather *stances* of a certain kind.¹⁰ In particular, van Fraassen maintains that empiricism and materialism are stances comprised of a cluster of commitments, ideals, propositional attitudes (including beliefs and intentions), tendencies to

weigh evidence of certain types, dispositions to emphasize (or deemphasize) certain theoretical ideals, and so forth. The proposal that I wish to champion is that moral nonnaturalism and naturalism are similar to materialism and empiricism in this respect. They, too, are not theories (although they may have theoretical elements), but stances of certain types. But what characteristics would a stance have that would qualify it as nonnaturalist (or naturalist) in character? As a step toward answering this question, I suggest considering some methodological reflections about metaethics that Mark Timmons offers at the outset of his book *Morality without Foundations*.¹¹

Central to Timmons's discussion is the thesis that, when developing positions in the foundations of ethics, philosophers find themselves with a twofold task. On the one hand, there is what Timmons calls the 'internal accommodation' project. The aim of this project is to construct a metaethical position that comports well with deeply embedded assumptions of ordinary moral thought and practice. Among these assumptions are the following: that ethical discourse is assertoric in appearance, that moral judgments are intimately linked with appropriate motivation, that entities of various kinds appear to display moral features of various sorts, that some moral obligations appear to govern our behavior regardless of our contingent desires or associations, that we know some moral claims, and so forth. Granted, these assumptions may not be mutually consistent. If so, the internal accommodation project endeavors to construct a moral theory that, as best possible, comports well with our broadly commonsensical conception of the moral domain.

On the other hand, there is what Timmons labels the 'external accommodation' project. According to this project, a satisfactory ethical theory must comport with the assumptions guiding, and the findings of, our best science. At the very least, a plausible ethical theory should be consistent with well-established scientific views, such as those in evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and empirical psychology. In the ideal case, a plausible ethical theory should also cohere with our best science, enjoying evidential and explanatory support from it and perhaps even being subsumed under a well-established scientific discipline. In this case, too, the accommodation may be imperfect. If so, the external accommodation project aims to construct a moral theory that, as best possible, comports with our best science.

A moment ago I raised the question of what it is about a given stance that might qualify it as nonnaturalist (or naturalist) in character. The proposal I wish to advance is that what unifies the nonnaturalist stance is a tendency to privilege the significance of the internal accommodation project while downgrading the importance of the external one. For example, when one takes a close look at the work of theorists in the nonnaturalist tradition, such as that of Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore, and Russ Shafer-Landau, one finds certain tendencies of thought at work.

These thinkers take our broadly commonsensical conception of the moral domain very seriously. As a matter of methodological policy, none of them seriously countenances the possibility that the assumptions embedded in ordinary moral thought are massively mistaken. All of them, moreover, count it as serious, even decisive evidence against a position if it fails to comport with central elements of our commonsensical conception of morality, such as the categorical nature of moral obligation. And while none of these thinkers harbors a dismissive attitude toward the sciences or would accept ethical positions they consider inconsistent with our best science, neither do they expect that ethical inquiry should be similar to scientific inquiry or gain significant evidential support from scientific endeavors. All of them, then, accept that ethics is to some significant degree a discipline autonomous from the sciences, with its own methods of inquiry and standards of justification.

For self-styled moral naturalists, such as David Hume, Herbert Spencer, and Frank Jackson, matters are much different. (It is testament to Moore's influence that it is difficult to find a contemporary of his who is – in the sense of the term used here – a moral naturalist.) As a matter of methodological policy, these thinkers tend to emphasize the significance of the external accommodation project while deemphasizing the importance of the internal one. Of principal interest to all of these thinkers is what Jackson calls the 'location problem', which is the task of locating ethical values in the world as understood by the natural sciences.¹² Accordingly, while typically not dismissive of ordinary morality, naturalists do not grant ordinary morality the privileged position that nonnaturalists do. In fact, naturalists often display a willingness to reject deeply embedded commonsensical moral assumptions, such as the categoricity of moral obligations, if these assumptions fail to mesh comfortably with prominent views in, say, empirical psychology. So, where nonnaturalists see discontinuity between ethics and the sciences, naturalists see (or at least endeavor to discover) unity and congruence. There is no robust sense, then, according to the naturalists, in which ethical thought and inquiry are autonomous from scientific inquiry; ethics, if it is legitimate, is also a species of empirical inquiry and subject to empirical constraints, broadly construed.

Moral nonnaturalism and naturalism are, I am suggesting, not theories proper, but stances of a certain kind – ones that display rather different approaches to the internal and external accommodation projects. In a slogan, nonnaturalists champion the primacy of the internal, while naturalists advocate the priority of the external.¹³ While I don't expect that this proposal should strike us as obviously correct, I do think that it has its virtues.¹⁴ Let me close this section by briefly indicating several of them.

First, if the proposal under consideration were true, it would offer not only an alternate way of thinking about the metaethical domain, it would also go some distance toward explaining why it has proven so difficult to

formulate an adequate characterization of nonnaturalism. The basic problem, according to the stance approach, is that nonnaturalism is not a theory at all. Attempts to cast it as a theory misrepresent the character of the view. Moreover, these attempts tend to fix upon particular, and in many cases, non-essential, elements of the nonnaturalist stance, while disregarding others. If we think back to Copp's proposal, for instance, it attributes to nonnaturalists a particular view about moral knowledge. But this view about knowledge – or so I've argued – is not essential to nonnaturalism. Copp's proposal is probably best viewed as one that highlights the fact that those who take up the nonnaturalist stance tend to downplay the importance of empirical considerations when formulating accounts of moral knowledge, while emphasizing the importance of a priori ones.

Second, while the stance approach denies that nonnaturalism and naturalism are theories proper, it can allow for the fact that one can reject or disagree with nonnaturalism (or naturalism) – disagreement in stance being a common enough phenomenon. So, for example, if your stance consists (in part) in having a policy of weighing certain pieces of evidence in a certain way while discounting others, and embracing certain theoretical ideals while remaining neutral with regard to others, I can disagree with it. In fact, the stance approach may give us additional insight into why the disagreement between nonnaturalists and naturalists is so deep, difficult to characterize, and persistent. When what is at stake in a disagreement is not simply the truth of a proposition, but the validity of something akin to a *Weltanschauung* or a 'worldview', it would not be surprising that such a disagreement would be multi-faceted, resist precise characterization, and difficult to resolve.

Third, the stance approach has the virtue of identifying what unifies nonnaturalist positions, while allowing for a reasonable amount of variety among views that are recognizably nonnaturalist. Russ Shafer-Landau and Graham Oddie, for example, both identify their views as nonnaturalist.¹⁵ According to the stance approach, their self-descriptions seem accurate, as the development of each of their views places more emphasis on the internal accommodation project than on the external one. Still, Shafer-Landau is skeptical of the claim that moral features are causally efficacious, while Oddie is not. This disagreement, however, does not render Oddie a naturalist, as it is Oddie's commitment to the primacy of the internal that leads him to accept that some moral features are causally efficacious. (I assume it is possible for two philosophers to accept the primacy of the internal and not weigh or evaluate evidence in the same fashion.) To adopt (and adapt) a phrase from Simon Blackburn (168), for nonnaturalists, it may not matter so much what one ends up saying, so much as *how* one got to say it.

