Ethical non-naturalism

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

MOORE, *PRINCIPIA ETHICA*, §§6–14

The naturalistic fallacy

In *Principia Ethica*, G. E. Moore argued that moral properties are not natural properties. He did not argue that there is no relation between moral properties and natural properties. Moral properties may be correlated with certain natural properties. But they are not identical. Correlation is not identity. For example, having a heart is correlated with having kidneys - every animal that has a heart has kidneys and vice versa. But hearts and kidneys are not the same thing! Or again, having a size and having a shape are correlated - everything that has a size has a shape and vice versa. But size and shape are distinct properties. So even if goodness is correlated with happiness, say, that does not show that they are the same property.

Moore called the attempt to equate goodness to any natural property the naturalistic fallacy. Goodness, he claimed, is a simple and unanalyzable property. It cannot be defined in terms of anything else (§6). Of course, we can say how people use the term (§8). But you can’t give a definition that defines goodness in terms of its parts that together ‘make up’ goodness (§10).

Colours are similar. Yellow is a simple property, and no one can explain what yellow is to someone who doesn’t know. You have to see it for yourself to understand what it is (§7). We can’t define yellow - which is part of our visual experience of the world - in terms of wavelengths of light (§10). It might be correlated with these, such that seeing yellow is always caused by certain wavelengths of light. But it is a mistake to think that they are one and the same thing.

Unlike colours, goodness is not a natural property (§25). It cannot be investigated by empirical means. It is real, but it is not part of the natural world, the world of science.

The ‘open question’ argument

Moore supports his view that a definition of goodness is impossible by the ‘open question’ argument (§13). If goodness just is pleasure, say, then it wouldn’t make sense to ask ‘Is pleasure good?’ This would be like asking ‘Is pleasure pleasure?’ This second question isn’t a real question (the answer has to be ‘yes’), but ‘Is pleasure good?’ is a real question - the answer can logically be ‘yes’ or ‘no’. And so goodness cannot be pleasure, or any other property. ‘Is x good?’ is always a real question while ‘Is x x?’ is not. And so goodness cannot be defined as any other property.

Now, the question remains, what has the property of goodness? It makes perfect sense to say that pleasure is good in this sense (§9). But this is to accept that there are two things here, not one. There is the pleasure, and pleasure has this additional property, goodness. So goodness cannot be defined as pleasure or identified with it. Compare: when we say ‘You weigh 60 kilos’, we attribute you
with the property of weighing 60 kilos. We don’t think that you are the same thing as that weight - you are a person, not a weight! Likewise, we can meaningfully say that pleasure is good if we distinguish between pleasure and goodness (§12).

IS THE ‘NATURALISTIC FALLACY’ A REAL FALLACY?

Moore’s open question argument doesn’t work. Here is a similar argument. ‘The property of being water cannot be any property in the world, such as the property of being H\textsubscript{2}O. If it was then the question “Is water H\textsubscript{2}O?” would not make sense - it would be like asking “Is H\textsubscript{2}O H\textsubscript{2}O?” So water is a simple, unanalyzable property.’

This is not right, as water just is H\textsubscript{2}O.

The reason the argument doesn’t work is because it confuses concepts and properties. Two different concepts - ‘water’ and ‘H\textsubscript{2}O’ - can pick out the same property in the world. Before the discovery of hydrogen and oxygen, people knew about water. They had the concept of water, but not the concept of H\textsubscript{2}O. So they didn’t know that water is H\textsubscript{2}O. ‘Water is H\textsubscript{2}O’ is not analytically true. However, water and H\textsubscript{2}O are one and the same thing - the two concepts refer to just one thing in the world. Water is identical to H\textsubscript{2}O.

Likewise, the concept ‘goodness’ is a different concept from ‘happiness’. ‘Happiness is good’ is not an analytic truth. We can accept that Moore has demonstrated this. But perhaps the two concepts refer to exactly the same property in the world, so that goodness is happiness. Moore’s open question argument does not show that they are different properties.

WARNOCK, CONTEMPORARY MORAL PHILOSOPHY, Ch. 2 ‘INTUITIONISM’

Moore’s intuitionism

If moral properties are not natural properties, then how do we discover them? How do we know what is good? In Mill’s ‘proof’ of utilitarianism, he claims that we cannot prove what is good or not. To prove a claim is to deduce it from some other claim that we have already established. Moore agrees. But unlike Mill, he does not think that we can argue inductively from evidence either. All we can do is consider the truth of the claim, such as ‘pleasure is good’, itself. Moore calls such claims ‘intuitions’.

