Session on Parfit on naturalism

Frank Jackson

PHI/CHV 524
14 November 2012

Background

- Parfit holds:

- Cognitivism. Ethical sentences are in the business of saying or reporting how things are, and get to be true if things are as they are said to be. Ethical beliefs are beliefs proper.

- Realism adds that some ethical sentences/beliefs are true. They get to be true just when the action etc., they are about is the right way.

- This means that Parfit accepts that there are ethical properties, and that they are sometimes possessed by actions, characters, etc. Indeed, Parfit's view connects metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.

- The thin ethical concepts are basic (so we can focus on, e.g., rightness and goodness etc.)

- There is a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the ethical, the moral, the normative etc., and, on the other, the natural, the descriptive, etc.

- This means we can ask (without confusion) about the relationship between moral properties and natural properties, and discuss whether or not they are ever identical.

- (They never are according to him; they sometimes are according to naturalists.)

- The natural doesn't *mean* that which isn't moral, and doesn't mean that which is physical (in the sense that figures in discussions of physicalism as a theory of mind or, more generally, of the world we occupy).

- Parfit is convinced that moral properties ≠ natural properties but not because of what "natural" means (he's saying something worth saying).

- Likewise, though naturalists may be mistaken it isn't because of the way the class of natural properties is specified.

- Parfit's arguments that moral properties ≠ natural properties have nothing to do with whether or not Descartes is right about the mind. If Parfit became a dualist tomorrow, he'd still be against naturalism; he doesn't think naturalism is true in Cartesian worlds.

- Parfit isn't a physicalist about the *world* we occupy (he might be a one about some other world provided no moral properties are instantiated in it).

- And some naturalists in ethics are naturalists precisely because they are physicalists about the world.

- A naturalist argument based on physicalism about the world:

  – Moral properties are instantiated by contingently existing items in our world.
  The only properties so instantiated are those with a place in the physicalist world view.
  Hence, moral properties are natural properties in a sense hospitable to physicalism.

- A second argument based on physicalism about the mind:

  – The only properties we can have beliefs about are those that stand in certain causal relations to our brains.
  The only candidates to be such properties are those with a place in the physicalist world view.
  We have beliefs about moral properties.
  Hence, moral properties are natural ones in a sense hospitable to physicalism.

- These naturalists can allow that if Parfit lived in another possible world, he might be right.

- There is, however, a key question that these forms of naturalism fail to address. It is essentially the question that functionalists pose identity theorists of mind.

- In the philosophy of mind the question is, What unites being a given mental state across logical space?

- In ethics, the question is, What unites all the cases of right action across logical space?

- The answer to this question won't/cannot vary as one goes from world to world.

- Important question for naturalism: Is there an argument for naturalism that delivers necessary truths of the form: being right = being N? If there isn't, there is a sense in which naturalism has to be false – it falls to the "across logical space" question.

- Parfit and I agree that naturalism must make claims of the form: being right = being N, which are necessarily true.

- Parfit thinks that all such claims are false; I think that one is true.

- Parfit and I also agree that naturalists should be hard naturalists, not soft naturalists.

- The only viable form of naturalism holds that the key moral-natural identities are a priori.

- There is a sense in which Parfit is "springing a trap" here—see next slide.

Parfit's master argument against naturalism

- If naturalism is true, then hard naturalism is true.

- Hard naturalism is false. (It falls to the triviality objection.)

- Therefore, naturalism is false.

How then should we define "natural property"?

- Philosophers are good at making trouble for definitions.

- The key idea common to all forms of naturalism is that we can give an account of moral properties in terms of non-moral ones (but in a way that doesn't violate Leibniz's Law).

- Some ways to do this:

- We can specify moral properties in non-moral terms.

- But that's a doctrine about words and/or concepts; isn't naturalism a thesis in the *metaphysics* of ethics?

- We can view moral properties as patterns or arrangements in non-moral properties.

- Density is a pattern in mass and volume; shapes are arrangements of dots; being a thermostat is a functional arrangement; …

How to argue that the natural-moral property identities are necessarily true (going back to Blackburn)

- *Grounding*: if an action has a moral property, then it has a natural property.

- *Supervenience:* If two actions differ in moral properties, they differ in natural properties.

- (= if two actions are exactly alike in natural properties, they are exactly alike in moral properties).

- Slogans: i) the moral is grounded in the natural, and ii) the moral supervenes on the natural.

- Let n_1, n_2, … be the non-moral natures of all the right acts in logical space, and consider:

- x is right if and only if x is n_1 or n_2 or …

- The above bi-conditional is necessarily true.

How significant is this result?

- It depends on two questions
  - Is there a pattern in the n_is?
  - One's attitude to a famous issue about property identity.

The pattern question

- The key point perhaps is best grasped from an example, which is, I admit, a bit of fun. See next slide.

