In Defence Of Reductionism In Ethics[1]

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This essay is concerned with Derek Parfit's critical discussion of naturalism in *On What Matters* (vol. 2, chs 25, 26 and 27). I explain why I am a naturalist and why I am unmoved by his criticisms of the kind of position I like. Why does the word 'reductionism' appear in the title of this essay rather than the word 'naturalism'? I will explain in due course, but to give you a sense of the reason: I agree with Parfit that what he calls soft naturalism is no advance on what he calls hard naturalism.[2] I start by noting some points of agreement.

1. *Common ground*

Like Parfit, I am a *cognitivist* in ethics. Cognitivists hold that when we affirm an action, X, to be morally right, we are making a claim about X's nature, about how X is. We are, in consequence, ascribing a property to X, that of being morally right. *Mutatis mutandis* for claims that something is morally good, or required, or that some character trait or law is morally evil, etc. Cognitivists are, therefore, believers in ethical properties. My disagreement with Parfit is over the nature of these ethical properties. Moreover, like Parfit, I am a realist: I think that the moral properties are, on occasion, actually possessed by actions, laws, character traits, etc. This indeed is how affirmations of the form 'X is right', 'T is immoral' etc. get to be true when they are true. 'X is (morally) right', for instance, gets to be true just when X has the property of being right, in the

[1] I am indebted to more discussions than I can possibly recall, but must mention Michael Smith, Simon Blackburn, Daniel Wodak, Philip Pettit, and Tristram McPherson. None should be held responsible for anything.

[2] He says, e.g., 'Soft naturalism is, I believe, an incoherent view', ch. 27, §97, p. 365.

same way that 'X happened last Friday' gets to be true when X has the property of happening last Friday. Moreover, to believe that X is right is to believe that X has the property of being right, and it is a true belief just when X does in fact have the property.

The contrast is with a range of views that deny, in one way or another, that ethical sentences ascribe properties. *Non-cognitivism* can take a number of forms but the currently most discussed version is a style of expressivism according to which ethical sentences express certain pro and con attitudes without reporting them, or indeed reporting anything at all. They aren't, according to expressivism, in the business of saying how things are; they are instead in the business of expressing attitudes. In this sense, they are akin to expressions of approval like 'Hooray', and expressions of disapproval like 'Boo'. Parfit argues against non-cognitivism in detail in *On What Matter*s.[3] In this essay, we will be taking the cognitivist position as given common ground with Parfit.

Let's now look at the case for naturalism, or if you prefer for reductionism, in ethics. It takes off from what we learn from the combination of two plausible theses, which I will call *Grounding* and *Supervenience*.

2. *The argument for necessary co-extension*

Grounding says that it is impossible to have an ethical property without also having a non-ethical property. Ethical properties are grounded in non-ethical properties. Every right act has, of necessity, properties in addition to being right that can be expressed in non-ethical terms – perhaps the act leads to an increase in happiness, or is the honouring of a promise. It is important here that the 'grounding base' be specified in negative terms, as that which is *non*-ethical. If, for example, one expressed Grounding as the doctrine that it is impossible to have an ethical property without also having a *physical* property, where a physical property is specified as the kind of property physicalists

[3] In vol. 2, ch. 28, and ch. 29, §102. Simon Blackburn's chapter in this volume is a reply to Parfit's arguments against expressivism and non-cognitivism more generally.

about the mind are thinking of when they declare themselves to be physicalists, one would make Grounding false. There are worlds where physicalism is false – indeed, dualists think that our world is one of them – and among these worlds will be ones with items possessing ethical properties but lacking physical properties. Their moral nature will be grounded in the 'ectoplasmic' properties they possess.

Supervenience says that, across logical space, there is no difference in ethical nature without a difference in non-ethical nature. It isn't just that *within* any possible world, there is no difference in ethical nature without a difference in non-ethical nature. The thesis is that, for any x and y, be they in the same world or not, if they differ in ethical nature, they differ in non-ethical nature. Of course, the difference may in some cases lie in non-ethical differences in how they are related to other items in the worlds they belong to, not in themselves. It may be that for some x in world, W_1, and y in world, W_2, where x and y differ in ethical nature, the difference in non-ethical nature between them lies in differences in the non-ethical nature of W_1 and W_2, respectively. As was the case with Grounding, it is important that we do not read non-ethical as a surrogate for physical or anything in that line of country. It is false that, across logical space, there is no difference in ethical nature without a difference in *physical* nature. In cartesian worlds, the good angels may differ from the bad ones without a difference in physical nature: the non-ethical difference demanded by Supervenience may lie in differences in their 'angelic' natures.

