

Naturalizing Ethics

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Introduction

In this chapter we provide (1) an argument for why ethics should be naturalized, (2) an analysis of why it is not yet naturalized, (3) a defense of ethical naturalism against two fallacies – Hume and Moore’s – that it allegedly commits, and (4) a proposal that normative ethics is best conceived as part of *human ecology* committed to *pluralistic relativism* (Flanagan 1995; 2002; Wong 1984; 1996; 2006b). The latter substantive view, supported by a neocompatibilist view of human agency, constitutes the essence of *Duke naturalism*. It provides a credible substantive alternative to bald or eliminativist *Australian ethical naturalism*, especially one that supports moral skepticism (Mackie), and to the more reticent *Pittsburgh naturalism*.¹

Naturalism in the Broad Sense

Ethical naturalism is a variety of a broader philosophical naturalism, so it will be good to say what naturalism in the broad sense is. According to the *OED*, the original *philosophical* meaning of the term “naturalism” dates back to the 17th century and meant “a view of the world, and of man’s relation to it, in which only the operation of natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces is admitted or assumed.”

¹ McDowell coined the term “bald naturalism” (McDowell 1996) and sometimes characterizes it in a way that engenders or is akin to moral skepticism. In principle, a naturalist might be a moral skeptic, believing that there are no moral properties as ordinarily conceived and thus that moral propositions are literally false (or meaningless). There is nothing ethics is about, and so forth. See Mackie (1977). For a more recent treatment, see Joyce (2001). *Duke naturalism* is also superior to *Rutgers naturalism*, but showing this will await a subsequent paper. It is possible that *Duke naturalism* and *Michigan naturalism* can be coalesced into *Duke–Michigan naturalism*.

In a presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, Barry Stroud writes:

Naturalism on any reading is opposed to supernaturalism...By “supernaturalism” I mean the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it. Most metaphysical systems of the past included some such agent. A naturalist conception of the world would be opposed to all of them. (Stroud 1996)²

Stroud’s comment can either be about ontology (i.e., that naturalists reject agents or forces that stand outside the natural world) or be about methodology (i.e., that naturalists reject the invocation of such agents or forces in their philosophical projects). These issues will be fleshed out later in the chapter. For now, we can note that ethical naturalism holds a number of thin ontological commitments, and some more substantial methodological ones.

Why Ethics Isn’t Naturalized

Ethical naturalism has a fair number of philosophical advocates, but most people reject it – including many in the academy. The reason has to do with the close connection in American culture (and throughout much of the world) between ethics and religion, and thus with the supernatural. Over 90% of Americans believe in a personal God who answers their prayers. Similar numbers believe in heaven (slightly fewer believe in hell). They believe that God, Yahweh, Allah is the source of moral law and that He rewards (or punishes) “souls” based on how well they conform to the moral law. Most people believe in God and think that moral knowledge is knowledge of what God creates or endorses as “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong.” Religious reasons are offered and accepted in America, and most of the rest of the world, as legitimate moral grounding reasons. Ethical naturalism, as a species of naturalism, rejects religious grounding reasons.

Let us call an individual a *scientific naturalist* if she does not permit the invocation of supernatural forces in understanding, explaining, and accounting for what happens in *this* world. An *ethical naturalist* (assuming this person already accepts scientific naturalism) applies the same principled restriction to describing, explaining, recommending, endorsing, prohibiting, and justifying values, norms, actions, principles, and so on.³ In other words, the complete warrant for any norm or value must be cashed out without invoking the views or commands of a divinity.

Call the folk view that there is a creator God, but one to whose thoughts we have no access, and who does no work in this world, has no effect on how this world operates, “folk naturalism.” This view is relatively common. Indeed, it must be if we are to make sense charitably of the behavior of scientists who restrict themselves to physical explanation of physical phenomena but believe nonetheless in God.

2 For other discussions of naturalism in philosophy, see Bouwsma (1948), Kitcher (1992), and Rosenberg (1996), as well as entries on “Naturalism” in Honderich (1995) and Audi (1999).

3 Not all scientific naturalists are ethical naturalists, but it would be a rare bird who was an ethical naturalist but not also a scientific naturalist. Typically, a view that incorporates these two kinds of naturalism is *epistemically imperialistic* as far as *this* world goes.

Most people accept that science can legitimately take the folk naturalistic stance. Seamstresses, carpenters, plumbers, auto mechanics, and scientists all practice as if they are committed to folk naturalism. Scientists take official vows, as it were, when they declare themselves to be scientists in some domain of inquiry. There is no glaring inconsistency in thinking that God set up the world in such a way that scientists or auto mechanics can describe, explain, predict, and manipulate what happens in it. The fact that there is no inconsistency does not mean it makes epistemic sense – that there are any good reasons – to believe in God.

When it comes to ethics, though, most people will balk at restricting themselves to folk naturalism. For complex reasons (though having to do in some large measure with the importance of morality), most people would like to see moral value justified in a very strong way. It would be good if moral values, beliefs, norms, and the like had something like the necessity that mathematical theorems have. One way this could work would be *if* an omniscient and all-loving being made the rules and then provided us with epistemic access to them. There are various familiar stories of how this works. Human souls exist prior to bodily implantation in the company of “The Good” and, once embodied, have the ability to remember, recollect, or intuit what is good, bad, right, and wrong (Plato; and with certain modifications, G.E. Moore). God directly illuminates faithful human hearts and minds through grace (Augustine). God produces a world and mind such that His perfect nature can be deductively established and, with some additional difficulty, His will can be known (Anselm, Descartes, Alvin Plantinga).⁴ God speaks to certain sages, who write down His moral rules in sacred texts (the Torah, the Old and New Testaments, the Qur’an), and so on. The last view – that we have epistemic access to God’s will and commands through sacred texts – is the dominant view: moral values, norms, and principles have their ultimate ground or warrant in divine revelation. There are many good values expressed in these sacred texts – the Golden Rule, for example. Most naturalists will endorse the Golden Rule, but all will reject that its warrant relies on any supernatural source.

