Good and Right as Non-Natural Properties¹

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There is widespread agreement that Georg Edward Moore takes ‘good’ to be a non-natural property.² It is his well-known “open question argument” that is supposed to show that good cannot be a natural property. “(G)ood does not, by definition, mean anything that is natural; and it is therefore always an open question whether anything that is natural is good” (Moore 1903, S. 44). The idea is this: For any natural property N it can sensibly be asked whether x which is N is at the same time also good. Thus, the term “good” cannot refer to a natural property, otherwise - Moore thinks - the question ‘but is it good?’ would not make sense.

Moore’s open question argument did not finish off ethical naturalism. As has been argued by various philosophers, the argument does neither show that good cannot be a natural property nor even that the term “good” cannot have the same meaning as a term which refers to a natural property.³ The former because “good” could refer to the same property as, for instance, the term “pleasant” without having the same meaning. This is, for instance, the case with the two terms “water” and “H2O”. They refer to the same items without having the same meaning. The identity of property does not imply the identity of meaning. Thus the fact that “good” might not have the same meaning as “pleasant” does not mean that they do not refer to the same property. But then Moore’s open questi-

¹ Thanks to Norbert Anwander, Susanne Boshammer, David Copp, Neil Roughley, Thomas Schmidt, Tatjana Tarkian, and Theo van Willigenburg for their helpful comments.

² For a different reading of Moore see Gibbard (2003), p. 29-37.

on argument also fails with regard to the identity of meaning. The fact that the question ‘X is pleasant but is it good?’ does make sense does not imply that these two terms differ in meaning. If a person does not know the meaning of “pleasant” or of “good” she might sensibly ask whether x which is pleasant is at the same time also good. The open question ‘Is it good?’ could be a question of clarification, asked by a person who does not know or is maybe not sure about the meaning of pleasant. Thus, open questions can be meaningful with regard to two terms which have the same meaning.

But even though Moore’s open question argument does not succeed I think we should agree with him that good is indeed not a natural, but rather a non-natural property sui generis. We should agree with him, I will argue in this paper, of course for reasons other than Moore himself offered. And we should not believe that good is a non-natural property. We should have the same belief about right and all other so called thin ethical properties such as bad and wrong. Thin properties are properties referred to by thin evaluative terms. Thin terms inform us about the relevant evaluative properties such as good. Thick terms such as “polite”, “generous”, “courageous” and “just” on the other hand inform us also about non-evaluative properties of the actions they are ascribed to. If the queen’s donation to Oxfam was generous, the amount of money exceeded one thousand pound. Thin ethical terms just inform you that the action in question has the relevant evaluative property. And the claim I will argue for is that thin ethical terms refer to non-natural properties.

1. Ethical Naturalism

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4 See also Williams (1985), p. 129.
In his “Principia Ethica”, Moore aims at refuting ethical naturalism. He takes ethical naturalism to be the view that the term “good” refers to a natural property, and that good is whatever the natural property the term “good” refers to. Moore himself holds this view in his “Reply to my Critics” (1942), p. 588: “I should never have thought of suggesting that goodness was nonnatural, unless I had supposed that it was derivative in the sense that, whenever a thing is good ... its goodness depends on the presence of certain non-ethical characteristics possessed by the thing in question ... if a thing is good ... then that this is so follows from the fact that it has certain natural intrinsic properties.”

Two forms of ethical naturalism have to be distinguished: a) reductive naturalism and b) non-reductive naturalism.

a) According to reductive naturalists good is identical with a natural property. Good could be, for instance, identical with the pleasant. Being this property it supervenes, of course, on other natural properties. Something is pleasant in virtue of other properties it has.

b) Non-reductive naturalists on the other hand hold the view that good is a natural property *sui generis*, that is, a property not identical with another natural

5 See Moore (1903), p. 40.

6 Moore himself holds this view in his “Reply to my Critics” (1942), p. 588: “I should never have thought of suggesting that goodness was nonnatural, unless I had supposed that it was derivative in the sense that, whenever a thing is good ... its goodness depends on the presence of certain non-ethical characteristics possessed by the thing in question ... if a thing is good ... then that this is so follows from the fact that it has certain natural intrinsic properties.”
property, even though also supervening on other natural properties. This is the view David Brink holds. According to Brink, the property good (or right) is a natural property constituted by natural properties. “Moral facts and properties, so construed, are constituted, composed or realized by organized combinations of natural and social scientific facts and properties ... This naturalist claim should be understood on the model of other common constitution claims: for instance, tables are constituted by certain combinations of microphysical particles, large scale social events such as wars and elections are constituted by enormously complex combinations of smaller scale social events and processes ...” (Brink 1989, p. 159).

