

NATURALISM AND THE NEW MORAL INTUITIONISM

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to defend moral intuitionism, in its new formulations, against the criticism that there is something objectionably non-natural about its conception of moral properties. The force of this complaint depends crucially on what it means to be a non-natural property. I consider a number of ways of drawing the natural/non-natural distinction and argue that, once the notion of 'non-natural property' is sufficiently clarified, it fails to figure in a compelling argument against moral intuitionism.

Moral intuitionism, in its classic formulation, was the favored view of a number of significant British moral theorists in the first part of the twentieth century, including G. E. Moore (1993), H. A. Prichard (1912), and W. D. Ross (2002). By the 1950s, intuitionism had fallen out of philosophical favor, and until quite recently, the view has been considered unworthy of serious attention.¹ Philosophers such as Robert Audi (2004) and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) have developed updated versions of intuitionism and argue that their theories are at least as promising as competing metaethical accounts, realist or otherwise. While intuitionism is starting to regain credibility, it remains an outlier position. One of the obstacles to its wider acceptance, I suspect, is its apparent incompatibility with a naturalistic worldview.

In this paper, I defend intuitionism, in its newer forms, against the criticism that there is something objectionably non-natural about its conception of moral properties. After surveying several prominent characterizations of natural and non-natural properties, I conclude that each account has some feature that prevents it from discrediting intuitionism in one or another of the following ways. (1) The required notion of 'natural property' is unusable for the intended purposes; it does not allow us to distinguish natural properties from non-natural ones. (2) The demand that moral properties be natural looks dubious. (3) Moral properties, as conceived by the moral intuitionist, are in fact perfectly natural. (4) Wherever this naturalistic

objection to moral intuitionism is in itself plausible, it also afflicts other reasonable brands of moral realism. I argue that each result blocks the charge that intuitionism faces some special ontological difficulty with respect to naturalism.

I. INTUITIONISM: OLD AND NEW

Before examining this naturalistic objection to moral intuitionism, let me first clarify the intuitionistic position. As I shall understand it, moral intuitionism is a realistic metaethical theory about the nature of moral properties and our knowledge of them. Intuitionists of all sorts are realists about morality: they claim that at least some properties picked out by our moral terms, such as ‘morally right’ or ‘morally good,’ are instantiated and that facts involving these moral properties obtain or fail to obtain independently of us, insofar as they do not depend on our beliefs or attitudes, provided that the facts in question do not involve these beliefs or attitudes themselves.² Furthermore, according to any moral realist—intuitionists among them—moral opinions express one’s cognitive attitude, such as belief or doubt, about truth-apt moral propositions, where the truth-makers for these propositions are facts about the way things morally stand. Intuitionism is minimally distinguished from other forms of moral realism by its contention that it is possible for us to become aware of some moral facts non-inferentially. According to intuitionism, some credible moral beliefs are not held on the basis of other premises. That promise-keeping is morally right or that willful cruelty is morally wrong are moral facts that many intuitionists think can be recognized to be true in their own rights and without inference from additional evidence. While these claims represent the core commitments of any intuitionistic theory, it is important to distinguish different formulations of the view.

Intuitionists of the early twentieth century, such as W. D. Ross, believed that some non-inferential moral knowledge was non-empirical. Ross (2002: chap. 2), like his contemporaries Moore (1993: 193–194) and Prichard (1912: 28 and 36), explained the possibility of such non-inferential, non-empirical moral knowledge in terms of the self-evidence of the basic truths believed. Ross further claimed that our beliefs in such self-evident truths were indubitable and also incapable of proof (2002: 30). Unfortunately, these latter claims left Ross’s intuitionism open to the charges that it is dogmatic, insofar as crucial moral opinions seem to stand beyond rational discussion or dispute, and that it is simply false, as few, if any, of our moral beliefs appear certain.³ It was also supposed that older formulations of intuitionism were committed to internalism about moral motivation in some unacceptable fashion. Internalism about moral motivation is the view that there is a necessary or conceptual connection between genuinely affirming a moral truth and having a motive, albeit a defeasible one, to act appropriately. Critics thought that intuitionism required the existence of strange, intrinsically motivating moral qualities, qualities that—as J. L. Mackie (1977: 40) put it—have “to-be-pursuedness” built into their very natures, as well as a distinctive, and equally mysterious, faculty of moral perception to detect their instances.

It is important to stress that newer articulations of intuitionism are not subject to many of these old objections.⁴ New intuitionists are also rationalists about basic moral knowledge and often claim that some moral facts are self-evidently true.⁵ Yet, unlike their predecessors, new intuitionists note that the self-evidence of such truths does not entail that our beliefs in them must be indefeasible, infallible, or free from doubt.⁶ Furthermore, the fact that such truths are in no need of proof—since they can be seen to be true without reliance on such reasoning—does not preclude them from being so proved,⁷ as Ross mistakenly claimed. New intuitionists stress that the prospect of non-inferential and non-empirical moral knowledge does not require us to possess some occult moral sense. Our recognitions of moral truths are underwritten by nothing more peculiar than the capacity for rational reflection, a capacity that may already be manifested in our knowledge of mathematics and logic. In addition, the new intuitionists question the standard arguments for internalism about moral motivation.⁸ If internalism were false, the connection between recognizing a moral truth and being motivated to act accordingly would be mediated by something external to the moral belief itself, such as a desire to be moral. On this view, intuitionism need not require positive moral qualities to contain “to-be-pursuedness” in their natures, since it would be possible, even if unlikely, for one to recognize the moral rightness of some act, yet fail to have any motivation to perform or promote it.

II. THE NATURALISTIC OBJECTION

Recent varieties of intuitionism avoid many of the complaints that afflicted older versions of the view. Still, new intuitionism faces resistance in many quarters. I here wish to address one prevailing worry, namely, that the ontological commitments of this metaethical theory are at odds with the naturalistic worldview of contemporary analytic philosophy. Philosophers have often leveled this objection against moral intuitionism—both new and old—and it relies upon two key claims. First, objectors think that, if there are any moral properties, they must be natural. The critics impose what I call a ‘naturalistic constraint’ on any adequate moral ontology. A central motivation for this constraint is a commitment to *philosophical* naturalism, a view according to which everything is natural. If reality is populated by natural entities⁹ exclusively, then moral qualities could not be non-natural. Second, it is supposed that, if moral intuitionism, in any of its formulations, were true, moral qualities would be non-natural.¹⁰ These two claims appear to make trouble for intuitionism. If the moral qualities of intuitionism are non-natural, and if moral properties must be natural in order to exist, then an intuitionistic account of moral properties must be mistaken. Because ethical non-naturalism is supposed to be an indefensible position, intuitionism is often viewed as the least promising kind of moral realism.

