Reductionism in Ethics

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1. What is reductionism in ethics?

Ethical reductionism is a doctrine in metaethics, the area of ethics in which we ask not what the facts are concerning our moral obligations, or concerning what things in life are worth pursuing, but, among other things, questions about the nature (or even the very existence) of such facts. One such question is whether moral facts are, to put it roughly, identical to facts of another kind. Reductionism in ethics is the view that they are. That is, reductionists hold that moral facts, or moral properties, are identical to facts or properties that can be expressed using non-moral vocabulary.

Moral reductionism (i) demystifies moral properties – it tells us what they are. It promises further advantages in (ii) explaining how we can come to know moral facts (*see* MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY), (iii) explaining why moral facts necessarily depend upon non-moral facts (*see* SUPERVENIENCE, MORAL), and (iv) rebutting charges of the explanatory idleness of moral facts (*see* EXPLANATIONS, MORAL). Critics complain, however, that explaining the moral in other terms leaves out what is essential to and important about it: its evaluative or normative nature (*see* NORMATIVITY).

Two simple examples of reductionist views are the following: the property of being morally wrong just is the property of being generally disapproved of; and the fact that some life is a good life is the very same fact as the fact that that life is an enjoyable life. These theses are said to *reduce* a moral or evaluative property or fact to a non-moral, non-evaluative property or fact, in the way that a reductive thesis in the philosophy of mind might reduce psychological

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facts to neurological facts. However, since reduction would seem to be an asymmetrical relation, while identity is symmetric, reduction must evidently be more than mere identity. Still, the identity claim is the core of any reductionist theory, and will be our focus here.

In contrast to reductionism, non-reductionism in ethics holds that at least some moral properties are *sui generis*. Their natures cannot be explained in any other terms; they are not identical to any other kind of property. Non-reductionists in ethics are like dualists in the philosophy of mind, who maintain that at least some mental properties cannot be explained in non-mental terms.

2. What are the main kinds of reductionism in ethics?

Just about all forms of reductionism defended by contemporary moral philosophers are also forms of naturalism (*see* NATURALISM, ETHICAL). Naturalism in metaethics is the view that moral properties are natural properties. But what is a natural property? According to one popular definition, a natural property is a property that can be studied by science. But one would think that it is the naturalness of the phenomenon that makes it amenable to scientific investigation, rather than the other way around. Two more promising conceptions are these: to be a natural property is to be a causally efficacious property; and to be a natural property is to be an empirically discoverable property (where a property is empirically discoverable just in case, roughly, it can be known through the senses, either by being directly observable, or by being inferable from such observations). Since it is not clear that these latter two definitions of naturalness will differ importantly in extension, we need not decide between them here.

Not all forms of reductionism are forms of naturalism. If we conceive of theistic properties, such as the property of being commanded by God, as supernatural rather than natural,

as it is natural to do, then a theory that reduces the property of being morally obligatory to the property of being commanded by God will be a form of reductionism without being a form of naturalism. Note, however, that it is not obvious that either of our definitions of naturalness would exclude God's commands, if they exist, from the realm of the natural (nor that a definition of naturalness should). Despite the possibility of non-naturalist reductionism, common practice reserves the term 'non-naturalism' for non-reductive non-naturalism (*see* NON-NATURALISM, ETHICAL).

Nor are all forms of naturalism forms of reductionism. Our conceptions of reduction and naturalness allow for an easy-to-overlook possibility: that there is no non-moral property to which some moral property is identical, but that this moral property is nonetheless empirically discoverable, perhaps through the role it plays in explaining observable non-moral phenomena. For example, the occurrence of the Holocaust might be best explained by appeal to Hitler's moral depravity, without moral depravity being identified with any particular non-moral property (Sturgeon 1984). This is non-reductive naturalism.