Non-naturalists also hold the view that moral properties supervene on natural properties. But unlike a reductive as well as a non-reductive naturalist a non-naturalist thinks that good and right are supervening non-natural properties.

2. Natural Properties

But what are natural and non-natural properties? Let us start with natural properties. In his “Principia Ethica” Moore holds the view that natural properties are those properties which do not depend on the existence of their objects.7 A natural property exist by itself without being the property of this or another object. Moore thinks that this does not apply to the non-natural property good. “Can we imagine ‘good’ as existing by itself in time and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it, whereas with the greater number of properties of objects - those which I call the natural properties - their existence does seem to me to be independent of the existence of those objects”

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7 See Moore (1903), p. 41.
(Moore 1903, p. 41). In his “Reply to my Critics” he advocates the view that natural properties do not depend on other properties (see Moore 1942, p. 588).

I think that both views should be rejected: The problem with the view advocated in his “Principia Ethica” is that it is hard to imagine any property existing by itself in time, independently of the existence of objects. And the problem with the second view is that it would exclude the supervenience of natural on other natural properties. But then the properties described by chemistry which supervene on properties described by physics had to be conceived of as non-natural properties. This is an implausible view.

I think that natural properties should rather be taken as those properties that would figure in a perfected version of the natural and social sciences.8 This is compatible with the view that natural properties are empirical properties: They would figure as properties in the best empirical sciences.9 What distinguishes non-natural from natural properties is to my mind the following: Unlike natural properties non-natural play no role in the explanation of empirical phenomena, that is, in the explanation of the objects of the empirical sciences. They play no role neither in causal nor in possible non-causal explanations of empirical phenomena.10 And it is not the case that they do not actually have an explanatory force, but could have one, provided the world was different. This is excluded by their very nature. Non-natural properties are not part of the explanation of how things, states of affairs and events come about. This applies also to the explanations of actions, choices and evaluative beliefs. Thus if ‘good’ and ‘right’

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8 See also Crisp (1996), p. 117.


10 It has to be emphasized that non-natural properties do not just play no role in causal but also in non-causal explanations. For a discussion of the causal criterion of a property’s being natural see Crisp (1996), p. 115.
are non-natural properties they have no explanatory force. The truth of ethical non-naturalism depends on the explanatory impotence of the thin ethical properties. I will argue that the properties ‘good’ and ‘right’ do have no explanatory force. They should therefore be taken as non-natural properties, because a property is a natural property if it is part of the best explanations of the best natural and social sciences.

3. Against Reductive Naturalism

We should reject ethical naturalism. But first of all, non-reductive naturalism is more plausible than reductive naturalism. There is the problem of reduction: Is good (or right) identical with a single natural property such as pleasant? How could we tell? Let us take Frank Jackson’s methodological proposal “about how to identify the ethical properties: find the properties which are such that, going under their purely descriptive names, they make the clause of mature folk morality come out true ... and then identify each ethical property with the corresponding descriptive property” (Jackson 1998, p. 143). If we proceed this way, could we then find a descriptive property name that would confirm our everyday moral judgments? Could the term “good” in this way be replaced by a purely descriptive term? This is not clear. But then, more importantly could “good” be replaced by one single descriptive term such as pleasant or serving the interests of others or desired by others? This seems to be very unlikely, given the way we use the word “good”. Things are called good for different reasons. Things that are pleasant are good, but then also things that are healthy or life saving or autonomy enhancing or problem solving and so on. Thus, if we follow Jackson’s methodological proposal we will end up with very different descriptive property names, and as a consequence with very different natural properties
“good” would supposedly refer to. The property would be identical with different properties such as “pleasant”, “healthy”, “life saving”, “autonomy enhancing” etc.

Jackson thinks that “good” and “right” might turn out to be disjunctive properties, “possibly infinitely disjunctive descriptive properties” (Jackson 1998, p. 124). If so, the word “good” would function just like the concept “bald” or the concept “tall”. “Bald” refers to many different hair distributions, and there are many ways to be tall.