Grounding and Supervenience combined give us an argument to the conclusion that ethical properties are necessarily co-extensive with non-ethical properties. I will develop it for the property of being a (morally) right act. It will be obvious how to extend the argument to moral properties more generally. Grounding tells us that every right act, r_1, r_2, ..., in logical space has a non-ethical nature. Let n_1, n_2, ... , be the non-ethical natures of r_1, r_2, ... , respectively. Supervenience plus Grounding then tells us that x is right if and only if x is n_1 or n_2 or n_3 or ... is necessarily true. Grounding gives us the necessity from left to right (remember we included every right act in logical space); and Supervenience gives us the necessity from right to left, for otherwise we could have two acts alike in having n_1, or alike in having n_2, or alike in having n_3, or ...,

but unlike in that one is right and the other is not.

What's the significance of this little proof that being right is necessarily co-extensive with a certain infinite disjunction of the non-ethical? We will say a fair bit about this shortly, but first we need to connect the discussion with naturalism, and also to head off an objection that sometimes comes up in discussion. I used 'n' above for 'non-ethical', but we can equally think of it as 'natural', *provided* we give 'natural' the negative reading of not being ethical. If we give it some positive content, as would be the case if we read it in the way common in the philosophy of mind, where it often figures as a surrogate for 'physical' with a nod to the idea that we should divorce the relevant notion of the physical from too close a link to physics, we would threaten the truth of both Grounding and Supervenience, as observed above. (I think that this is likely the reading of 'natural' that G. E. Moore had in mind when he insisted that goodness was a *non-natural* property.[4] He wasn't, as many note, saying that goodness was a *supernatural* property, in the sense of a property of something outside nature. He was insisting that goodness could not be identified or analysed in non-ethical terms.) From here on, I will use the word 'natural' in the sense of 'non-ethical'. Thus, our discussion to follow will be framed in terms of the significance (or otherwise) of the equivalence of being right with an infinite disjunction of natural properties. But first that objection.

3. *Leibniz law trouble?*

If we read naturalism in the negative way just outlined, one might wonder – and some have in discussion – whether naturalism can possibly be true. We would seem to have a violation of Leibniz's law that if x is identical with y, then x and y are alike in all their properties – a law that applies to properties just as much as it applies to objects, events, or whatever. For isn't it a core thesis of naturalism that ethical properties are *identical* with natural properties? Naturalists disagree about the possibility of analysing the

[4] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1929).

ethical in natural terms, and about what to say about ethical concepts and ethical language, but they agree that ethical properties are identical with natural ones. But if we cash out natural as non-ethical, this sounds awfully like identifying ethical properties with properties that aren't ethical, and that would be a violation of Leibniz's law. Ethical properties cannot be identical with properties that aren't ethical.

The simplest way of seeing what is wrong with this perhaps tempting line of objection is in terms of an example. Analogues of Grounding and Supervenience are true for density. *Grounding*$_D$ says that, necessarily, every object with a density has properties that are not density (mass and volume, in fact). *Supervenience*$_D$ says that, necessarily, if objects o_1 and o_2 differ in density, they differ in properties that are not density (in fact, they differ in volume or mass). All the same, there is no violation of Leibniz's law in identifying density with mass divided by volume. We don't identify density with a property that isn't density; we identify it with a property that can be specified in terms that do not mention density – in particular, we identify density with a pattern in properties that aren't density, namely, the ratio of mass to volume.[5] It is in virtue of this fact that we can think of the identification of density as a *reductive* account. In this sense, what's on offer is a reduction of density (though of course there are other senses of reduction in the philosophical literature).