Both folk naturalism and scientific naturalism are methodological and domain-restricted. Neither view *warrants* belief in any supernatural forces or entities outside this world, but both *allow* it. Naturalism in the broad sense does not prohibit there being supernatural forces or beings; it is just that such forces or beings do not – at least since she’s been up and running – have causal (or any other sort of) intercourse with Mother Nature. A stronger form of naturalism says that what there is, and all there is, in this and any *actual* world is natural. Stronger still would be the claim that what there is, and all there is, in any *possible* world is natural – that it is impossible for there to be *any* world that contains supernatural beings, entities, and the like. (This view has its attractions because it has rhetorical

4 Kitcher (1992) and Stroud (1996) claim that naturalism is pretty much the only game in town. This claim has credibility to the degree that they intend some version of the idea that for the purposes of doing ontology (or for naturalized epistemology or ethics), divine agency does not need to be introduced to play an explanatory role. Stroud, for example, thinks that Plantinga is a naturalist when it comes to descriptive epistemology, but not when it comes to normative epistemology. However, there are other major contemporary philosophers whose views should also give him pause, such as W.P. Alston, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor. MacIntyre (1988; 1991) holds a two-level view; like Aquinas, he thinks that there are natural and supernatural justifications of norms. The natural justifications are satisfactory but the divine ones are “more” ultimate. Taylor (1989) expresses the idea that perhaps God can play a role in the justification of our ethical norms.

force in telling everyday supernaturalists that one is just not going to yield them any ground. However, it epistemically overreaches.)⁵

At any rate, what seems warranted is this: there are no good epistemic reasons to believe that there are any of the entities, processes, or forces of the sort posited by any supernaturalist ontology. Call this *quietistic ontological naturalism*. The view is bold but quietistic at the same time – thus its name. The Buddha, at his inaugural address, claimed that no human, himself included – as enlightened as he was – was in any position to give epistemically respectable answers (possibly to even formulate epistemically respectable questions) on matters such as those on which both ordinary religious folk and woolly metaphysicians are inclined to speak. The Buddha was a Wittgensteinian as far as epistemology goes: “Whereof one cannot speak, one ought to be silent.” For present purposes, consider us committed to this form of naturalism. What is warranted, all things considered, is a form of ontological naturalism about *this* world, which is the only world we have reason to believe exists. Thus, for all we know, what there is – and all there is – is the natural world. Because the conception of what is “natural” is not fixed, the central concept in the motto lacks a clear and determinate meaning. Still, vague as it is, the view is not friendly to theism.⁶

5 *Ontological naturalism* is the view that what there is, and all there is, is natural. Everything that exists/has existed, happens/will ever happen, is a natural phenomenon, process, or event. Every property, event, process, and thing, if it *genuinely* exists/is happening, did exist/happen, or will exist/happen, is natural. This is the right definition, but it is not especially helpful until we specify what it means to be “natural.” This is surprisingly hard. Imagine a world governed by Newtonian physics and Darwin’s theory, supplemented by whatever chemistry and molecular biology (etc.) go neatly with them. In this world, “natural” would mean something like this: what there is and all there is, is whatever Newtonian physics and the principles of Darwinian biology say there is or can be. Furthermore, all the events in this world are explained, or explainable, by the causal laws of (or extendable from) these two theories (plus chemistry, etc.). This much would give us the familiar picture of the natural as comprising law-governed material, and it would provide us with a story of why the physical universe contains what it does and behaves as it does, as well as of how life came to be, evolved, and so on. The trouble is that contemporary physics is wilder and woollier than Newton’s physics. There is quantum indeterminacy. There are particles or strings that are the same size in relation to a single proton as a single proton is in relation to the known universe. There are (if string theory is true) at least ten spatial dimensions, as well as one for time. Gravity is weak because gravitons escape from our universe into other ones through wormholes in space.

The story that our universe originated in a Big Bang 13 or 14 billion years ago was always somewhat mysterious. How did the singularity that banged get there? Some will say that there was “no there” then. Well, there was no “then” either because space and time as we know them only came into being when the “thing that wasn’t quite there then” banged. Many sensible people have found this explanation less than satisfying. As we’ve said, more than 90% of Americans believe that a supernatural force, indeed a personal God, created the universe. If scientists can get away with postulating that the singularity that was not really “there then” led to there being “hereness,” “thereness,” “nowness,” “thenness,” and so on, many theists feel licensed to posit their own kind of mystery. See Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong (2003).

Contemporary physics now seriously toys with explaining away the mystery of the Big Bang in this way: our universe, which appears to be four-dimensional (three space, one time), isn’t. The thing that appears that way is really eleven-dimensional, and it was formed – guess when? – 13 or 14 billion years ago, when a preexisting universe wormed its way into empty space in our vicinity. How did that sneaky universe get going? Same way. It’s universes all the way back, down, and so on. See, for example, Greene (2000).

6 The epistemological humility called for is not so humble that it tolerates agnosticism. The agnostic thinks it makes epistemic sense to stop with three possibilities: theism, agnosticism, and atheism. But the quietist thinks the agnostic has been tricked into playing a fool’s game. There is no reason to play the game or address the questions that force the familiar three choices. Just say “no” to talking about the supernatural and only then, apparently, will you see that nothing epistemically respectable can be said on such matters.

Why Naturalize?

The ontological naturalism advanced in this chapter opposes belief in supernatural forces. It also rejects various forms of ontological dualism, such as a sharp bifurcation of humans and the rest of the natural world, as well as mind–body dualism.

