## 1.4 What Is the Nature of Morality? A Response to Casebeer, Railton, and Ruse

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It should be obvious that, within the confines of a short response, we cannot possibly answer the question that constitutes the title of our reply. Nonetheless, each of our commentators touched upon issues that bear directly on this question, so we've chosen it as a framework within which to reflect upon their many stimulating comments.

Naturalism in moral philosophy is associated with diverse views that do not make up a happy family. At the turn of the twentieth century, G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* outlined a (purportedly fallacious) metaethical view that came to be known as "moral naturalism." According to Moore, this particular form of naturalism is committed to the view that moral properties are natural properties and can therefore be defined as such. Definitions provide analyses in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; that is, they are analytic. Such analytic definitions do not leave open any questions about the relationship between the definition and what is defined. However, Moore claimed, all attempts to define the moral *do* allow for such open questions. Therefore, moral naturalism is false. In addition, the term is also used to denote a claim that natural facts can vindicate, justify, or ground moral facts in a strong sense. Now, the view we outline is, by our lights, ethically naturalistic. However, we believe neither in the reducibility of the moral *to* the descriptive nor in the vindication of the moral *by* the descriptive. We do, of course, believe that moral norms, ends, and values are amenable to rational discussion. But the strong sense of vindication—the demonstrative sort that Hume correctly saw as not in the offing—is something we reject. Thus, given the multifarious uses of the term "ethical naturalism" or "moral naturalism," it is not surprising that our commentators (naturalists themselves) would hold some beliefs different than our own.

For example, Michael Ruse believes (as J. L. Mackie did) that ethics requires a strong form of rationally compelling, objective categoricity, and

since this notion is now incredible, the upshot is skepticism. We, too, reject this notion of categoricity but replace it with a naturalized version that does not lead to skepticism. After all, why think that morality *would* or *should* bind rational beings, wherever they may be? On our view, this conception is an artifact of *one* particular tradition of morality, which maintains that moral judgments and imperatives must have objective categorical prescriptive force, or else they are not moral at all. There are many naturalists who maintain this feature to be a necessary (perhaps conceptual) truth about morality; without it, morality is a fiction, a myth, an error.[1] But what, precisely, is this error? Is it that our concept of morality has no referent? Or that one particular conception of morality got things wrong and should be replaced by another? Any naturalistic genealogy of morals (including values, virtues, and norms) will reveal them as resulting from contingent biological and cultural processes, and it is entirely apt to claim, as Ruse does, that none of the imperatives of morality need bind all other rational beings, wherever they may be (and whatever that might entail). Instead, we claim that the imperatives of morality pertain to our particular species, and not to any larger, more inclusive set of "rational" beings, of which we comprise some part. As an "intergalactic relativist," we believe Ruse would agree, and as a "terrestrial relativist," we believe he has no need to be a skeptic in any radical sense. In denying that morality consists in self-certifying rational a priori truths (or deductions from such truths), one need not deny that there are sensible, rational ways of endorsing ends and means. These ways would be inductive and abductive, but this should not engender skepticism in any strong sense.[2]

William Casebeer's comments concerning the implications of the collapse of the analytic/synthetic distinction are helpful here and should make any naturalist uncomfortable in thinking that any thick concept such as morality would include a feature such as "binding on all rational beings" as a necessary conceptual truth. To borrow some of his language, why not say that instead of *conceptual truths* concerning morality, we have an evolving *theory* of morality, and that the proper way to investigate and evaluate this theory is to see how it coheres with other theories in the empirical and social sciences and with our experience of morality as found in history, literature, and phenomenology? We can characterize elements or features of morality, but Quinean criticisms and the work of cognitive linguists give us reason not to expect analytic definitions for most interesting terms outside of formal sciences. Thus, it turns out that Moore was right: questions will remain open when we want to "define" morality. But that's precisely what we should expect with *synthetic* "definitions," which

are more akin to characterizations that try to isolate core or essential properties of a term and so rarely claim to be exhaustive or fully reductive.

