

Folk Moral Semantics, Moral Naturalism, and Moral Descriptivism

Wade A. Tisthammer*

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Abstract: Whether morality exists entirely as part of the natural world depends at least in part on what we mean by “morality.” Using analysis and formal logic it can be shown that, if one adopts a certain colloquial moral semantics whereby “is” and “ought” are different relations with respect to the type of ought that morality uses, it leads to deontic morality not being part of the natural world (at least not entirely so), thereby leading to a folk moral semantics argument against moral naturalism (or for moral non-naturalism). A similar argument can be used for arguing that, if one adopts the view that moral facts are natural facts, they should also adopt the view that moral facts are descriptive facts, i.e., that moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism.

Keywords: Moral naturalism; moral non-naturalism; moral descriptivism; the is/ought gap; moral semantics; normativity objection.

* Holy Apostles College and Seminary

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4134-8754>

 Holy Apostles College and Seminary, 33 Prospect Hill Rd, Cromwell, CT 06416, United States

 tisthammerw@hotmail.com

Introduction

Moral descriptivism is the view that “moral facts are identical to descriptive facts.” (Heathwood 2009, 85) While some moral naturalists are moral descriptivists, the idea that moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism is not universally agreed upon. One could be a moral naturalist without being a moral descriptivist.

A closely related issue is moral semantics and deontic moral normativity. The folk sense of moral normativity, while perhaps not as sophisticated as that of the moral philosopher, at least sees a distinction between statements about what is and statements about what ought to be. Examples of the former include “Bismuth has more protons than silicon” and “Sue the infant is in pain.” Deontic moral statements, such as “It is morally wrong for a man to torture an infant just for fun,” are instances of the latter. One could propose a revisionist semantics for normative terminology, as for example Peter Railton (1989) did for moral axiology, whereby the reformed definition differs from the original. A revisionist moral semantics might well lead to moral facts being natural facts, but a less revised moral semantics closer to folk moral normativity might not, particularly if such folk moral semantics sees the “is” and the “ought” as entirely different relations as far as the moral ought is concerned.

This paper presents two key arguments: (a) if one uses a colloquial moral semantics for deontic morality, viz. a real distinction between “ought” and “is” such that it is not the case that the moral ought has only descriptive characteristics,¹ then this leads to deontic morality not being part of the

¹ Note that this moral semantics leaves it open for the moral ought to have *some* descriptive characteristics. For example, one might think that the moral ought necessarily has some purely descriptive quality (perhaps a prudential one), in addition to having a not-purely-descriptive component. On that note, one must be careful to distinguish between sense adequate and intensionally adequate definitions. For example, “water is H₂O” works as an intensionally adequate definition but not a sense adequate one (we knew of water long before we discovered it is H₂O). Similarly, the not-purely-descriptive moral ought semantics allows for “An action is morally obligatory if and only if it has this descriptive quality *Q*” being an intensionally adequate definition (i.e., no metaphysically possible counterexamples to the biconditional) but not a sense adequate one, since a defining characteristic of the moral ought is that

natural world (at least not entirely so); (b) I will argue along similar grounds that moral naturalists ought to be moral descriptivists. For the sake of precision, I will delineate what I mean by descriptive facts, morality, and what it means for morality to be natural (and non-natural) before presenting these two arguments.

2. Defining Terms

2.1. Descriptive Facts, Properties, Etc.

One relation between language and facts is the existence of statements that state what the fact is, using something like Tarski's (1972, 343-344) disquotation concept of truth for a statement.² Just as "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white, the statement "snow is white" states the fact that snow is white. Similarly, in Parfit's (2011, 266) lingo, an irreducibly normative fact is one that "cannot be defined or restated in non-normative terms." Since irreducible normativity is essentially defined in terms of what it is not, it becomes difficult to delineate precisely what it is without such negative predication. Henry Sidgwick (1981, 32) even goes so far as to say that the fundamental notion behind the moral sense of "ought" is "too elementary to admit of any formal definition." Parfit (2011, 265) helps however by giving examples of normative and non-normative terms. Examples of the latter include "kill," "unexpected," "cause," and "electric." When Parfit gives examples of normative terms he includes both deontic terminology (e.g., "ought," "right," "wrong," and "duty") and axiological terminology (e.g., "good," "bad," and "mediocre").

