

Normativity and Water: The Analogy and Its Limits

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1. Introduction

- a. In this talk, I will be setting aside *analytic naturalism* about normativity as a non-starter. We can all agree that normative *concepts* are primitive and irreducible in the sense that given any proposed natural-normative identity, competent speakers will find it an “open question” whether the proposed identity is correct. If normative properties turn out to be identical to certain natural properties, then the identity in question is not an *analytic* truth—or, at the very least, not an *obvious* analytic truth.
- b. For the purposes of this talk, I will also be glossing over differences between *reductive* and *non-reductive* versions of synthetic naturalism. These differences, while important in some contexts, are not important for my purposes here. Hereafter, when I say *ethical naturalism*, I will mean *synthetic ethical naturalism*, understood in a way that is neutral between reductive and non-reductive accounts.
- c. On first glance: What could be more different than normativity and water?
- d. On closer inspection: There are striking parallels. The ethical naturalists are right to argue for a deep analogy here. (This is *not* to say that I think the analogy is complete.)
- e. The question I want to explore: Granting the depth of the analogy between normativity and water, and between normative inquiry and scientific inquiry more generally, does synthetic ethical naturalism vindicate the objectivity of morality in the sense we ought to be philosophically concerned with?
- f. The answer I will defend: No, it doesn't. More precisely: *Either* the view fails to uphold the objectivity of morality in the sense we ought to be philosophically concerned with, *or* it does uphold it, but in that case only because it has lapsed into either a disguised form of Kantian constructivism or a disguised form of non-naturalist realism, in which case the view confronts all the usual objections that those views face.

2. The analogy

- a. Overview:

	<i>Investigating the nature of water</i>	<i>Investigating the nature of normativity</i>
<i>The concept(s) we begin with</i>	Our everyday concept water . (The concept of a colorless, odorless liquid found in lakes and streams, etc.)	Our everyday normative concepts such as moral wrongness, goodness, and normative reason . (These concepts are primitive and irreducible in the sense mentioned above under 1a.)
<i>Collecting the “samples”</i>	We start with our commonsense, everyday judgments about what is and isn't water. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That (in the stream) is water. • That (in the lake) is water. • That (the liquid in the thermometer) is not water. • That (on Mars) might be water. • That (a shimmering pool on the desert horizon) is water. 	We start with our commonsense, everyday judgments about what is and isn't wrong, good, or a normative reason. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That (the setting of a cat on fire) is wrong. • That (the helping of an injured child) is good. • That (the fact that someone is a member of a minority group) is no reason to accord him lesser treatment.
<i>Studying the “samples”</i>	We systematically investigate what all of our “samples” have in	We systematically investigate what all of our “samples” have in common, seeking to

	common, seeking to identify the underlying property that constitutes water. As part of this investigation, we may decide that some of the liquids that we initially thought were water are not, and we may decide that there in fact <i>is</i> water in places we initially thought there wasn't. We gradually refine and systematize our view about the nature of water; none of our initial judgments about water is in principle immune to revision in this investigation.	identify the underlying property that constitutes moral wrongness, goodness, or the status of being a normative reason for action. As part of this investigation, we may decide that some of the actions or states of affairs that we initially thought were good actually weren't, and we may decide that some things <i>are</i> good that we initially thought were not. We gradually refine and systematize our view about the nature of a good life, or how we have most reason to live; none of our initial normative judgments is in principle immune to revision in this investigation.
<i>What we discover</i>	Water is H ₂ O.	Goodness is natural property N.