Ethical naturalism is not chiefly concerned with ontology, but with the proper way of approaching moral inquiry. Ethical naturalism thus has a number of methodological commitments, only some of which consist in a rejection of supernatural forces when explaining or justifying values and principles.⁷ If naturalism were only opposed to supernaturalism, then the category of ethical naturalists would be overly inclusive, and if it were only committed to being receptive to findings from the natural sciences, if its most plausible core doctrine was a kind of open-mindedness, as Barry Stroud (1996) has suggested, then it would be difficult to see how it could represent a distinctive view.

However, naturalistic ethics does have a number of substantive methodological commitments. Chief among these is the belief that moral philosophy should not employ a distinctive *a priori* method of yielding substantive, self-evident, and foundational truths from pure conceptual analysis. The claims of ethical naturalism cannot be shielded from empirical testing. Indeed, the naturalist is committed to there being no sharp distinction between her investigation and those of relevant other disciplines (particularly between epistemology and psychology). In other words, ethical science must be continuous with other sciences.

In order to better understand what naturalistic ethics entails, it might be helpful to consider varieties of moral theory that are not supernatural, yet not natural either. Some such theories are semantic and maintain that moral terms (or predicates) cannot be cashed out using non-normative terms (or predicates). More frequently, such theories affirm a metaphysical thesis that naturalists deny – namely, the existence of irreducible and non-natural moral facts or properties.⁸ Other non-naturalists maintain the autonomy of the moral: that morality is essentially autonomous from other forms of inquiry, namely, from the natural sciences.

Consider, for example, morality as conceived by Immanuel Kant. In the *Groundwork*, Kant writes that a “worse service cannot be rendered morality than that an attempt be made to derive it from examples.” Trying to derive ethical principles “from the disgusting mishmash” of psychological, sociological, or anthropological observation, from the insights about human nature that abound “in the chit-chat of daily life” and that delight “the multitude,” and upon which “the empty headed regale themselves,” is not the right way to do moral philosophy (Kant 1785/1964).

7 See also Putnam (2004).

8 Indeed, Pigden (1991) suggests that the belief in the nonexistence of such irreducible *sui generis* moral properties or facts is what unites the category of naturalists. Most naturalists maintain that if ethics provides a respectable kind of wisdom, then moral properties, values, virtues, norms, oughts, and so on must be analyzed in ways that do not involve ontologically queer properties, forces, or commitments. The kind of naturalism defended here is quietistic with regard to the existence of supernatural forces or entities. This is also true of natural moral properties. We imply no position on the question of whether there really are, or are not, moral properties in the universe in the sense debated by moral realists, antirealists, and quasi-realists. The important thing is that moral claims can be rationally supported, not that all the constituents of such claims refer (or fail to refer) to “real” things. Furthermore, in both the realism/antirealism cases and the cognitivist/noncognitivist case, different answers might be given at the descriptive and normative levels. Mackie (1977) is an example of a philosopher who thought that ordinary people were committed to a form of realism about values but were wrong. In spite of this, Mackie saw no problem with advocating utilitarianism as the best moral theory, and in that sense was a cognitivist – a cognitivist antirealist, as it were.

What is the right way to do moral philosophy? According to Kant, we need “a completely isolated metaphysics of morals,” a pure ethics unmixed with the empirical study of human nature. Once moral philosophy has derived the principles that ought to govern the wills of all rational beings, then and only then should we seek “the extremely rare merit of a truly philosophical popularity.”⁹

Kantian ethics, *qua* philosophical theory, might not seem to be openly supernaturalistic. However, it is not naturalistic either. Kant maintains, for example, that postulating the existence of God is essential to ethics.¹⁰ What’s more, he claims that the self, the will, and the laws of freedom reside in the realm of the noumena – which is disconnected from all phenomena that could be studied by science. Kant’s ethics cannot be naturalistic because we cannot give a naturalistic account of these things. For example, we cannot account for a faculty of pure practical reason that possesses moral principles not gleaned from observation and assessment of human practices that work differentially well to meet our aims, and which, in addition, fits with the findings of the mental sciences. There is no such faculty that meets these criteria, and thus no faculty to account for.

Kant’s rationale is transcendental. Ethical naturalism is nontranscendental, since it rejects divine command or, in this case, since it will not locate the rationale for moral claims in the *a priori* dictates of a faculty of pure practical reason. Thus, ethical naturalists will need to explain the appeal of transcendental rationales and explain why they are less credible than pragmatic rationales (possibly because they are disguised forms of pragmatic rationales). Suppose, as seems plausible, that Kant intended his *grounding* of the categorical imperative in pure practical reason to both rationalize the categorical imperative and motivate us to abide by it. If one denies (as we do) that there is such a thing as pure practical reason, and if one also thinks that the categorical imperative expresses deep moral insight, then one needs to give an alternative account of the deep insights he expressed.

Unless one is an eliminativist or a physicalist in the reductive sense – that is, a bald naturalist – then reasons exist, as do norms and ideals. Reasons, furthermore, can be causes. However, being *a reason that causes* is not the same as being *a reasonable cause*; a motivating reason is not, in virtue of being motivating, something that it is reasonable to believe in or invoke in justification of one’s (other) thoughts or actions. The belief that “Santa Claus will deliver coal to me unless I behave myself” will motivate, but it is not the sort of thing we think a sensible adult should believe in, let alone be motivated by.