One might wonder whether, by scuttling the strong objective prescriptivity of morality and its ties with rationality, we are throwing the moral baby out with the bathwater? Not at all. We believe there is a naturalistic story that not only captures the insights of the outdated conception mentioned above but also shows why the old conception got things wrong in the first place. For example, as Peter Railton notes, in practice, moral imperatives and judgments are often exchanged in particular contexts which include tacit background assumptions and qualifications. Indeed, they can be stated categorically only if we assume such a contextual framework. Of course, we could include all the possible exceptions and qualifications within the imperatives themselves, but that would assume a small or manageable finite set of such qualifications and exceptions, as well as a way to efficiently deploy them. Both of these claims are contentious; the former would be impossibly cumbersome (to use Railton's turn of phrase), the latter cognitively onerous. Hence, as a matter of practical usage, the imperatives of morality are often *explicitly categorical*; as regards their logical status, they are *implicitly hypothetical*, contingent on features arising in their application.

It is true that moral judgments and imperatives elicit strong reactions in individuals and are felt to be particularly compelling. It is also true that moral imperatives are often stated categorically, especially to the morally immature (though it is an interesting question to what extent moral judgments and imperatives are stated categorically by mature agents in everyday discourse). These facts arising out of moral phenomenology and practice might explain how one particular conception of morality might have seemed so cogent (namely, the one that claims for it objective categorical prescriptions binding all rational beings). They do not, however, render morality a sham.

Moral imperatives and judgments can guide action and motivate individuals not because of anything internal to their syntax, semantics, or logical structure, still less because our biology makes us think that they refer to something objective (as Ruse claims),[3] but rather because of how they relate to vital human needs, desires, and interests, such as a need for safety, security, friendship, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging. This affords an understanding of their "practical clout."[4] Without these *contingent* facts about the species *Homo sapiens*, morality would be inert. Railton describes the connection between moral language and motivation as one of *regular implication*, not *logical entailment*. Without such a regular

connection, "moral language could have no 'special action-guiding force' or give rise to interpersonal expectations" (p. 42). We find this way of parsing our position agreeable.

Additionally, moral language is not merely a laundry list of acceptable and deplorable actions, and moral imperatives do not simply justify certain behaviors and proscribe others. Rather, they work to encourage members of a community to adopt a certain perspective, to shape their preexisting desires and interests in such a way as to make them conducive to moral ends.[5] In this way, some moral judgments and imperatives (in particular, the most important ones) have to be external to any particular agent and are applied to particular agents regardless of their own motivations, desires, and beliefs. If they succeed in this role, it is not because of a special force they exercise on rational beings but because they relate to needs and desires most members of our species hold dear and most have an interest in promoting.[6] Moral reasons are thus often (and rightly) presented as being in the interests of those on whom they are being urged. In other words, when we examine the way moral concepts and imperatives are deployed in social lives, and when we understand the vital functional role they play in forging our desires, we can then understand the special status many have claimed for morality without having to set apart moral language as having peculiar qualities on its own.[7]

This naturalistic developmental model helps us see morality as a functional system that aims to shape multifarious and inchoate desires (both self- and other-regarding), not merely sanction or vindicate them. Morality "works" because it answers to these deep-seated-yet-contingent interests and desires of humans. Indeed, their very biological and cultural contingency allows for the fact that, as our drives are shaped by the ecological niches we construct and the selective pressure we thereby bring upon ourselves, morality—this functional mechanism for dealing with intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict—will change along with it. Natural phenomena do not justify normative ethics, but they surely feed into this justification—even while it must take place within a normative framework (not reducible to a descriptive one).

An interesting question remains. We claim that moral statements are truth apt, and that many of them will turn out to be true. What kinds of truths do these consist in? This is a complicated question, and we cannot do it full justice in this instance. Nonetheless, there are a number of factors to consider.