Fourth, as both van Fraassen and Michael Rea argue, central to the broadly naturalist program in philosophy is a commitment to accepting

the findings of empirical science, whatever they may be. But if this is right, naturalists should be very careful about formulating positions that are not, in principle, subject to empirical disconfirmation. More specifically, according to van Fraassen and Rea, naturalism cannot be a metaphysical or epistemological thesis, such as the claim that all that exists is located in the spatio-temporal manifold or that all knowledge is empirically based.¹⁶ For, at least in principle, these claims can come into conflict with what our best science tells us about the world. By identifying both nonnaturalism and naturalism as stances of a certain kind, however, we avert this problem. At the core of the naturalist stance is the disposition to follow wherever science leads. Nonnaturalists, by contrast, do not share this methodological disposition, as they maintain that there are some areas about which science, by its very nature, either will have little or not much illuminating to say.

Let me add to this a final observation. According to the position I am advocating, nonnaturalism and naturalism are not positions or theories but stances. However, it is worth emphasizing that accepting the nonnaturalist or naturalist stance can commit one to certain substantive claims. This is for two reasons. First, a stance can include theoretical commitments that are constitutive of the stance itself. For example, it is arguably constitutive of the nonnaturalist stance that, if there are moral obligations, then some are categorical. Second, accepting a stance can commit one to certain claims that are not, strictly speaking, essential components of that stance. For example, suppose that being a naturalist implies that one must do one's best to square claims about the motivational force of moral judgments with our best empirical psychology. And suppose that our best empirical psychology is resolutely Humean. Then moral naturalists are committed to a Humean theory of moral motivation. So, while not constitutive of naturalism, a Humean theory of motivation may be something to which a naturalist is committed to accepting at the present time, given his naturalism.

In what follows, I am going to assume that both nonnaturalists and naturalists commit themselves to certain substantive claims about the character of moral concepts and properties. (I won't try to decide the issue of whether these claims are constitutive of these stances or merely that to which, at the present time, those who accept these stances are committed.) More exactly, I will assume that nonnaturalists believe that there are moral concepts such as *being wrong*, *being just*, and *being morally obligatory*. These concepts, according to nonnaturalists, are irreducibly normative inasmuch as they are not identical in sense to those concepts employed in our current physics, biology, psychology, or the like.¹⁷ Naturalists, I will assume, also maintain that there are moral concepts. But they remain noncommittal as to whether they are irreducibly normative. And as for moral properties, I assume that nonnaturalists maintain that there are things that have moral properties. These properties, according to nonnaturalists, fall under moral concepts. By contrast, I will assume that naturalism is not committed to

there being things with moral properties. Whether there are such things with moral properties will, according to the naturalists, be something that is revealed by engaging in the external accommodation project.

In the next section, I am going to consider several arguments for moral nonnaturalism. In my judgment, the best way to interpret these arguments is this: They are not arguments for nonnaturalism as such, but rather arguments that attempt to establish claims to which nonnaturalists often take themselves to be committed (such as the claim that there are synthetic a priori moral propositions), given their nonnaturalism.

2. *Three Arguments for Nonnaturalism*

At the outset of our discussion, I said that nonnaturalism owed its earlier popularity entirely to the force of the Open Question Argument. Those sympathetic with nonnaturalism still appeal to modified versions of this argument, maintaining that, however awkwardly Moore himself presented it, the argument contains an important insight.¹⁸ But, as I also indicated, nonnaturalism has received fresh defenses in recent years that are not simply attempts to rehabilitate Moore's argument. In this section, I consider three such arguments.

2.1. THE FIRST ARGUMENT: SHAFER-LANDAU

A theme to which I have already called attention is that, according to nonnaturalism, ethics is an autonomous discipline that asks its own questions and employs its own standards of explanation and justification. In his essay 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism', Russ Shafer-Landau suggests that this may overstate the degree to which ethical inquiry is autonomous from other disciplines. For when we look closely at ethical inquiry, it appears to manifest, says Shafer-Landau, many of the defining marks of philosophical inquiry. In fact, ethical and philosophical inquiries are so similar, Shafer-Landau suggests, that ethics is plausibly viewed as a species of philosophy. If we grant this, however, the following line of argument in favor of moral nonnaturalism suggests itself:

1. Ethics is a species of enquiry; philosophy is its genus.
2. A species inherits the essential traits of its genus.
3. There are (among others) two essential traits of philosophy: the realistic status of its truths, and its status as something other than a natural science.
4. Therefore nonnaturalistic ethical realism is true. (Shafer-Landau, 'Ethics as Philosophy' 215)

Call this the 'ethics-as-philosophy' argument. As Shafer-Landau points out, its crucial claims are found in its first and third premises.

In support of its first premise, Shafer-Landau notes that there are deep similarities between how we pursue philosophical and ethical questions.

Suppose, for example, I want to inquire into whether there are universals. If there is disagreement on the matter and I am thinking philosophically, I will want to get clear on the use of my terms, consider any empirical evidence relevant to the question, test certain claims for logical consistency, and investigate which views regarding universals exemplify theoretical virtues such as having explanatory power, being simple, preserving the commonsensical appearances, unifying disparate phenomena, and so on. Having done that, I will attempt to discover which view regarding universals is the strongest overall.

Suppose, by contrast, I want to determine whether it is morally permissible to eat animals. If there is disagreement on the matter, then in this case, too, I'll want to make sure that the relevant terms are being used in sufficiently precise and uniform ways, consider empirical evidence relevant to the question, test particular views on this issue for their coherence, and investigate which views best exemplify theoretical virtues such as having explanatory power, being simple, preserving the commonsensical appearances, and so on. Having done that, I'll attempt to discover which position is best supported by the balance of reasons.

There are, of course, important differences between these cases: The first is a case of theoretical reasoning, while the second is an instance of practical reasoning. Even so, they have much in common, according to Shafer-Landau, because in both cases, the methodology employed appears broadly *a priori*. Both cases, for example, appeal not so much to sensory experience or inductive generalizations to establish conclusions, but to conceptually necessary principles such as the indiscernibility of identicals, the categorical imperative, the principle of utility, or the like.

What Shafer-Landau says in favor of the argument's first premise also supports its third premise. This premise, recall, says that two essential traits characterize philosophy: the realistic status of its truths and its status as something other than a natural science. The fact that both philosophical and ethical inquiries are broadly *a priori*, Shafer-Landau contends, is sufficient to distinguish them from scientific inquiry. Unlike the natural sciences, ethics is such that:

Its fundamental principles are not inductive generalizations. It is not primarily concerned with causal efficacy. Its central principles are not descriptive of historical contingencies. The phenomena it does describe are supervenient as a matter of conceptual requirement. It allows for a much greater degree of indeterminacy and vagueness than is found in typical natural sciences. It has only a very little concern for mathematical quantification and precision. Unlike any of the recognized sciences, its truths are normative truths that direct and guide, rather than (in the first instance) predict the course of future events or explain what has already occurred. ('Ethics as Philosophy' 211)

And as for the additional claim that philosophical truths should be understood realistically, Shafer-Landau points out that this appears to be an

assumption that most philosophers accept. Most philosophers, for example, appear to assume that there is a fact of the matter as to whether there are such things as universals or numbers. Were such things to exist, they would not do so relative to individuals, communities, conventions, conceptual schemes, fictional worlds, or the like. Moreover, most philosophers appear to assume that when they say such things as 'Universals exist', they are stating a fact. Of course, these assumptions might be mistaken. But going antirealist about general philosophical issues is a radical move, and most philosophers seem not at all inclined to believe that there is sufficient reason to do so.

2.2. AN OBJECTION TO THE FIRST PREMISE

A full defense of the ethics-as-philosophy argument would require a more thorough discussion of its two controversial premises, as Shafer-Landau candidly acknowledges. Still, there is some reason to believe that these premises might not survive scrutiny, even when defended in more detail.