The success of this attack upon intuitionism depends crucially on what it means to be a natural property. Despite the large number of naturalizing projects in philosophy today, there is no consensus on how to distinguish the natural from

the non-natural. When commentators complain that intuitionism cannot respect the naturalistic constraint, the boundaries of the categories ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ are not always drawn with care. Critics of intuitionism rarely do much to explain what natural properties are. The ways in which we distinguish the natural from the non-natural have serious implications for both the plausibility of the naturalistic constraint and the intuitionist’s ability to respect it. Once we press for a clearer account of naturalness, I submit that this criticism of intuitionism loses its force.

While the classic intuitionists, such as Ross and Moore, explicitly endorsed ethical non-naturalism, we must remember that ‘non-natural’ did not always have the same meaning then as it does today. As Ross understood it, if a moral predicate fails to be definable in purely non-moral terms, then the property to which it refers is non-natural (1939: 6–9). Non-naturalistic ethical theories, said Ross, “preserve at least one ethical term as irreducibly different from any term expressive of ordinary matter of fact” (1939: 8). I do not mean to suggest that ‘non-naturalism’ had a univocal meaning during Ross’s time. Moore notably struggled to clarify what he meant by ‘non-naturalness’, and he offered several proposals during his career.¹¹ Still, Ross’s formulation captures the minimal commitments of non-naturalists during this period.¹² Since the aim of this paper is to evaluate the charge that intuitionism is committed to an extravagant ontological view about the nature of moral entities, I shall not be concerned with semantic theses about the meanings and definitions of moral terms.¹³ Even if it were the case that moral terms are “irreducibly different” from factual terms, or that the predicate ‘morally required’ means something different from ‘maximizes happiness,’ moral properties still might be natural.

Whether or not Ross or Moore were ethical naturalists in one of the ontological senses that I shall consider is a harder question to answer, since their theories were deeply influenced by, and embedded within, the prevailing philosophical worldviews of their time. For this reason, I am hesitant to speculate about which contemporary commitments they would have endorsed had they been writing today. I am more concerned with the cogency of the naturalism objection as it affects the newer and more plausible formulations of intuitionism. Henceforth, unless otherwise qualified, I shall use the term ‘intuitionism’ to refer to the new intuitionistic theories.

To evaluate the charge that intuitionistic moral properties, i.e., moral properties as conceived by the intuitionist, are objectionably non-natural, I shall survey several leading accounts of ‘natural properties.’ In the end, I conclude that none of these elucidations supports this criticism. Each account of ‘natural property’ has some feature that prevents it from undermining intuitionism in one of the following ways. (1) The relevant notion of ‘natural property’ cannot be used in the service of the naturalistic objection; it does not allow us to distinguish natural properties from non-natural ones. (2) The naturalistic constraint proves to be unfounded and we should not require moral properties to be natural. (3) Intuitionistic moral properties are in fact natural, and intuitionism respects the naturalistic constraint. (4) Wherever this naturalistic objection to moral intuitionism appears compelling, it also afflicts other reasonable brands of moral realism. If, following (4), any plausible realist view is also

committed to ethical non-naturalism, this would block the charge that intuitionism faces some *special* ontological difficulty vis-à-vis the naturalistic constraint.

Nowadays, a leading form of moral realism seems not to be intuitionism, but Cornell moral realism, a non-reductive realist view advanced most notably by Richard Boyd (1988), David Brink (1989), and Nicholas Sturgeon (1988).¹⁴ Briefly, Cornell realists see no relevant disanalogy between moral thought and scientific thought, and they claim that moral properties are ontologically and epistemologically akin to the properties of natural science. According to Cornell realists, we know about moral facts just as we do the facts of natural science, through empirical investigation and theory-dependent inference. As Richard Boyd explains, “I understand the analogy between the development of scientific knowledge and the development of moral knowledge to be very nearly exact” (1988: 208).

The aim of this paper is not to adjudicate between intuitionism and its realist rivals, nor is it to argue that moral realism itself is true. Rather, my concern is to remove one barrier to the wider acceptance of intuitionism. If I can establish that the ontological commitments of moral intuitionism are at least as plausible as those of its chief realist competitors, this will be a significant result, since I believe that philosophers often dismiss intuitionism because of concerns about its ontology.

III. OSTENSIVE ACCOUNTS

It might be supposed that we can distinguish the natural from the non-natural by ostension. According to this account, we could elucidate the distinction by pointing to paradigm cases of natural and non-natural things. Stars, mountains, and electrons are to be natural, while angels and miracles count as non-natural. Being human or negatively charged would be examples of natural qualities, being telepathic or magical would not. Perhaps the shape of the natural/non-natural distinction would then emerge from such lists.

However, it is not obvious that these lists will provide a helpful elucidation of ‘natural property.’ The examples themselves are not without controversy. For instance, one could dispute the categorization of angels as non-natural. Moreover, the concepts in each category seem to share a number of commonalities, any one of which might fix the natural/non-natural distinction. The concepts *tree* and *electron* pick out entities that are not supernatural, are not occult or paranormal, and are also not mythical. Presumably the ideas of ghosts and magical forces are supernatural, occult, paranormal, and mythical. Hence, the examples given above fail to distinguish the natural/non-natural division from a number of alternative category divisions, such as non-mythical/mythical or non-supernatural/supernatural. Further, if the natural/non-natural distinction does collapse into one of these further distinctions, intuitionism would not violate the correlative naturalistic constraint. There need be nothing mythical nor supernatural about intuitionistic moral properties. Of course, we would need a further account of what it means to be supernatural, if a defining feature of naturalness is not being supernatural. Importantly, citing alleged examples fails to provide us with the necessary account.¹⁵

The main point is that a useful criterion of naturalness simply does not emerge from these lists alone. We still do not know what makes allegedly natural properties *natural*, and it is not enough merely to say that natural properties are not supernatural. Absent a further story, we cannot reliably distinguish natural properties from generally non-natural ones on this ostensive approach; this is an instance of result (1) mentioned above.