To take good as a disjunctive property has its obvious difficulties. First of all, it is definitely not what we expect naturalism to be. One assumes “good” to refer to a property such as “pleasant” or “promoting hedonic value”. But if we follow Jackson’s methodological proposal it is very unlikely that this will be the upshot of our inquiry. But then, more importantly, why do we call all these different natural properties “good”? The different hair distributions we refer to by the word “bold” are not the same, but we call them all “bald” because of their similarity. But it is not at all clear whether the properties “good” refers to have any similarity. Thus, if the natural properties “good” refers to are very different it is unclear why they all are supposed to be referred to by the term “good”. If the relevant natural properties are very different something else is meant by “good” than just that the object in question has a certain natural property.

Non-reductive naturalism is of course not faced with this problem. A non-naturalist can claim that the term “good” refers to a natural property sui generis that supervenes on certain natural properties. It is always the same property that is referred to by “good”; a property that is realizable in many different ways,


12 See Jackson (1998), p. 124: “You have at some stage to say that to be bald is to be like these exemplars in the ‘bald’ way, hoping that one’s hearers have latched onto the relevant similarity and can go on in the right way.”
supervening on different natural properties. If so, the non-reductive naturalist is in a better position to account for our use of “good” and the other thin property names. Thus I think our choice has to be one between non-reductive naturalism and non-naturalism. And with regard to this choice the question the question of whether thin ethical properties have an explanatory force is crucial.

4. Good and Right as Secondary-Properties

We should have a clearer picture of what we mean by saying that x is good, in order to answer this question. I take it that Thomas Scanlon’s buck passing view of goodness is helpful in this context (Scanlon 1998, p. 95-100). According to Scanlon, to say that x is good means that x has properties that provide us with reasons to respond to x in certain ways. Good is not a property that itself provides us with reasons to respond in a certain way: “Rather, to be good ... is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. Since the claim that some property constitutes a reason is a normative claim, this account also takes goodness and value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind” (Scanlon 1998, p. 97). Good is related to reason-giving properties, it is not in itself reason-giving. X is good, for instance, because it is pleasant. To say that x is good is not to say that it is pleasant. It is just to say that it has a property that provide us with a reason to choose or to recommend it to others. The formal property good supervenes on the property of being pleasant: It is good, because it is pleasant.

The idea is that good is not itself a reason-giving property. A reason is something that speaks in favour of an action or a response or an attitude etc. I have a reason to choose x, because x is pleasant. The fact that x is good is not a
reason for choosing x. It is not the case that I have a reason to choose x, because x is pleasant and then in addition to this it is also good. If good was reason-giving we had two reasons in play here. But this is not true. ‘Why should I choose x?’ ‘Because it is pleasant’. This would be a satisfactory answer.\textsuperscript{13} Nothing had to be added such as: ‘and then it also good’. ‘X is good’ tells you that there are reasons to choose x such as the fact that it is pleasant.

5. Does Good have an Explanatory Force?

Does the second-order property good have an explanatory force? Let us take the action of my choosing x. Does good have an explanatory force with regard to this choice? I think that x is good and also that x is pleasant. And I choose x. One could say I did so, because x was good. That is to say, the goodness of choosing x brought about the belief that doing so is good and the belief then moves me to action. Could this be a satisfactory explanation of my choice?

Explaining an action is, I take it, naming the reasons the action has been carried out for. If good has an explanatory force it would be such a \textit{motivating reason}. But I think that good is not a motivating reason in the same way as it is not a normative reason for doing something. Take the example of Paul’s writing a paper on abortion. ‘Why did he write this paper? His doing so would not be explained by saying that he did it, because it was a good thing to write a paper on this subject. Of course, it might indeed be a good thing to write such a paper. But