However, since beliefs that have contents that don’t refer are no problem for the naturalist, the causal power and efficacy of beliefs about things that don’t exist are not things that worry the naturalist, either. It is largely a matter of psychological, sociological, and anthropological inquiry why different sorts of things are motivating reasons; that is, why certain reasons and not others motivate at different times and places. The task for the normative

9 Thanks (or no thanks) to Kant, the dominant conception of the intellectual division of labor makes a sharp distinction between moral philosophy and moral psychology. Moral philosophy is in the business of saying what ought to be, what is really right and wrong, good and evil, what the proper moral principles and rules are, what counts as genuine moral motivation, and what types of persons count as genuinely good. Most importantly, the job of moral philosophy is to provide philosophical justification for its “shoulds” and “oughts,” for its principles and its rules.

10 Despite his commitment to the project of the Enlightenment, Kant in fact believed in God – namely, the God of pietistic Lutheranism. And he believed that God was, in fact, the ultimate source of morality.

naturalist is to recommend ways of finding *good* reasons for belief and action and to indicate why it makes sense to be motivated by such reasons.¹¹

Just as a naturalist cannot accept the postulate of a faculty of pure practical reason, she also cannot accept the notion (found in Kant) that humans have metaphysical freedom of the will. Descartes famously articulated the idea this way: “But the will is so free in its nature, that it can never be constrained... And the whole action of the soul consists in this, that solely because it desires something, it causes a little gland to which it is closely united to move in a way requisite to produce the effect which relates to this desire” (1649/1968). The 20th-century philosopher Roderick Chisholm puts the point about free agency, what he calls “agent causation,” thus: “[I]f we are responsible... then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain things to happen, and nothing – or no one – causes us to cause those events to happen” (1966).¹² Descartes’ and Chisholm’s views are openly non-naturalistic. This sort of free will violates the basic laws of science, so the naturalist must offer a different analysis.

The most plausible view, “neocompatibilism,” holds that free will is compatible with determinism (Flanagan 2002). A neocompatibilist rejects the dialectic that frames the problem as one between free will and determinism because our best physics now says that there are both ontologically deterministic and indeterministic causal processes, so determinism is not the issue. Causation is. And no matter how one views things, causation is ubiquitous. So far, it does not look as if indeterministic processes at the quantum level “percolate up” to macro levels. However, in principle, they might. If they do, some macroprocesses might not be deterministic. But it is a nonstarter to think this will help secure a place for “metaphysical freedom of the will” or “agent causation.” Consider the hypothesis that there are in fact quantum-gravitational effects or processes in the microtubules of certain neuronal segments. Such random swerves do nothing to secure anything like agent causation, which involves an agent doing something as a prime mover himself unmoved.

On the other side of the dichotomy sits the concept of “free will.” Naturalists from Hume on have tried to tame the concept of free will. The picture that Hume and other compatibilists paint is a fairly good fit with our best contemporary science. However, to really make the compatibilist position work, one will need to read Hume et al. as resisting the posit of a distinctive faculty of will; that is, as rejecting the faculty psychology within which free will, reason, imagination, and their suite historically are situated.

What is “new” – and thus what warrants the name “neocompatibilism” – is the outright denial of any faculty that fits the description of free will. Why? Because the concept utterly fails to locate anything significant that we mean to be talking about.

11 Motivational grounds to one side, there is always the interesting question of whether, even if we judge the reasons motivating some norm(s) unwarranted, we judge the norm(s) themselves unwarranted. There is no strict implication. One is inclined to say that even if you behave well only because you believe “Santa Claus thoughts,” you should still behave well even though there is no Santa Claus – albeit for non-Santa Clausy reasons. On the other hand, it just may be the case that, across multifarious social contexts, things like “Santa Claus thoughts” motivate as well – if not better – than “Mom and Dad disapprove of” thoughts. If this is so, we need an explanation of how beliefs in certain kinds of nonexistent objects can motivate, and motivate powerfully. False beliefs that produce goods are an interesting phenomenon, but they create no special problem for the naturalist.

12 Chisholm might, however, say that the self depends on and is often affected by the body, and so is part of the natural world in this limited sense.

There is no such thing as “will,” and thus no such thing as a “free will.” (Here is one of the rare places where the eliminativist move is totally warranted.) There is no faculty of will in the human mind/brain. Talk of dedicated faculties can be useful when speaking of sensory and perceptual systems, but no respectable cognitive neuroscientist thinks there are distinctive faculties of will, reason, imagination, and the like.¹³ If there is no such faculty as will, then there is no way for it to *be* – large, small, heavy, light, free, or unfree. As Dewey says, “what men and women have fought and died for in the name of freedom is multiple and various. But it has never been metaphysical freedom of the will.” This was true when Dewey said it in 1922, and it is true today. So change the subject; there is no such thing as free will.¹⁴

Nevertheless, persons make choices. Typically, they do so with live options before them. If new reasons present themselves, they can change course.¹⁵ If not, they do what they choose or intend. There is a phenomenology to these activities and processes; persons experience themselves choosing, intending, and willing. Ethics sees persons as choosing and thus works the quarry looking for veins of voluntary action involving reasoning, deliberation, and choice. Moral practices of shaping character, of assigning praise and blame, work over the topography of voluntary, involuntary, and nonvoluntary actions, and various admixtures of these. Aristotle and Confucius saw how this worked with zero help from the fiction of “will” – “free” or otherwise.

Understanding Morality

The *genealogy of morals* asks how moral sensibilities, moral values, moral norms, and so on, originate and develop. There is some consensus among naturalistically oriented philosophers that some combination of cultural anthropology, the psychology of learning, and evolutionary biology will play a key role in providing a genealogy of morals. Dewey is helpful: “For practical purposes morals means customs, folkways, established collective habits. This is a commonplace of the anthropologist, though the moral theorist generally suffers from an illusion that his own place and day is, or ought to be, an exception” (Dewey 1922, 55).