Consider the argument's first premise, which tells us that ethics is a species of philosophy. Suppose we grant – contrary to what some moral naturalists seem to hold – that ethical principles are employed not primarily to predict or explain behavior, but to guide it. Still, even if we grant this, there is reason to doubt that ethical inquiry is, by its very nature, an a priori enterprise. In this respect, it's instructive to consider the divine command theory.¹⁹ Advocates of this view agree that ethical principles function (in the first instance) not to predict or explain behavior, but to guide it. However, they also maintain that substantive ethical principles cannot be discovered in an a priori fashion. Since ethical principles are the content of God's (contingently issued) commands, they can be discovered only in an a posteriori fashion – in particular, by becoming aware of the content of a certain range of God's speech acts at a given time.²⁰

Whatever its demerits, the divine command theory is, however, an ethical theory. So also are naturalistic counterparts to the divine command theory, such as Hobbes's contractarian view. To be sure, were divine command theorists or Hobbesians to deliberate about what to do on a given occasion, their deliberation would not look like what philosophers do when inquiring into the existence of universals. Rather than employing a priori methods of conceptual analysis, they would instead attempt to determine, by broadly empirical means, what the relevant authorities have pronounced on the ethical matter at hand. But for all that, their inquiry still seems to be ethical in character. If this is right, though, then there is reason to be skeptical of the first premise of the ethics-as-philosophy argument. It is doubtful that it is part of the *nature* of ethical inquiry that it is philosophical in character, at least if we assume that such inquiry proceeds (in the first instance) in an a priori fashion.

2.3. AN OBJECTION TO THE THIRD PREMISE

Suppose we assume, however, that ethical inquiry is a species of philosophical inquiry in the sense under consideration. This leaves us to consider the second controversial premise in the ethics as philosophy argument, which, recall, tells us that philosophy has at least these two essential traits: Its truths are realistically understood and its methods are not those employed in natural science. Let's assume, for argument's sake, that philosophy isn't a natural science. I think there is, nonetheless, reason to worry about whether its truths should be realistically understood.

The worry I have is twofold. First, suppose we say that a 'philosophical proposition' is one whose truth is the sort of thing that philosophers are concerned about and inquire into. Propositions that concern the existence of universals and possible worlds are good examples of philosophical propositions thus understood. And suppose we say that a proposition *p* is true in a realist sense if and only if it is a fact that *p* – where *p*'s being a fact is not something that holds by virtue of societal agreement, convention, the existence of fictions, conceptual schemes, and so on. When the third premise of the ethics as philosophy argument tells us that philosophical truths should be realistically understood, presumably something like the following is being claimed:

For any philosophical proposition *P*, if *P* is true, then *P* is true in a realist sense.

This claim, however, is compatible with there being many philosophical propositions that are false. For example, it may be that positive, existential pronouncements that predicate universals of things such as 'this paper exemplifies the universal of whiteness' are all false. But if that is right, the conclusion of the ethics as philosophy argument does not follow from its premises. For it may be that ethical propositions – ones that ascribe ethical properties to things – are also all false. At most, what follows from the argument's three premises is:

(4') Therefore, if there are moral properties, then nonnaturalistic ethical realism is true.

It appears, then, that the ethics as philosophy argument needs to take another step, which is to argue against broadly nihilistic ethical views that deny that there are any moral features. In my estimation, this argument can be provided.²¹ Rather than provide such an argument, however, let me turn to the second concern I have about the argument's third premise, which is that we have good reason to believe that some philosophical propositions are true, but not in a realist sense.

Shafer-Landau notes that controversies rage in philosophy in much the same way they do in ethics. They are deep, pervasive, and don't promise an imminent resolution. And yet, Shafer-Landau argues, philosophers typically don't find themselves attracted to the view that entities such as

possible worlds and universals exist relative to individuals or societies (or, for that matter, particular schools of philosophical thought). While this may be true, there are many ways to be an antirealist about the truth of philosophical propositions. And some of them, it seems to me, are rather attractive.

Consider, for example, the version of conceptual relativism that Hilary Putnam has defended for the last twenty-five years or so.²² Although Putnam's view proves difficult to state accurately, the basic idea is this: Pronouncements such as 'space-time worms exist' are semantically incomplete. To complete such a proposition, we need to index it to a conceptual scheme. When we do so, it turns out that our original statement says: 'space-time worms exist relative to conceptual scheme C' – where a conceptual scheme is not a language, but a network of concepts (the latter being whatever it is that composes the propositional content of our assertions and beliefs).²³ Now, I think the unqualified version of Putnam's view, according to which all propositions are scheme relative, is deeply problematic, for I don't think that all propositions or objects could be scheme-relative.²⁴ But there are specific cases in which scheme-relativism looks appealing.

Consider such philosophically 'indeterminate' cases as the following.²⁵ Take the lamp in my office, the tip of my left index finger, and the Hagia Sophia. Do they constitute an object? Is there an objective fact of the matter as to whether this and countless other mereological sums constitute objects? Well, it's difficult to say how we'd go about answering this question in a principled fashion. Or consider a hunk of marble and the statue out of which it is composed. Should we count the marble out of which Michelangelo's *David* is composed as an entity in its own right with its own essential properties and conditions of persistence? Or should we believe that the statue, as it were, 'swallows up' the stuff out of which it is composed? Again, it's difficult to say. In particular, it's difficult to see what facts there are that would constrain us to recognize that the two are distinct or, for that matter, identical. Or, consider, finally, an Aristotelian substance ontology and a Whiteheadian process ontology. On the assumption that we can describe the lamp in my office or Michelangelo's *David* in terms of each ontological scheme, is there any reason for thinking one correct, but not the other? Again, no answer appears to present itself as obviously correct. On the face of things, it seems as if we can equally well (though perhaps not equally easily) describe reality in either of these ways; the choice between them seems radically underdetermined.

Putnam's suggestion is that cases such as these provide reason for believing that only relative to certain purposes or conceptual schemes do certain objects exist or count as things of a certain kind. Only relative to a particular conceptual scheme, for example, is it the case that lumps of marble are identical with statues. And only relative to a conceptual scheme of a certain kind do certain configurations of living matter count as

substances. In contrast to examples such as these there are, however, philosophically ‘determinate’ cases – ones in which the reality of a given kind is, as it were, forced upon us because members of it share properties that are very important for our attempts to understand the world. Among other things, these properties prove useful for taxonomy, prediction, and the construction of powerful and elegant explanatory theories. Chemical elements, chemical compounds, fundamental physical particles, basic types of forces, and so on, fall into the ‘determinate’ case category. We believe such things as hydrogen, the cold virus, water, and the weak nuclear force exist because (at least in part) of the explanatory roles they play. Nor are these the only sorts of entities that seem amenable to a non-scheme relative treatment. Artifacts such as hammers, for example, appear to have a foothold in reality that mereological sums do not, because of the intentions of their makers. We can, after all, identify the purpose for which a hammer is made.²⁶

It is not my purpose here to argue that a chastened version of Putnam’s scheme-relativism is correct. It is, rather, to make the following points. First, on the assumption that a broadly antirealist position such as Putnam’s has its appeal, we can’t assume that premise three of the ethics as philosophy argument is true. That is, we can’t assume that philosophical truths deserve a realistic status; some may, but some may not. The issue is controversial. Second, on the assumption that not all true philosophical propositions are true in the realist sense, the advocate of the ethics of philosophy argument has to develop a further argument, which is that moral features fall into not the ‘indeterminate’, but the ‘determinate’ case category. Finally, I want to note that although many nonnaturalists are suspicious of the explanatory work that naturalists think moral properties must do were they to exist, it might be better on the whole were nonnaturalists to relax such suspicions. For if naturalists are right and moral features play robust explanatory roles, then this is precisely the sort of thing that would give us reason to believe that moral truths should be understood in the realistic sense. Granted, the explanatory roles needn’t be those that naturalists themselves have identified; perhaps there are unique normative explanatory roles that would place moral features in the ‘determinate’ case category.²⁷ From a nonnaturalist’s view, then, one way to appropriate the naturalist’s project is this: The primary value of moral explanations is not to show that moral features exist. Rather, it is to establish their credentials as entities that deserve a realist treatment.