\textsuperscript{13} See Scanlon (1998), p. 97: “(T)he fact that a resort is pleasant is a reason to visit it or to recommend it to a friend, and the fact that a discovery casts light on the causes of cancer is a reason to applaud it and to support further research of that kind. These natural properties provide a complete explanation of the reasons we have for reacting in these ways that things that are good or valuable. It is not clear what further work could be done by special reason-providing properties of goodness and value, and even less clear how these properties could provide reasons.”
to say that it is good to do so is just to say that there are reasons to act accordingly. The reasons that speak in favour of doing so differ from its being good. To write a paper on abortion is good due to the reasons that speak in favour of it. It is good to write such a paper, because it is a controversial issue in ethics which needs to be solved. This might be the reason Paul wrote a paper on abortion. To say that it is good to do so is too unspecific with regard to an explanation of the action in question. Why - one can ask - a paper on abortion? Because it is good to deal with this issue. But this holds for many other papers. Why abortion? This question is not answered by saying that it is good to do so. It might be good to do so, but the reasons Paul wrote the paper are different. For instance, he wanted to develop a solution to the problem of abortion people could agree on. Thus good does not figure among the reasons that guide our actions. And good has therefore no explanatory force. It might be the beginning of an explanation of an action, in the sense that there is an explanation of the action, that there are reasons that speak in favour of responding in a favourable way to the thing in question. Some one might have serious doubts: ‘Why does one write a paper on abortion?’ ‘What does guide a person who does this?’ If one answers, ‘it is good thing to do this’, one says that there are indeed reasons for writing such a paper, reasons that have to be spelled out in order to explain the action in question.

The same I think holds for evaluative beliefs. I think that doing x is good. Again, the property good does not play a role in explaining how I came to have my belief. I do not hold this view because doing x is good, that is to say because I saw that doing x was good. There are reasons why I think that doing x is good: I think so, because doing x is pleasant or autonomy enhancing or very important for my health etc. Such properties provide us with reasons to believe that the things in question are good. They bring about the relevant evaluative beliefs. I
think that doing x is good, because I saw that it has good-making properties. And to say that I saw that doing x was good is just to say that I saw that doing x has properties that provide us with reasons to respond to it in a positive way.

6. Under the guise of the good?

Berys Gaut does not share the view that good has no explanatory force (see Gaut 2002). He thinks that a full explanation of actions and choices cannot be given without reference to goodness. Take the following explanation: Talking to John is pleasant, and this is why I talk to him. I think that this could be a perfect explanation of the action in question. But Gaut believes that this could not be a satisfactory explanation if it was not clear that things which are pleasant are at the same time good. “It turns out then on closer inspection that one cannot eliminate reference to values in giving a full explanation of one’s reasons for choosing” (Gaut 2002, p. 151). So why did he choose x? One might say: ‘Because he knows that doing x is pleasant’. But then might ask ‘Is this a reason for choosing x?’ Yes, it is, because things that are pleasant are good.

According to Gaut, this reference to good is necessary for a full explanation of an action. His idea seems to be the following: Take the counterfactual test of explanatory relevance.¹⁴ A property does not play an explanatory role with respect to a certain fact if “we could have explained it just as well even if the assumption had not been invoked in the explanation ...” (Sayre-McCord 1986, p. 272). The question then is: Would the explanandum have occurred even if the putatively explanatory fact had not obtained, other things being equal?

Provided that we - as Gaut assumes - are always guided by the good, good seems

to meet this counterfactual text of explanatory relevance. X would not have been chosen if it was not good. Thus good seems to be explanatorily relevant.

But even if we were - as Gaut thinks - always guided by the good, good played no explanatory role. First of all, good has no explanatory relevance when the relevant evaluative belief is wrong and the thing in question is as a matter of fact not good. In these cases only the belief about good would have an explanatory relevance. Good could only play a part in explaining choices in those cases where the belief about goodness is true. But even then I think good does not explain choices. If it is true that x is good, good is just an enabling condition of an agent’s choosing x.\textsuperscript{15} One has to distinguish between being part of an explanation and just being a necessary condition which is not part of the explanation. X being an enabling condition of Z does not belong to the elements which brought about Z. Z would not have occurred, had X not obtained. But X has not be mentioned to explain why Z came into existence. Take one of Jonathan Dancy’s example: “For instance, that England is not sinking beneath the waves today is a consideration in the absence of which what explains my action would be incapable of doing so. But that does nothing to show that England’s not submerging today is part of the explanation of why I do what I do” (Dancy 2000, p. 127). I think that this applies to good (and of course also to all other thin ethical properties). If the relevant belief about good is true the choice would not have been made without its object being good. But the goodness of the object chosen is not the reason why it has been chosen, and thus it is not a proper part of the explanation of the choice in question. To say that x is good is not in any way to illuminate us as to why x occurred. Things do not happen, because they are good. Things are chosen because of the reasons that explain why they are

