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# [Ethics Naturalized]

[Naturalism as Explanatory Structure in  
Metaethics]

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# Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate what implications a naturalized account of metaethics could have for our understanding of ethics and to advance a type of ethical naturalism that is non-reductionist. During the course of the study several different approaches to metaethics are investigated and critically evaluated, before a positive account of ethical naturalism is delivered. It is argued that ethics is a natural phenomenon that is best understood as an aspect of human ecology and that moral properties arise from our species natural history and supervene on our evolved human nature. It is also argued that this account of ethics is well supported in both phenomenology and moral language.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Evolution, Emotivism, Metaethics, Naturalism, Moral Philosophy

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## 1. Scoop of Enquiry

The aim of this essay is nothing less than to give an answer to what ethics is. One might think this is a superfluous question. Surely we already know what ethics is? An immediate answer to the question presents itself; for naturally, “ethics” is the things we talk about when we use ethical concepts and terms, i.e. “good”, “evil”; “commendable”, “virtuous”, “axiological”, “agent relative reason” and so forth. It is the thing people practise in their everyday life, when they partake in ethical discourse and it is the bread and butter for moral philosophers. However, on second thought, it becomes clear that this kind of answer is all but an answer to the question we have posed. It doesn’t tell us what ethics is, it just pushes the question ahead into the obvious rejoinder “what then is the subject matter of these things?”.

Perhaps we could salvage the answer that has just been given by saying that all that can be said about the matter has been said and to press on for a more precise definition is futile. This would be the same as saying that ethics is about ethical terms, e.g. “good”, and ethical terms are irreducible, i.e. “good is good”. Some ethical non-naturalists find this an appropriate way to answer the question and are content to view ethics as a *sui generis* that cannot be defined with non-ethical terms. (Finlay, S. 2007: 828) Others find the question unanswerable, because they think ethical terms and concepts are devoid of analysable content; i.e. words such as “good” are meaningless. This position is taken up by error theory, which I have dealt with elsewhere (Karlsson, J. 2011).

There is one other possibility and that is that we actually can know the subject matter, which we are dealing with in ethics, in the same way as we can know about other objects and relations that surrounds us in the natural world. This is the position taken up by ethical naturalism and this is the position that will be the core theme of this essay. Now, it would have been neat if ethical naturalism was a well-defined position, with clear terminology and a worked out methodology. Since this is not the case, we will have to take into consideration how to best define and apply this polymorphic concept, so that it enables us to attempt an answer to our question. There are, as we will see, forms of naturalism, which would not allow questions such as ours in the first place.

On a further note someone might think this is a peripheral, perhaps even exotic, type of question with no apparent practical use or interest. Ethics has been around for at least as long as there are any written records of human thought but theories about ethics, whenever they have emerged, have hardly brought any revolutions in the way people deal with ethical

issues. However, I think there are two ways in which a metaethical theory can contribute positively to those that think ethics is of at least marginal importance in their private and public life, provided that is, that the theory at least get a few things right.

First of all, there is the question of meaning and meaningfulness. Ethics and ethical issues are things people tend to care deeply about and not so few find ethical issues worth both living, dying and killing for. A theory about ethics therefore seems to have substantial existential ramifications. It will tell people if the worth they invest in ethical commitments is well founded or if ethics perhaps rests on a huge mistake and they would be better served perusing other ends that better merit their longing for meaning and purpose in life. If, however, our philosophical investigation turns out to buttress the central standing ethics has in human life then metaethics can, with proper exposition, take on the alimentary role stoic meditations used to have for the soul weary of life. Such an application ought to be of interest to secular and religious communities alike, since it could afford a common ground from which to view ethical issues.<sup>1</sup>

Second, there is the question of practical applicability within the field of ethics itself. Can a theory about ethics help us construct better ethical theories and/or improve applied ethics? This will of course depend on what a theory about ethics turns out like. If it is an error-theory there will be no material to work with, since ethics will be a nought. Ethics will, as Mackie ([1977]1990) suggested, need to be invented. If it be a non-naturalist theory the fundamental questions in metaethics must remain inexplicable. If it, on the other hand, is a naturalist theory (that isn't an error theory) it might well provide us with information that could be of value both for ethical theory and for applied ethics. It might lend support to, or undermine, some present forms of ethical theory and it might help us to better understand how