Very roughly, a truth-apt statement uses purely "descriptive language" just in case its language makes claims about what is without making claims about what ought to be; e.g., "As a matter of practical necessity, Jill needs

it does not have *only* descriptive qualities. This moral semantics in which it is not the case that the moral ought has only descriptive characteristics refers to sense and not merely intension.

² This does not mean that facts are *identical* to true statements. Moreover, this article does not take sides about what a fact exactly is (is it merely a truth-bearer that is true? is it merely a state of affairs that obtains?).

to study to do well in school.” With Tarski disquotation in mind, we can at least as a first approximation define the term “descriptive” in such a way that any fact that can be defined or restated entirely in non-normative terms is a sufficient (though not necessary) condition for that fact to be descriptive. Why is it not a necessary condition? People can have beliefs about deontic normativity even when facts about those beliefs are descriptive. For example, the statement “Sally believes that people ought to be kind” is descriptive since the language makes claims about what is without making claims about what ought to be, even though the statement might not be able to be restated entirely in non-normative terms. Language depicting raw sensory experiences is also descriptive language, and thus empirical facts are descriptive facts. Language that depicts only the physical interactions of physical entities (e.g., collisions of protons) is likewise descriptive language, and facts that can be fully characterized in such language are consequently descriptive facts. We can say that a descriptive fact, property, predicate, etc. is one where what it is can be stated entirely in descriptive language.

In line with how “descriptive” is being used for descriptive facts, properties, and so forth, say that a “descriptive ought” is any ought such that what it is can be stated entirely in descriptive language. A paradigm example of a descriptive ought is the hypothetical ought of Kant’s (2012, 28) hypothetical imperative, which describes a possible action that is practically necessary to accomplish some goal; e.g., when “If Jill wants to do well in school, she ought to study” just means something like “As a matter of practical necessity, Jill needs to study to do well in school.”

A rough and ready definition for moral naturalism (also called “ethical naturalism”) is the view that moral facts and properties are natural facts and properties. Thus, with the above analysis for what it means for a fact or property to be descriptive (viz. what it is can be stated entirely in descriptive language), some people’s intuitions might lead them to believe that it is a given that moral naturalism implies and requires moral descriptivism (and more generically, that anything natural would also be descriptive), but such intuitions are not given to everyone. A view that Jonathan Dancy (2006, 127) calls “one-term naturalism” says that every “normative fact is a natural fact, whether or not there is a descriptive way of capturing that

fact in addition to the evaluative way.” This of course would include moral normative facts. Speaking in defense of ethical naturalism, Nicholas L. Sturgeon (2003, 537) says that ethical naturalism leading to the assumption that moral facts and properties “can be fully characterized in entirely non-moral terms” is “not obvious at all, but highly questionable: possibly false, and at the very least requiring defense.” Such a view of ethical naturalism would of course suggest that it is highly questionable that moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism.

In §4 I will argue that moral naturalism does indeed imply moral descriptivism, but before getting to that I will give an analysis of what it is to be “natural,” describe a colloquial conception of morality that I will refer to as folk moral semantics, and argue that this folk moral semantics leads to deontic morality being non-natural. The Folk Moral Semantics Argument in §3 will be similar to the argument for moral naturalism implying moral descriptivism in §4.