- b. The analogy is powerful, and more complete than one might have suspected going in.
- i. The method in both cases: The method of (wide) reflective equilibrium.
 - ii. In both cases, we start by supposing, as a default assumption to which we are entitled until demonstrated otherwise, that our everyday concepts have some meaningful application, and we work to uncover the nature of what it is that we've really been tracking with these concepts.
 - iii. In both cases, if all goes well and we don't decide that the original concept needs to be abandoned as hopelessly confused, then we arrive at a synthetic property identity claim. There is no identity of concepts, but there is an underlying property identity.
- c. So far, so good—or so, anyway, I am going to assume. The question I want to focus on: Does this analogy, or more broadly the ethical naturalist program in metaethics, vindicate the objectivity of morality in the sense we ought to be philosophically concerned with?
- i. It is natural to think so. After all, aren't moral properties as real as water, on this view? Hasn't ethical inquiry been shown to be on all fours with scientific inquiry? What could be more of a vindication than that?
 - ii. The *self-presentation* of ethical naturalists is certainly as of having strongly vindicated the objectivity of morality.
- d. In what follows, I'll argue that that self-presentation is highly misleading. If you want “stark, raving moral realism,” you need to look elsewhere. Ethical naturalists either should be more upfront about the fact that they have given up on moral objectivity in the sense we went into metaethics concerned with, or else they need to acknowledge that there is something going on beneath the surface of their view that puts them in problematic company.
3. Moral objectivity in the sense we ought to be philosophically concerned with
- a. A rough, intuitive statement of what we care about when it comes to morality: Are we normatively bound by morality no matter what our contingent evaluative attitudes? For example, is someone who does not give a hoot about the suffering of others making a mistake of any kind—in particular, a mistake about what matters, about what normative reasons there are, about how to live? Are there any truths about the subject matter of how to live that hold in a way that is *robustly* independent of what we happen to care about and happen to think about these matters? (Of course there are *modestly* attitude-independent truths about how to live.)
 - b. *Uncompromising realism about normativity* = the view that there are at least some normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes, such that an agent can have normative reason to X even though the conclusion that she has this reason in no way follows, as a logical or instrumental matter, from within her own global evaluative standpoint, in combination with the non-normative facts.

- c. *Normative antirealism* = the view that there are *no* normative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes in this way. According to the antirealist, if an agent has normative reason to X, then this conclusion must somehow follow, as a logical or instrumental matter, from within her own global evaluative standpoint, in combination with the non-normative facts. We may distinguish further between “Kantian constructivist” and “Humean constructivist” versions of antirealism.
- d. A summary, illustrating with reference to Gibbard’s case of an “ideally coherent Caligula”¹:

	<i>Are there some normative reasons that agents have even though the conclusion that they have this reason in no way follows from within their own global evaluative standpoint?</i>	<i>Is an ideally coherent Caligula possible?</i>	<i>If an ideally coherent Caligula existed, would he have most normative reason to torture others for fun?</i>	<i>If defensible, would the view vindicate moral objectivity in the sense we should be philosophically concerned with?</i>
<i>Uncompromising realism</i>	Yes.	Yes.	No, he’d be badly mistaken about his reasons.	Yes.
<i>Kantian antirealism (what I also call “Kantian constructivism”)</i>	No.	No. One is guilty of an incoherence if one judges that one has most normative reason to torture others for fun.	The question has a false presupposition.	Yes.
<i>Humean antirealism (what I also call “Humean constructivism”)</i>	No.	Yes.	Yes. (Of course we still might <i>say</i> otherwise, if we think that would help.)	No.

4. A test case for ethical naturalism

- a. Imagine two (for the moment causally isolated) communities:
- i. The members of **community A** hold that the fact that setting a cat on fire would be fun is no reason whatsoever to do so, and (let us stipulate) they are ideally coherent in holding this position.
 - ii. The members of **community B** hold that the fact that setting a cat on fire would be fun is a good reason to do so, and (let us stipulate) they are ideally coherent in holding this position.
- b. The methodology described earlier—common between inquiry into the nature of water and inquiry into the nature of normativity—will lead the two communities to different conclusions:
- i. Given the normative “samples” that **community A** starts out with, the pursuit of reflective equilibrium will lead them to the conclusion that the good life consists in one with **natural**

¹ Allan Gibbard, “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures,” *Ethics* 110 (1999): 140-164, p. 145.