IV. NARROW, SCIENCE-BASED ACCOUNTS

It is common for explications of ‘natural property’ to refer to the natural sciences, and I consider several variations of this view. Some philosophers claim that a property is natural provided that it figures in a scientific description of things. Science-based accounts elucidate the notion of naturalness in terms of what science licenses us to accept. Science is to be the ultimate arbiter of what is natural. David Brink, for instance, claims that natural properties are those “picked out and studied by” science (1989: 22). For Roger Crisp, this means that “natural properties are those postulated in scientific explanations” (1996: 116), while Frederick Schmitt claims that “it would do best to define ‘natural’ as ‘what is recognized by natural science’” (1995: 343). The natural sciences are thought to reveal a certain class of entities, and these entities are to be the natural ones.

We should not grant at the outset that the social sciences, such as political science and sociology, are also among those disciplines that fix the class of natural things for the following reasons. First, the social sciences abound in reference to intentional states and functions, and all manner of relations and entities, such as culture, symbolic interactions, actor networks, technological determinism, and so forth. If we adopt a social science-based criterion of naturalness, the now-contentious issue of whether or not these disciplines can be naturalized would be moot. Second, I am less sure how to distinguish a social science from a non-social science, and I doubt that all the multifarious entities of the standard social sciences deserve the label ‘natural.’ Finally, I do not see why one’s ontological commitments must be hostage to the dictates of the social sciences. Many social sciences recognize moral values and obligations, but only under a non-realist conception. If the moral properties of the realist turn out to be non-natural because they are not cited by the social sciences, this should not count against the realist’s ontology. I do not deny that some social scientific entities might be natural, under certain understandings of naturalness. I simply do not think we should render the question closed by finding all such entities to be, by definition, natural.

If the natural sciences are to fix the class of natural entities, we must first identify these scientific disciplines. Biology and physics are natural sciences, while library science and astrology are not. It is notoriously difficult to say what makes a human activity a *science*. Philosophers have had little apparent success uncovering the necessary and sufficient conditions that distinguish science from non-science.¹⁶ Unfortunately this failure means that we will be unable to settle satisfyingly certain disputes that break out over the naturalness of particular disciplines, such as clinical

psychology or mathematics, and this in turn threatens our ability to determine the naturalness of large classes of properties.

Even if there were a way to distinguish a science from a non-science, another well-known difficulty with basing one's ontological commitments on scientific disciplines remains. Scientific beliefs and theories change over time, and current scientific thought is certainly both incomplete and incorrect. There are many genuine entities that contemporary science neither studies nor posits, and surely some of the scientific entities it does postulate are in truth non-existent. Thus, if it is present-day scientific theory that fixes the class of natural entities, there seems to be no reason whatsoever to suppose that moral properties must be natural to exist, i.e., the naturalistic constraint would be unfounded. Alternatively, if we tie the criterion of naturalness to a true and complete natural science, we would be in the dark as to which properties are natural, since we do not know what a complete science looks like.¹⁷ The class of natural things likely includes entities we could not now imagine. At minimum, this conception of naturalness lacks the resources to pose a threat to intuitionism or to any other standard view in metaethics. One could not object that moral properties are non-natural if one cannot distinguish a natural property from a non-natural one. This again is a version of result (1).

For those not convinced by this line of argument, let us suppose that the above criterion does allow us to determine the naturalness of any given entity. Quarks, genes, and stars are presumably the objects of natural scientific study, and hence qualify as natural. Ghosts and telepathic powers, for instance, would count as non-natural; they are not picked out by physics and astronomy and so on.¹⁸ Moral qualities, such as being morally right or morally good, also are not among the subject matters of current science and nor do they seem to figure in its explanations or laws. If an entity must be cited by a scientific explanation or research program to be natural, then intuitionistic moral properties are not natural. Yet, according to this criterion for naturalness, *any* metaethical theory that recognizes the existence of moral properties would violate the naturalistic constraint. Intuitionists would be non-naturalists simply in virtue of being moral realists, and in this regard, they are certainly not alone in their failure to be ethical naturalists. In this case, result (4) would be operative: the said naturalistic objection does not isolate a unique problem of moral intuitionism. Furthermore, I see no reason to suppose that moral properties must be *scientific* to exist. Many apparently real entities, such as chairs and mothers-in-law, do not figure in the laws of natural science. If these ordinary objects turn out to be non-natural, then the fact that moral qualities are also non-natural cannot count against the intuitionist. That is to say, we could alternatively follow strategy (2) and question the requirement that intuitionism must meet this version of the naturalistic constraint.

V. WIDE, SCIENCE-BASED ACCOUNTS: REDUCTION

Other science-based accounts of the natural are less restrictive than the one just outlined, broadening the class of natural things to include not only scientific entities,

but also those entities ontologically related to them in a certain way. Individuals and attributes that bear the right ontological relation to the objects of natural science might be afforded full naturalistic status, although they are not themselves studied by the natural sciences. In what follows, I consider three ontological relations invoked in contemporary formulations of ethical naturalism: reduction, supervenience, and constitution.

Reductive science-based accounts extend the label ‘natural’ to those entities that reduce to scientific ones. As I shall understand it, ‘reduction’ means that one class of entities can be *identified with* a class or sub-class of others. If *A* is reducible to *B*, then *A* and *B* pick out the self-same quality; *A* is in fact identical to *B*.¹⁹ On this understanding, properties that are type-identical to scientific properties are considered natural; those that are not are non-natural. Thomas Baldwin (1985), Michael Huemer (2005), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2001) each appeal to this criterion in their respective accounts of ethical naturalism.

The problem is that there are independent reasons to deny that moral types reduce to a particular complex of physical, biological, or chemical properties. Being morally wrong is related to a wide range of scientific states. According to the ethical pluralism new intuitionists embrace, there are many ways to be morally wrong and morally wrong actions do not always share some further natural feature. Cases of promise-breaking and murder each instantiate moral wrongness, yet on a pluralistic view, there are no further kinds, natural or otherwise, common to these morally negative actions. If the property of being wrong could occur in the absence of natural property or properties *N*, then instances of wrongness cannot be identified with, and cannot reduce to, instances of *N*.