The most important distinction in reductionism is between analytic and synthetic reductionism (or, on an alternative taxonomy, between *a priori* and *a posteriori* reductionism). Analytic reductionists hold that the identity statements that constitute the core of their reductive theories are analytically true, or true simply in virtue of the meanings of their words – in the way that the identity statement that to be a triangle is to be a three-sided polygon is analytically true. Analytic reductionists maintain that these identity statements are knowable *a priori*, or simply by understanding and thinking about them (*see* A PRIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE). Synthetic reductionists maintain that moral/non-moral identifications are knowable only empirically (*see* A

POSTERIORI ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE). A common analogy is the *a posteriori* identification of water and H_2O.

Finally, reductionism comes in realist and constructivist varieties. A reductionist theory is constructivist just in case, according to it, the properties to which moral properties reduce are *stance-dependent*, in the sense that whether something has one of them depends upon the attitudes, responses, or practices that some specified observer or observers take up, or would take up, towards that thing. Examples include *being approved of by an ideal observer* and *being permitted by rules that would be chosen by rational contractors*. If the reduction base is instead a stance-independent property, such as *minimizing suffering* or *acting in accord with natural human function*, then it is a realist theory.

3. Why think that reductionism in ethics might be true?

Moral reductionism purports actually to reveal the nature of moral properties – it enlightens us as to *what it is* for an act to be right, an outcome to be bad, or an arrangement to be unjust. Non-reductionist theories, however, must leave the nature of moral properties unexplained. This is especially troubling in ethics, since moral properties are apparently not directly observable, at least if reductionism is false (although *see* PERCEPTION, MORAL). By contrast, dualists in the philosophy of mind, while they too cannot say much to explain the nature of their object of study (phenomenal consciousness, e.g.), can at least point out that we are all directly acquainted with it anyway.

Reductionism also claims advantages concerning epistemology, supervenience, and the threat of explanatory idleness.

<u>a. Moral Epistemology</u>

Analytic reductionism makes possible a simple and appealing moral epistemology. We can come to know the fundamental moral principle or principles, which on this view turn out to be identity statements linking some moral predicate with some non-moral predicate, through traditional *a priori* conceptual analysis. For example, an analytic reductionist might come to hold that for an act to be morally right is for it to maximize happiness, and that this analytic truth can be known *a priori*. Additional moral knowledge can be obtained by applying the *a priori* principles to particular cases. For example, one might come to know that torture is never right on the basis of the utilitarian principle above together with the empirical claim that torture never maximizes happiness. This need not work exclusively in such a "top-down" fashion either. The *a priori* principles might be refined in light of judgments about imagined particular cases, judgments which are also *a priori*. A possible advantage of this approach is that it seems to reflect, to some degree at least, the actual practices of philosophers and laypeople when thinking about moral problems.

Synthetic reductionist moral epistemology is more complicated. According to one approach, a moral term refers to the natural property that "causally regulates" our use of the term, just as, perhaps, 'water' refers to that natural property – in this case, *being composed of H_2O* – that regulates our use of 'water' (Boyd 1988). It is an empirical matter which natural properties regulate our use of which moral terms. According to another approach, a property such as moral wrongness is identical to whichever natural property happens to play the "wrongness role" (*see* FUNCTIONALISM, MORAL). This role is determined by the collection of obvious truths, or "platitudes," about wrongness, recognition of which is claimed to be constitutive of grasping the concept of wrongness. An example of one such platitude is the claim

that wrongness is exemplified by typical intentional killings (Jackson 1998). Although these platitudes are supposed to be *a priori* and analytic, discovering which natural property plays the role that they determine – and so discovering which natural property *is* wrongness – requires *a posteriori* investigation.

Non-naturalists in ethics, however, are likely committed to the synthetic *a priori*, a controversial epistemological category. One non-naturalist view is that the fundamental principles of ethics are necessarily true conditional claims connecting non-moral features with moral features – such as the claim that if an act is the breaking of a promise, then it is *prima facie* wrong – and that these synthetic truths are knowable *a priori*.