It is worth noting that putting the point in terms of a pattern in properties that aren't density makes it clear that the claim about density isn't a claim about words. It is a claim in metaphysics. Although we may and often do put the claim using words like 'density can be identified with a property that *can be specified in terms that do not mention* density', it isn't a claim about language. The possibility of so specifying rests on the metaphysics of the situation. Likewise, when we naturalists agree that ethical properties are natural properties and explain the notion of the natural in the negative way outlined earlier, what we affirm is that ethical properties are identical with properties that can be specified in non-ethical terms (and so, are offering a reductionist

[5] The need for a notion of density *at a point* means that things are a bit more complicated than this but not in ways relevant to the philosophical point.

account, in one good sense of that notion). But the possibility of so specifying isn't a thesis about ethical words (although some of us, myself included, do hold relevant theses about ethical words, more on this anon); it is a thesis about the metaphysics of ethical properties. The possibility of specifying them in non-ethical terms rests, we naturalists say, on the metaphysics of ethical properties.

Now I can say why I agree with Parfit that soft naturalism is no advance on hard naturalism. Both claim that ethical properties are identical with natural properties. Soft naturalism insists that ethical terms cannot be analysed in natural terms. But if ethical properties are one and all natural properties, and given our account of what is (ought to be) meant by a natural property in the context of discussions in ethics, it must be possible, at least in principle, to *specify* ethical nature in non-ethical terms.[6] Or is soft naturalism really some sort of *unsayability* doctrine? If it is, it would seem to me to be an implausible one, and essentially one about words and not about matters central to ethics as such.

There is, however, something important Parfit gets wrong, or so it seems to me. He is right, I have said, to insist that naturalists should allow that ethical terms are dispensable. However, he conflates this with the view that we can do without ethical *concepts* (see especially his discussion of Richard Brandt in §98). However, doing without terms and doing without concepts are two quite different matters. The laws of flotation can be expressed without using a term for density. For, at the cost of a bit of complexity, one can replace terms for density by terms for volume and mass in those laws. But that isn't doing without the concept of density: the concept of density *is* that it's what you get when you divide mass by volume. Or think of the concept of a nondenumerably infinite set. When we specify it in terms of the impossibility of putting the members of the set in 1:1 correspondence with the natural numbers, we clarify what the concept is, we open up a way to show that some set is or is not nondenumerably infinite, and we show how one might do without the *term* (the *word*). But one thing we

[6] Parfit, ch. 27, §97, quotes me (and Scott Sturgeon) as saying essentially this.

do not do is show that the *concept* is dispensable.[7]

4. *The significance of the necessary co-extension of ethical and natural properties*

I think the necessary co-extension of ethical and natural properties provides a strong reason to identify them, strong but not apodictic. However, one thing we cannot say, it seems to me, is that ethical properties match up with pattern-less, infinite disjunctions of natural properties. We cannot say that the right-hand side of the necessarily true bi-conditional given earlier: 'x is right if and only if x is n_1 or n_2 or n_3 or ... ' is a pattern-less infinite disjunction. If it were, we couldn't make sense of the way we draw ethical conclusions from information couched in non-ethical terms, something we do all the time. A big part of inferring the ethical way things are from the natural way things are involves latching onto to the patterned connections between the ethical and the natural.[8] Some reply to this point by insisting that we never in fact infer ethical nature from purely natural information; the inference is always from a combination of the ethical and the natural. Don't think, they say, of the inferences in question as of the form: N, therefore, E. Think of them as of the form: N, E_1, therefore, E_2. But this cannot be right. The second inference can be re-written: N, therefore, if E_1 then E_2.

So there must be a pattern, just as there is with an example like: x is a circle if and only if x is p_1 or p_2 or p_3 or ... , where each p_i is a location of points that make up a circle. The p_is aren't a patternless disjunction. Of course, the pattern will be harder to spot in the ethics case but it will be there (must be there) to be spotted all the same. Call the pattern in the ethics case, N. The question on the table now becomes whether or not we should identify being right with N. Being right is necessarily co-extensive with N,

[7] So, for the record, when Parfit says 'We don't need normative concepts, Jackson claims...', ch. 27, §98, p. 376, this isn't my view.

[8] For more on this issue, see Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, 'Ethical Particularism and Patterns' in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (eds), *Moral Particularism* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 79–99.

but is it identical with N?