- features N**, where a life with natural features N is one in which (say) one never tortures animals for fun.
- ii. Given the normative “samples” that **community B** starts out with, the pursuit of reflective equilibrium will lead them to the conclusion that the good life consists in one with **natural features O**, where a life with natural features O is one in which (say) one regularly tortures animals for fun.
- c. We may further imagine that causal feedback processes will serve to regulate the desires, behavior, and ultimately the normative convictions of members of community A and community B, respectively, gradually bringing their views more in line with the discovery (in the case of community A) that the good life is a life with natural properties N, and the discovery (in the case of community B) that the good life is a life with natural properties O. The process of discovering what natural property they were tracking all along needn’t be reflective. Just as Lonnie (in Railton’s example) learns, by means of a “wants/interests mechanism,” that his objective good includes drinking 7-Up rather than milk when dehydrated, so members of community B (for example) might learn that a good life includes torturing animals for fun.
 - d. When communities A and B go to investigate the nature of normativity, then, they will discover the truth of the two following synthetic property identities, respectively:
 - i. Community A: *The good life consists in a life with natural property N.*
 - ii. Community B: *The good life consists in a life with natural property O.*
 - e. The basic challenge (to be elaborated further): Synthetic ethical naturalists can’t accommodate this case without either (a) making it clear that they have given up on moral objectivity in the sense we should care about, or else (b) implicitly going either Kantian constructivist or non-naturalist realist.
 - f. How is this challenge different from Horgan and Timmons’s “Moral Twin Earth” challenge?
 - i. Horgan and Timmons pitch their point as one about the *semantics* of moral terms. Their claim is that moral terms do not operate like natural kind terms such as ‘water’. They argue that synthetic ethical naturalists are mistaken to accept “causal semantic naturalism” for moral terms, according to which each moral term *t* rigidly designates the natural property N that uniquely causally regulates the use of *t* by humans.
 - ii. My point is not—at least not in the first instance—about the semantics of moral terms. For all I want to argue here, there might be something deeply right about the analogy that the ethical naturalists wish to draw between normativity and water. My claim is just that the overall picture does not vindicate the objectivity of morality in the sense we went in caring about, and we should be clear about that fact.
 - iii. Furthermore, different planets, causally isolated communities, and so forth, ultimately have nothing to do with it, in my view. The same point ultimately applies to individuals within the same community. (More on this below.)
 - iv. Finally, Horgan and Timmons focus on the case of morality. I am talking about normativity across the board.
5. What it would take to uphold genuine moral objectivity, and why the ethical naturalist can’t say it
- a. To uphold genuine moral objectivity, one needs to say that community A and community B are discussing (or taking positions on) a common subject matter—the subject matter of how to live—and that community B is mistaken about how to live. To say anything less is to admit that it’s okay to torture animals for fun so long as one is ideally coherent in thinking and feeling that it’s okay.
 - b. But the ethical naturalist cannot accommodate this thought—that community B is mistaken about how to live. To argue for this point, I’ll consider a series of possible naturalist responses to the example, arguing that each is unacceptable.
 - c. First response
 - i. *Naturalist*: In discussing the scenario just now, you invoked the idea of how to live *simpliciter*. But there is no answer to the question how to live *simpliciter*. There is *what’s morally good*, and

there is *what's good for an individual*, but there is no such thing as what's good *simpliciter*.
(Copp.)

- ii. *Reply*: Not only does this view not uphold the objectivity of morality, this is normative nihilism. On this view, there is no answer to the question how to live. Example: Your child consults you about how to handle a bullying situation at school. Your child is asking you what to do *period*. A normative claim is a claim that takes a stand on *that* question.²

d. Second response

- i. *Naturalist*: But the fact that normative terms are rigid designators allows us to say everything we want to say about community B. I, standing here in community A, am able to look over at community B, and say that what they're doing is not good.
- ii. *Reply*: No, this view does not allow us to say everything we want to say. If this is how the terms operate, then we (communities A and B) are just talking past each other. There is no common subject matter about which community A is right and community B is wrong. The reference of our word 'good' is fixed by *our* actual evaluative attitudes and the reference of their word 'good' is fixed by *their* actual evaluative attitudes. Moreover, it's not clear why this point doesn't carry over to "communities" of one—i.e., to different individuals within a single community, so long as their most fundamental evaluative attitudes are different enough in character. In virtue of fundamentally different basic evaluative attitudes, an ideally coherent Caligula's use of normative concepts (and here I am talking about general normative concepts such as *normative reason*, *should*, and *ought*, as opposed to moral concepts) will be "causally regulated" by a different natural property than ours. His, for example, will be regulated by a natural property that involves promoting the suffering of the powerless when fun and possible; ours is not so regulated.