In the following passage from *The Descent of Man*, Darwin suggests the general form that an adequate genealogy of morals might take:

In order that primeval men, or the ape-like progenitors of man, should become social...they must have acquired the same instinctive feelings... They would have felt uneasy when separated from their comrades, for whom they would have felt some degree of love, they would have warned each other of danger, and have given mutual aid in attack or defence. All this implies some degree of sympathy, fidelity, and courage...[T]o the instinct of sympathy...it is primarily due that we habitually bestow both praise and blame on others, whilst we love the former and dread the latter when applied to ourselves; and this instinct no doubt was originally acquired, like all the other social instincts, through natural selection...[W]ith increased experience and reason, man perceives the more remote consequences of his actions, and the self-regarding virtues, such as temperance, chastity, etc., which during earlier times are...utterly disregarded come to be highly esteemed or even held sacred...Ultimately our moral sense or conscience

13 See, for example, Wegner (2002).

14 See Flanagan (2002).

15 An exception is what Dan Dennett (1984) calls “pockets of local fatalism.”

becomes a highly complex sentiment – originating in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, and confirmed by instruction and habit. (Darwin 1871/2004)¹⁶

Of course, the genealogical story – both ontogenic and phylogenetic – is even more complex than Darwin sketches. Morality evolved and developed in order to coordinate and harmonize the interests (both self- and other-regarding) of humans living in mutually dependent communities. Such communities would need to regulate conflicts of interest, divisions of labor, and hierarchy arrangements, and systems of moral norms would help make such cooperative projects beneficial. On the self-regarding side, morality evolved to shape character and specify worthwhile lives and ideals of behavior toward which to strive. To understand the full story, we will need what we only have pieces of – namely, insights from evolutionary biology, animal ethology, developmental psychology, learning theory, psychiatry, cognitive neuroscience, and cultural anthropology. All these disciplines and research programs are essential to (and thus have a say in) the genealogy.

Normative ethics, on the other hand, is concerned with articulating and defending which virtues, values, norms, and principles will reliably guide favorable character development, intra- and interpersonal well-being, social coordination, and harmony. Normative ethics involves saying and justifying what is right, wrong, good, or bad. Murder and rape are wrong, honesty is the best policy, and so on. Ethical naturalists evaluate their subject matter using standards that are derived from certain human needs, desires, and purposes. Some of these might be thought of as fixed by our natures as social animals; humans need peace, security, friendship, and so on. The specific form of these needs, the ways they are best met, will have a culturally variable component. Some aims or needs are quite culturally specific and defensible. The aims(s) of morality are thus included as part of what humans need and desire.

Naturalistic Epistemology and the Problem of Normativity

In “Epistemology Naturalized,” Quine (1969) suggested that epistemology be assimilated to psychology. Many have read Quine’s arguments for naturalization as arguments against a normative role for epistemology. Hilary Putnam writes: “The elimination of the normative is attempted mental suicide...Those who raise the slogan ‘*epistemology naturalized*’... generally *disparage* the traditional enterprises of epistemology” (1993, 229). And Jaegwon Kim writes: “If justification drops out of epistemology, knowledge itself drops out of epistemology. For our concept of knowledge is inseparably tied to that of justification...itself a normative notion” (1993, 224–225).

The alleged problem with epistemology naturalized is this: psychology is not in general concerned with *norms* of rational belief, but with the description and explanation of mental performance and mentally mediated performance and capacities. However, the best way to

16 It is worth marking the fact that when Darwin speaks of “deep religious feelings” being involved in the development of conscience, he points to an anthropological commonplace that we will try to explain. The naturalist may need to accept that humans have dispositions that easily yield religious beliefs and feelings and that these are widely utilized to produce moral motivation. This, of course, is different from saying such beliefs are warranted or true.

approach epistemology naturalized is not to think of epistemology as a “chapter of psychology,” where psychology is understood merely descriptively, but rather to think of naturalized epistemology as having two components: a *descriptive-genealogical* component and a *normative* component. Furthermore, not even the descriptive-genealogical component will consist of purely psychological generalizations, for much of the information about actual epistemic practices will come from biology, cognitive neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, and history – from the human sciences broadly construed. More obviously, *normative epistemology* will not be part of psychology, for it involves the gathering together of norms of inference, belief, and knowing that lead to success in ordinary reasoning and in science. And the evolved canons of inductive and deductive logic, statistics, and probability theory most certainly do not describe actual human reasoning practices. These canons (take, e.g., principles governing representative sampling and warnings about affirming the consequent) come from abstracting successful epistemic practices from unsuccessful ones. The database is, as it were, provided by observation of humanity, but the human sciences do not (at least as standardly practiced) involve extraction of the norms. Thus, epistemology naturalized is not epistemology psychologized *simpliciter*.¹⁷ However, since successful practice – both mental and physical – is the standard by which norms are sorted and raised or lowered in epistemic status, pragmatism reigns.¹⁸

The natural objection here is that all the epistemological work has been done in identifying the cognitive *aims*, and that the relevance of empirical work is just in identifying what *accomplishes* those aims. The two projects seem distinct, with neither one affecting the other. How is this “psychologizing” epistemology to any extent whatsoever? As we noted earlier, a naturalistic approach works back and forth between the normative and the descriptive. Our aims are various and are capable of specification on many levels. Given naturalism’s methodology, we can modify our cognitive aims – at least on the more specific levels – with knowledge of how our minds work.¹⁹

Naturalistic Ethics and the Problem of Normativity

The same worries that Putnam and Kim express over Quine’s conception of naturalizing epistemology recapitulate Kant’s worries over Hume’s approach to naturalizing ethics. John McDowell’s criticism of “bald naturalism” in favor of “second nature naturalism” is arguably a way of stating the same concern: namely, that at least some kinds of naturalism are not equipped to explain ethical normativity.²⁰ In any case, moral psychology, sociology, and

17 Alvin Goldman (1986; 1992) has produced arguably the best work in naturalized epistemology. Goldman never tries to derive normative conclusions from descriptive premises. Furthermore, he continually emphasizes the historical and social dimensions of epistemology in a way that Quine perhaps has not. See also Kornblith (1994).