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1 As I'm writing this essay Dalai Lama (2011) has published a book which calls for a secular ethics that can appeal to believers and non-believers alike. Indeed, there seems to have been a deeply felt need to universalise ethics beyond the confines of religious denominations also in ancient times, as is evident from the rabbinic tradition of a transmission of moral norms, originating in Noah's preaching of the law. (J. Kalrsson 2001: 25-26). Also, in the gospel of Matthew the universal epistemic access to moral truth is hinted at in 7:11 (εἰ οὖν ὑμεῖς πονηροὶ ὄντες οἴδατε δόματα ἀγαθὰ δίδοναι τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν), and explicitly by Paul in his letter to the Romans in 2:14-15 (ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος: οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτῶν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, συμμαρτυροῦσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως καὶ μεταξύ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων). Yet, "ethics" should not be confused with "Ethics" in the Wittgensteinian sense, where Ethics escapes rational thought and belongs to the domain of which one cannot speak but must remain silent. Wittgenstein seems to have kept these two notions of "ethics" and "Ethics" apart (see: Flanagan, O. 2011). I will, for practical reasons, only deal with the ethics of which one can sensibly speak and pass by "Ethics" in silence. Ethics in this latter sense is metaphysical and is perhaps best understood as a feeling of, or belief in, a cosmic moral order that transcends the things we can observe with our senses, as such "Ethics" is in the domain of spirituality in a way "ethics" is not.

to think clearly and argue effectively in ethical matters. To what extent these possibilities can be realised will remain unanswered in this essay, though a hint at such possibilities can be read between the lines.

I have previously (Karlsson, J. 2011: 29-31) indicated the possibility of a naturalized ethics, on the ground that ethical discourse have few if any conceptual commitments to dubious metaphysics. I will reiterate those arguments and add substantial further considerations in section three. In section four I will present my own suggestion for how to naturalize ethics. Section five follows as an appendix to questions that were raised in section four but were of such importance that they deserved a section of their own; these are questions that deal with moral language. Section two, that will follow the present section, is mainly devoted to methodology and terminology. Section six, that is the final part of this essay, will sum up the most important pieces of our investigation and suggest ways to go forward.

## 2. How to Frame Ethics

Explanations draw their meaning from the contexts, which first provoked us to engage in explicative acts. Thus explanations instantiate a reference to their contexts, either explicitly or implicitly, every time they are offered. We might oftentimes forget the context dependency of an explanation, because situated communication offers a more or less unconscious familiarity and acceptance of implicit contexts. Consider these explanations: (a) “the office is closed since it is Sunday”, (b) “the office is closed since its main door is locked”, (c) “the office is closed since there is no staff in the building”, (d) “the office is closed since it is not open” and (e) “the office is closed since it is closed”. All five explanations, in some sense, explain the question “why is the office closed?”. Yet, only one seems to be a sensible answer to that selfsame question. Among the alternatives (d) and (e) are analytic explications; (b) is semi-analytic or synthetic<sup>2</sup> while (a) and (c) are purely synthetic. Still yet, only one option resonates with the implicit context we are used to, when asked or asking why an office isn’t open. The backdrop to the question seems to be an ethnographic discourse, which explains why a particular institution isn’t operational at a particular time in a particular culture. Thus,

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2 There is an analytic relationship between “locked” and “open” so that  $p$  or  $q$ , not- $p$ , thus  $q$ . This holds true when “open” and “locked” are applied to “doors” and “locks” but there is no logical relation between these words when “locked” is applied to “a door” and “open” to “an office”. In this case we must supply the condition that “an office is open only when its main door isn’t locked”. It is however problematic to add this as a general condition since many offices are open while their main doors remain locked. This serves to remind us that the number of analytic truths are quite few, save for blunt tautologies as in (e) and conclusions derived from the law of the excluded middle as in (d).

only an explanation that utilizes ethnographic idiosyncrasies is deemed to be meaningful, even though there are no formal errors in any of the other alternatives that discredit them as explanations. We can perform the same test on any “why”, “how” or “what” question and the result will be quite the same. Every question seems to have a large space of formally correct answers and yet only a select few, often only one, will make sense in situated communication. To give a correct answer is thus not simply picking one formally correct answer but selecting *the* formally correct answer that corresponds to *the* situated communicative act.

In quotidian speech the business of picking out the communicatively appropriate answer is a more or less automated affair. But what about theoretic questions like “what is life?” or “what is ethics?”; do we have the same intuitive skill of homing in *The* correct answer to these questions as well? I submit that this is not the case and that much confusion derives from this fact. Section three will give ample proof of how different ideas about what a correct answer would entail have bogged down the academic metaethical discourse. There is simply no one notion on this subject but a plethora of different ideas that are competing against each other. So how could one then go about to address the question?

I have no illusion of my word being the final in this debate but given the current state of disagreement it might be wise to explicate what one hope to accomplish with one’s own attempt at an answer. This will hopefully put the debate in perspective and offer a ruler against which the merits and demerits of one’s suggestion can be measured.