e. Third response

- i. *Naturalist*: Community B is mistaken about the correct synthetic property identity. They have made a mistake in arriving at this view. The good life consists in a life with natural property N, not O.
- ii. *Question*: What is the mistake you think they made?
- iii. *Naturalist answer 1*: You stipulated that they're ideally coherent—that this conclusion about the good life's consisting in O is what would fall out of their views in reflective equilibrium—but that can't be. In reflective equilibrium, they would reach the same conclusion as we would concerning what constitutes the good life; the good life consists in N.
- iv. *Reply*: Then you are really just a Kantian constructivist in disguise. You think that no matter what normative views an agent begins with, a commitment to morality is ultimately entailed by those views. But Kantian constructivism isn't plausible (and in any case is certainly not the kind of position that ethical naturalists ever otherwise seem inclined toward).³
- v. *Naturalist answer 2*: Okay, fine, we can imagine a case in which a community concludes, in reflective equilibrium, that the correct synthetic property identity is between goodness and natural property O, but in that case they have simply arrived at a false view about the correct synthetic property identity. There is an independent fact of the matter—a fact that holds independently of what any given community would conclude in reflective equilibrium—about which natural property, N or O, goodness *really* consists in, and the members of community B have failed to recognize that fact.
- vi. *Reply*: Then you are really just a non-naturalist realist in disguise. You are taking community A and B to be disagreeing about a common subject matter, in this case *what is the correct synthetic property identity*, and you are insisting that there is a mind-independent fact of the matter about

² I argue for this point in greater depth in "Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About," *Philosophical Issues* (a supplement to *Noûs*), vol. 18 on "Interdisciplinary Core Philosophy," ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008, pp. 207-228, section 8.

³ I say more about why I think Kantian constructivism isn't plausible in "Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason," in *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, eds. James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 40-59.

which community is right. But this just takes all the metaphysical and epistemological mysteries associated with the non-naturalist realist's posited realm of robustly mind-independent normative truths, and transfers them to a realm of robustly mind-independent truths about the correct synthetic property identity.⁴ The terminological guise of the position has changed, but the underlying view and all its associated problems have not.

1. Note that the view being suggested here would be the equivalent, in the Twin Earth case, of granting that there is a sense (the “what’s in the head” sense) in which we and Twin Earthlings share a *concept*—sharing, in particular, the concept *water* in the sense of “colorless, odorless liquid found in lakes and streams”—and yet then insisting that there is an *independent fact of the matter* about which chemical compound, H₂O or XYZ, is the compound to which that shared concept *really* applies, such that Twin Earthlings are mistaken to apply that concept to XYZ. This, presumably, would be an extremely bizarre and implausible view.
2. This is where the water/normativity analogy breaks down. We are not disturbed by the thought that there is no mind-independent fact of the matter about which chemical compound, H₂O or XYZ, is *really* “water” in the shared sense of “colorless, odorless liquid found in lakes and streams.” We *are* disturbed by the analogous admission in the moral case. (Note: That doesn’t mean the admission is incorrect. It might be exactly the right view.)

f. Fourth response

- i. *Naturalist*: What you’re calling “uncompromising realism” is crazy. My own view is the best we can do.
- ii. *Reply*: I agree with you that uncompromising realism is mistaken (though I don’t agree that the position is crazy or easily dismissed). I also agree that something along the lines of your view *is* the best we can do. My only point here is that your view does *not* get us moral objectivity in a sense that allows us to deny that an ideally coherent Caligula who popped up among us would be making mistake about how to live. And it would be good to admit that point upfront.

6. Conclusion

- a. Ethical naturalists either need to come out as non-naturalist realists or Kantian constructivists in disguise, or else they need to be much clearer and more forthcoming about the sense in which they have given up on a genuinely objectivist view about morality or normativity more generally. On their view, as on my own “Humean constructivist” view, there are no truths about how to live that aren’t *ultimately* a function of our contingent evaluative standpoint on the world.
- b. Put another way: Those “samples” of goodness we started with? There is ultimately no world-guided constraint on how we apply normative concepts such as *good* (simpliciter), on how we pick out the initial set of “samples.” An ideally coherent Caligula, who has a radically different motivational structure and evaluative standpoint on the world, will start his inquiry with a very different set of “samples,” and we won’t be able to accuse him of conceptual incompetence. (This is arguably the lesson of the open question argument.)
- c. As a result, it will turn out that Caligula is tracking, with *his* concept of goodness, a very different natural property than we are. He might be tracking O, while we are tracking N. And we won’t be able to say, truly, that he is making a mistake in doing so. In other words, there is no fact of the matter about who is right, between him and us, about the question how to live, though of course we might *say* there is if we think that doing so might help to stop him.

⁴ I develop this point in greater depth in “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-166, section 7.