Ethical naturalism

Ethical naturalism is a form of cognitivist moral realism. So we first need to understand what cognitivism and moral realism is before we can discuss ethical naturalism.

COGNITIVISM

Theories of what morality is fall into two broad families – cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Cognitivism claims that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. To believe that murder is wrong is to believe that the sentence ‘Murder is wrong’ is true. So ethical language aims to describe the world, and so can be true or false.

Here are three quick arguments in favour of cognitivism:

1. We think we can make mistakes about morality. Children frequently do, and have to be taught what is right and wrong. If there were no facts about moral right and wrong, it wouldn’t be possible to make mistakes.
2. Morality feels like a demand from ‘outside’ us. We feel answerable to a standard of behaviour which is independent of what we want or feel. Morality isn’t determined by what we think about it.
3. Many people believe in moral progress. But how is moral progress possible, unless some views about morality are better than others? And how is that possible unless there are facts about morality?

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they?

MORAL REALISM

Moral realism claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgements are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person or situation actually has.

Moral realism in the last 150 years has focused on trying to clarify the precise nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties, i.e. properties that we can identify through sense experience and science. This has led to two positions: ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism. Ethical naturalism
claims that moral properties are natural properties; ethical non-naturalism claims that they are a distinct kind of property.

ETHICAL NATURALISM
Ethical naturalism is a form of reductionism. It claims that the things in one domain - moral properties of goodness and rightness - are identical with some of the things in another domain - certain natural properties. The most plausible natural properties are certain psychological properties. The identity claim is a reduction because we have ‘reduced’ moral properties - which we might have thought were a different kind of thing - to psychological properties, i.e. there is nothing more to moral properties than being a certain kind of psychological property.

Utilitarianism as naturalism
Utilitarianism can be understood within the framework of ethical naturalism. It claims that the only good is happiness. We can interpret this to mean not simply that happiness is the only thing that is good, but that happiness is what goodness is. They are the same property. Happiness is a natural (psychological) property, and therefore, so is goodness. Because happiness is a natural property, so is maximizing happiness. Whether an act maximizes happiness is a (complex) natural property. According to utilitarianism, an act is right if it maximizes happiness. Therefore, rightness is also a natural property.

Naturalism can argue that it solves some of the issues facing cognitivism. In particular, we now understand the metaphysics of moral properties. If goodness is just happiness, then there is no puzzle about what kind of thing goodness is. Furthermore, we can discover what creates happiness empirically. So we have an answer to the question about how we find out what is morally right and wrong: Through experience.

*Moore, Principia Ethica, §§36–41*

This is how Moore understands Mill. Moore argues that Mill may not have realized that he was defining good as ‘desired’, but unless he does, Mill’s ‘proof’ of utilitarianism doesn’t succeed. Mill argues that happiness is desired. From this, he infers that happiness is good. This only works, says Moore, if Mill thinks that what is good is the same as what is desirable, and that what is desirable is the same as what is desired. So Mill must be thinking that goodness is the natural property of what is desired. Further evidence comes from Mill’s claim, at the end of the proof, that ‘to think of an object as desirable... and to think of it as pleasant are one and the same thing’.

However, Moore has misinterpreted Mill. Mill takes what people desire (which is a natural property) as evidence for what is desirable (good). He does not say that goodness is the same property as being desired. And when he claims that what is good is what is desirable, nothing he says implies that he thinks that ‘being desirable’ (as opposed to being desired) is a natural psychological property. So we simply can’t say whether Mill is a naturalist or not.
Was Aristotle a naturalist?

Some philosophers have read Aristotle’s function argument as presenting a reduction of the good to the natural, understood in terms of ‘function’. The facts about human nature, in particular psychological facts about our desires, our needs and our ability to reason, are the basis for moral truths. There are facts about what our characteristic activity is, there are facts about what traits enable us to perform our characteristic activity well. And so it turns out to be a psychological fact whether a character trait, such as courage or being short-tempered, is good or bad.

However, exactly what eudaimonia consists in can’t be identified with any natural fact. This is shown by the analysis of the relation between eudaimonia, virtue and practical wisdom. The person who has practical wisdom is not simply able to grasp some psychological fact about a situation that someone without practical wisdom cannot grasp. Instead, they understand the reasons for feeling, choosing or acting a certain way in a certain situation. This is why virtue is in accordance with ‘right reason’. To make Aristotle a naturalist, we would have to provide an argument for thinking that whether some consideration is a reason or not is a matter of natural fact.

OBJECTION

How can we establish that a moral property just is (identical to) some natural property? Given the different normative ethical theories that exist, claiming that goodness is happiness (or any other natural property) is obviously contentious. Such a claim isn’t something that we can demonstrate by empirical reasoning - no scientific experiments will show that goodness is, after all, just happiness. We have to defend the identity claim philosophically. So from the psychological facts alone, we cannot deduce any moral knowledge. Only after we’ve established the identity claim by philosophical argument can we use empirical investigation to discover what is right or wrong.