Even if we come to believe in the synthetic *a priori* on independent grounds – the claim that nothing is both red and green all over is a plausible example – ethical non-naturalism faces a further epistemological challenge: How do we become aware of these causally inefficacious, empirically undiscoverable moral properties in the first place? Although one might be puzzled about how we can know, just by understanding it, the apparently synthetic truth that nothing is red and green all over, there is no analogous problem about how we come to be aware of the properties of red and green in the first place: they are empirical properties. Not so for moral properties, if ethical non-naturalism is true. Note also that there is no analogous problem for dualists in the philosophy of mind either: as suggested earlier, they can plausibly maintain that we are empirically acquainted with the mental properties they claim are irreducible.

b. Moral Supervenience

No doctrine in metaethics is more widely endorsed than that of the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. This is the view that if two situations agree with respect to all non-

moral facts, then they must also agree with respect to all moral facts. Why should this be? Reductionism provides a hard-to-beat explanation: moral facts cannot vary independently of non-moral facts because moral facts *just are* non-moral facts. Remember that by 'non-moral fact' we simply mean a fact that can be expressed using non-moral terms; thus a single fact can be both moral and non-moral.

Non-naturalism in ethics, on the other hand, seems unable to explain the supervenience of the moral. It must accept that there are inexplicable, metaphysically necessary connections between moral properties and non-moral properties wholly distinct from them. It must hold the seemingly paradoxical view that there are properties that are both *basic* (in that they are unanalyzable) and *dependent* (in that they can obtain only if certain other properties obtain). Interestingly, non-reductionist views in other areas of philosophy don't face this problem. Dualists in the philosophy of mind, for example, who deny that mental properties are either identical to or realized by non-mental properties, *deny* the supervenience of the mental on the non-mental. They are dualists precisely because they deny this. But denying supervenience is not a plausible option in the moral case (although see Sturgeon 2009).

c. Explanatory Power

Many philosophers, especially those of a broadly naturalist persuasion, are attracted to an Occam's Razor-like explanatory requirement: we have reason to believe in some putative entity just in case positing that entity is required to best explain what we observe in the world. This epistemic principle might explain why we should believe in electrons, but not rain gods. Some hold that moral properties won't be countenanced by such a principle (Harman 1977: ch. 1). We

neither directly observe moral facts nor need to posit them in order to explain what we do observe.

As noted earlier, others doubt this. They contend that positing moral facts is sometimes required for providing the best explanation of observed non-moral phenomena. The issue is contentious, however; critics maintain that the observed events are just as readily explained by appealing to the non-moral facts in virtue of which the supposed moral facts hold (non-moral facts that, given supervenience, we know are available to do this explaining). This is relevant to ethical reductionism because reductionists may be able to sidestep the whole controversy, while adhering to the explanatory requirement. For if, as reductive naturalists maintain, moral properties are identical to already-recognized natural properties, then moral properties survive Occam's Razor.

4. Why think that reductionism in ethics might be false?

Moral reductionism has been the target of sustained criticism since the beginning of twentieth-century metaethics. No attack on it has drawn more attention than G.E. Moore's open-question argument (Moore 1903, esp. §13; *see* OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT). Consider a form of analytic reductionism according to which the expression 'is good' means the same as 'is something we desire'. Now consider these two questions:

Q1:   I see that this is something we desire, but is it *good*?

Q2:   I see that this is something we desire, but is it something we desire?

Q1, intuitively, is an "open question," in the sense that it seems possible for a reasonable person who fully understands it to wonder what its answer is. Not so for Q2. Thus, they must be asking

different things; they must not have the same meaning, contrary to our imagined form of analytic reductionism. Since the point generalizes, analytic reductionism of any kind must be false.