- (By the way, I doubt if I'm disagreeing with Parfit here.)

How not to win the Nobel prize

- (Karl von Frisch won the Nobel Prize for decoding the honey bee dance.)

- Thank you for your work on this demanding project. We have accomplished two things. We have confirmed that the bees get information from the dance, information that allows them to find sources of nectar. This means that there is a property in the dances reliably correlated with nectar locations. We have also shown something important about this property: it is a matter of the geometry and kinematics of the dance, and its orientation with respect to the sun and the vertical. My colleagues in the philosophy department have told me a good way to express this: say that the property *supervenes* on the geometry and kinematics of the dance, and its orientation with respect to the sun and the vertical.

- We have, however, been unable to articulate the crucial property of the dance. Exactly what it is about the geometry etc. of the dance that delivers the location information to the bees has defeated us. We have tried many formulae but each has been found defective in one way or another. At first I thought our failure was due to the complexity of the task and that we might succeed if only we worked a bit harder, were a bit smarter or a bit luckier. However, my colleagues in the philosophy department have opened my eyes to another possibility. They express it in different ways. Sometimes they express it by saying that the relationship between the nature of the honey bee dance and the location of nectar is *sui generis*. Sometimes they express it by warning against *reductionism*. Sometimes they express it by talking of the *autonomy* of the location of the nectar with respect to the nature of the dance. Sometimes they say that the properties of the dance are *shapeless* with respect to the location of the nectar. But the words they use aren't crucial. What is crucial for our project is the message: what we were attempting is impossible as a matter of principle, not complexity. The honey bee dance is uncodifiable. This is why I have abandoned the project. (One small consolation is that we can be sure that no other research team will succeed where we have failed.)

- If there's a pattern, we can abbreviate the infinite disjunction
  x is right if and only if x is n_1 or n_2 or …
  as follows:

- x is right if and only if x is N, where N captures the pattern..

- Comments:
  – How simple the pattern is is another question altogether
  – So is the question as to whether we in part create the pattern
  – So is the question as to whether we can capture the pattern in words (think of the fuss over analyzing knowledge).
  – But if we cannot capture the pattern in words, there are limits on what is achievable in books on ethics.

The famous issue about property identity

- Being an equilateral triangle in E space is necessarily co-extensive with being an equiangular triangle in E space.

- Are there two properties?

- Yes: we can believe a triangle has one but not the other.

- No: each is a shape and there aren't two shapes.

- I think the second consideration is decisive. We are talking about a shape and there aren't two shapes. (Parfit indicates sympathy with this view.)

- Upshot for moral properties?

- We should say that being right = being N.

- Not compulsory, but the plausible way to go.

Why is it the plausible way to go?

- The "chaperone" hypothesis is metaphysically implausible, motivationally obscure and raises serious epistemological questions deriving from what we know about the causal history of our beliefs about ethical properties.

- And the maths analogy doesn't help with the causal problem.

- That's obvious if fictionalism about mathematical objects is true.

- If realism about them is true, we can divide mathematical claims into two groups: those that are *about* mathematical objects, like "There are two primes between 3 and 11", and those that *use* mathematics to describe *non-mathematical* objects, like "There are 7 apples in that bowl".

- The first kind may be useful examples for non-naturalist realists to appeal to when they reflect on, say, "It is obligatory to maximize the good" – that is, on claims about how ethical properties inter-connect.

- But it is the second kind that are relevant to questions about which *naturalistically described items* have which ethical properties. But, of course, the number of apples in a bowl does have causal effects.

- When we use numbers to describe the world, we ascribe properties that make causal differences.

- (Sarah McGrath's talk in the Tower Room but don't hold her responsible for my wordings.)

- Maybe the best way for Parfit to go is to hold that we grasp an a priori truths of the form: if X has so and so natural properties, then X has such and such an additional property of an ethical kind.

- That would of course be to reject Hume on "is" and "ought" (and so would not be a response available to Dworkin?).

- And would raise an important question about how the additional properties could count as non-natural. If a property is a priori determined by the natural, how could it fail to count as natural?

Why hard naturalism is the naturalism of choice

- Once upon a time, the naturalists' conclusion that it is necessarily true that being right = N would have been taken to lead automatically to the conclusion that it is a priori true. No longer.

- Natural thought: the smart thing for naturalists to do is insist that their key identities are necessary a posteriori truths.

- Models:

- Water = H_2O, lightning = an electrical discharge, heat (in gases) = molecular K.E., gold = stuff with AN 79, etc.

- This way, runs the thought, we can acknowledge what Moore got right, and have a reply to Parfit's triviality argument.

- This view is, in Parfit's terms, soft naturalism; the alternative is hard naturalism (the view I like). We agree that naturalists should be hard ones.