Here is why I think we should say that being right is identical with N, and in what follows I'll be repeating things I (and others) have said before. I will include some commentary bearing on Parfit's reservations, but I think Parfit's major objection to the kind of naturalism I like is his triviality objection (it is after all the title of a whole chapter, ch. 26), and that objection gets, as it should, a separate section in this essay.

First, there are a number of examples of properties that are necessarily co-extensive, where the right thing to say is that 'they' are one and the same – or, perhaps better, this is the right thing to say if one is thinking of properties in the way we are in this essay (and the way that Parfit thinks of them, it seems to me). Being an equilateral triangle in euclidean space is necessarily co-extensive with being an equiangular triangle in euclidean space.[9] One might say that there are two properties here, for can't you believe that a triangle has one property without believing that it has the other? But surely both properties are a certain shape, and we don't have two shapes. That is, what is true is something like: being an equilateral triangle in euclidean space = shape S, and being an equiangular triangle in euclidean space = shape S. But then the transitivity of identity delivers the conclusion that being an equilateral triangle in euclidean space = being an equiangular triangle in euclidean space. What we have aren't two properties but two different ways of representing the same property. Philosophers (and the folk, the jargon to follow isn't local to the academy) often speak of properties as ways *things* might be; the phrasing signalling that properties are being thought of as pertaining to the nature of what's to be found in our world, and this is how we are thinking of properties. Our concern, and Parfit's, is with the *nature* of the acts, motives, laws, etc. that makes them right, evil or whatever. Given this perspective on properties, surely the right thing to say is that we have one property in the triangle example.

Parfit mentions cases in logic and mathematics (ch. 25, §87) where it is plausible that we have two distinct but necessarily co-extensive properties. Fair enough. But I

[9] Thanks to Gil Harman for reminding me (telling me?) that one needs to include 'in euclidean space' in this example.

think it is also fair enough to observe that the whole question of the ontology and metaphysics of mathematics and logic is deeply mysterious and highly controversial, whereas, in ethics, we are addressing the question of the properties of entities that we come across every day and that have a location in space-time. For example, we see and bring into existence actions that have one or another moral property, the morally evil consequences of a bad law will start at some point in time and (hopefully) end at some later time, and so on. Also, many examples in mathematics of necessarily co-extensive properties *are* cases where it seems clearly right to insist that there's just the one property. A set has infinitely many members if and only if, for any natural number z, the set has more than z members. The suggestion isn't that those sets with the property of having infinitely many members also have the distinct property that, for any z, they have more than z members.

Second, if being right and N are distinct properties, how could we be justified in believing that some action had the property of being right in addition to having N? Its being right would – could – make no distinctive contribution to our experience of the action or to our thought about the action (how could our neural states track these extra properties?). Of course we can ask the same question about our knowledge of the properties of, e.g., numbers, but, to repeat the point made earlier, when we ask about the properties of actions, we are asking about the properties of concrete items in space-time. We want – indeed, need – the moral properties to be accessible in some relatively straightforward sense. If we deny that they are, I cannot see how we can have any good reply to the kind of scepticism about moral properties embraced by J. L. Mackie,[10] and Parfit most especially wants to hold that this would be very bad news.

The complaint I am making here is, of course, a common one. (Parfit mentions a number of authors who have made it, in one form or another.) And, interestingly, one of the features of Parfit's discussion of personal identity that impressed many, myself included, was his insistence that there was 'no further fact' that constituted being the

[10] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Penguin, 1977).

same person over time, in addition to the well-known continuities.[11] I find it strange that he should be so prepared to countenance further facts when the topic is ethics instead of personal identity.