In summary, the ethics as philosophy argument is open to two concerns: It is neither clear that ethical inquiry is a species of philosophical inquiry nor that philosophical truths should be realistically construed.

2.4. THE SECOND ARGUMENT: FINE

When we teach children about the world, our language is sprinkled with phrases that contain ‘musts’ of various sorts.

The two angles of a triangle must equal that of the third.
 If you throw the stone in the air, then it must fall.
 One must tell the truth when asked.

Are all of these ‘musts’ of the same sort? The central thesis of Kit Fine’s article ‘The Varieties of Necessity’ is that they are not.²⁸ According to Fine, there are three main forms of necessity – the metaphysical, the natural, and the normative. None of these is reducible to the others or to any other form of necessity. The fact that normative necessity is an irreducible kind of necessity, moreover, implies that moral nonnaturalism is true. Why so? Fine’s thought isn’t explicitly spelled out on this matter, but presumably it runs something like this. Naturalism has no difficulties countenancing so-called natural necessity – the type of necessity that binds together the relata of a causal relation. And it is not obviously incompatible with there being metaphysical necessities – that is, the sort of necessity according to which anything red is red, or that nothing is both red and green all over, or that I am a person, or that 2 is a number. But it is difficult to see how a moral naturalist could countenance irreducible normative necessity. As Jean Hampton puts the matter, such necessity would be entirely resistant to empirical explanation; it would be ‘ineffable’ (99).²⁹ If this is so, then, according to naturalists, normative necessity must be reducible to either natural or metaphysical necessity. But it isn’t. So, nonnaturalism is true.

What exactly, however, is normative necessity, according to Fine? Here is what Fine says:

The sense of necessity in which the radical pacifist wishes to maintain that it is necessary that any war is wrong I propose to call *normative*. . . . It is in this sense of necessity that the moral supervenes on the natural, and, indeed, such cases provide the least contentious examples of normative necessity. Suppose that D is a complete description of the world in naturalistic terms. Then we will be inclined to make certain moral judgements about the world so described – that such-and-such a consequence was unfortunate or such-and-such an action is wrong. But in so far as we are prepared to make such judgements, we will also be prepared to say that it was no accident that they are true. In those particular circumstances, the consequences *had* to be unfortunate, the action *had* to be wrong. (267)

Fine’s idea is that natural properties of various sorts are intimately linked with moral ones. For example, if the radical pacifist is correct, a natural property such as *being a case of warfare* is intimately linked with the property *being wrong*; something could not display the former without displaying the latter. Fine’s proposal is that normative necessity is that type of necessity that accounts for the intimate connection between ordinary natural features and moral ones. It is not itself the supervenience relation, as that is a purely modal relation. Rather, normative necessity is what accounts for the fact that (assuming the radical pacifist is correct), necessarily, engaging in an act of warfare is wrong.³⁰

But why think that the ‘modal glue’ that binds together ordinary natural and moral features is not some other brand of necessity? Well, it would be very odd to think that the necessity in question is natural necessity – the sort of necessity according to which, if one billiard ball hits another, then the other must move. Among other things, this type of necessity would appear to render the connection between natural and moral features too loose. It is conceptually possible in the billiard ball case, after all, that the second ball does not move when hit by the first. But, if radical pacifists are correct, it is not genuinely conceptually possible that an act of warfare is not wrong; one could not, say the pacifists, be fully competent with the relevant concepts and still believe that engaging in war is morally permissible. More interesting for present purposes, according to Fine, is the question of whether the necessity in question might be metaphysical – that is, the sort of necessity according to which anything red is red or that 2 is a number.

Moore, suggests Fine, gave us strong reasons to believe that normative necessity shouldn’t be identified with that type of metaphysical necessity that holds in virtue of the identity of concepts. Charitably understood, Moore’s point can be put thus: Suppose one holds that it is conceptually necessary that something is good if it promotes pleasure over pain. If this is true, then presumably it must also be true that something is good *in virtue* of its promoting pleasure over pain. In fact, it would appear that it is only because something is good in virtue of its promoting pleasure over pain that there is the relevant conceptual connection between these two things. But, Fine asks, what is the in-virtue-of-which relationship that accounts for the conceptual connection? The only answer seems to be that it is the relationship of one thing *consisting in* its being no more than some other; this would seem to be the only sort of relationship capable of underwriting the conceptual connection. But, says Fine, we have strong intuitions that goodness does consist in something more than its promoting more pleasure than pain. It seems possible, for example, that something is good, but is not a case of something’s promoting more pleasure than pain, and vice versa. Moreover, that this seems possible doesn’t appear to be merely a case of someone’s not having adequate command of the concepts in question.

Many philosophers would be willing to concede this. But might it be the case that normative necessity is really identical with metaphysical necessity more broadly construed – that kind of necessity, as Fine puts it, that holds in virtue of the identity or essence of things (254)? Fine contends that this question should also be answered negatively. Consider, for example, the following three, broadly naturalist, positions that attempt to reduce normative to metaphysical necessity.

Advocates of the first type of naturalist position maintain that (a) the necessary connection between natural and moral features is ordinary metaphysical necessity; and (b) this can be seen clearly were we to examine cases such as the radical pacifist’s claim that engaging in warfare must be wrong.

This position, says Fine, must be mistaken. There is, after all, nothing in the identity of naturalistic or normative features that demands that they be connected in the way they are. It is, for example, no part of what it is to be in pain that it should be bad, and vice versa. In this sense, the relation between natural and normative features is rather different from that of, say, being water and being H₂O. The identities in this case, it appears, require that these two kinds of thing be identical.

Proponents of the second type of naturalist position claim, in contrast to advocates of the first view, that normative features have a hidden essence. This essence implies that they are connected to natural ones by metaphysical necessity. Since the essence is hidden, however, we shouldn't expect to ascertain it simply by contemplating natural or normative features; the connection emerges only when we begin to theorize about the nature of normativity itself.

To spell this out more fully, advocates of this second position typically develop it in several stages. First, they offer a functional characterization of a property such as *being good*, according to which something is good just in case it fits the 'good-making role'. Second, a candidate is offered for satisfying the good-making role. So, for example, one might say that for a property to fit the good-making role is for it to be valued under ideal conditions. Of course the account can be made even more precise once we discover what in fact would be valued under ideal conditions. It may be, for example, that ideal valuers would value only pleasure, in which case we could identify pleasure with goodness. To which, Fine adds, any proposal to the effect that such-and-such property satisfies the good-making role would be a posteriori since it is an a posteriori matter as to whether the property, say, *there being a balance of pleasure over pain*, is what is valued under ideal conditions.

This view, according to Fine, is subject to a dilemma. Consider, once again, the good-making role. If we think, along with naturalists such as Frank Jackson, David Lewis, Michael Smith, and others, that it is the property of being valued under ideal conditions, then there are two possibilities to consider.³¹ The first possibility is that the ideal conditions are ego-centric. In this case, being good is identical with *being the property that I would value under ideal conditions*. The second possibility is that the ideal conditions are not ego-centric. According to this position, being good is identical with *being the property that we would value under ideal conditions*.³² The first option, Fine maintains, isn't attractive. It would imply that genuine moral disagreement is impossible, as any case in which an agent talks about what is good would be simply a matter of talking about him or herself, which appears to be false. The second option, however, is also problematic. For it is incompatible with the non-empirical character of moral judgment. It appears to imply that having access to the way the world is would put us in a better position to know how things stand in the moral domain. And that, Fine thinks, is not true.