So let us start by asking what the alternative to offer or accept any suggested answer would be. It would be to strand without any conception whatsoever of ethics, in a way similar to Sartre’s Roquentin who “*was aware of the arbitrary nature of these relationships, which I [Roquentin] insisted on maintaining in order to delay the collapse of the human world of measures, of quantities, of bearings; they no longer had any grip on things*”. (Sartre, J-P. 2000: 184) This loss of conceptual bearings was the reason behind Roquentin’s afflictions of the *nausea*, a malady so grave that it drove him into a half psychotic state before he regained his foothold. I for my part doubt that it is even possible to really loose one’s conceptual bearings in Sartre’s sense, at least under normal conditions.<sup>3</sup> We seem to arrive at some fussy conception of things and relations just by being aware of them, or perhaps more to the point, we become aware of them by our (mostly unconscious) act of forming a conception. What

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3 This goes for humans under normal conditions. There are a few neurological maladies that seem to literally deprive the afflicted of the ability to conceptualise reality. What immediately springs to mind are cases of regained sight after blindness since infancy and at least some cases of *agnosia* and *apraxia*.

once was an undifferentiated unknown becomes a thing in our minds eye and things are something individuated, however vague that individuation might be. If we read Sartre metaphorically, Roquentin's nausea becomes a more familiar and plausible malady, namely the struggle to make sense of the world *in toto* given our scientific knowledge, our culturally inherited understanding and our phenomenological experience. It is in this vein I view my own attempt to offer a conception of ethics. I wish to offer a way to talk and think about ethics that doesn't cause unnecessary ethical *nausea* and comfortably can be fitted into a scientifically oriented worldview, without seriously distorting our vague inherent sense of what ethics is.

One aspect of this undertaking is decidedly therapeutic in the Wittgensteinian sense. I will try to dispel some wrongheaded philosophical conceptions about ethics by tending to both how these errors could creep into philosophy and why they are wrong. This part will be a search and destroy missions for pseudo-problems and thus a purely destructive project. Having rid ourselves of philosophical prejudices we are free to form a new understanding of ethics but I take this to mean understanding in a way dissimilar to propositional knowledge. I will not offer any formal demonstration or proofs for the main thesis or suggest anything that is essentially new. Hutto (2009: 643) has commented on this method by observing that “[w]hat makes this form of understanding distinctive is that it is not progressive in anything like the usual sense; unlike scientific knowledge we start from what we already know [...] the difficulty here is to achieve an understanding – an elucidation – of something that in some sense we already know[...]”. The method in itself is simply a rearrangement of the things already known which makes it possible for us to view them in a differently coloured light, in a way similar to what happens when we hold up a prism and turn it in the light.

## **2.1 Naturalism**

As always in philosophy, there are disagreements lurking at every corner and the meaning of naturalism prove to be no different, though the disagreement in this case stem from a remarkably high degree of agreement on the general meaning of the term. The great majority of contemporary philosophers call themselves naturalists and that also holds true for contemporary philosophers that study ethics. What they all seem to agree upon is that being a naturalistic philosopher is doing philosophy without appeal to the supernatural and being content with what can be framed within a naturalistic worldview. It is at this later stage disagreement start to surface, because what exactly is it to have a naturalistic worldview; that



is, what entities and relations can be accommodated by nature? The term “naturalism” has therefore been charged with being everything from all-encompassing and thus vacuous to being an extremist position that virtually no one defends. On the one end, we have a naturalism that accepts everything that can be stated without appeal to the supernatural and on the other end we have a naturalism that denies the existence of everything except the fundamental laws of physics.

The argument that naturalism is vacuous rests on a critique of using a concept that is so loosely held together that the only thing it unanimously is supposed to exclude is the assumption that supernatural forces meddle in the workings of our universe. The real controversy for the great majority of contemporary philosophers is thus not whether or not to be a philosophical naturalist but “*what is and what is not to be included in one’s conception of ‘nature’*”. (Stroud, B. 1996: 43) If we let all points of view on this latter controversial question be included in the term “naturalism” it has been said that it is “*little more than a slogan on a banner raised to attract the admiration of those who agree that no supernatural agents are at work in this world*” (Stroud, B. 1996: 54). At least this is how the argument against the informativeness of naturalism goes.

At the other end of the spectrum we have eliminative physicalism that has been characterized (Shook, J. 2011: 6) as the view that the only things that exist are those that are described by physics best theories. Claims about things that don’t fall under these descriptions are thought to be either false or meaningless. Consequently, entities such as molecules and proteins, not being physical but chemical, must go. The same holds for all the other sciences, be they natural, social or humanities, and naturally the same goes for our quotidian way of talking and thinking about objects and relations. Eliminative physicalism rejects all talk of values as misguided, since neither the property of being evaluable nor the act of evaluation itself are related to the fundamental theories of physics. If I allow myself to suggest an irreverent metaphor it would be that eliminative physicalism is platonic idealism turned on its head; the less manifestly physical a concept is the less real it becomes. Any attempt to naturalise ethics under this paradigm would amount to nothing more than to shelve the whole idea in the section for fiction on par with the tooth fairy. Though not even this would be strictly orthodox since neither “shelves” nor “ideas” are considered to be real entities.