The reductivist might protest that ethical pluralism is simply not true, maintaining instead that there is a single natural kind shared by all morally required actions, such as maximizing utility or promoting human well-being. Unfortunately, such naturalistic moral reductions face a number of problems. For any candidate moral-natural identity claim, there are apparent counterexamples; some actions that would promote well-being, for example, seem not to be morally required. Furthermore, it is not clear that the proposed property to which the moral quality is identical—promoting human flourishing—is itself a natural property in the relevant sense, i.e., a property that figures in scientific laws or is studied by science.

Perhaps the naturalness of the moral could instead be established by identifying moral properties with some large disjunctive class of natural properties. On this proposal, even though being morally right is not identical with the instantiation of some scientific property *n*₁, it might be identical with being either *n*₁ or *n*₂ or *n*₃ or *n*₄, and so on. We would include, in the reduction base, any naturalistic way in which moral rightness could be realized and then identify moral rightness with this disjunction of natural properties.²⁰

Against this reductivistic strategy, Cornell moral realist David Brink has claimed that “the fact that moral properties can be realized by an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of combinations of natural properties provides another reason for

resisting the identification of moral and natural properties, if we assume that identity is a relation that cannot hold between relata that are indefinitely or infinitely disjunctive" (1989: 177). As is evident in these remarks, Brink rejects the idea that realists could identify moral properties with natural properties by identifying them with a disjunction of natural properties. One problem with this disjunctive move is that, as Jerry Fodor (1980: 127–131) has argued, an open-ended disjunction of scientific states is not itself a scientific kind. Such disjunctions fail to figure in scientific laws as they seem not to do any genuine explanatory work.²¹ Moreover, many philosophers do not think that disjunctive properties are genuine properties. If an unbounded disjunction of properties is not a scientific property, or even a property *tout court*, then this approach will not secure the naturalistic status of moral kinds. The fact, if it is a fact, that a moral property could be identified with an infinite disjunction of natural properties would not show the moral property to be natural, under the assumption that this disjunction is not itself a natural property. There would be no naturalness for the moral property to inherit.

Even if the above line of thinking is misguided and a property *could* be natural if it were identical with an infinite disjunction of natural properties, a further worry remains. It is simply false that being morally right, for example, is identical with some unbounded disjunction of natural states. As Brink also recognizes, it seems possible that *non-natural* properties, such as those supernatural ones possessed by God or angels, could realize moral goodness or rightness.²² On this supposition, being morally right clearly could not be identical with any set of *natural* properties, since moral rightness could occur in the absence of natural properties altogether. It would not help to maintain that there are in fact no supernatural or non-natural entities, for the point is a modal one. Reduction, in the sense under consideration here, concerns the reduction of property-types, not actual property-instances. If an action could be morally right without possessing any natural properties, then the moral type of being right is not identical to any natural type. I shall take up the issue of token-token identities as it bears upon the potential naturalistic status of moral properties in Section VII.

For the above reasons, a naturalistic reductive account of moral properties does not appear promising. Yet, non-reductivism of this sort about moral properties can hardly be considered a strange or unpopular position; Cornell realism, one of intuitionism's chief realist competitors, is also committed to this view.²³ If a critic wishes to impose the naturalistic constraint on moral ontology, using this notion of 'natural,' a moral realist should either claim that this reductive account of naturalness is mistaken or object that the naturalistic constraint is too demanding. The intuitionist would likely adopt a version of strategy (2): deny that there is anything objectionable about such irreducible moral properties. If this defense does not convince, the intuitionist can always invoke a partners-in-guilt argument, as reflected in result (4). Since any reasonable brand of moral realism also seems committed to ethical non-naturalism, so understood, intuitionists can point out that they are hardly alone in violating the naturalistic constraint. In summary, I claim that none

of the accounts of 'natural property' discussed thus far shows intuitionism to be a special or objectionable offender of the naturalistic constraint.

VI. WIDE, SCIENCE-BASED ACCOUNTS: SUPERVENIENCE

Perhaps it is too demanding to require of higher-order entities that, if they are to be natural, they be identical with obviously natural lower-level ones. Properties types that *supervene* on scientific types might be considered natural, even if they are scientifically irreducible. Supervenience is a non-reductive, law-like covariance relationship between two kinds of properties. While there are many varieties of supervenience, let us consider a common formulation: strong supervenience. Suppose that A and B are non-empty sets of properties.

(SS) A strongly supervenes on B just in case, necessarily, for each x and each property F in A, if x has F, then (i) there is a property G in B such that x has G, and (ii) necessarily, if any y has G, it has F. (Kim 1984: 165)

The modal operators at work in (SS) are usually treated as expressing metaphysical or conceptual necessity and not epistemic, causal, or nomological necessity. For this reason, discussion of particular supervenience relations sometimes involves examples of nomologically impossible, but conceptually possible scenarios, such as scenarios involving zombies and ghosts.

Since we are interested in the claim that the moral supervenes on the natural, let us understand A to be the set of moral properties and B to be the set of natural ones. This presumes some prior account of naturalness. Supervenience does not tell us what it is for a property to be natural, but rather, what it is for a property to supervene upon properties that are.

Cornell realists sometimes appeal to moral supervenience in an effort to show that their moral ontology does not run afoul of a naturalistic worldview. For example, Brink has responded to the charge that moral properties are ontologically peculiar as follows.