2.2. *Folk Moral Semantics*

In contrast to the descriptive ought, a defining characteristic of folk moral semantics is a real distinction between “ought” and “is” such that it is not the case that the moral ought has only descriptive characteristics. Thus on folk moral semantics, facts of what the moral ought is will not be comprised of only descriptive facts. So some oughts are not descriptive oughts; they are prescriptive in a way that is not purely descriptive. Call these not-purely-descriptive oughts “Humean oughts,” from David Hume’s is/ought distinction, in which someone saying “You should not set cats on fire” might be using this sort of ought. When Hume (2000, 302) famously mentioned the apparent difficulty of deducing an “ought” from an “is” in the final paragraph of book 3, part 1, section 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, not only did he say that the “ought” is an “entirely different” relation from the “is,” he specifically had the moral ought in mind when he did so. For my is/ought dichotomy, descriptive facts/properties/etc. are the “is” and Humean oughts are the “ought.”³

³ As a disclaimer, I am not saying the two categories of this dichotomy are mutually exhaustive; e.g., one might think that axiological facts fit neither category

Moral rightness and moral wrongness pertain to moral obligation. To illustrate, an action *A* is morally wrong for a person *S* only if *S* morally ought not do *A*, and thus facts that some specific acts are morally wrong (if any exist) are examples of deontic moral facts. Notably though, the moral ought also seems to have something to do with moral values; e.g., one morally ought to value justice.

To simplify, I will focus on deontic morality in arguing for folk moral semantics leading to moral non-naturalism. Recall that folk moral semantics is such that it is not the case that moral oughts have only descriptive characteristics; i.e., moral oughts are Humean oughts. We can also describe folk moral semantics using the Moorean sense of a closed question from G. E. Moore's (1993, 66-69) famous Open Question Argument, in which a closed question is one where the meaning of the terms suffices to answer the question (e.g., "I know he is a bachelor but is he married?"), and an open question is the opposite of a closed question. To simplify matters slightly, I shall use something like "*P* is a closed question" to mean that whether *P* is true is a closed question with the answer in the affirmative. For example, on folk moral semantics it is a closed question that moral oughts do not have only descriptive characteristics.

It is worth noting that moral oughts being Humean oughts would potentially help fulfill the categoricity desideratum of morality. (Jordan 2011) That is, being reason-giving for people independently of what one's goals are, assuming our conception of "reason" is such that a fact *F* making choice *C* proper and appropriate is a sufficient condition for *F* being a reason to do *C*. In this case, the fact that one ought to do *C* in the Humean sense

(though by my lights, a moral value would be something that one *ought* to value in at least some conceivable circumstance, else it would not be a moral value). Nor am I saying that the line dividing the two categories is necessarily perfectly sharp, though in at least some instances we can say with reasonably high confidence that something fits a certain category. As analogy, the line between "healthy" and "unhealthy" is not perfectly sharp, but we can still in some cases categorize instances of an unhealthy body (e.g., one riddled with severe disease) and a healthy one (e.g., physically fit with nothing medically wrong) with reasonably high confidence. Similarly, I think one can argue that natural facts are descriptive facts with reasonably high confidence (see §2.3, §3, and §4) even if my is/ought dichotomy is not perfectly sharp.

would make it proper and appropriate to do *C*, and thus a Humean ought would be reason-giving. If there are cases where one ought to do *C* in the Humean sense that hold independently of one's goals (as would be the case when the Humean ought is used in moral objectivism, the view that there are moral truths that hold independently of human perceptions and attitudes towards those truths), such cases would fulfill the categoricity desideratum. In contrast, hypothetical oughts do not fulfill this desideratum, and it is difficult to think of an ought that fulfills the categoricity desideratum that is not a Humean ought.⁴