For example, does moral variety result from an interplay of human interests, needs, and desires with a particular socioecological context? On

one view, supported by relationalists, the answer is "yes." As individuals and environments differ, their interests will too. For any particular individual, we might say that there are objective facts concerning her best interests. What are these? They are what she *would* want in "ideal epistemic conditions," that is, with full information about her relevant capacities, history, and genes, her psychological and physical constitution, and so forth. Given these considerations, it is easy to see how and why an individual's objective interests will be fitting for her and not others. On a relational view, this can be understood as standard ecological variation. Similarly, if individuals are alike in most ways and if their niches align, then they will agree on most things.

In any event, we must assume that most people have at least some tendencies towards their own good; minimally, people must want *some* good things *some* of the time. Moreover, as noted above, these wants must be amenable to the general constraints of cooperative activity. In addition to these evolutionary constraints, we have theories, traditions, putative authorities, and other resources to help us work out intrapersonal and interpersonal tensions. With the relevant information, reasoning skills, and patience, we can arrive at objective values and truths (deploying a very unobjectionable notion of truth). This is possible on a relational model.

However, what happens when things break down, when disagreement endures? How is one to determine which side is correct? Imagine two individuals in a moral dispute. The dispute need not be grave, but let's suppose that they judge it worthy of sustained discussion. Let's further suppose (to make things advantageous to an amenable outcome) that the dispute involves persons otherwise well disposed to one another, who will be curious, sincere, and willing to expose themselves to risk, all of which are generally necessary to resolving moral disputes. So investigations are made, questions are answered (hopefully in good faith), authorities are cited, reasons are exhausted, and appeals fail to gain assent. Disagreement persists. How to understand this? We believe we can understand how this can happen, and happen regularly, by looking at an important component common to moral traditions.

Take, as an example, a Confucian community, wherein the preservation of certain relationships embodied in an ideal of social harmony would be very high in determining what the true moral duties are in that community. This kind of morality can satisfy and coordinate the intrapersonal and interpersonal needs, interests, and purposes of its members. All the same, such a morality will differ substantially from that of another community, which emphasizes the rights of the individual and the

preservation of individual autonomy more than social harmony. This latter type of morality can also meet the functional requirements of satisfying and coordinating the needs, interests, and purposes of its own members. However, in both cases, part of what affords their functionality is the way these moralities *rule one another out*; indeed, moralities can only work effectively by so ruling out several possible moral options, which cannot all be included without rendering morality's "action-guiding-ness" impotent. When fundamental ends are prioritized in a certain way, there will be more or less sensible or efficient ways of configuring moral codes to meet those ends. Indeed, some such configurations will be inapt. Hence, the moral truths of one community will be relative to it in the sense that other moralities and other configurations of moral codes will be ruled out for it (even while being acceptable from the standpoint of the functional requirement).[8] Considerations of morality's functional role, together with facts about human nature, constrain only so much. A great many options will remain viable, as the very ways in which moral communities evolve— by responding and adapting to technological innovation, political change, climate change, interactions with other cultures, and so forth—lead to great contingent variation.[9] In ascertaining *how* a Confucian moral community would come to have different priorities compared to a Western one, examining the particular ecological niche will tell us a great deal. However, it cannot tell us *why* these norms are correct; they are correct not in virtue of meeting the functional requirement in a niche-specific way but in how they figure in moral systems, systems that meet this functional requirement while ruling other options out. In a sense, moral truth *has* to be relative; when everything is acceptable, nothing is action-guiding.

A relational analysis is vital to understanding certain common features of moral systems, and some moral facts might be as straightforwardly relational as atmospheric oxygen's being poisonous to anaerobic bacteria.[10] Our view therefore includes relationalism as a good explanation for some similarities and variations among moral imperatives across societies. Nevertheless, even while all true moralities will fulfill the functional requirement, and even while the moral concepts of different moral traditions will overlap to a significant degree, some aspects of particular moralities, including important variations in fundamental moral ends (such as those pertaining to social harmony versus greater individual autonomy outlined above), will be true only relative to those moralities and not others. These considerations concerning the justification of practical moral judgments and particular moral codes represent, to our mind, the real sticking point between relationalism and relativism.