There is nothing strange and certainly nothing unique about the supervenience of moral properties on physical properties. Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are metaphysically queer (and those that do do not think that the supervenience makes them queer). Social facts such as unemployment, inflation, and exploitation supervene upon physical facts, yet no one supposes that social facts are metaphysically queer. . . . In short, it is difficult to see how the realist's use of supervenience in explaining the relationship between moral and physical properties makes his position queer. (1984: 120)

Brink in this passage tries to address the issue of this paper by identifying the natural with the physical. Mental and social states are believed to supervene upon physical states, and these dependent states are thought to be metaphysically respectable. Brink's point seems to be that, if the moral also supervenes upon the physical, moral properties would not be ontologically strange. If we understand the claim

that moral properties are peculiar to mean that they are *non-natural*, this suggests that certain supervenient entities are perfectly natural.²⁴

It is doubtful, though, that this supervenience-based understanding of ‘natural property’ forms a compelling argument against moral intuitionism. As several commentators have pointed out, moral intuitionism is not inconsistent with the general truth of moral-natural supervenience. Robert Audi has noted, for example, that “[s]upervenience is the kind of relation which a plausible rationalism [intuitionism] is likely to posit between moral and natural properties” (1997: 99).²⁵ While I agree that intuitionism can embrace some kind of supervenience thesis, I will argue shortly that intuitionists need to be careful about just how the supervenience thesis is understood. On some forms of the relation, intuitionistic moral properties fail to supervene on the natural. These failures, though, are not specific to intuitionism. The naturalistic credentials of Cornell moral realism can also be questioned under a supervenience-based account of naturalness.

To meet the naturalistic constraint, so understood, realists must demonstrate that moral properties supervene on natural properties. Consider condition (i) of (SS). For the moral to supervene on the natural, any object that instantiates a moral property must instantiate a natural one. The problem is that, as Brink (1984: 118) has already admitted, moral properties could be realized by a number of *non-natural* states, and this admission is also consistent with the truth of intuitionism. Certainly there are conceptually possible worlds in which wholly non-natural individuals, such as God or ghosts, are morally good or do morally right things, in the absence of possessing any corresponding natural properties. We could suppose that some such possible worlds are even exclusively populated by such beings. The possibilities in question are conceptual or metaphysical. Ruling out such possible worlds would involve showing that ghosts are metaphysically or conceptually impossible. If the above scenarios are possible, the first condition of moral supervenience, namely, that a moral property could *only* occur in virtue of a natural property, would not be satisfied. It simply seems unlikely that the moral supervenes upon the natural in this way. Thus, the fact that intuitionistic moral properties fail to be natural according to this account should not reveal a special ontological difficulty with intuitionism. Any reasonable brand of moral realism should reject this moral supervenience claim.

The above explanations seem to rule out a potential version of moral-natural supervenience. Perhaps an alternative formulation of supervenience offers a way in which the moral may be said to supervene on the natural. Consider the following version of *global* supervenience.

- (GS) A globally supervenes on B just in case, for any possible worlds w and w^* , if w and w^* have exactly the same world-wide pattern of distribution of B-properties, then w and w^* have exactly the same world-wide pattern of distribution of A-properties.²⁶

For the moral to supervene globally on the natural, (GS) requires that, for any possible worlds w and w^* , if w and w^* are exactly alike naturally, they are exactly alike morally.

If this is what is needed for moral properties to be natural, then it turns out that intuitionism still does not face a unique problem respecting the naturalistic constraint. This is because, once again, any plausible version of moral realism should deny that the moral globally supervenes on the natural. It seems possible for two worlds to be naturalistically indistinguishable, but morally different, if, for example, some additional non-natural beings were present in the first world but not the second. If the first world contained a mean and hateful supernatural spirit that was absent in the second world, it seems there would be a *moral* difference between the two worlds. For this reason, the moral seems not to supervene globally upon the natural.

There are at least two possible replies to these sorts of counterexamples. First, the proponent of moral supervenience might maintain that, as a matter of conceptual necessity, the moral supervenes upon the descriptive or the non-moral, and not upon the natural. The conceptual truth of moral-*descriptive* global supervenience would not be affected by the above sorts of scenarios, since they each involve a descriptive difference: one possible world contains a hateful supernatural spirit, the other does not. Yet, if we go this route, it should be clear that this supervenience relation will no longer provide us with a criterion of *naturalness*; it would now be a thesis about the dependence of the moral on the descriptive.

The second possibility is to maintain that the global supervenience relation correctly captures the nature of moral-natural dependence, but deny that it holds as a matter of conceptual truth. Suppose we restrict the class of possible worlds relevant to (GS) to those worlds nomologically accessible from our own. This restriction might block the possibility of there being extra, non-natural stuff, on the assumption that the laws of nature that govern our world rule out non-natural entities. The relevant claim would now be that, for any worlds w and w^* that share the laws of nature of the actual world, if w and w^* are exactly alike naturally, they are exactly alike morally.

I wish to stress that the intuitionist would not deny that the moral supervenes on the natural in this sense. Moral intuitionism claims that an object's moral properties are closely related to its natural characteristics. Facts about moral properties do not float free of facts about natural properties, according to intuitionism. The instantiation of moral properties depends crucially on how things go in the natural world. For new intuitionists who embrace a Rossian ethical pluralism, an action accords with the duty of fidelity, for example, in virtue of possessing some further trait, such as keeping a promise. An intuitionist would grant that, within a class of possible worlds sufficiently like ours, no two worlds could differ with respect to their moral properties without also differing with respect to their natural ones. To say that the moral supervenes upon the natural in this way is not at odds with intuitionism. Moreover, if this claim is enough to make one an ethical naturalist, then there is nothing non-natural about intuitionistic moral properties. This would be an instance of result (3) mentioned at the outset.

VII. WIDE, SCIENCE-BASED ACCOUNTS: CONSTITUTION

In his 1984 paper, “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness,” Brink appeals to the alleged supervenience of the moral on the physical to show that moral properties are not metaphysically extravagant. In his 1989 book, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Brink claims that a relation of supervenience is not strong enough to secure the naturalness of moral qualities. There, he states, “The supervenience of moral facts and properties on natural facts and properties follows from, but does not establish, ethical naturalism” (1989: 160). According to Brink, the ethical naturalist now must claim that moral properties are either *identical to* natural properties or that moral properties are *constituted by* them (1989: 157). Brink rejects the first option, for reasons I have already discussed. Since moral properties can be realized by a variety of natural and non-natural properties, Brink denies the availability of type-identities between the moral and the natural. Instead, he thinks that moral properties *consist in* natural properties, and that this position is enough to satisfy the naturalistic constraint. To make this claim out, and to evaluate the plausibility of the naturalistic constraint on this reading, it is crucial that we know what it means for a property to be constituted by other properties.