2.3. Natural and Non-natural

There are a number of ways to define the distinction between a fact that is "natural" and one that is "non-natural." Indeed, Jonathan Dancy (2006, 122) notes that the debate between ethical naturalism and ethical non-naturalism is "vitiating by the fact that there is no agreed account of what it is to be natural." Still, one can find similarities among some definitions. Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, 19, 55) defines a natural fact as "one whose existence can be confirmed by the best natural or social scientific theories," later describing ethical naturalism as the view that "moral facts are a species of scientific facts, discoverable in all the ordinary ways, as motivating and as normative (or not) as ordinary facts." Similarly, Nicholas L. Sturgeon (2006, 92) describes ethical naturalism as the view that moral values and obligations "fit into a scientifically based, naturalistic view of the world" with moral properties being "of the same general sort as properties investigated by the sciences." My approach will be similar to that of Robert Adams (1987, 145) who defined non-natural facts as facts that "cannot be stated entirely in the language of physics, chemistry, biology, and human or animal psychology."

What does this mean exactly? It does not, presumably, mean something like whatever those disciplines happen to be studying, such that if science

⁴ Though one might think ethical naturalism could have something "close enough" or "good enough" for a kind of authoritative (even if somewhat different) normative desideratum. See (Väyrynen 2021).

were changed to study metaphysical matters then natural facts would include metaphysical facts. Rather, it means the type of language describing the sorts of observations, facts, etc. that those fields study, with the purview of the disciplines being as we understand them currently (or at least as of this writing). For example, physics deals with the constituents of the physical world (space, time, matter, etc.) and the physical interactions of these constituents (e.g., particles of like charges repelling) and the “language of physics” is that type of language that refers to such things. Language can evolve and new terms introduced – such as the word “quark” coined in the twentieth century – but the *type* of language remains the same insofar as the discipline’s purview does not change (e.g., the realm of physics still being physical constituents and interactions thereof). The language of physics will be nothing more than that type of language which points to the types of observations, facts, etc. that physics studies, and examining the language of physics gives us a more concrete idea of what sorts of facts those are. The same goes *mutatis mutandis* for the languages of the other natural sciences.⁵

Similarly, examining the language of psychology helps us understand that psychology (by which I mean animal and human psychology) studies descriptive facts of behavior, the mind, and the mind’s functions. (Should someone have a different conception of what psychology is for whatever reason, we can consider this a stipulative definition of psychology for purposes of this paper, such that facts of psychology refer only to descriptive facts of behavior, the mind, and the mind’s functions.)

Borrowing largely from Adams then, I will say that a “natural fact” is any fact such that what it is can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences. The rubric of the natural sciences (we may stipulate) includes the entire physical realm, so that any fact exclusively about the physical realm will be a natural fact. More generically, a natural fact, property, relation, quality, etc. is such that what it is can be described entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences.

⁵ At least, this is what I mean by “language of the natural sciences,” viz. it is that type of language that points to the sorts of observations, facts, etc. that the disciplines study, even if Adams had something different in mind (though I suspect Adams had at least something very similar in mind).

3. A Folk Moral Semantics Argument against Moral Naturalism

What I will call the Folk Moral Semantics Argument is essentially a version of the Normativity Objection against moral naturalism. The Normativity Objection is a class of objections claiming that facts of moral normativity are, to borrow David Enoch's phrase, "just too different" from natural facts. (Enoch 2011, 4) (Parfit 2011, 324-327) Moore's Open Question Argument, in which it is an open question whether a morally positive axiological fact is identical to a natural one, is one version of the Normativity Objection. The Folk Moral Semantics Argument is in one sense the opposite of Moore's because it focuses on there being a certain type of closed question rather than an open one vis-à-vis moral normativity; viz. it is a closed question that moral oughts do not have only descriptive characteristics. Before getting to the premises of the Folk Moral Semantics Argument, some predicates and propositional variables need to be defined.

Recall that something is "natural" just in case what it is can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences; and that a descriptive fact, property, predicate, etc. is such that what it is can be stated entirely in descriptive language. With those definitions in mind, we can use the following predicates:

- $D_L(x)$ = What x is can be stated entirely in descriptive language.
 $N_L(x)$ = What x is can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences.