But why is it a problem that this view implies that moral judgment is non-empirical? Consider, says Fine, a 'world-bound conditional', which is a conditional of the form: It is normatively necessary that, if this is how things were, then this would be (morally) good.³³ These conditionals, suggests Fine, are non-empirical. By this he means that an ideal cognizer who had the relevant concepts could know these conditionals in a non-empirical fashion.³⁴ More precisely, she could know these conditionals on the basis of 'inner experience' – experience that is not (and the subject does not take to be a case of) veridical perception – just as well as she could know them on the basis of any other type of experience. Even if I were a brain in a vat, the claim is, I would have equally good reasons to believe world-bound conditionals to be true as I would were I not. How, after all, would empirical experience make any difference to whether I grasp the truth of such a conditional? For one thing, it might inform me of the circumstances in which the moral concepts are applied. But such experience is irrelevant to assessing world-bound conditionals, since Fine understands the relevant circumstances to be completely specified in the antecedent of the conditional. For another, it may make it more vivid to me how the concepts are to be applied in a given circumstance. Only by actually witnessing torture, for example, may I learn to appreciate its horror. But this, Fine contests, is also not relevant. After all, I could learn about the horror of torture even if my experience of a putative torture session were not veridical.

The problem with the version of naturalism we are considering, in Fine's view, is that it cannot make good sense of this. For, if naturalism is to be believed, whether a world-bound conditional is true will in general depend on how things are 'outside' me. But, if moral knowledge is genuinely non-empirical, then it is difficult to see why having a window on the world (so to speak) – or taking myself to have such a window – would put me in a better position to determine whether a given world-bound conditional holds. The non-empirical character of moral knowledge implies that the warrant an agent has for believing a world-bound conditional should not be affected by whether that agent is empirically related to the world.

Now for the third type of naturalism that Fine considers – what is widely called 'Cornell realism': This view tells us that it is an a posteriori metaphysical necessity that goodness is (or is constituted by) such-and-such natural property, but it denies that any specific good-making role is part of our understanding of the term 'good'.³⁵ Whether the term 'good' refers, according to this position, is determined by its (or its use) bearing appropriate causal (or similarly empirical) relations to the world. In this way, moral terms function in a very similar fashion to natural kind terms.

Fine grants that this view avoids the dilemma posed to the second version of naturalism since it does not employ the concept of a good-making role. But, he contends, the view still faces epistemological problems. The basic problem is this: Suppose reference to moral features

obtains by virtue of our terms bearing appropriate causal (or broadly) empirical relations to them. It is difficult to see, however, how mental reference can be a function of our terms or concepts bearing broadly causal relations to moral reality and its also being true that moral knowledge does not require epistemic access to the world. While it is probably true that a brain in a vat is at a great disadvantage if she wants to have well-founded beliefs about natural kinds and their instances, she is, if Fine is right, at no disadvantage (assuming she is an *ideal* brain in a vat) when it comes to moral knowledge. If so, there is a marked difference between ordinary empirical knowledge and moral knowledge, which Cornell realism does not recognize.

2.5. OBJECTIONS

We saw earlier that broadly epistemological considerations, according to Copp, distinguish moral naturalism from nonnaturalism: In contrast to naturalist views, nonnaturalist positions tell us that moral judgments of certain kinds are immune from empirical disconfirmation. Copp maintains that this is a strike against nonnaturalism. For, if Copp is correct, moral disagreement can function as an empirical defeater, at least in principle, for any moral proposition. Interestingly, Fine's position is almost exactly the reverse of Copp's. He holds that it is precisely nonnaturalism's ability to make sense of the nonempirical character of moral judgment that recommends it. Is Fine correct about this?

Let's see if we can make progress on this question by working with a particular world-bound conditional and a particular proposal for what satisfies the good-making role. Consider the conditional:

It is normatively necessary that, if this were an instance of warfare, it would be morally better if it had not occurred.

And suppose we consider not a naturalist view of goodness, but a 'divine desire' account, according to which a thing's being good is a function of God's desiring or approving of it.³⁶ (I find a view such as this easier to work with as I have some idea of what it would be to ascertain God's desires but little idea of how to ascertain an 'ideal valuer's' desires.) Fine objects that if a view such as this were correct, it would yield counterintuitive consequences. The counterintuitive consequence to which he draws attention is that, in determining whether this conditional is true, having actual experience of the world – in this case, being apprised of God's desires and approvals – would put us in a better position to tell whether it is true.

I fail to see, however, why this is a counterintuitive consequence of the divine desire view. Presumably, if the divine desire view were correct, this is exactly the result that we would expect. One can look at the matter this way: Some normatively necessary world-bound conditionals will strike any

minimally decent (and idealized) moral agent as clearly true. In such cases, a divine desire theorist or a naturalist needn't be committed to the claim that ascertaining God's desires puts us in a better position to see whether these conditionals are true. (Of course it may *confirm* to us what already seems clear. Or it may give us greater insight into *why* the conditional holds. In such cases, the warrant of a moral judgment might be boosted. But I judge that this is not what Fine has in mind when he talks of our being put in a better position to determine the truth of a conditional.)

To take an analogy: Even if particular causal relations were a function of God's willings, it doesn't follow that ascertaining God's willings (under that description) would put us in a better position to ascertain whether a given natural law holds. Suppose that, during the course of my life, I see that stones fall to the earth when dropped from six feet from the surface of the earth. Having witnessed many such events, I form the conviction that it is naturally necessary that stones fall to the earth when dropped from six feet from the surface of the earth. Were I to learn that God wills that stones behave in this way, this would not, however, help me to determine whether the natural necessity in question holds (at least absent skepticism regarding induction). Experience is sufficient for that. In general, being apprised of what accounts for the truth of a given conditional needn't put us in a better position to determine *whether* it is true. If so, it is false that divine desire theorists or naturalists are committed to the claim that, for every world-bound conditional, having access to God's desires or the valuing of an ideal agent would put us in a better position to know that that conditional holds.

In other cases, though, things may not be so clear. Even given a complete description of the world, it may be that, given the complexity of the case, it will be very difficult to know whether a given object is morally better than another. In cases such as these, ascertaining God's willings or the valuing of an idealized agent may put us in a better position to determine whether a given world-bound conditional is true. The world-bound conditional stated above is perhaps such a case. Suppose we know all the descriptive facts about the case of warfare in question: how many people were injured or died, what was destroyed by the fighting, what was preserved due to the fighting, and so on. But we may not know how to weigh or evaluate all these natural facts. In such a case, having access to God's desires or approvals would help us to see why it is normatively necessary that the occurrence of the war in question was morally worse than its not having occurred (or vice versa).

I conclude that the second horn of the dilemma that Fine presses against naturalist views is not decisive. The fact that, in some cases, appealing to empirical considerations can help us ascertain the truth of a world-bound conditional is not a strike against naturalism.

That is the first objection I wish to raise. Here is the second, which concerns Fine's understanding of the notion of normative necessity. Recall

that, according to Fine, normative necessity is what accounts for the fact that nonmoral features of certain kinds are intimately linked to moral properties of certain types. It is the type of necessity that, as Fine puts it, explains why the moral supervenes on the natural. Thus understood, normative necessity is a relation that holds between the moral and the nonmoral realm – although let it be added that the relation itself is not said to be normative; rather, one of its relata is claimed to be normative.³⁷ At any rate, once we see that the term ‘normative necessity’ is used to signify a relation of this kind, it is natural to raise two questions. First, are naturalists committed to the claim that the necessity in question is metaphysical necessity? And are nonnaturalists committed to there being the type of necessity that Fine terms ‘normative necessity’?