What does this mean? The claim that some truths can be known by rational ‘intuition’ is made by rationalism. But what is an intuition, and how can we tell if it is true? Are we supposed to have some special faculty of moral intuition? Moore leaves these questions open: ‘when I call such propositions Intuitions, I mean merely to assert that they are incapable of proof; I imply nothing whatever as to the manner or origin of our cognition of them’. However, he has already said more than this. He has argued that these claims are not analytically true. And he has argued that we cannot know them through empirical investigation. So they must be some variety of synthetic a priori knowledge. He claims that we know claims about what is good to be true (or false) by considering the claim itself. Intuitions are ‘self-evident’ propositions.
A self-evident judgement rests on the ‘evidence’ of its own plausibility, which is grasped directly. This doesn’t necessarily mean that everyone can immediately see that it is true. ‘Self-evident’ is not the same as ‘obvious’. Our ability to make a self-evident judgement needs to develop first, and we need to consider the issue very carefully and clearly. Because moral intuitions are not known through the senses, the self-evidence of a moral intuition will be more like the self-evidence of a necessary truth, such as mathematics or claims about what is logically possible, than the self-evidence of a perceptual truth, such as the claim that there is a table in front of me. So, intuitionism does not need to claim that we have a faculty of intuition that ‘detects’ whether something is good or not, a bit like a supernatural sense. Intuitionism is simply a form of ethical non-naturalism that claims that some of our moral judgements are synthetic yet self-evident.

**Varieties of intuitionism**

Moore is an intuitionist about claims about what is good. He argues that we can define rightness in terms of goodness. Like Bentham and Mill, Moore claims that what is right is what produces the most amount of good. By contrast, Prichard is an intuitionist about what is right, what our duty is. Just as Moore argues that ‘good’ cannot be defined or analyzed, so Prichard argues that we cannot define obligation. Now we often want to know whether something that we think may be our duty really is our duty. But, he argues, this is not something we can give reasons for. The only reason why something is my duty is because it is my duty, and that is the only reason I ought to do it. The fact that it causes happiness, for instance, is quite irrelevant. Our obligations are self-evident: we understand what they are by directly understanding, in each particular situation, what we ought to do.

Ross disagrees with both Moore and Prichard. Against Moore, he argues that we have intuitions about what is right. Against Prichard, he argues that it is not what is right in each particular situation that is self-evident. Rather, certain general principles about what is right are self-evident. Certain *kinds* of action, such as keeping our promises, gratitude, maximizing the good, and not harming others, are our duty, and we can only know this by intuition. From these principles, we can then work out what we should do in each situation. Ross allows that these duties can conflict. In each case of conflict, one duty will ‘give way’ to the other. However, following Aristotle, there is no rule for knowing which duty should give way, nor is this a matter of intuition but a matter of judgement.

**Objections**

Warnock agrees with intuitionism that moral judgements are not like other kinds of assertion, such as descriptions of empirical facts (against naturalism) or expressions of taste (against non-cognitivism) or commands (against Kant). From this, intuitionists conclude that goodness must be some non-natural property that is quite different from other properties. But they don’t tell us what this difference is.

First, they fail to tell us how morality is related to anything else. For example, isn’t hurting someone what makes an action wrong? Isn’t showing concern for another person something that makes the motive right? Intuitionists provide no explanation of how natural facts contribute to moral thinking.
Second, to say that we know moral judgements to be true or false ‘by intuition’ is only to say that we don’t know them in any of the usual ways. The theory doesn’t give us any real answer as to how we know truths by intuition. This leads to difficulties when people disagree over whether self-evident judgements are true. Because the judgements are supposed to be self-evident, any further reasons for believing them will not be as conclusive as considering the claim itself. So how can we establish that the claim is true in the face of disagreement?

But intuitionists can develop their account. Suppose that pleasure is good. Is it self-evident that pleasure is good, or can we give a further explanation? Suppose we can, e.g. pleasure is good because it forms part of a flourishing life for human beings. Is it, then, self-evident that being part of a flourishing life makes something good? If you give a further explanation, we can ask whether this explanation is self-evident, and so on.

Alternatively, non-naturalists may claim that no judgement is self-evident, because it is supported by other beliefs. When we then question those beliefs, we can give reasons for believing them, but must in turn assume others. Our reasoning, then, involves a matter of interpreting, applying and adjusting a framework of reasons. We test our claims and the reasons we give by their place in the framework.

In our reflections on reasons, we will be guided by trying to make sense of our moral attitudes generally. Reflection itself will be guided by what seems plausible or implausible to us. We justify moral judgements by appealing to the overall coherence, the balance between our judgements in individual cases and our general moral beliefs, the ‘reflective equilibrium’ we reach.

Third, Warnock argues, according to intuitionism, moral judgements differ from other kinds of factual judgement just in terms of their subject matter, what they are about. But in saying that a moral judgement attributes a property, say goodness, to some action, it seems that morality simply gives us information. But what has that got to do with how to live? Why are moral truths relevant to what to do, while other truths are not? Intuitionism doesn’t give us an account of how or why morality motivates us.

But if we argue that moral judgements are about what we have reason to do, they will be motivating, because judgements about reasons are judgements about reasons for us. As long as we are rational, reasons will motivate us directly. Of course, that motivation can be interfered with because we are not completely rational, so we will not always do what we have most reason to do.