One definition of moral naturalism is that moral facts and properties are natural facts and properties, but not everyone who affirms morality's existence necessarily agrees that there are such things as moral properties. (Byerly 2018) What exactly counts as a "property" is itself a matter of dispute and may depend in part on what exactly one means by "property." We can sidestep such concerns by using a placeholder. Let the predicate $A(x)$ be a generic placeholder for x being a fact, property, relation, quality, etc. For example:

- $N_L(x) \wedge A(x)$ = x is a natural fact if $A(x)$ means x is a fact.
 $N_L(x) \wedge A(x)$ = x is a natural property if $A(x)$ means x is a property.

$D_L(x) \wedge A(x) = x$ is a descriptive fact if $A(x)$ means *x is a fact*.

As handy shorthand, we can use these definitional equivalences for an arbitrary x :

$$N_A(x) \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} N_L(x) \wedge A(x)$$

$$D_A(x) \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} D_L(x) \wedge A(x)$$

For example, if $A(x)$ means that x is a property then $N_A(x)$ means that x is a natural property (i.e., a property that exemplifies $N_L(x)$), and if $A(x)$ means that x is a fact then $D_A(x)$ means that x is a descriptive fact (i.e., a fact that exemplifies $D_L(x)$).

We can let $M_A(x)$ be our deontic morality predicate such that the following is true:

$M_A(x) = x$ is a deontic moral fact if $A(x)$ means *x is a fact*.

$M_A(x) = x$ is a deontic moral property if $A(x)$ means *x is a property*.

The formal definition of $D_A(x)$ allows us to derive the following:

- | | | |
|-------------------|--|--|
| (1 _D) | $D_L(a) \wedge A(a)$ | conditional proof assumption |
| (2 _D) | $D_A(a)$ | 1 _D , definitional equivalence |
| (3 _D) | $(D_L(a) \wedge A(a)) \rightarrow D_A(a)$ | 1 _D -2 _D , conditional proof |
| (4 _D) | $\forall x[(D_L(x) \wedge A(x)) \rightarrow D_A(x)]$ | 3 _D , universal generalization |

Call (4_D) theorem TD. The formal definition of $N_A(x)$ allows us to derive the following:

- | | | |
|-------------------|--|--|
| (1 _N) | $N_A(a)$ | conditional proof assumption |
| (2 _N) | $N_L(a) \wedge A(a)$ | 1 _N , definitional equivalence |
| (3 _N) | $N_A(a) \rightarrow (N_L(a) \wedge A(a))$ | 1 _N -2 _N , conditional proof |
| (4 _N) | $\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow (N_L(x) \wedge A(x))]$ | 3 _N , universal generalization |

Call (4_N) theorem T_N. Alternatively, we might merely want to say that $N_L(x) \wedge A(x)$ is a *necessary* condition for x to be a natural fact/property/relation/etc. in which case (4_N) will serve that purpose as well.

With F representing *Folk moral semantics (and thus the Humean ought)* is used for deontic morality, the Folk Moral Semantics Argument goes as follows, where (1) is theorem T_N and (3) is theorem T_D:

(1)	$\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow (N_L(x) \wedge A(x))]$	
(2)	$\forall x[N_L(x) \rightarrow D_L(x)]$	
(3)	$\forall x[(D_L(x) \wedge A(x)) \rightarrow D_A(x)]$	
(4)	$F \rightarrow \forall x[M_A(x) \rightarrow \neg D_A(x)]$	
(5)	$N_A(a) \rightarrow (N_L(a) \wedge A(a))$	1, universal instantiation
(6)	$N_A(a)$	conditional proof assumption
(7)	$N_L(a) \wedge A(a)$	5, 6, <i>modus ponens</i>
(8)	$N_L(a)$	7, conjunction elimination
(9)	$N_L(a) \rightarrow D_L(a)$	2, universal instantiation
(10)	$D_L(a)$	8, 9, <i>modus ponens</i>
(11)	$A(a)$	7, conjunction elimination
(12)	$D_L(a) \wedge A(a)$	10, 11, conjunction introduction
(13)	$(D_L(a) \wedge A(a)) \rightarrow D_A(a)$	3, universal instantiation
(14)	$D_A(a)$	12, 13, <i>modus ponens</i>
(15)	$N_A(a) \rightarrow D_A(a)$	6-14, conditional proof
(16)	$\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow D_A(x)]$	15, universal generalization
(17)	F	conditional proof assumption
(18)	$\forall x[M_A(x) \rightarrow \neg D_A(x)]$	4, 17, <i>modus ponens</i>
(19)	$N_A(a) \rightarrow D_A(a)$	16, universal instantiation
(20)	$\neg D_A(a) \rightarrow \neg N_A(a)$	19, transposition
(21)	$M_A(a) \rightarrow \neg D_A(a)$	18, universal instantiation
(22)	$M_A(a) \rightarrow \neg N_A(a)$	20, 21, hypothetical syllogism
(23)	$\forall x[M_A(x) \rightarrow \neg N_A(x)]$	22, universal generalization
(24)	$F \rightarrow \forall x[M_A(x) \rightarrow \neg N_A(x)]$	17-23, conditional proof

The above is a bit abstract so to make it easier to understand I will use a concrete example. Suppose the placeholder for $A(x)$ refers to x being a fact, and to make things a bit less clunky, I will use “ x can be stated entirely in the language of Y ” to mean “what x is can be described entirely in the language of Y .” At the cost of oversimplifying somewhat, the argument would then be this:

- (1) All natural facts are facts that can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences.
- (2) What can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences can be stated entirely in descriptive language.
- (3) Any fact that can be stated entirely in descriptive language is a descriptive fact.
- (4) If folk moral semantics is used for deontic moral facts, then all deontic moral facts are not descriptive facts.

Therefore: If folk moral semantics is used for deontic moral facts, then all deontic moral facts are not natural facts.

The truth of premises (1), (3), and (4) is a closed question given the stipulative definitions the argument uses. Premises (1) and (3) are proven theorems (theorems T_N and T_D , respectively) but these premises can also be justified more informally. A “natural fact” is stipulatively defined as a fact that can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences, and thus (1) is a closed question. A “descriptive fact” is stipulatively defined as a fact that can be stated entirely in descriptive language, and thus (3) is a closed question. For (4), this premise says that folk moral semantics implies that all deontic moral facts are not descriptive facts. That this is true is a closed question, since folk moral semantics definitionally requires that moral oughts are not descriptive oughts.

Premise (2) is somewhat less obvious. Yet insofar as the natural sciences study only the physical characteristics of the physical world, the idea that such language of physics, chemistry, etc. is descriptive (or can at least be restated in descriptive language) seems nearly a truism, largely because it seems clear that such language can be at least restated in non-normative terms (recall that all non-normative terminology is descriptive language).⁶ That leaves the language of psychology, which as mentioned earlier is such that psychological facts are descriptive facts of behavior, the mind, and the mind’s functions; and so *qua* descriptive facts, the language of psychology can be stated entirely in descriptive language. Thus, what can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences can be stated entirely in descriptive language, and premise (2) is true.

The upshot of the Folk Moral Semantics Argument is that if one adopts a moral semantics such that it is a closed question that moral oughts do not have only descriptive characteristics, then deontic morality is non-natural.

⁶ Another way to look at it: if we had physics, chemistry, etc. in their completed forms, the language of physics, chemistry, etc. would still be descriptive (at minimum, it would be restatable in descriptive language).

4. An Argument for Moral Naturalism Implying
Moral Descriptivism

My argument that moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism uses mostly the same premises and much of the same reasoning as the Folk Moral Semantics Argument against moral naturalism (or alternatively, the Folk Moral Semantics Argument for moral non-naturalism⁷).