good. Take an action you do not understand: Why did she do x? The reasons for doing are not at all obvious. Say one gave the answer ‘Well, doing x is good’. Would this make the action understandable? Would we now know why she did x? Not at all. And referring to the goodness of the action is not even part of a full explanation. It does give you no reason at all. The reasons for her to choose x might be that doing so made her happy or doing x was pleasant etc. These are reasons that make our choices and actions understandable. Of course, in some cases it is certainly true that if there were no reasons explaining the goodness of an action, the action had not been carried out. But this does not mean that good plays any explanatory role. This role is played by the reasons that explain the goodness of the action chosen.

7. Properties, Reasons, and Good

How are natural properties, reasons and goodness related to each other? The reasons for choosing x are provided by certain properties x has. It is good to choose x, because x is pleasant. Being pleasant is the reason for choosing x. And it is also the reason that can guide an agent (She chose x, because it was pleasant). ‘X is good’ means x has such reason-providing properties. It does not mean that x is pleasant. Good is a formal property which can supervene on many different natural properties. That x is good is a normative fact. That x is pleasant is not a normative fact. It is rather a normatively relevant fact (it provides us with reasons to respond).¹⁶ ‘S has reason to choose x’ is also a normative fact. Like the property ‘is good’, the property ‘is a reason for S’ has no explanatory force. ‘S chose x, because she had reason to do so’ is not an explanation of the action.

¹⁶ See also Parfit (1997), p. 124.
in question. S chose x due to the reasons she had to do so, but not due to the fact that she had reasons. These reasons are explaining actions, not the fact that you have a reason. One can compare this with reasons for beliefs. I have reasons to believe that p. These reasons explain my belief. I believe that p, because I saw such and such speaks in favour of holding this belief. I don’t believe that p, because I think I have reasons to do so. The same holds for actions: Actions are explained by reason-giving properties: I did x, because it was a great pleasure to do so.

8. Good as a Property?

The fact that good (or any other thin ethical property) does not illuminate us as to why an action has been carried out, could be seen as a reason to conclude that the term “good” does not refer to a property, neither to a non-natural property nor to a natural one. “Good” one could say has a completely different function: It does not refer to anything, it has rather an expressive meaning. It is the expression of an inner state (a positive attitude, an approval). To say ‘x is good’ is to say something like ‘I’m pleased that x has the properties a and b’ or ‘I recommend choosing x due to the properties a and b it has’.

But I think that “good” should not be taken this way. I might of course express my approval that x exists by calling x “good”. But I tell you at the same time that x has properties that are worth going for. I myself might not be pleased about x. x might not interest me, but I have to admit that it has properties that speak in favour of choosing x. And I might be right or wrong with regard to this. I’m right if it has such properties and I’m wrong if it has no such properties. Thus, to say that x is good is to say that x has a certain kind of property, namely the second-order property to have reason-giving properties. And this is the case
or not the case: S has a reason to choose x or he has not. The talk of a property ‘good’ is related to the possibility of being right and wrong about the existence of reason-providing properties. Thus the fact that good has no explanatory force is no reason to conclude that “good” does not refer to a property.

9. Supervenience: Two Objections

There are two objections to be met with regard to the idea that the thin non-natural properties ‘good’ and ‘right’ supervene on natural properties. According to the first objection (a) supervenient properties have to be natural properties and according to second objection (b) the supervenience-relation between the property good and any natural property is completely mysterious.

   a) Frank Jackson thinks that ethical properties are as supervenient properties necessarily natural properties:
      “(F)or any ethical predicate there is a purely descriptive one that is necessarily co-extensive with it. It follows that ethical properties are descriptive properties. For it is a consequence of the way the ethical supervenes on the descriptive that any claim about how things are made in ethical vocabulary makes no distinctions among the possibilities that cannot in principle be made in purely descriptive vocabulary” (Jackson 1998, p. 123).

      Jackson’s idea is that ethical properties are natural properties because for any ethical predicate there is a natural predicate which is necessarily co-extensive with it. If the ethical property M is instantiated, necessarily also the natural property N. If so, M and N are identical. Identical properties are co-extensive in all possible worlds. And properties that are necessarily co-extensive are identical.