The naturalistic constitution of moral properties, Brink suggests, “should be understood on the model of other common constitution claims” (1989: 159). For example, we claim that “tables are constituted by certain combinations of micro-physical particles, large scale social events such as wars and elections are constituted by enormously complex combinations of smaller scale social events and processes, [and] biological processes such as photosynthesis are composed of physical events causally and temporally related in certain ways” (1989: 159). According to Brink, just as small-scale events and processes constitute wars, certain social and economic conditions and properties constitute the moral properties. To quote from Brink, “[e]thical naturalism, on this construal, claims that moral properties are constituted, composed, or realized by different combinations of natural and social scientific properties. Moral properties are nothing over and above organized configurations of natural properties” (1989: 177). The alleged naturalistic constitution of moral properties is thought to qualify them as *natural* properties.

I am not certain that this notion of constitution is as helpful as Brink supposes. To clarify, a relation of constitution or composition holds between particulars, and not between types of things. *Individual* tables are constituted by certain microphysical particles; *particular* wars consist in series of events. So when Brink claims that moral properties are constituted by certain natural states and properties, he must be referring to particular *instances* of the property. I understand what it means for a physical object, such as a table, to be composed of microphysical particles. I also see how being a particular war could consist in there being a series of small-scale attacks, battles, surrenders, and so on. However, I lose my grip on what is supposed to be special about the constitution relation once I try to apply it to the realm of moral properties and their instances. An individual table appears

to be a mereological sum or aggregate of its component parts. A particular war is a collection of certain social and political events, arranged in a specific way. Yet, instances of moral properties, like injustice or obligation, do not depend upon the presence of component parts in this way. Social conditions do not seem to constitute the instantiation of a moral property in the same way in which molecules constitute there being a table or in which discrete biological processes constitute the occurrence of photosynthesis.

At best, the supposed constitution relation, in the moral case, seems to amount to a token-token identity relation. To say that Smith's goodness consists of certain natural properties of his seems to mean that Smith's goodness can be identified with certain instances of natural properties, configured in a specific way. Indeed, as Brink claims, constituted moral properties are "nothing over and above organized configurations of natural properties" (1989: 177). When Brink denied that moral properties are identical with natural ones on the grounds of their multiple realizability, the rejected identity claim concerned moral property *types*. It is hard for me to see how a relation of constitution between actual moral and natural property-instances is relevantly unlike that of token-token identity. For this reason, I am doubtful that discussions of constitution will be particularly helpful in efforts to illuminate the thesis of ethical naturalism as it concerns the naturalistic status of moral property types.

Suppose that, despite my reservations, Brink's general notion of property constitution does in fact support a unique and compelling account of derivative naturalness for the constituted property-instances. If so, it is far from clear that such a criterion rules out intuitionistic moral property-instances as non-natural. The intuitionist can advance a similar constitution claim about moral tokens. According to Ross's ethical pluralism, an action instantiates a *prima facie* moral quality in virtue of its being a particular type or kind of action. As Ross wrote, "an act, *qua* fulfilling a promise, . . . or *qua* promoting the good of others, or *qua* promoting the virtue or insight of the agent, is *prima facie* right" (Ross 2002: 29). If we assume that a certain configuration of natural properties and states instantiates one of these further features, such as fulfilling a promise, then the intuitionist could also say that a particular act's *prima facie* rightness is in fact constituted by those natural properties and states that instantiate the fulfilling of a promise.

This discussion raises a further question about the correlative arguments for ethical naturalism. Is it really correct to suppose that the properties which allegedly constitute moral properties are *natural*? Moral property-instances, on Brink's view, are constituted by those property-instances that bear upon human well-being. For example, Brink tells us that "the racial injustice in South Africa consists in those social, political, and legal arrangements whereby the objective welfare of black members of the community is arbitrarily frustrated" and that "Lincoln's fairness . . . consists, roughly, in his respecting other people as persons who have an interest in the pursuit and realization of personal projects and in the development of personal and social relationships involving mutual concern and commitment" (1989: 246).

He must assume that these arrangements, states, and properties are *natural*. Yet, properties like *respecting people as persons who have an interest in the pursuit of personal projects* or *being a social arrangement that arbitrarily frustrates the objective welfare of black community members* are not picked out by chemistry, geology, or biology. The properties that seem to constitute moral values are not here the properties of natural science. One might suppose that they are perfectly natural because they are among the properties of a (true?) social science. Yet, as I have already mentioned, tying one's criterion of naturalness to the dictates of a social science faces a number of difficulties.

It might turn out that, while many of the properties and states that bear on human flourishing are not themselves the subject of natural scientific study, their instances are constituted by, or otherwise reducible to, those which are. Still, naturalizing intentional states and their satisfactions, as well as teleological states, such as human ends and goals, is the subject of some debate. It is possible that a naturalistic account of intentional states, functions, or ends might not be forthcoming.²⁷ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the prospects for naturalizing intentionality, at the very least, Brink owes us some account of how it is that property-instances that bear on human flourishing, and so forth, could wholly consist in naturally scientific property-instances. In the absence of such a story, the contention that moral tokens are constituted by natural tokens does not look quite as compelling. Of course, if this is correct, then the intuitionist will also have trouble showing that her view respects the naturalistic constraint, since the allegedly lower-level natural property-instances on which intuitionistic moral property-instances depend also include intentional ones. The important point for my argument is that this situation would not represent a special problem for moral intuitionism, and in fact, it would undercut what was supposed to be interesting about the naturalistic objection at the outset. If it turns out that intentional states are not themselves natural, then the demand that moral property-instances be natural loses much of its force, since now many other apparently existent entities fail to meet this constraint as well. I highlight this issue only to press once more against the requirement that moral properties must be natural properties if they are to be respectable. It seems to me that this demand is not nearly as clear as commentators suppose; the notion of what is and what is not natural becomes more complicated upon closer inspection.

VIII. NATURAL PROPERTIES: A METHODOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATION?

Naturalism is not always an *ontological* thesis. 'Naturalism' can also refer to a *methodological* view about the best methods of inquiry. For example, Jean Hampton writes, "Methodological naturalism is the view that philosophy—and indeed any other intellectual discipline—must pursue knowledge via empirical methods exemplified by the sciences, and not by a priori or nonempirical methods" (1998: 20). Paul Moser and David Yandell similarly understand methodological naturalism to assert that "every legitimate method of acquiring knowledge consists of or

is grounded in the hypothetically completed methods of the empirical sciences (that is, in natural methods)” (2000: 10). This methodological understanding of ‘naturalism’ sometimes informs one’s ontological view about what it means to be a natural *property*. Consider the following two accounts of natural entities, one offered by Arthur Danto and another by David Copp.