Third, any account of being right needs to *make sense* of someone's being motivated to do what is right. I am not saying that there is some kind of conceptual connection between, e.g., judging that x is right and being motivated to do x. For all I say here, maybe there is, maybe there isn't. Equally, I am not appealing to a humean or neo-humean doctrine to the effect that all that can motivate an agent must, in one way or another, relate to what the agent desires, or would desire, or would ideally desire, or would desire to desire or ... . For all I say here, maybe that is right, maybe it isn't. I am making a 'it's not arbitrary' point. Children sometimes go to some trouble not to walk on the cracks in the pavement (as do some adults, I am told). There can be a good reason to avoid walking on the cracks: perhaps they are unstable, maybe avoiding them makes a walk more fun or there's a reward for avoiding them. But suppose that nothing like this is true. The choice between avoiding them and not avoiding them is a matter of whim. Perhaps the child tossed a coin to make the decision. That's fine in a case like this. But it isn't fine when we address the question of the relationship between an action's being right and one's doing it. But if we think of being right as some kind of unanalysable property that necessarily goes along with N but is quite distinct from it, how could we give an account of why being motivated by it is non-arbitrary? How could adding this property to N make a difference to the case for performing an action that has N? The difference between doing what's right and doing what's not right cannot be like that between avoiding and not avoiding stepping on the lines.

Some may insist that there's an easy response available to Parfit.[12] He can appeal to the existence of a priori true conditionals that take one from an antecedent that mentions one or another moral property to a consequent that concerns action. One might quarrel about the details of proposed candidate conditionals, swapping intuitions about

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[11] Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity', *The Philosophical Review*, 80/1 (1971): 3–27.

[12] Thanks to Barry Maguire for forcing me to think about this style of response.

test cases. I am not going to enter that minefield. I think there is a problem of principle with this kind of response. To the extent that one finds one or another conditional framed in terms of 'right' a priori, that places a constraint on the interpretation of the term; it constrains what the property of rightness, according to you, might be. (And, if it comes to that, the same is true for moral terms in general, and for statements other than conditionals: to the extent one finds statements framed in moral terms a priori that constrains the interpretations of those terms.) If Fred insists that it is a priori that anyone who judges that x is right is strongly motivated to do x, he had better offer an account of what the property of being right is that allows that claim to be a priori. This means that the mooted response gets things backwards. Any putative a priori conditional highlights the problem; it doesn't solve it.

There are signs that Parfit has some sympathy with some of these concerns.[13] He resists because he is persuaded by the triviality argument. He clearly regards this as a master argument against any form of naturalism. I also speculate that he is moved by a way of thinking about the nature of disagreement in ethics that seems to me to underlie the concerns that so many have about the kind of naturalism that I like. I will start with the triviality argument.

5. *Parfit's triviality argument*

The argument is simplicity itself. Take any putative identification of being right with natural property N. If it is correct, saying that an act which is N is right will be trivial. But it manifestly isn't. For example, suppose the naturalistic candidate for being right is maximising happiness, then, he argues, the claim that it is right to maximise happiness will be trivial. It can come to nothing more than the claim that being right is being right, or that maximising happiness is maximising happiness. But no-one thinks that. Many think the claim that being right is maximising happiness is false, and those who think it

[13] See the sentence that starts 'Though these last two claims are plausible ...', ch. 98, §27, p. 377.

is true agree it needs argument and, moreover, think it is important to tell people about its truth. How then could the claim be trivial?

Some naturalists reply to the argument (and its close cousin the open question argument) by affirming the importance of the distinction between soft and hard naturalism, and arguing that the triviality objection is only a problem for hard naturalism. I cannot make this response. As I say above, I think Parfit is right that soft naturalism is no advance on hard naturalism. What I will say in reply is along the lines of some traditional replies to the open question argument, although I will say things in my own way.

My reply takes off from a point that will, I hope, be relatively non-controversial. The most attractive approaches to ethics start by making rather general claims that are urged to be self-evident, or a priori, or constitutive of the moral, or justified by the way they makes sense of our most firmly held moral convictions, or ... . What's right is what's in accord with norms that no-one could rationally object to; what's right is what satisfies desires that are fully universalisable; what's right is that which maximises the good, where the good is that which is desirable, or ideally desirable, or desired to be desired, or that which it is rational to desire ...; what's right is what we have most reason to do when acting on desires that treat everyone as an end, not a means; what's right is that which satisfies the golden rule in all its forms; what's right is that which satisfies as many as possible of the virtues; etc. Speaking for myself, I like to think of the set of general claims as a theory, folk morality, akin in some ways to folk psychology,[14] but that's not important here. What is important is that we start from rather general claims that, for one reason or another, are thought to be compelling enough to be the starting point for an ethical theory. They give naturalists their riding instructions, as we might put it. The naturalists' task is then to find an identification of, let's say, being right in terms of a natural property that makes true the general claim or claims in question. If there is no way to do this, Mackie threatens. Indeed, the case for Mackie's error theory is a simple application of the approach to finding an ethical theory that we are talking

[14] See, e.g., *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 6.

about. The general claim that founds Mackie's error theory is, to put it roughly, one about the good being a 'necessary attractor', and the empirical contention is that there exists, in nature, no necessary attractor.