As best I can tell, the answer to both these questions is ‘no’. Begin with the naturalists. Naturalists view the relationship between natural and moral properties differently. Some believe that the relation is that of identity.³⁸ Of these views, it might be accurate to say that they imply that normative necessity is merely a species of metaphysical necessity. I myself, however, would be more comfortable describing their view as one according to which normative necessity is simply the relation of identity: What accounts for the covariation found between natural features of certain kinds and moral ones, according to these views, is that these features are identical.³⁹

Some ‘nonreductive’ naturalists, however, deny these claims about identity, maintaining that the relation between the natural and the moral is looser than this. Often it is said that natural properties ‘constitute’ or are ‘realized in’ moral ones, but are not identical with them.⁴⁰ Of these views, I think it would be inaccurate to say that they imply that normative necessity is a species of metaphysical necessity. Rather, these thinkers maintain that what Fine calls ‘normative necessity’ is a common enough, although perhaps not particularly well understood, asymmetric determination relation that is not itself a purely modal relation. According to some, it is the relation that holds between marble and statues, brain states and mental states, language use and meaning, chemical processes and biological processes, and so on. Granted, the claim that moral and natural features bear this relationship (or some species thereof) to one another may be false. The important point for our purposes, however, is not whether such a view is true. Rather, it is that one cannot dismiss these views on the ground that they are committed to the claim that normative necessity is a species of metaphysical necessity. They appear committed to no such thing.

Turn now to the nonnaturalists. In his *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Shafer-Landau maintains that he, a nonnaturalist, believes that the relation between the natural and the moral is as nonreductive naturalists say: It is the fact that the moral is constituted by the nonmoral that accounts for the strong supervenience of the moral on the nonmoral. Shafer-Landau denies, however, that the resulting moral properties are natural (76–7).⁴¹ Now, if Shafer-Landau is right, then the issues that divide moral naturalists and

nonnaturalists on this matter are fairly subtle; they concern the issue of whether to tag certain properties as natural or nonnatural. However, if Shafer-Landau has correctly characterized his view, then what we just said about nonreductive naturalism also holds for nonnaturalism. Nonnaturalists deny that the moral realm is identical with the natural one. They also deny that normative necessity is a variety of metaphysical necessity. But they are not thereby committed to there being a special type of determination relation that holds exclusively between natural and normative features. (Certainly the fact that one of the relata of such a relation is normative does not license such a commitment.) What is distinctive about nonnaturalism, according to this view, is not its commitment to a distinctive type of determination relation that holds between natural and moral properties, but its commitment to the nonnatural character of the moral properties that are the relata of this relation.

To recapitulate: Fine contends that there is an irreducible type of necessity that he calls 'normative' necessity, the existence of which is incompatible with moral naturalism. I have claimed, first, that naturalist views do not yield the unattractive epistemological consequences that Fine claims and, second, that it is not evident that either naturalists or nonnaturalists are committed to there being normatively necessary relations as Fine understands them.

2.6. THE THIRD ARGUMENT: HAMPTON

I turn now to the final argument for nonnaturalism that I wish to consider, namely, that offered by the late Jean Hampton in her book *The Authority of Reason*.⁴² Hampton concedes that it is difficult to identify any one feature that distinguishes moral naturalists from nonnaturalists. Nonetheless, Hampton suggests, a definitive feature of naturalist views about the world is their rejection of irreducibly teleological or 'final cause' explanations of the behavior of things.⁴³

What does Hampton have in mind by a 'final cause' explanation? According to Hampton, a final cause explanation has three components. First, it assumes that there is a certain place, state of affairs, or kind of motion that is appropriate or 'fitting' for an object. Second, it assumes that the object whose movement or state is to be explained is in some way able to respond to this compelling fittingness or rightness. (This response needn't be conscious; for example, according to the medievals, nonconscious objects such as planets were thought to be sensitive to the requirement that their movement be circular.) Finally, a final-cause explanation assumes that the object's state or movement can be explained by appealing to its sensitivity to this compelling fittingness or rightness.

Naturalism, in Hampton's view, rules out appeal to explanations of this kind. If this is true, however, a robustly realist account of the moral domain must be nonnaturalist. Hampton's argument for this conclusion is swift: Consider a case, she asks, in which we endeavor to explain why an agent

acted in a morally appropriate way. Suppose, for example, an agent has risked her life by climbing down a steep precipice to attend to an injured child who had fallen. An explanation of her behavior assumes, first, that there is an action that is fitting or correct in such a circumstance, namely, climbing down the precipice to attend to the child. (Let me emphasize that we needn't assume that an action's being fitting or correct implies that it is obligatory.) Second, the agent in question can ascertain that the action is fitting or appropriate in those circumstances. And, third, she can act for the sake of doing what is fitting or appropriate. As Hampton puts it, if naturalism were true, we could no more

posit a compelling rightness in the world for the sake of which she acted, any more than we could think that there was a compelling rightness to iron filings [*sic.*] being close to [a] magnet that explained why they were attracted to the magnet. (113)

None of this, Hampton notes, is incompatible with naturalists' employing the language of reasons and our sensitivity to them. But discourse of this sort would, at the end of the day, have to be 'paraphrased away' by appeal to (only) naturalistically unobjectionable terminology. For example, if we could paraphrase all instances of 'for the sake of' or 'goal' locutions found in final cause explanations entirely in terms of the terminology used in efficient cause explanations, then naturalists could freely and, in good conscience, appeal to teleological explanations. Somewhat more specifically, if we could appeal to the (efficient) causal efficacy of a moral property to explain why an agent acted as she did, then teleological-style explanations would not pose a threat to moral naturalism.

2.7. OBJECTIONS

Hampton's argument, as I noted earlier, is swift; she offers no argument for believing that teleological explanations cannot ultimately be reduced to ordinary efficient-causal explanations. For example, Hampton offers no argument for believing that putative teleological explanations of human behavior cannot be replaced, without loss, by broadly Humean-style explanations that appeal only to psychological states such as beliefs and desires. The first question I want to raise, then, is whether her argument fails by virtue of the fact that it does not take this further step.

My own view of the matter is that Hampton's argument is not successful, but not because it leaves this gap unfilled or because we have a successful reduction of 'for the sake of' locutions to ordinary efficient-causal locutions. Rather, I want to suggest that, once we draw some distinctions, naturalists can be much more comfortable with teleological explanations than Hampton believes.

Hampton's argument assumes that final cause or teleological explanations form a unified kind. Recall that, according to Hampton, final cause explanations are such that they posit (i) a certain state of affairs that is

fitting or appropriate for an object; (ii) that this fittingness or appropriateness can be discerned by that object; and (iii) that objects act for the sake of bringing about what is fitting or appropriate for them. If recent discussions of teleology in the philosophy of biology are correct, however, we should distinguish different types of teleological explanation – call them ‘robust’ and ‘non-robust’ teleological explanations, respectively. Robust explanations incorporate Hampton’s second and third conditions, according to which a thing detects the goodness of a state of affairs and acts for the sake of bringing it about. Non-robust explanations do not, adding other sorts of conditions.⁴⁴ Some philosophers believe that we can offer non-robust teleological explanations of the non-intentional behavior of objects in the natural world. For example, some philosophers believe that we can offer non-robust teleological explanations of the behavior of bodily organs such as the heart (‘the heart pumps for the sake of circulating blood’). No one, however, believes that we can offer adequate robust teleological explanations of such behavior. A heart, for example, may pump for the sake of circulating blood, and the circulation of blood may even be good for it. But advocates of non-robust teleological explanations do not maintain that its pumping blood is a function of its responding to this goodness; natural selection responds not to goodness, but to survival.