[W]hatever exists or happens is *natural* in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which, although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences, are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events. (Danto 1967: 448)

A property is natural if and only if any synthetic proposition about its instantiation that can be known, could only be known empirically. (Copp 2003: 185)

Both accounts characterize natural entities with respect to the methods used to learn about them. Roughly put, natural properties would be those properties revealed by empirical methods, methods that are exemplified by the natural sciences.

According to new intuitionism, facts about moral properties are sometimes grasped non-inferentially and non-empirically. Credible moral beliefs are not always held on the basis of explicit evidence, experience, and observation. Intuitionism rejects an empirical model of moral knowledge and denies that the empirical methods of natural science always reveal moral truths.

I have suggested that moral properties, as conceived by both the intuitionist and other moral realists, might be natural insofar as they nomologically globally supervene on, or whose instances are actually constituted by, entities recognized by the natural scientist. It is not clear to me why we should require that such ontologically dependent properties themselves also be revealed by empirical methods to qualify as natural. An ontological-dependency requirement says nothing about the methodology by which we *learn* about the higher-order entity or the conditions surrounding its dependency.

Despite this, a critic might suppose that, even if we do not define ‘natural property’ as one that is known about empirically, certain methodological constraints follow from a property’s being natural in an ontological sense. Nicholas Sturgeon, a leading ethical naturalist, takes such a position. He writes,

I think of the most interesting form of ethical naturalism as primarily a meta-physical doctrine, not tied to a specific epistemology. It holds that there are ethical facts and that they are entirely natural facts; as a nonskeptical view it also says that we can gain knowledge of these facts, but it is compatible with a variety of views about how we do this. . . . Although my definition ties ethical naturalism to no one epistemology, there is still an obvious epistemological constraint that any version must meet. This is, speaking generally, that its account of ethical knowledge should fit with a plausible overall epistemology; and, more specifically, that since it says that ethical facts are natural facts, its account of how we know ethical facts ought to look a lot like its story about how we know other natural facts. (2002: 198)

In the above passage, Sturgeon does not adopt a methodological characterization of natural properties. Still, he does suggest that ethical naturalism is subject to a further epistemological constraint, namely, that moral properties be known in the same way other natural properties are known, that is, through observation, inference, and theory-dependent empirical theorizing.²⁸ Sturgeon's reason for imposing this added epistemological constraint does not stem from anything internal to the concept of a natural property. Rather, he supposes that, because moral properties are natural properties, we should expect our epistemic access to moral properties to "look a lot like" our access to other natural properties. What is important for our purposes is that, if compelling, Sturgeon's further epistemological restriction might preclude the intuitionist from being an ethical naturalist, even if one rejects a methodological account of naturalness. Indeed, elsewhere Sturgeon has suggested that this epistemological condition is so closely allied to the truth of ethical naturalism that one could not plausibly assert that moral properties are natural without also being an empiricist about moral knowledge.²⁹

Unfortunately, Sturgeon does not provide us with much of an argument as to why judgments about moral properties should be empirical if the properties themselves are to be natural. For Sturgeon's part, he does not find it plausible for moral properties to be like natural ones if our moral judgments were not empirical. Yet, if the likeness between the moral and the scientific is in some sense ontological, it remains to be seen if knowledge of moral facts would be like our knowledge of natural scientific ones. For instance, if moral properties resemble scientific properties insofar as moral property-instances are actually constituted by instances of scientific ones, an empiricist moral epistemology does not follow from this alone. Absent a further story about why this epistemological claim plausibly results from the metaphysical one, the moral intuitionist should simply deny that ethical naturalism requires the further corollary that moral properties be revealed by the empirical methods exemplified in science.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish it here, I believe that there are compelling reasons to *resist* the assimilation of moral knowledge to empirical knowledge.³⁰ Knowledge that it is morally wrong to inflict needless pain on another need not be grounded in empirical evidence, theory-dependent reasoning, or inferences to the best explanation, as is our knowledge that atoms contain electrons, for example. Rather, intuitionists claim that some moral truths can be grasped non-inferentially and non-empirically, by carefully reflecting upon the situations at hand. According to intuitionism, some basic moral truths can be seen to be true in their own rights, and not on the basis of empirical theorizing or additional argument.³¹ If a naturalistic account of moral properties is itself consistent with a wide range of moral epistemologies, then it is not contradictory to suppose that some natural properties are grasped non-naturally, i.e., non-inferentially and non-empirically.

For those who disagree and think that naturalness *is* an essentially methodological notion, the naturalistic constraint will demand that moral properties be

revealed only by an empirical methodology. Yet, this claim is precisely what is at issue between the intuitionist and those philosophers who advocate an empiricistic moral epistemology. If a critic wishes to label intuitionistic moral properties ‘non-natural’ in this methodological sense, the intuitionist should, following strategy (2), question the requirement that moral properties must be natural to be instantiated. As noted above, intuitionists think that at least some moral knowledge is non-empirical. If this is right, then enforcing the naturalistic constraint, so understood, would rule out our knowledge of such moral facts. This would be a serious and potentially unacceptable result. Furthermore, other apparently existing facts are also known non-naturally, such as facts about mathematics and logic.³² Even the truth of methodological naturalism—the claim that any legitimate method of inquiry is empirical—cannot itself be naturally known. In short, there is room and reason to argue against this methodological formulation of the naturalistic constraint.

IX. CONCLUSION

Once the notion of ‘natural property’ is sufficiently clarified—I have claimed—it fails to figure in a compelling argument against intuitionism. It seems likely that the naturalistic constraint is itself unfounded. On some readings of ‘natural,’ it would be too demanding to require an entity to be natural to exist. Additionally, if we use a science-based account, the naturalistic constraint appears useless for the present purposes. We lack a principled way to identify which disciplines count as natural or completed, and by extension, which entities are natural.