The implication of this picture is that any identification of being right will be an unobvious one. It takes real work to move from the general claim or claims to a thesis about which property fits the bill. Indeed, this is obvious from the fact that books and articles on ethics can be quite long.

Moreover, the situation can be complicated by the need to draw a role-realiser distinction. Depending on the nature of the general claim or claims from which our theorist launches their theory, it may be that those claims specify a job description that rightness (to stick with that example) needs to satisfy, where it is a *contingent* which property satisfies it. For example, if part of the job description gives a central place to what's desired in ideal circumstances, and allows that what's desired in ideal circumstances is contingent, then the property that fills the job description for rightness may vary from possible world to possible world. We will need, in this case, to distinguish the property that fits the bill – something that may vary from one world to another – from the property of being the property that fits the bill – something that is constant across worlds. The first is the realiser property, the second is the role property.[15] To which property does our little proof earlier that being right is necessarily co-extensive with some natural property apply? The role property, for that's the property shared by all right acts across logical space. The other possibility is that the general claim or claims from which our theorist launches their theory are such that which property satisfies the job description is not a contingent matter. In this case, there's no need to draw a distinction between the role property and the realiser property. From now on, we'll mean by being right the role property, in cases where there's a need to distinguish the role property from the realiser one.

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[15] Analogy. Suppose that red is the King's favourite colour. In this example, red is the realiser property and being King's favourite colour (whatever it may be) is the role property.

The fact that naturalists must and do allow that it takes real work to find the natural property to identify with being right means that the identification isn't trivial. The situation will be akin to that which obtains in discussions of randomness in probability theory and statistics, and data fitting in the philosophy of science.

The concept of a random sequence is of central importance in probability theory and statistics. In consequence, what it takes to be a random sequence is an important foundational question. It is also a controversial and difficult one, and different accounts are on offer. Finding the right account is very far from trivial. All the same, when someone offers an account of what it takes to be a random sequence, the proposal isn't that there are *two* properties, that of being a random sequence and that of being so and so, where so and so is the account on offer – two distinct properties that are somehow glued together of necessity. There's one property. All the same, someone who says that being a random sequence is being so and so isn't saying nothing more than that being a random sequence is being a random sequence, or that being so and so is being so and so.[16]

Much the same applies to the problem of data fitting. Long books and articles have been written on the problem of what it takes to be the hypothesis that best fits a given set of data points. How big a role does simplicity play? Can there be two distinct but equally good 'curves' that each fit all the data points? How theory laden is the data itself? And so on. The solution to the problem will be a claim of the form: the hypothesis that best fits a given set of data points is such and such (or maybe, if ties are possible: *an* hypothesis that best fits a given set of data points is *an* hypothesis that is such and such). The claim won't be that there are two properties that necessarily go hand in hand. The claim will be that being the (or an) hypothesis that best fits the data

[16] Perhaps there are different concepts of randomness in different parts of statistics. In that case, what we say needs to be complicated but the essential point remains: it will be that being a random_i sequence is being so and so isn't trivial, despite the fact that the claim is that being a random_i sequence and being so and so are one and the same property.

points *is* the (or an) hypothesis that is such and such. But no-one thinks that because there is just the one property, the claim is trivial. ('If only it were', those struggling to find the answer may well say.)

The triviality argument is Parfit's master argument against naturalism, as we said. However, I think that there is another argument – or maybe line of thought best describes it – hovering in the background which is playing a role in making him so sure that naturalism is a big mistake. My reason is partly that when I present the kind of response just bruited to his attack on naturalism, those sympathetic to Parfit's position often quickly move to this other argument.[17] Also, I know that something similar often happens when naturalists reply to the open question argument, which, as we've remarked, is a close cousin of the triviality objection. Finally, there is Parfit's discussion of disagreement in ch. 25, §87, some of which seems rest on the argument I am about to criticise. I will call this argument: *the argument from real disagreement*. It is the last topic of this essay.