Suppose, then, we place to the side non-robust teleological explanations, which arguably fit within a broadly naturalistic worldview, and focus on robust teleological explanations of intentional behavior. Should naturalists be skeptical of this type of explanation?

Not obviously. For one thing, what makes robust teleological explanations of non-intentional behavior seem so odd to us is (in part) the idea that natural objects such as hearts can detect the goodness of a state of affairs. But for naturalist and nonnaturalist realists, it is not odd to say that human agents can grasp the goodness of a state of affairs; that is, in part, what makes their views realist in character. If so, one of the most important reasons we have for rejecting robust teleology in nature is simply not present when it comes to intentional human behavior.

Second – and here I follow G. F. Schueler’s recent discussion of purposive action – it is plausible to believe that robust teleological explanations are, in the sphere of intentional behavior, rather easily had.⁴⁵ Once again, all parties to the naturalism/nonnaturalism debate who are realists agree that there are states of affairs that are good or fitting.⁴⁶ All parties, furthermore, agree that agents can detect the goodness or fittingness of some states of affairs. Finally, all parties agree that agents act for goals or for the sake of bringing about certain states of affairs that are (or are believed to be) good. Suppose we say that if it is fitting for an agent to bring about a state of affairs, then that agent has a reason to do it. Then the question for naturalists is, to use Davidson’s terminology, whether reasons can be causes.

The answer seems to be: Yes, they can be causes, provided that the notion of a cause with which we are working is sufficiently minimal.

Minimalist accounts of causality, such as David Lewis's and J. L. Mackie's, differ in their details, but what they have in common is the idea that a cause is necessary for its effect (although Mackie allows that we often think of causes as being sufficient for their effects). The idea is usually presented in terms of the truth of counterfactuals of the following sort: Given a certain set of background conditions, if a certain state of affairs C had not occurred, then a second state of affairs E would not have occurred (on the assumption, in Mackie's case, that C is 'causally prior' to E).⁴⁷ Admittedly, causal explanations that appeal simply to accounts of causality of this sort are relatively uninformative. They tell us only *that* there is an explanatory story connecting two things. But they don't shed much light on what that explanatory story is or what the 'mechanisms' that ground the truth of a causal claim might be. Still, there is a case to be made that the minimal conception of a cause closely approximates our ordinary notion of a cause. For example, we regularly offer true causal explanations such as 'Her smoking caused her lung cancer' without thereby having shed much light on what it is about smoking that causes cancer; the mechanisms are nowhere in sight. In any event, the bearing of minimalist views of causality on teleological explanations should be clear. Teleological explanations are causal explanations. To say that a reason (or a good state of affairs) caused an agent to behave in a certain way is simply to say that it satisfies the criteria for a minimal causal explanation. And to say that an item of behavior satisfies such an explanation is to claim that there is an explanation to be had of this behavior in which that reason will figure importantly.

Suppose, then, teleological explanations are minimalist in character. As such, they are acceptable to naturalists and nonnaturalists alike. But if they are acceptable to naturalists and nonnaturalists alike, then there is no sense in which the fact that human behavior is explained teleologically could itself be a reason for rejecting naturalism or arguing for nonnaturalism. Granted, there will be both naturalists and nonnaturalists alike who are not satisfied with minimalism of this variety. To be genuinely naturalist in one's approach to these issues, according to these philosophers, is to offer informative explanations of human behavior that appeal to causal mechanisms of various sorts.⁴⁸ I have my doubts about whether this is true. But the issue needn't be settled here. For our purposes, we can summarize the force of Hampton's argument as follows: At most, Hampton's argument succeeds in posing a challenge to naturalists. On the assumption that minimalist causal explanations are insufficiently naturalist, the challenge is to identify those causal mechanisms by which reasons or values cause behavior.

3. *The Prospects for Nonnaturalism*

At the beginning of our discussion, I said that my aim in this article is twofold: to locate what separates nonnaturalism from naturalism and to engage critically with several recent arguments for moral nonnaturalism.

Each of the arguments we've considered, I have argued, is open to considerable objections. Still, I do not view our discussion as primarily a destructive enterprise. Nor do I conclude that the arguments we've considered are without promise. Rather, as I see things, two issues have emerged from our discussion.

First, we've found that the contemporary debate between naturalists and nonnaturalists exhibits certain patterns, as it tends to cluster around certain core issues. For example, the articles by Copp, Shafer-Landau, and Fine all indicate that a main point of difference between naturalists and nonnaturalists concerns the role of the a priori in ethical thought. Non-naturalists believe that its role in moral epistemology is more prominent than naturalists believe, contending that naturalists cannot account for this. Somewhat differently, Hampton's argument also identifies a point of difference between naturalists (of at least some types) and nonnaturalists concerning how we explain action done for moral reasons. Naturalists who desire to go beyond merely minimal causal explanations of human behavior tend to accept broadly Humean strategies of action explanation, while nonnaturalists do not, finding these strategies deeply unsatisfactory.⁴⁹ Needless to say, to have located points of deep disagreement is not thereby to have made progress toward solving them! But sometimes even modest gains are noteworthy. Which brings me to the second and related point: If we have in fact located substantive issues that divide moral naturalists from non-naturalists – and not, say, simply differences in methodology – we have a better idea about where future work in (at least this corner of) metaethics should be focused. For instance, suppose one believes, as I do, that there is something to the nonnaturalists' claim that ethical thinking is, in large measure, a priori. The task for nonnaturalists, then, is clear: to defend sophisticated forms of a priori warrant and indicate the degree to which accepting an account such as this compromises the integrity of the naturalist project.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Steve Finlay, Steve Layman, Brad Majors, Luke Reinsma, and Russ Shafer-Landau for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Short Biography

Terence Cuneo works primary in the areas of ethical theory and history of early modern philosophy. His papers have been published in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Noûs*, *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and elsewhere. He is the editor (or co-editor) of three books, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*

(Cambridge, 2004), *Religion in the Liberal Polity* (Notre Dame, 2005), and *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2007). His book *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (Oxford, 2007) develops an argument for moral realism that turns on the similarities between epistemic and moral facts. He is presently working on two projects, the first concerning the role of speech acts in metaethics, the second concerning Thomas Reid's ethical theory. From 1999–2001, Cuneo held a post-doctoral fellowship at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Presently an assistant professor at Calvin College, Cuneo will begin teaching at the University of Vermont in fall 2008.

Notes

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¹ As Moore himself noted, getting clear on what exactly is being claimed in the Open Question Argument is not easy. I offer here a variant of a standard way of understanding it.

² See, for example, Cuneo, 'Moral Realism'; Enoch; Fine; FitzPatrick; Hampton; Huemer; McGinn; Parfit; Regan; Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*; Stratton-Lake. In fairness, it should be noted that the nonnaturalist tradition has had a continued presence in British circles due to Dancy (*Moral Reasons*; 'Nonnaturalism'), McDowell, McNaughton, Wiggins, and others.

³ Shafer-Landau (2006); Fine (2002); Hampton (1998).

⁴ For an alternate way of carving up the territory, see Finlay. Finlay has also pointed out to me that the view I propose has certain affinities with Harman, 'Is There a Single True Morality?.'

⁵ In calling this the 'standard definition', I follow Sturgeon, 'Moral Naturalism' 92.

⁶ See Copp 185–90. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* II.3 defends a similar characterization, although, to my knowledge, Copp and Shafer-Landau developed their views independently of one another. I will have more to say about Shafer-Landau's view shortly.