      The latter seems false. Triangularity and trilaterality would then also be the
same property. But this does not seem to be true. They are not the same property, even though they are necessarily co-extensive. But Jackson holds the view that triangularity and trialaterality are the very same property: “Cases where we think that a triangle is equiangular while failing to think that it is equilateral are ones where we have a separation in modes of representation in thought for what is, all the same, one and the same property in our sense of ‘property’” (Jackson 1998, p. 126).

If so, having angles and having sides would be, as Shafer-Landau rightly argues, identical, too. Although they are necessarily co-extensive, they can be distinguished. “(A)ngularity is a function of the distance between two intersecting lines. Laterality isn’t that. Thus a difference” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 91). This is an example of how two predicates can be necessarily co-extensive without referring to the same property. Thus, ethical properties are not necessarily natural properties. If the natural property N is instantiated, necessarily also the non-natural property M. The fact that ethical properties supervene on natural properties does not imply that they are identical with natural properties.

b) Let us turn to the second objection. Simon Blackburn argues that “(s)upervenience ... becomes a mysterious fact” (Blackburn 184, p. 185), if one takes this - as moral realists do - to be a relation between natural and ethical properties. According to Blackburn, the problem consists in explaining “the ban on mixed worlds, and the argument goes that anti-realism does this better than realism” (Blackburn 1984, p. 184). What is meant by “mixed worlds”? Say, M supervenes on N*. But M does not necessarily supervene on N*. It might be the case that X is N* without being at the same time M. Mixed worlds obtain where it is true that M does not necessarily supervene on N*. These mixed worlds seem

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17 See also Shafer-Landau (2003), p. 91.
to be excluded by the supervenience idea. If X is M due to the fact that x is N*, how could it be that X is N*, but at the same time not M, other things being equal? There is a ban on mixed worlds, and the problem is, as Blackburn thinks, “that of finding out the authority behind the ban” (Blackburn 1993, p. 135).

According to Blackburn, this a particular problem for moral realists who think that all moral properties supervene on natural properties. There is an explanation available with regard to the supervenience of two different natural properties. All competent people will agree, for instance, that chemical structures supervene on physical structures. “The best explanation of why competent people recognize the supervenience of kinds of physical or chemical structure is that we live in a culture in which science has found this out” (Blackburn 1993, p. 144). This sort of empirical explanation is - as Blackburn thinks - not available with regard to the supervenience of moral on natural properties. The supervenience relation is not the result of empirical investigations. So how can we assume that if x is N*(a natural property), then necessarily x is also M (an ethical property)?

First of all, I think it is not clear why the same answer should not also be available to a moral realist. Competent people recognize the supervenience of the moral on the natural, because they found out that if x is N*, it is always also M. The moral realist has of course no explanation why this is so, but then I think the same applies to those who believe in the supervenience, for instance, of mental on physical properties. What would explain the fact that there is a necessary connection between these two kinds of properties?

But let us assume that there was an explanation of the supervenience of the mental on the physical. Would this create a problem for the moral realist? I think it would not be a problem for the naturalist realist. She could argue that the moral
supervenes on the natural, just because the moral and the natural are identical. That is to say, there cannot be a change with regard to the moral properties of x, if there is no change with regard to its natural properties, because they are the same. Say, good was pleasant, x could not cease to be good without ceasing to be pleasant.

This answer is not available, one has to admit, to the non-naturalist. But then it would also not be available to the non-reductive naturalist. So if the moral realist has a particular problem with explaining the supervenience of the moral on the natural, it is a particular problem for the non-naturalist as well as for the non-reductive naturalist. If so, Blackburn’s objection is a challenge not only for the non-naturalist realist. Thus, Blackburn’s problem, provided that there is one, had to be dealt with in a general defense of moral realism. There is no particular problem of the supervenience of non-natural on natural properties.

Conclusion

Ethical naturalism which takes ethical properties to be natural properties should be rejected, because thin ethical properties do not play a role in the best explanations of empirical phenomena, including actions, choices and evaluative beliefs. Thin ethical properties (good, right) supervene on natural properties that provide us with reasons to respond to them in certain ways. Something is good or right if it has such reason-giving natural properties. Unlike these reason-giving properties they are not part of the natural world.

References