6. *The argument from real disagreement*

Not all disagreements are real. Sometimes what appears to be a disagreement is, when one does some digging, really a case of two people talking past each other. They use the one term 'T' to make what appear to be inconsistent claims – 'x is T' and 'x isn't T', as it might be – but it turns out that they understand 'T' differently, in a way that means it is possible for x to be T on the one understanding, while failing to be T on the other. Perhaps this happens more often than we philosophers (who love an argument) admit. All the same, some disagreements are real and, surely, runs the argument from real disagreement against naturalism, two naturalists in ethics must allow that sometimes when one of them says that being right = N_1, and the other says that being right = N_2, where $N_1 \neq N_2$, they are disagreeing. Maybe sometimes they mean something different by 'morally right' and so are talking past each other, but it isn't plausible that this is

[17] This happened at a graduate seminar at Princeton; I am indebted to that discussion.

always the case or must be the case. But how can they, on the naturalists' own picture, be in real disagreement? Doesn't real disagreement here require that there be one property about which they are taking different views? But what might that one property be? Being right, you might say. But our two naturalists agree on at least this much – either N_1 is being right or N_2 is. What's more, they agree that $N_1 = N_1$, $N_2 = N_2$, and $N_1 \neq N_2$. Where's the single property about which they are disagreeing? Somehow it has vanished from the scene. That's the challenge to naturalism from the argument from real disagreement.

I grant the initial appeal of this line of argument but think it embodies a confused way of thinking about disagreements about the identity of properties. Philosophers disagree, really disagree, about the nature of motion. Let Dr Relational be our representative of the school that insists that motion is a relational property. She holds that motion is a relation between an object's position at a time and its position at earlier and later times. On this view, an object's velocity at time t is nothing over and above the value the rate of change of position over time takes at t (ds/dt, in obvious notation). Professor Intrinsic agrees that objects change position over time but he insists that motion is that which *explains* change of position over time, and so is distinct from change of position over time. It is an intrinsic property, I, which explains the relational property R.

This is a real disagreement and one that generates vigorous discussion at conferences. But what is the single property about which they are disagreeing? Motion, one might say. Doesn't one theorist think motion = R, and the other that motion = I. But what is this single property about which they take different views? There would appear to be just the two possible candidates to be that one property about which they disagree, namely R and I. But they agree that R = R, I = I, and that R ≠ I. Where's the property about which they take different views? What's more, although Dr Relational thinks that Professor Intrinsic is mistaken, she doesn't think that he's so confused as to think that R = I. But R is motion according to her. So, by her lights, Professor Intrinsic doesn't believe that motion is an intrinsic property after all! What's then is going on when she gets up at a conference and declares that Professor Instrinsic wrongly thinks that motion

is an intrinsic property?

There is much that could be said about this kind of puzzle in general.[18] But I think, in the broad, it is reasonably clear what needs to be said. Motion plays a role in our theory of the world we occupy. It plays a role in folk physics; it plays a role in the big improvement on folk physics that gets taught in physics departments. Dr Relational and Professor Intrinsic disagree about which property it is that plays that role. Their disagreement is not so much about the nature of some given property, but about which property *has some further property* – in this case, the property of playing a certain role. It is like the disagreement between someone who thinks that Oxford blue is light blue, and someone who thinks it is dark blue. They are in real disagreement, but it isn't the case that there's a colour such that one person holds it is dark blue and the other that it is light blue. Rather one person thinks that light blue has the property of being the colour with a special association with Oxford University, whereas the other thinks that it is dark blue that has that property.

Ethical naturalists can and should say the same about the disagreement between those who hold that being right = N_1, and those who hold that it = N_2. There is no property the one holds to be N_1 and the other holds to be N_2. Their disagreement is over which property has the property of playing the role we give being right when we engage in moral theory.

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[18] See, e.g., David Lewis, 'Noneism or Allism', *Mind*, 99/393 (1990): 23–31.

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