Finally, what of tolerance? Moral disagreement can certainly be troubling. However, even when sincere investigation and dialogue yield no single verdict owing to fundamental variation in moral ends (and imperfect means of achieving those ends), this need not have any deleterious effects. Tolerance itself can be a moral end of many traditions, as can cognate notions such as acceptance, accommodation, forgiveness, or flexibility. Among a tradition's moral resources might be heroes or saints who were able to forge cooperation, even flourishing, in the face of serious disagreement. In any case, these are contingent matters. There is no guarantee that, even given exceptionally forgiving moral systems and exceptionally sincere moral discussions, substantive *agreement* will follow. Nevertheless, solutions can be made *agreeable*. And when strategies line up, the natural upshot can be a healthy, tolerant relativism.

Both relationalists and relativists can be pluralists and recognize a wide range of true (or justified) moralities, and naturalists of these stripes can understand certain features to be common (perhaps universal) across true moralities owing to the way they relate to human nature and owing to constraints arising from the circumstances of social coordination. Which of these approaches best captures the variation of moral traditions among our species and the nature of moral truth? We ascribe to much of what relationalism holds, but we believe a relational analysis can't take us all the way, that the truths of moral systems are underdetermined by a relational analysis. Our brand of relativism can embrace this underdetermination, owing to an understanding of a characteristic component of moral systems in general and how it works to determine what is true for any moral system in particular. Relationalism cannot.

## Notes

1. Prominent contemporary error theorists include Richard Joyce, Michael Ruse, and Tamler Sommers and Alex Rosenberg, all of them naturalists. J. L. Mackie, while not an obvious choice for a naturalist, is the modern patriarch for this philosophical lineage.

2. Much of engineering, for example, consists of inductive and abductive reasoning, but no one seriously doubts that there are better and worse ways to build bridges, and so forth.

3. Ruse (p. 36). More on this issue below.

4. We borrow this phrase from Richard Joyce (2006).

5. For these reasons, we deny what Ruse claims in this regard—namely, that "biology trumps philosophy" (p. 36). Ruse claims, first, that we have a "biological" tendency

to *objectify* morality or a biological tendency to understand moral statements as having objective referents; second, that without this biological tendency, "our substantive ethics would break down" (p. 36); third, that this tendency provides us with powerful dispositions towards moral ends; and fourth, that this biological tendency cannot be trumped by "philosophical knowledge" that moral statements in fact lack objective referents. In other words, evolution selected for an overpowering tendency to objectify morality, and this explains the prescriptive force of moral claims. As it stands, this account runs contrary to much of human moral development, which is accomplished through a communal process of cultivating individuals' promoral tendencies (no easy task on its own) while reworking many other, equally natural and powerful tendencies orthogonal or antagonistic to moral ends. These other tendencies, such as those towards self-preservation, personal advantage, or even reproduction, must be made compatible with (or amenable to) moral ends. If biology provided strong, trumping promoral dispositions, then coordinating means and ends would not be so notoriously difficult. We recognize this difficulty and so deny that "biology trumps" in any interesting or deep sense. Our account (outlined below) allows us to understand the "force" of moral imperatives while eschewing such speculation.

6. This, in spite of the undeniable polymorphism of psychological traits among human beings.

7. Incidentally, Railton classifies Simon Blackburn and Alan Gibbard as non-naturalists, whereas by our lights, and given our methodological commitments, they would qualify as naturalists.

8. For more on this aspect of morality, see Wong (2006b).

9. Compare with the "Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism" (Flanagan, 1991): "Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral idea that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us" (p. 32). This both describes a feature common to many moralities and prescribes a standard of evaluation. However, a great variety of moral traditions can meet this standard of psychological realizability. In other words, it does not rule out that much. The same might be said for socioecological constraints: they do provide real criteria for evaluation, but they leave much in play.

10. Railton (p. 43).