18 In epistemology, pragmatic evaluation is done relative to our cognitive aims. These, to be sure, are themselves norms, and, as such, are subject to the same sort of requests for rationales and warrant as all other norms.

19 If, to take one example, connectionism is right, then this must have implications for the nature of successful inquiry, and in particular what constitutes successful reasoning.

20 Though our approach is different from McDowell’s, we don’t think we can be charged with bald naturalism. Actually, it’s unclear who he would think is an actual bald naturalist in ethics – unless he is thinking of John Mackie, possibly A.J. Ayer, and perhaps some evolutionary psychologists. We’d be interested in hearing him name names.

anthropology (what Kant called the “empirical side of morals”) might tell us what individuals or groups *think* ought to be done, what they *believe* is right or wrong, what they *deem* a good person, and so on. However, all the human scientific facts taken together, including that they are widely and strongly believed, could never *justify* any of these views.

But we should conceive naturalistic ethics in pretty much the same way we conceive naturalized epistemology. Naturalistic ethics will contain a descriptive-genealogical component that will specify certain basic capacities and propensities of *Homo sapiens* – for example, sympathy, empathy, egoism, and so on – relevant to moral life. It will explain how people come to feel, think, and act about moral matters in the way(s) they do. It will explain how and in what ways moral learning, engagement, and response involve the emotions (and which emotions). It will explain what moral disagreement consists in and why it occurs, and it will explain why people sometimes resolve disagreement by recourse to agreements to tolerate one another, without, however, approving of one another’s beliefs, actions, practices, and institutions. It will tell us what people are doing (or trying to do) when they make normative judgments. And finally, or as a consequence of all this, it will try to explain what goes on when people try to educate the young, improve the moral climate, propose moral theories, and so on.

Defenders of naturalistic ethics are continually asked to explain how a better picture of moral psychology *can* contribute to our understanding of ethical theory in general and normative ethics in particular. Moral psychology, cognitive science, cultural anthropology, and the other mental and social sciences can tell us perhaps how people *in fact* think and behave. Ethical theories tell us what the aims of ethics are, where to look to ground morality, and so on, while normative ethics tells us how we *ought* to feel, think, and act. It is hard to see, the objectors claim, how such factual or descriptive knowledge can contribute to the project of understanding the aims of ethics, where the sources of moral motivation lie, and how we ought to live.

First, it should be pointed out that *every* great moral philosopher has put forward certain descriptive-genealogical claims, certain theories of philosophical psychology that postulate basic human dispositions which help or hinder morality (e.g., reason, emotion) and the sources of moral motivation. This is a ubiquitous feature of the moral tradition; *everyone* thinks that philosophical psychology (including, e.g., philosophical anthropology) has *implications* for ethics. And though most of these claims suffer from sampling problems and were proposed in a time when the human sciences did not exist to test them, they are almost all testable – indeed, some have been tested (Flanagan 1991). For example, here are four claims familiar from the history of ethics which fit the bill of testable hypotheses relevant to normative ethics: (1) He who knows the good does it; (2) If you (really) have one virtue, you have the rest; (3) Morality breaks down in a roughly linear fashion with breakdowns in the strength and visibility of social constraints; and (4) In a situation of profuse abundance, innate sympathy and benevolence will “receive tenfold increase” and the “cautious, jealous virtue of justice would never once have been dreamed of” (Hume 1748/1751/1975). Presumably, how the descriptive-genealogical claims fare matters to the normative theories and would have mattered to their proponents.²¹

If this much is right, the question arises as to why the contemporary movement to naturalize ethics raises so many hackles. It is true that *philosophical psychology* – the sort that

21 The descriptive-genealogical component will itself be normative in one sense: it will involve descriptions of human actions (etc.) and thus traffic in intentional description. However, it will not be normatively *ethical*.

can be done from an armchair and which is an assemblage of virtually every possible view of mind – is now giving way to *scientific psychology*, which may eliminate some of the classical views of mind on empirical grounds. If this happens, then our ethical theories will be framed by better background theories about our natures. What could be wrong with this?

Hume's Objection

The standard view, again, is that nothing normative *follows* from any set of descriptive-genealogical generalizations. David Hume is supposed to be the father of this line of objection. Yet Hume (along with Aristotle) is often thought to be a father of ethical naturalism. Could it be that Hume was objecting to his own enterprise? In fact, Hume's "objection" is limited to one paragraph in his *Treatise of Human Nature*:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with...the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with ought or ought not...[A]s this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that should be observ'd and explain'd...how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (Hume 1739/1978)

Hume is making a rather simple point here: one cannot draw normative conclusions from non-normative premises alone. But Hume found the slide from statements of mere fact to statements of value to be characteristic of "vulgar systems of morality." For him, morality was inexplicable without mentioning moral sentiments or passions.²²

Let us return, then, to the objection in its current form: namely, that nothing normative follows from any of the empirical information we might gather from the natural, social, and human sciences. Perhaps the fear is that if the background theory is scientific, this makes ethics a science, or that if the background theory is a science, we can suddenly violate the laws of logic and derive "ought" from "is." However, no one has suggested these things! No important moral philosopher, naturalist or non-naturalist, has ever thought that merely gathering together all relevant descriptive truths would yield a full normative ethical theory. Morals are radically underdetermined by the merely descriptive, but so too, of course, are science and normative epistemology. All three are domains of inquiry in which ampliative generalizations and underdetermined norms abound.