⁷ See Bonjour ch. 4.6; Casullo ch. 3; Plantinga ch. 6.iii.

⁸ Accordingly, I find myself disagreeing with Shafer-Landau's characterization of nonnaturalism in Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* II.3.

⁹ See section 2 of Copp, as well as Rea chs. 1, 2.

¹⁰ See van Fraassen. Rea ('Introduction'), develops a similar view, although he prefers to think of naturalism not as a stance, but as a research program. According to Rea's characterization, a research program is a set of methodological dispositions, where these are primarily 'dispositions to trust at least some of our cognitive faculties as sources of evidence and to take certain kinds of experiences and arguments to be evidence' (2). While the notion of a stance is closely related to Rea's account of a research program, I think there are at least the following two differences between them.

First, Rea maintains that research programs such as naturalism are 'maximal sets' of methodological dispositions, where a set of dispositions is maximal just in case it is possible to have all of the dispositions in the set but it is not possible to have all of them and to have other methodological dispositions (3). Second, Rea holds that research programs are dispositions to take certain cognitive faculties as basic, reliable sources of evidence. By contrast, I do not assume that stances such as the naturalistic one are maximal. One can adopt a stance and be undecided about how to treat certain sources of putative evidence, thus leaving open the possibility that one's stance may include further components. Indeed, one might think of the metaethical stances with which I'm concerned in this article as sub-components of larger research programs, such as the naturalist one. Second, as I'll point out shortly, stances include not only dispositions to count certain cognitive faculties as reliable basic sources of evidence, but also dispositions to weigh and evaluate evidence of particular types in certain ways. In my estimation, it is the

tendency of nonnaturalists to weigh certain types of evidence differently from naturalists that, in many cases, distinguishes their position from naturalists'.

¹¹ See Timmons ch. 1.

¹² See Jackson ch. 5.

¹³ Let me add to this a qualification. Strictly speaking, a more accurate map of this conceptual territory would divide things up more precisely. A more fine-grained division would say that naturalism maintains the priority of the external. *Anti*-naturalism, however, would be any stance that rejects the priority of the external. Within the anti-naturalist camp, we can draw the following twofold division: A supernaturalist view is one that rejects the priority of the external in favor of the priority of the supernatural – that is, the privileging of certain types of religious experience, religious tradition, religious texts, and so on. A nonnaturalist view is one that rejects the priority of the external in favor of the priority of the internal.

¹⁴ As Rea (ch. 1) points out, among its virtues is that it approximates what some very prominent philosophical naturalists themselves have claimed, such as Dewey, Roy Wood Sellars, and Quine.

¹⁵ See Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* II.3; Oddie ch. 6. Admittedly, Oddie's case for nonnaturalism hinges on some fairly abstract considerations regarding the nature of properties. Still, it is clear that Oddie's project is driven by a commitment to the primacy of the internal.

¹⁶ What about the claim that naturalism is the view according to which everything that exists is what would be mentioned in an ideal scientific theory? This view is not vulnerable to the concern just raised. Even so, I think it is an uninformative account of naturalism. Who knows, after all, what will be mentioned by a fully comprehensive and accurate scientific theory of the world?

¹⁷ One could, I suppose, call these latter concepts 'natural' and the properties to which they refer 'natural' properties. But by this we should mean only this: Natural concepts and properties are those countenanced by the external accommodation project, given our best present understanding of those things whose existence to which it commits us. Nonnatural concepts and properties, by contrast, are those countenanced by the internal accommodation project, given our best present understanding of those things whose existence to which it commits us.

¹⁸ As do Regan; Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* 56–8; Stratton-Lake, 'Introduction'. Gibbard, who is an expressivist, also finds value in the argument, although not the same value that nonnaturalists do.

¹⁹ The divine command theory comes in different guises. The type of view I am considering is roughly the type of view defended by contemporary philosophers such as Adams, Quinn (*Divine Commands*; 'Recent Revival'), and Wierenga.

²⁰ Let me add a qualification here. It is sometimes argued that, if the divine command theory were true, there is at least one obligation that is not a divine command, namely, the obligation to obey God's commands. It is also sometimes said that this obligation can be known a priori. Still, even if this is correct, ethical inquiry is not, according to the divine command theory, primarily an a priori enterprise.

²¹ I try my hand in Cuneo, *Normative Web* chs. 4–6.

²² See Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*; *Representation and Reality*.

²³ Here I follow Lynch 45. The type of relativity here calls for fuller exploration. Alston (20–1) maintains that the relativity can be understood on the models of the relativity of motion and indexicals.

²⁴ For the argument, see Alston 32–5.

²⁵ In what follows, I'm drawing from Alston 44–5.

²⁶ Do these claims conflict with the claim that it is indeterminate whether a substance or process ontology is correct? For Alston's answer, see 51–3.

²⁷ For a nonnaturalist's approach to normative explanation, see Enoch; Majors, 'Moral Explanation and the Special Sciences'; 'Moral Explanations'.

²⁸ Hampton (ch. 3) defends an argument very similar to Fine's. Fine has indicated to me in private correspondence that, to the best of his knowledge, his argument and Hampton's were developed independently.

²⁹ In fairness to Fine, he does not call the position for which he argues 'nonnaturalism'. But he clearly identifies it as Moorean. See Fine 278 n37.

³⁰ Fine's view appears to echo Kim, according to which 'supervenience itself is not an explanatory relation. It is not a "deep" metaphysical relation; rather, it is a "surface" relation that reports a

pattern of property covariation, suggesting the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it' (167).

³¹ See Jackson; Lewis, 'Dispositional Theories'; Smith.

³² For the record, there may be independent reasons to reject property identities of this sort. While both *being good* and *being the property that I would value under ideal conditions* are properties, the latter appears to be a second-order property of properties, while the former does not.

³³ Fine (272) appeals to conditionals of this form to avoid having to work with conditionals that are true merely because their antecedents are false.

³⁴ Fine adds to this three points: First, according to Fine, an ideal cognizer is someone 'capable of grasping a complete description of the world'. Second, Fine adds that grasping the concepts involved in a world-bound conditional might require us to have empirical experience. Finally, Fine says that the reasons for judging a world-bound conditional true are 'sustainable'. Roughly, the idea here is that if reasons of a certain kind are parasitic on other reasons – as in the case of testimony – then they can't have 'greater probative value than the reasons upon which they depend' (275).

³⁵ See Boyd; Brink; Sturgeon, 'Moral Explanations' for developments of Cornell realism.

³⁶ Wolterstorff defends this view.

³⁷ For an argument that the relation itself is normative, see FitzPatrick.

³⁸ See Jackson for an example.

³⁹ I am assuming that identity is a relation such that, if it holds at all, it holds necessarily.

⁴⁰ See, in particular, Brink 176–7.

⁴¹ They are not natural, according to Shafer-Landau, because we can know them a priori.

⁴² Hampton ch. 3.

⁴³ Hasker (63) suggests something similar.

⁴⁴ See Bedau for a discussion of the issues. In what follows, I've been helped by Murphy ch. 1.

⁴⁵ See Schueler, especially ch. 1.3.

⁴⁶ Or at least nearly all do. In her Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association in 1983, Philippa Foot denied it. To accommodate views such as this, one can read what follows as including an implicit qualifier according to which all realists believe that there are states of affairs or objects that are good or fitting.

⁴⁷ See Mackie; Lewis, 'Causation'.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Harman's reply to Sturgeon in Harman, 'Moral Explanations'. One way to read the debate between Harman and Sturgeon about moral explanation is that Sturgeon believes that naturalists can be minimalists about causal explanation, while Harman does not.

⁴⁹ Dancy (*Practical Reality*), McDowell, and Parfit are nonnaturalists who argue in this vein.

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