Let *N* symbolize *moral naturalism is true* and *D* symbolize *moral descriptivism is true*. Thus, if the placeholder for *A(x)* referred to *x* being a fact, premise (4*) below would mean *if all natural facts are descriptive facts, then moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism*. Not only does this argument use mostly the same premises but also mostly the same line derivations for showing that moral naturalism implies moral descriptivism (note that lines (1)-(3) and (5)-(16) are identical to those of the Folk Moral Semantics Argument).

(1)	$\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow (N_L(x) \wedge A(x))]$	
(2)	$\forall x[N_L(x) \rightarrow D_L(x)]$	
(3)	$\forall x[(D_L(x) \wedge A(x)) \rightarrow D_A(x)]$	
(4*)	$\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow D_A(x)] \rightarrow (N \rightarrow D)$	
(5)	$N_A(a) \rightarrow (N_L(a) \wedge A(a))$	1, universal instantiation
(6)	$N_A(a)$	conditional proof assumption
(7)	$N_L(a) \wedge A(a)$	5, 6, <i>modus ponens</i>
(8)	$N_L(a)$	7, conjunction elimination
(9)	$N_L(a) \rightarrow D_L(a)$	2, universal instantiation
(10)	$D_L(a)$	8, 9, <i>modus ponens</i>
(11)	$A(a)$	7, conjunction elimination
(12)	$D_L(a) \wedge A(a)$	10, 11, conjunction introduction
(13)	$(D_L(a) \wedge A(a)) \rightarrow D_A(a)$	3, universal instantiation
(14)	$D_A(a)$	12, 13, <i>modus ponens</i>
(15)	$N_A(a) \rightarrow D_A(a)$	6-14, conditional proof
(16)	$\forall x[N_A(x) \rightarrow D_A(x)]$	15, universal generalization
(17*)	$N \rightarrow D$	4*, 16, <i>modus ponens</i>

⁷ Though this being an argument for moral non-naturalism might require the background assumption that moral facts exist.

The justification and meaning of premises (1)-(3) is the same as it is for the Folk Moral Semantics Argument (recall that (1) and (3) are proven theorems). Premise (4*) is almost self-evident, but we can adduce it with a simple example: if all moral facts are natural facts, and all natural facts are descriptive facts, then it follows that all moral facts are descriptive facts.

Note that in contrast somewhat to one-term naturalism, line (16) suggests that anything that is natural is also descriptive, and in the more specific case of $A(x)$ meaning *x is a fact*, line (16) suggests that being a descriptive fact is a necessary condition for being a natural fact.

5. Objections

It is one thing to make stipulative definitions. It is another thing to carry them over into definitions the ethical naturalist is willing to accept. As alluded to earlier, the idea of defining what is natural in terms of what is expressible in terminology is not new. Pekka Väyrynen (2021, 513) describes this objection against it:

[I]t seems possible for natural properties to exceed even our best representational resources, non-normative or otherwise. Any natural language can have only countably many predicates, but natural properties might not be only countably many. Some natural properties might also be more fine-grained than what natural languages or human thought can represent. Examples might include the most maximally determinate values along certain continuous physical parameters.

Recall however that in this case the conception of natural facts and natural properties vis-à-vis $N_L(x)$ is about the *type* of language and *types* of things that e.g., physics studies (physics deals with the constituents of the physical world – like space, time, and matter – and the physical interactions of these constituents) and the conceptual domain of what physics studies remains what it is even if our current human terminology does not cover literally every fact of physics. To use an analogy, the set of real numbers is uncountably infinite and an irrational number cannot practically be written out in terms of what comes after the decimal point because the sequence of