The smart naturalist makes no claims to establish demonstratively moral norms. Instead, he or she points to certain practices, values, virtues, and principles as reasonable based on inductive and abductive reasoning (more on this further on). Indeed, anyone who thinks that Hume thought that the fallacy of claiming to move demonstratively from is to ought revealed that normative ethics was a nonstarter hasn't read Hume. After the famous passages in the *Treatise* about is-ought, Hume proceeds for several hundred pages to do normative moral philosophy. He simply never claims to *demonstrate* anything. Why should he? Demonstration, Aristotle taught us long ago, is for the mathematical sciences, not for ethics.

22 See Sutherland and Hughes (2000).

Moore's Fallacy

Regarding the challenges to naturalism based on open-question arguments, the ethical naturalist has all the resources to effectively meet the challenges. Ethics naturalized need not be reductive, so there is no need to define "the good" in some unitary way such that one can ask the allegedly devastating question: "But is that which is said to be 'good,' good?"

Indeed, the force of open-question arguments fizzled with discoveries about failures of synonymy across the board – with discoveries about the lack of reductive definitions for most interesting terms. Suppose "good" is taken to be a term and we think, as Moore does, that it should have a definition. If Moore thinks (as it seems he does) that a definition ought to supply necessary and sufficient conditions of application, then he is correct that if such a definition were available it would not be "open" to "questioning." However, except for some technical terms (e.g., "even numbers" and "odd numbers") and certain scientific terms, most others do not have necessary and sufficient conditions of application. What we call "dictionary definitions" are a mix of current usage patterns and functional characterizations. This makes sense, given that most terms in natural language have some sort of prototype/exemplar/stereotype structure.²³ It is not surprising that G.E. Moore couldn't find a definition of "good." Failure to find a definition of "good" would no more prove that it names a non-natural property than the same failure to find definitions for "fuzzy" or "chair" would prove that fuzziness is a non-natural property or that chairs are non-natural objects.

Moreover, "good" is not a singular term in our language, including the moral sense of "good." Instead, it is a theoretical term in the following sense: we call different things morally good for different reasons. Moral virtues, for example, are morally good for reasons $r_1, r_2 \dots r_n$, and so on. It takes a complex moral conception to help fix the multiple meanings of "morally good." "Morally good" likely names a heterogeneous set.

Relativism and Nihilism

This leads to some final alleged obstacles to naturalism – namely, that it typically leads to relativism, that it is deflationary and/or morally naive, and that it makes normativity a matter of power: either the power of benign but less than enlightened socialization forces or the power of those in charge of the normative order (possibly fascists, Nazis, or moral dunces).

How does naturalistic ethics avoid extreme relativism or – even worse – nihilism? The answer is simple: *the ends of creatures constrain what is good for them*. The relativist is attuned to relations that matter; not all kinds of food, clothing, and shelter suit us members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Nor do all interpersonal and intrapersonal practices suit us. Thus, there are substantial constraints on what might count as an adequate morality stemming from intrapersonal and interpersonal factors.²⁴ We are social animals with certain innate capacities and interests. Though the kinds of play, work, recreation, knowledge, communication, and friendship we seek have much to do with local socialization, the general fact that we like to play, work, recreate, know, communicate, and befriend seems to be part, as we say, of human nature.

23 See Casebeer (2003) for a similar argument against Moore. Prinz (2002) gives an edifying discussion of concepts and their prototype-like structure.

24 A more detailed account can be found in David Wong's (2006b) *Natural Moralities*.

The distinctively normative component of naturalistic ethics should explain *why* some norms (including norms governing choosing norms), values, and virtues are good or are better than others. One common rationale for favoring a norm or set of norms is that it is suited to modify, suppress, transform, or amplify some characteristic or capacity belonging to our nature – either our animal nature or our nature as socially situated beings. Consider some of the core moral beliefs likely to be found across various cultures: beliefs concerning the permissibility of killing, rights to property and resources, and the need for norms of reciprocity. These beliefs might vary from culture to culture, but they all serve to regulate and promote human social life. Even prior to the powerful (natural) effects of culture, we prefer different things when it comes to shelter, play, communication, and friendship than do beavers, otters, dolphins, birds, orangutans, and bonobos. Morality cannot seek to instantiate behavior that no human beings have a propensity to seek. This much constrains extreme relativism.

This seems to reduce morality to a system of *hypothetical imperatives* that hinge on our wanting to secure certain aims: “If you want to secure social cooperation, then you ought to...” It is true that naturalists cannot allow for *categorical imperatives* if they are conceived of as independent of human interests and values, or categorical imperatives that are binding on all rational beings, wherever they might be. Yet, while the aims of naturalistic ethics are *internal* to the motivational systems of the species *Homo sapiens*, they are *external* to any particular individual member of that species.²⁵ This follows from the view that there are a limited number of goods that human beings seek, given their nature and potentialities, and these goods (or aims) limit what can be placed as antecedents to the hypothetical conditionals. In referring to these facts in moral discourse, one is not simply pointing to preexisting propensities in any given individual, but rather is referring to basic and fundamental reasons stemming from human nature that might help shape and channel the particular propensities of any given individual. In this sense, they do have some “categorical” force.²⁶ Pluralistic relativism articulates and advances a theory about the constraints on “morally adequate” plural ways of life that aim at the set (or some subset) of the goods that constitute morality, broadly construed.

Nihilism is also not a problem. Humans seek value; we aspire to goods, to things that matter and interest us. Now, nihilism can be a problem for individuals when their *motivating* reasons (discussed earlier) are exposed as not good *grounding* or *justifying* reasons. (The loss of faith in parental wisdom and authority during adolescence is one example.) Nihilism is also a familiar problem for theists who lose their faith, and for very depressed humans for whom things have stopped mattering. However, nihilism is not a special problem for naturalists. Animals like surviving; reflective animals like living well. Over world-historical time, reflective animals develop goals for living: welfare, happiness, love, friendship, respect, personal and interpersonal flourishing. These are not an altogether happy and consistent family of values. Still, even if there are incompatibilities involved among the ends we as animals – socialized animals – seek, the fact remains that there *are* ends we seek, and nihilism is not normally an issue; it is not usually a “live option.” Nihilism is the view that *nothing* matters. Things do *matter* for us: certain things matter because of our membership in a certain biological species, and certain things in virtue of how we have evolved as social beings with a history. That is the way it is.