A way to sketch the case for hard over soft naturalism

- Suppose I offered as an argument for naturalism the truth of:
The property we are discussing today = being right
observing that the LHS contains only natural terms.

- You might object by referring to our earlier point that the identities need to be necessary truths. Fair enough. But you might also object that the fact that one can refer to a property using natural terms doesn't show it is a natural property; it shows it *has* a natural property.

- Naturalists need a way of referring to the property that is rightness that reveals which property it *is*, and which reveals it to be a natural property. But as it is a priori that every property is identical with itself, this means that the needed identities must be a priori – just as hard naturalism says.

- Parfit's distinction between direct and indirect ways of referring to a property may be getting at essentially the same distinction.

- What's more, the issue about concepts is a bit of an irrelevance according to Parfit (I take it) and me.

- Would Parfit's life have been wasted if all he had managed to achieve were the answers to questions like: which actions etc. have the *property* of being right? What's the nature of the *property* of being right? How is the *property* connected to facts about motivation? Etc. Of course not.

- Upshot: naturalists have to affirm property identities of the form:
  Being right = N
  as being a priori true.

Springing the trap?

- Can Parfit now pounce, arguing that
  - We cannot do without ethical concepts, and that
  - Hard naturalism makes naturalism trivial.

Being able to do without words doesn't mean we can do without concepts

- Example of density tells us this.

- We could, with a cost in complexity, do without the word "density".

- Certain laws would be harder to state but it would still be possible.

- But we wouldn't be dispensing with the concept; we'd be dispensing with an easy way of expressing the laws.

- The same point can be made with the example of a set's being non-denumerably infinite.

Triviality

- Suppose a naturalist says that being right = N
- Then they are saying that N = N.
- That cannot be right; it's trivial.
- Or suppose a naturalist writes a book arguing that being right = N, and then uses their conclusion to infer that acts are right iff they are N.
- But, by their own lights, to be right is to be N (it isn't to be something else!), and we don't need to write a book to find out that acts are N iff they are N.
- Disagreement.
- Isn't a naturalist who says that being right = N_1 disagreeing with one who says that being right = N_2, where $N_1 \neq N_2$?
- But *what* property are they disagreeing about?

The background assumption about the connection between a priori true identities and triviality

- If it is a priori that property P = property Q, then any claim that is trivial when expressed in terms of "P" remains trivial when expressed in terms of "Q".

- Many of the debates in philosophy and mathematics over property identities provide counter-examples to any principle of this kind.

The philosophy of color

- Some views about color:
- Red = the disposition to look red in normal circumstances
- Red = the ground of the disposition, whatever it is
- Red = the actual ground of the disposition
- Red = the property looking red represents things to have
- Red = red (it is sui generis)
- Red = physical property P
- With the exception of the last, these identities are offered as a priori truths.

What are they disagreeing about?

- The proponents of these views are in disagreement. This means that they take the 6 RHSs to be different properties.

- But now it is hard to say which property they are quarreling about.

- The disposition to look red in NCs?

- They *all* think that the disposition to look red in NCs = the disposition to look red in NCs, and *none* think that it is one of the other 5 properties. There's no disagreement over that property?

- Ditto for all the other candidates.

- Is there a 7th property they are fighting over? No supporter of one of the 6 thinks their candidate is identical with some other property.

- What is more, the protagonists each think that "Red objects are precisely those that are disposed to look red in normal circumstances" says something non-trivial.

- Some think this because they think it says something true and worth saying, indeed is the conclusion of their recent article.

- Others think this because they think it says something false, as is demonstrated in their recent article.

- Likewise, the protagonists each think that "Red objects are precisely those that have the property looking red represents things to have" says something non-trivial.

- Some think this because they think it says something true and worth saying, indeed is the conclusion of their recent article.

- Others think this because it says something false, as is demonstrated in their recent article.

- And so on for all the different positions on what the property of being red is.

- Have philosophers of color wasted a portion of their lives?

- Of course not.

- What is going on is a debate over how to find the right way through a "puzzle thicket" set by the combination of different individually appealing claims about color, namely:

  - Looking red plays a special role in settling whether something is red.

  - Looking red would seem to be a causal response to red.

  - Looking red is a representation state, and how it represents something to be is red.

  - There is something "ineffable" about red.

- Red is a property of objects' surfaces.
- People with equally good color vision draw color hue boundaries in different places, and there is no non-ad hoc way to decide who gets it right.

- We can and do quarrel about the best path through the thicket. That's what the quarrel is about.
- Mutatis mutandis for naturalism in ethics.

What about the "shiftability" intuition?

- Can't we make perfect sense of pairing the property of being right with *different complete* sets of natural properties?

- Not really. We all have to think that the passage from complete sets of natural properties to moral nature is a priori. What experiments could possibly be relevant?

- We all – naturalist realist and non-naturalist realist alike – have to hold that shiftability is a priori impossible.