numerals would be infinitely long, yet those individual numerals after the decimal point fall under the province of what we can represent and real numbers are still conceptually numbers. We could apply the same principle for natural facts and properties, in which “what it is can be described entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences” for $N_L(x)$ is akin to the fact that all real numbers “can be described entirely in terms of a decimal point and the numerals 0 through 9,” not in a practical sense but in a kind of theoretical or conceptual sense. For example, suppose facts of physics were equinumerous with (and as uncountably infinite as) the set of real numbers. If we *per impossibile* used the entire set of real numbers as letters for our scientific vocabulary such that we stated each of the uncountably infinite facts of physics using this language,⁸ this superhuman form of physics language would not change the *types* of things being referred to when it is said that facts of physics are those stated in the language of physics (regarding space, time, matter, and so forth), even if we rely on finite human language to give us a more concrete idea of what those types of facts, observations, etc. are like. The same sort of thing goes for the relevant descriptive facts, properties, etc.⁹ Even if they cannot all be stated in a practical sense, they can be stated in a theoretical or conceptual sense even if finite human language gives us a more concrete idea of what those sorts of things are like.

Apart from representational concerns, one could more directly attack the semantics for what counts as natural. An ethical naturalist could deny that moral terminology is co-referential with a subset of the language of psychology and the natural sciences on the grounds that the defined conceptual domain of $N_L(x)$ is not a necessary condition for something to be

⁸ To use a more concrete hypothetical case for our real-number-based alphabet, if all facts of physics were broken down into a dozen fundamental components (aspects of space, matter, time, etc.), we could use words of twelve letters long (one for each component) to map onto all facts of physics using the first letter for spatial aspects, the second letter for matter aspects, etc. Or given our definition of physics, we could use one letter for the constituents of the physical world and a second letter for the interactions of these constituents.

⁹ Note that if natural facts and the relevant descriptive facts each had the cardinality of real numbers, a vocabulary that used the entire set of real numbers as its letters could map onto both sets of facts. With this in mind, see also n. 6.

natural in the ordinary sense of the term, whereby the ordinary sense of “natural” means something like “of or a part of the natural world.” Some form of this anti-co-referential view is perhaps understandable (see above on the limitations of finite human language), but in this case however, due to the “what it is can be stated entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences” being somewhat more conceptual than completely literal¹⁰ as described earlier, the issue would largely be more about what is reducible to that which is within the combined subject matters of psychology and the natural sciences. Consequently, it is difficult to see what a natural fact or property could be in the ordinary sense of “natural” that does not fall under that defined conceptually natural domain if this sense of “natural” means “of or a part of the natural world” (considering that e.g., the natural world is precisely what the natural sciences aim to study). By my lights, any brand of ethical naturalism in which the moral ought does not fall under that defined conceptually natural domain is simply ethical non-naturalism under a different name.

6. Conclusion

With certain tweaking of what a descriptive fact is and what a natural fact is (e.g., being somewhat more conceptual rather than being completely literal¹¹ vis-à-vis “what it is can be described entirely in the language of psychology and the natural sciences”), there is a good case for the moral naturalist to be a moral descriptivist. Similarly, there is a good case for the moral realist who adopts folk moral semantics to embrace moral non-naturalism. Whether morality is natural depends greatly on what moral semantics we are using. To illustrate what I mean by this, consider that whether a “blarg” is natural depends greatly on what we mean by “blarg.” If “blarg” is synonymous with “supernatural deity” then a blarg is non-natural. However, if “blarg” is synonymous with “carbon atom,” then a blarg is natural. Similarly, whether deontic morality is non-natural depends on what we mean by “deontic morality.” On folk moral semantics where the moral

¹⁰ Barring superhuman language.

¹¹ See n. 10.

ought does not have only descriptive characteristics, deontic morality is non-natural. On the other hand, there are no physical laws I am aware of preventing the moral naturalist from using a different moral semantics in which deontic morality is perfectly natural, but in that case when the moral naturalist converses with the moral non-naturalist (or the folk) the people involved may wish to be cautious about talking past each other. Moral semantics regarding the Humean is/ought dichotomy is frequently overlooked in discussions about the existence and ontology of morality. Perhaps that should change to some degree.

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