Despite these problems, the demand for a naturalized moral ontology persists. If this demand is at all plausible, I hope to have shown that the intuitionist is no worse off, *vis-à-vis* the naturalistic constraint, than her leading moral realist competitors. Contrary to received opinion, intuitionism can respect a broadly naturalistic worldview on several readings of ‘natural property’. Intuitionistic moral properties are ontologically related to, insofar as they nomologically globally supervene upon or whose instances actually consist in, those entities revealed by natural science. If this is enough to satisfy the naturalistic constraint, then intuitionism is consistent with the truth of ethical naturalism. Furthermore, intuitionistic moral properties can satisfy this criterion for naturalness even if we sometimes learn about these dependent properties through the non-empirical moral methodology endorsed by and characteristic of intuitionism. For as Ross said,

[t]hat an act, *qua* fulfilling a promise, or *qua* effecting a just distribution of good . . . is *prima facie* right, is self-evident; not in the sense that it is evident from the beginning of our lives, or as soon as we attend to the proposition for the first time, but in the sense that when we have reached sufficient mental maturity and have given sufficient attention to the proposition it is evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself. (2002: 29)³³

ENDNOTES

1. For recent discussions of intuitionism, see Audi 1996; 1997; 2004; Huemer 2005; Shafer-Landau 2003; Simon 1990; and many of the papers contained in Stratton-Lake 2002.
2. For a further discussion of the kind of mind-independence moral realism requires, see Brink 1989: chap. 2, and Shafer-Landau 2003: chap. 1.
3. For representative criticisms of intuitionism, see Hudson 1970: 100–105; Nowell-Smith 1954: 44–47, and Warnock 1967: 9–17.
4. New intuitionists include philosophers such as Audi 2004 and Shafer-Landau 2003.
5. Unlike Audi 2004 and Shafer-Landau 2003, I have misgivings about appealing to self-evidence, as it is standardly conceived, to explain intuitionistic moral knowledge. See my “Renewing Moral Intuitionism.”
6. See Audi 2004: chaps. 1–2.
7. See Audi 1996: 101–118, and Shafer-Landau 2003: 247–250.
8. See Audi 1997: chap. 10, and Shafer-Landau 2003: chaps. 5–6.
9. I use the term ‘entity’ to refer to an individual, object, relation, or property.
10. This presumption seems so common to conceptions of intuitionism that even those sympathetic to intuitionism equate the view with ethical non-naturalism. For example, Huemer 2005, a recent proponent of intuitionism, characterizes intuitionism as a species of non-naturalism about moral properties. He distinguishes intuitionism from all other metaethical theories by its rejection of ethical naturalism. See Huemer 2005: 6–8. As I argue below, on several accounts of ‘non-natural,’ intuitionism is not committed to ethical non-naturalism.
11. See G. E. Moore 1942.
12. It is important to note that ethical non-naturalism was not as objectionable during Moore’s time as it is today. Many philosophers took Moore’s so-called “naturalistic fallacy” seriously, a mistake allegedly committed by any view that equates the meaning of a moral term with that of a non-moral one, and being a non-naturalist was considered sufficient to escape this error.
13. For a recent proponent of semantic ethical naturalism, see Jackson 1998.
14. While the label ‘Cornell realism’ is in some senses an imperfect one, I follow other commentators in restricting my usage of it to refer to non-reductivistic varieties of moral realism. See, for example, commentators such as Miller 2003: chap. 8, and Shafer-Landau 2003: 63, on Cornell realism. For this reason, Michael S. Moore 1992 and Peter Railton 1986 would not count as Cornell realists, due to their reductivism about moral properties.
15. See Rea 2002: 54–55 for similar remarks about this characterization of naturalness.
16. For a nice discussion of various attempts to solve this demarcation problem, see Laudan 1988.
17. For a clear articulation of this problem, see Crane and Mellor 1990.

18. Poland 1994, for example, offers an analogous account of physicalness. He reserves the category 'physical' for those entities picked out by physical theory. For Poland, if an entity does not figure in scientific thought, it is non-physical.

19. I am not considering the *linguistic* sense of reduction, according to which property *A* is said to reduce to property *B* just in case predicate *B* figures essentially in an analytic definition of predicate *A*. Nowadays, philosophers are more interested in whether or not *A*'s are *B*'s, independent of any linguistic definition for term *A*.

20. Jackson 1998: chaps. 5–6, argues that moral properties can be reduced to such a disjunction of *descriptive* properties.

21. The issue here does not concern the existence of genuine moral explanations. While it might be the case that, as M. Moore 1992 and others have argued, moral categories are themselves explanatorily powerful, this would not be enough to secure the naturalness of moral properties under this reductive proposal, if type-type identities between moral and natural kinds are not forthcoming. What is presently under dispute is the claim that a moral kind can be identified with a kind that itself figures in the law-like explanations of science.

22. See Brink 1989: 158.

23. In addition to Brink's non-reductivism discussed above, see Boyd 1988, and Sturgeon 1986; 1988.

24. If Brink does not wish to call supervenient entities 'natural,' then his moral ontology would fail to respect the naturalistic constraint on this notion of naturalness. I am using the naturalistic constraint to capture the demand that moral properties be naturalistically acceptable. If it turns out that certain supervenient entities are non-natural, but naturalistically acceptable, then this represents merely a verbal difference with my conception of 'naturalistic acceptability' and 'non-naturalness.'

25. See also Brink 1989: 160 n.12, and Copp 2003: 182.

26. See McLaughlin and Bennett 2006 for discussion of this formulation of global supervenience.

27. For a critic of such naturalizing projects, see Searle 1992: 49–52.

28. For more about the alleged empirical character of moral judgments, see Sturgeon 2002, 201; 2003.

29. See Sturgeon 2003: 542. Sturgeon continues to take this position on ethical naturalism in his 2006 paper, "Ethical Naturalism."

30. See Audi 1997; Shafer-Landau 2003; and Zangwill 2006 for critical discussions of empirical models of moral knowledge.

31. For a fuller account of how such non-inferential moral knowledge might be possible, each somewhat different, see Audi 2004: chap. 2; Shafer-Landau 2003: chaps. 11–12; and Tropman unpublished.

32. Bonjour's 1998 arguments in his *In Defense of Pure Reason* also suggest that knowledge extending beyond the content of direct experience is at least partially non-empirical.

33. I would like to thank Darren Abramson, Marcia Baron, Jonathan Jacobs, D. Charles McCarty, and an anonymous referee of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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