An important complaint against Moore's argument is that it proves too much. Perhaps any term whose definition is less than obvious can generate open questions. Consider the term 'knows', which we understand at least as well as we understand the term 'good'. According to a traditional, but now widely rejected theory, 'knows that p' means the same as 'has a justified true belief that p'. This theory was refuted when counterexamples – cases of justified true belief without knowledge – were discovered. It was *not* refuted by noting that simply wondering about the following question is reasonable:

Q3:   I see that this person has a justified true belief that something is the case, but does she *know* that it is the case?

But Moore's open-question argument suggests that this would have been a successful refutation of the traditional definition of knowledge.

Despite this and other problems, it has seemed to many that Moore was nonetheless on to something. One thought is that questions like Q1, which connect a naturalistic notion with an evaluative notion, will never seem "closed" in the way that questions like Q3, which connect notions from rather similar categories, can. The evaluative or normative simply eludes definition in non-evaluative, non-normative terms. R.M. Hare, who joined Moore in rejecting all forms of reductive naturalism, offered his own version of the argument, which may help to drive home the point (Hare 1952: ch. 5). 'Good' cannot mean the same as 'something we desire', according to Hare, because then it would be impossible to use the sentence 'this thing that we desire is good' in order to *commend* the thing. For we would just be saying the same as if we had said, 'this thing that we desire is something that we desire' – a sentence that, Hare claims, cannot be used to

commend. Other critics of reductionism have offered other variants on Moore's argument (Ayer 1936: ch. 6).

Many philosophers have been persuaded that naturalistic definitions of the moral do leave something out, and so that analytic reductionism is untenable. But some such philosophers have endorsed in its place not some form of non-naturalism (with Moore), non-cognitivism (with Hare), or nihilism, but our other form of reductionism. Synthetic reductionism does not promise that the naturalistic terms that it says refer to moral properties will capture the full meaning of the moral terms that also refer to these properties.

Such theories, which, as noted, are often modeled after *a posteriori* scientific reductions, such as the theory that water is identical to H_2O, face their own challenges, however. First, the semantic theses about moral terms that these forms of synthetic reductionism require – most notably, the idea that moral terms are "twin-earthable" – has been called into doubt (Horgan and Timmons 1991; Barnett 2002; *see* TWIN EARTH, MORAL). Second, although Moore's own open-question argument seems not to apply to synthetic reductionist theories, as they make no claims of synonymy between moral and non-moral terms, versions of Moore's argument tailored to apply to synthetic reductionist theories have been developed (Horgan and Timmons 1992; Gampel 1996). Finally, synthetic reductionism in ethics faces epistemological challenges. Our discovery that water reduces to H_2O began with direct observations of water, followed by investigations into its composition. There is nothing analogous in the moral case, which may present difficulties (Huemer 2005: §4.4). Furthermore, it is not clear that any actual people ever come to their moral beliefs in the way that these scientifically-inspired reductionist theories suggest that we should.

One final drawback to the reductionist program in general is that it may be in tension with certain views in normative ethics, such as some pluralist views. If normative theorizing delivers the monistic result that only pleasure is intrinsically good, then metaethical reductionists can go ahead and identify the property of being intrinsically good with the property being an episode of pleasure. But suppose normative theorizing instead delivers the result that both knowledge and pleasure are intrinsically good. A reductionist would then seem committed to identifying intrinsic goodness with the disjunctive property of *being either an episode of pleasure or a case of knowledge*. But goodness may not seem to be such a gerrymandered property, and may instead seem to be something unified that both knowledge and pleasure have in common. A related worry is that reductionism in metaethics is incompatible with moral particularism – the normative ethical view that there simply are no exceptionless moral principles, as moral-to-non-moral identifications require there to be.

SEE ALSO:

A Posteriori Ethical Knowledge; A Priori Ethical Knowledge; Explanations, Moral; Functionalism, Moral; Moral Epistemology; Naturalism, Ethical; Non-Naturalism, Ethical; Normativity; Open Question Argument; Perception, Moral; Supervenience, Moral; Twin Earth, Moral.

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