

# Morality in the Gaps

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Upon reflection, the bulk of one of the defenses of moral non-naturalism seems to resemble nothing so much as a form of the “God in the gaps” argument that many times surfaces in debates over evolution and creationism. This style argument is also (less confrontationally, perhaps) known as the “argument from ignorance.” In the context of evolution, it is used to claim that since we do not have a natural explanation for some phenomenon, then the reason for that phenomenon must be a divine force. That is, since we do not know the answer (yet), the answer must be God (or some other inscrutable supernatural force). One of the major failings of this argument, at least when presented in the context of evolution, is that as our knowledge increases, the hypothesized role of God shrinks; hence the nickname “God in the gaps.”

Claims of the inexplicability of non-natural moral properties seem at least to be flirting with a similar sort of argument, if indeed they have not already taken on this strategy. As Finlay (In progress) puts it, “non-naturalism is characterized by a general insistence on unproblematic inexplicability and refusal to recognize the legitimacy of further questioning of moral reality.” While non-natural views certainly seem to succeed in the project of internal accommodation (that is, the appearance or “feel” of morality), they really seem to fall down on the project of external accommodation. Moreover, non-natural theories seem to deny even the possibility of engaging in such a project of locating morality in the world (e.g, identifying the manner in which it is connected, broadly speaking, to natural facts about the world), or the related question of how we come to have moral knowledge.

Shafer-Landau, a non-naturalist, attempts to uphold the non-naturalist position in this area not with a positive account, but rather by characterizing naturalism as having “a history of failed attempts” (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p.79). Thus he, and non-naturalists in general, seem to be relying on an assumption that further attempts to construct naturalist theories of morality will similarly fail. This is in lieu of presenting either a positive theory of the nature of moral properties, or a knockdown argument against moral naturalism. As such, the argument for non-naturalism looks like an argument from ignorance. We know not how these properties are related to the natural world, so they therefore must not be natural. The non-naturalist actually takes it a step further, and claims that we cannot know of such a correlation.

This argument would be fine, if it were operating in the opposite direction. In fact, it is pretty much tautological to say that if there are no natural moral properties then we cannot know of such properties. At the very least, knowledge has to be a true belief, and if there are no properties of the relevant sort, any belief in them would be false. However, the problem for the non-naturalist arises because they are trying to run that argument in the reverse, where it is certainly open to question. The claim is since we do not know of these natural moral properties or their nature, then they do not exist.

I recognize that it may in fact be the case that there are no such things as natural moral properties. However, the sort of argument that most non-naturalists put forward to advance this claim is not so much an argument as a plea to intuition, and a parade of past failures on the part of naturalism. Some may claim that we should be able to hold non-naturalism as a backup hypothesis, treating it as a view which we may allow ourselves to fall back on in case we find that a naturalistic explanation of morality cannot be forthcoming. The problem with this approach is that, barring an explicit refutation of the possibility of a naturalistic explanation, we are not warranted in concluding that that search has ended or failed.

As in the situation where increased knowledge and insight about the biological and biochemical processes behind evolution decreases the size of the gaps and constrains the God posited as inhabiting those gaps, more sophisticated ideas and theories of moral naturalism have the potential to force the non-natural moral properties into a smaller space. This follows from the fact that non-naturalism makes really a rather weak claim (from the point of view of refutability). Any properties for which we have no naturalistic explanation (at present) are absorbed under the heading of non-naturalism. If natural science is any model to go by, it is likely that there will remain gaps in any naturalistic moral theory. And as long as there are gaps, there will be a way to slide non-naturalism into those gaps. But what good is a theory that does not explain anything?

As it stands, Shafer-Landau's flavor of non-naturalism does not take on this challenge. He (along with other non-naturalists) agrees that moral properties supervene on the non-moral. But beyond this there is no attempt to understand why it is that there are (as it seems) certain consistent sets of non-moral properties on which particular moral properties are said to supervene. Surely there is a connection, even if it may be difficult to state as a simple identity or as a simple biuniqueness relation between the two domains. But at the same time there is something absurd in the thought that (moral) goodness, say, could supervene on any arbitrarily selected non-moral properties. Yet Shafer-Landau's theory doesn't seem to have any sort of explanatory power when it comes to this issue. He merely says that "a moral fact supervenes on a particular concatenation of descriptive facts just because these facts realize the moral property in question" (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p.77).

In the analogous situation of mental states supervening on physical states, Shafer-Landau cites pain as a paradigmatic example of a non-physical property supervening on a physical property, but where the two properties are not identical. Following Kripke (1972), Shafer-Landau wants to claim that pain can be realized by different physical states by

different people, or in different species, so it cannot be identical to the particular physical state of c-fiber stimulation. To a first approximation, this is an important observation, but I think there is an additional constraint that is missing. We experience pain when there is tissue damage or infection or other harmful biological states. Evolutionarily speaking (roughly), pain is useful as an indicator of biological distress and danger to the body; hence it's phenomenological unpleasantness. It seems quite strange to envision a similarly (or, in fact, identical) unpleasant sensation being related to something beneficial. So it looks like there are constraints on the sort of physical properties and states which pain (or some other non-physical property or state) could supervene on. While these constraints may not be identities in the strictest sense, it seems like there are useful generalizations that may be made from them. Similarly for the domain of the moral; there is likely to be more to the relation between the moral and the non-moral than just non-moral features fixing the moral features of a situation. There are surely constraints on this "fixing," and these constraints are in need of an explanation. It may not be a simple identity, and it may not be an answer to Moore's open question challenge, but it seems like a fruitful direction that is largely ignored in the metaethical literature.

The closest attempt to this that I have seen so far is Philippa Foot's conception of natural normativity and (as specifically related to questions of human morality) natural goodness (Foot, 2001). Features or actions of an organism can be said to be good to the degree with which these features or actions are in accord with that organism's species or "life form" (to avoid entanglement with the technical senses of "species" as used by biologists). From here, Foot proposes that the goodness we are talking about when we use that term in a moral sense is goodness of the human will. Foot is cautious about claims that the human will is really ultimately biologically determined, but it seems like there is a reasonable case to be made for at least some biological connection. After all, the will is part of the human mind, which I would suggest is a natural and ultimately biologically based or constrained object.

Perhaps I am being unfair in some of my criticisms of non-naturalism, as I have in some respects been attempting to hold it to a more scientific standard of acceptability as a theory. And indeed, perhaps it is unfair to hold *non*naturalism to any sort of *natural* standard. But even so, I would persist in wanting to hold the study of morality to a more natural and scientific standard. And one the important tenants of standards of that sort is that theories explain something about the world. Morality is an important component of human life. Much of our behavior is governed by it. Is there not something to be gained by seeking an explanation of this?

## References

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