25 For more on this view, see Wong (2006a,b).

26 For another take on the problems of categoricity and nihilism from a naturalistic perspective, see Railton (1986). Railton believes moral imperatives apply even to those who have no reason to follow them, because rationality is not a precondition of moral obligation. This represents one way of introducing categoricity that is different from our own approach. Railton uses a similar tactic to evade nihilism.

Ethics Naturalized: Pluralism and Human Ecology

We close with Dewey's insight that "Moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological, and historic knowledge placed in a humane context where it will illuminate and guide the activities of men" (1922, 204–205). What is relevant to ethical reflection is everything we know, everything we can bring to ethical conversation that merits attention. To put a pragmatist spin on the point, we can say that moral knowledge obeys the canons of inductive and deductive logic, statistics, and probability theory in producing warranted beliefs about which traits are virtues, which are vices, and what values, actions, norms, and principles reliably produce social coordination and human flourishing. The normative component involves the imaginative deployment of information from *any* source useful to self/social examination, forming new or improved norms and values, improving moral educational practices, training moral sensibilities, and so on. These sources include psychology, cognitive science, and all the human sciences (especially history and anthropology), as well as literature, the arts (for the arts are ways of knowing and ways of expressing insights about our nature and about matters of value and worth),²⁷ and ordinary everyday observations about how individuals, groups, communities, nation states, and the community of persons or sentient beings are faring. The aims relevant to these sorts of pragmatic evaluation are various and are capable of specification on various levels. First-order, second-order, third-order, and possibly higher-order level evaluation of norms are things natural human minds can do. We can tinker with these aims, systematizing them where this proves useful, addressing severe conflicts (e.g., between universal and particular duties), and thinking of possible ways of addressing them (e.g., through revising our norms). The pragmatist is committed to the requirement that normative judgments get filled out in conversation and debate, that his or her background criteria are open to criticism and reformulation, and that terms like "what works" and "what conduces to flourishing" are superordinate. Specificity is gained in more fine-grained discussion of particular issues. Even if there is no such thing as "transcendent rationality," no ultimate or non-question-begging way of establishing one's viewpoint over another, there are perfectly reasonable ways of analyzing problems and proposing solutions.

If ethics is like any science or is part of any science, it is part of *human ecology*, concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments. What is good depends a great deal on what is good for a particular community, but when that community interacts with other communities, these too get a say. Furthermore, what might *seem* like a good practice or ideal can, when all the information from history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and literature is brought in, turn out not to have been such a good idea after all. If ethics is part human ecology, then the norms governing the evaluation of practices and ideals will have to be as broad as possible. To judge ideals, it will not do simply to look and see whether healthy persons and healthy communities are subserved by them in the here and now; it must also be the case that this "health" is bought without incorporating practices – slavery, racism, sexism, and the like – which we know can go unnoticed for some time but that can

27 Richard Rorty (1991) convincingly suggests that the formulation of *general moral principles* has proven less useful to the development of liberal institutions than has the gradual *expansion of the imagination*, for example through the writings of individuals such as Friedrich Engels, Harriet Taylor and J.S. Mill, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bronislaw Malinowski, Martin Luther King, Jr., Alexis de Tocqueville, and Catherine MacKinnon.

keep persons from flourishing and eventually poison human relations, if not in the present, at least in nearby generations.

The aims of morality are heterogeneous, not always individually or collectively or at all times optimifically satisfiable. One aim of ethics is to try to make the best of this fact in particular ecological niches, particular historical communities with their own sets of aims, practices, and so forth. Thinking of normative ethical knowledge as something to be gleaned from thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches will make it easier for us to see that there are forces of many kinds, operating at many levels, as humans seek their good; that individual human good can compete with the good of human groups and of nonhuman systems; and finally, that only some ethical knowledge is global: most is local, and appropriately so. It might also make it seem less compelling to find ethical agreement where none is needed.

The localized and contingent nature of many of the values we hold dear is no reason for not cherishing them, no reason to deny them a constitutive role in providing meaning. There are some things to be said for contingency (besides the fact that consciousness of it can possibly undermine confidence, self-respect, and their suite). Recognition of contingency has the advantage of being historically, sociologically, anthropologically, and psychologically realistic. Realism is a form of authenticity, and there is much to be said in authenticity's favor. Furthermore, recognition of contingency can engender respect for human diversity, which engenders tolerant attitudes. This has generally positive moral and political consequences. And this is all consistent with deploying our critical capacities in judging the quality and worth of alternative ways of being. Attunement to contingency, plural values, and the vast array of possible human lives and personalities opens the way for use of important and underutilized human capacities: capacities for critical reflection, for seeking deep understanding of alternative ways of being and living, and for deploying our agentic capacities to modify ourselves by engaging in identity experimentation and meaning location within the vast space of possibilities that have been and are being tried by our fellows. There are many things to be said in favor of emphasizing "consciousness of contingency."

The pluralistic relativist, the pragmatic human ecologist, has the right attitude: right for a world in which profitable communication and politics demand respect and tolerance, but in which no one expects a respectful, tolerant person or polity to lose the capacity to identify and resist evil where it exists, and right in terms of the development of our capacities of sympathetic understanding, acuity in judgment, and self-modification – and, on occasion, radical transformation.

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