

Lecture Notes 5 : Non-Naturalist Moral Realism

Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

Recall the form of Harman's challenge:

- (1) Moral properties are irreducibly normative.
- (2) Irreducibly normative properties are not natural properties.
- (3) Only natural properties are real.

∴ (4) Therefore moral properties are not real.

Cornell realists reject (2). Moral non-naturalists reject (3).

Derek Parfit: moral claims imply reasons for action, and such reasons cannot possibly be natural properties, just like heat could never turn out to be a medieval knight.

Non-naturalism and the *a priori*

Non-naturalist moral realists believe that moral claims are synthetic, *not* analytic, *a priori*.

Naturalists argue, against non-naturalists, that there is no such thing.

Are *categorical* imperatives possible?

Non-reductionism about the mental

My particular headache may be identical with the particular firing of my C-fibres. But there is no metaphysical necessity that anyone who has a headache should have C-fibres, or indeed have C-fibres, or neurons, firing.

Pain (like solidity) supervenes on (disjunctions of) distinct physical property-tokens.

Hence Davidsonian 'anomalous monism' and other forms of non-reductionism in the philosophy of mind.

Constitution and Identity

A particular distribution of clay *constitutes* a statue. Moreover, statues supervene on particular clay-distributions. But a statue is *not* identical to its clay-distribution:

- (5) For any x to be identical to any y , x and y must possess exactly the same properties. (Leibniz's law)
- (6) The statue and the clay do not possess exactly the same properties.

∴ (7) The statue and the clay are not identical.

Likewise, we want to say that certain non-moral properties constitute moral properties, but are not identical to them.

For example:

- (8) A takes B's hat, which B made himself at his own farm, etc., without B's consent.
- (9) A steals B's hat, i.e. *wrongfully* takes it.

NB: (9) follows only in conjunction with certain claims about B's *rightful* ownership.

Cornell realism and non-naturalism

(10) Ethics is but a branch of philosophy.

(11) Philosophy is an *a priori* discipline.

∴ (12) Ethics is an *a priori* discipline.

Some resist (10), by trying to show that ethics can be part of a broader (non-philosophical) form of scientific inquiry (e.g. neuroethics).

The study of logical, or arithmetical 'behaviour' (i.e. how people behave when confronted with logical or arithmetical puzzles), if it existed, would not give us any insight into the solution to logical or arithmetical problems.

Others may be tempted to resist (11). But most of the envisaged questions, and proposed answers, in philosophy do not depend on how the physical world turns out: even if that world turned out to be very different, we would still have to ask what, if anything, free will is, or what, if anything causes are, or what it means to lead a good life, etc.

Study questions

Are non-naturalist moral realists right about moral properties?

Must moral non-naturalists be realists?

Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, Ch. 5.

Ridge, M. (2003), 'Moral Non-Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.