

Lecture Notes 4 : Naturalist Moral Realism

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A common-stock argument for the view:

(1) A property is real if and only if it is natural.

(2) Moral properties are natural.

∴ (3) Moral properties are real.

A property is natural just when it figures ineliminably in true natural or social laws.

Harman's Explanatory Challenge

How could moral properties have causal efficacy?

You need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral facts to explain the occurrence of the so-called moral observations I have been talking about. In the moral case, it would seem that you need only make assumptions about the psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation. (Harman 1977. 6)

Harman rejects (2), and infers that moral properties are nonexistent, or mere fictions.

Moral realists who accept (1) must find some way to defend (2).

What is an explanation?

Explanations are answers to 'why?' questions that cite causes. A stronger definition:

Counterfactual dependence: Event e explains f if, had e not occurred, f would not have occurred

Note that Harman is not denying the existence of moral beliefs. He is, rather, claiming that:

(4) The best explanation for our moral beliefs is not the existence of moral properties or facts.
But since

(5) Only the best explanations figure in true laws.

∴ (6) Moral properties are not natural properties. (from (4), (5) and the definition of a natural property)

And if (1) is true, then moral properties are not real properties at all.

The Naturalist Response

Nicholas Sturgeon questions (4):

Hitler's moral depravity—the fact of his really having been morally depraved—forms part of a reasonable explanation of why we believe he was depraved (Sturgeon 1988, 234)

Does this meet the counterfactual dependence test?

Harman's Reply

Harman here responds by appeal to moral epiphenomenalism:

Epiphenomenalism: A (set of) event(s) E is epiphenomenal to (another set) F if and only if E is caused by F , but E has no causal influence on F

The notion of supervenience

Here's an example due to R. M. Hare:

If LB1 is a nice room, and LB2 is similar to LB1 in all other respects, then LB2 must be a nice room.

More formally:

A set of properties P supervenes on a set of properties Q if and only if there cannot be any difference in P -properties without a difference in Q -properties.

Moral epiphenomenalists claim that: (i) moral properties supervene on natural properties, and (ii) it is the latter that do all the causal work.

The naturalist rejoinder

Solidity is a supervenient property. But this does not make the solidity of the wall epiphenomenal. The (nonreductionist) moral naturalist asserts that moral properties are, in relevant respects, like solidity.

Study questions

Do moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties?
Can moral naturalists avoid the open question argument?

Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, Ch. 4.

Lenman, J. (2006), 'Moral Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.