These two extremes then, one open ended and the other exclusive, are nonetheless held together by the common philosophical problem of how experience, reason and especially science can be related to one another. Most important is the keen interest in what role science plays in this triad. The different forms of naturalism can therefore be distinguished depending

on the role they see science play in a proper understanding of the world. Naturalism is thus a philosophical worldview that relies on the triad of experience, reason and foremost science to develop an understanding of the cosmos, (Shook, J. 2011: 1) some would also add a repudiation of “first philosophy” to this list (Rosenberg, A. 1996: 4).<sup>4</sup>

Even if the least restrictive forms of naturalism are considerably more open ended than reductive physicalism, they are all confined and unified by this triad and are thus opposed to idealism and supernaturalism. I therefore cannot agree with those who think naturalism is an empty buzzword. Though it is not so specific that it is unambiguously clear what exact role science, reason and experience are supposed to play, naturalism still stands out as a venue of its own, apart from other traditions. However, since naturalism isn’t unambiguous, those that use the term owe an explanation of what kind of naturalism they defend.

Naturalism has had different goals in different context, depending on the subject matter to which it has been applied for elucidation. As far as ethics is concerned the most succinct explanation of the intersection between naturalism and ethics, that I have encountered, is given by Lenman (2008: §1) who wrote that “*the naturalist offers to save realism but eliminate the mystery [...] and reveal values to us as straightforwardly part of the domain of natural fact*”. A way to do this is to say that ethical terms must be able to play a role in scientific theories. One such proposition is offered by Railton (1986: 191-193) who suggests that moral wrongness is to be understood as a lack of “*social rationality*”, which is said to be a cause of civil unrest. Social rationality, in its turn, entails counting equal the objective interests of those affected by x. This means that if a thing is morally wrong this is testable as a hypothesis in the social sciences. Morally wrong would there be translated into a hypothesis like “x causes social unrest”. A neat feature of Railton’s theory is that it also solves the problem of how people get epistemic access to moral facts, i.e. they get epistemic access by inferring what kind of actions destabilize a community. Though not uncontroversial,<sup>5</sup> Railton’s theory has been received as a serious candidate for naturalized ethics.

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4 Though I share the conviction that a “first philosophy” is a misplaced ambition I hesitate to use a repudiation of it as a prerequisite for naturalism, because I’m not sure that all self-styled naturalists is of this opinion, at least not yet. Furthermore it would exclude those old school naturalists that we call empiricists. Perhaps it would be better to talk about Quine and non-Quine naturalists since W. V. Quine 1969 (2008: 528-337) was the first philosopher to seriously suggest a repudiation of first philosophy, but doing so is not a convention so I will refrain from introducing new terms and stick with a Quine-neutral naturalism.

5 Neil Sinclair (2006: 429-436) has raised the objection that Railton’s theory renders moral wrongness an explanatory redundancy. This since all explanatory work is actually performed by the “*dissatisfaction of interests*”, thus making “morally wrong” superfluous as an explanatory element in a scientific theory. As far as I can judge this is a correct assessment that effectively invalidates Railton’s attempt on its own terms. A position similar to that of Railton but without a claim to play a role in scientific theories is offered by David Copp (2005).

One way to understand candidates for a naturalized ethics, such as that offered by Railton, is against the backdrop of Moore's open question argument. Moore's (1903) argument rests on the premise that if there is an analytic identity between two words or concepts (e.g. "unmarried man" and "bachelor") then there will be no residue of uncertainty about the identity of the two words or concepts, so that one can intelligibly ask "I know Tom is unmarried but is he a bachelor?". In cases of analytic identity the question of identity is hence closed. When it comes to ethical terms and concepts the question remains open because we can intelligibly ask "I know x satisfies the preferences of all those concerned but is it good?". Moore maintained that this openness will remain for whatever natural property we choose to name good and naturalism can therefore never succeed in reducing ethical terms and concepts to natural properties.

Rosati (1995: 48) has suggested that though Moore's argument primarily turns against analytic definitions of ethical terms, it still has a bite even for synthetic definitions and that this bite is what most contemporary naturalism tries to overcome. Even though the aim at an analytic conceptual closure is abandoned by contemporary philosophers, there remains the less formal challenge of bridging a synthetic proposal with our notions of moral terms and concepts. If we on the one hand were told that the synthetically arrived at meaning of "good" is "soap" we would not be convinced but if we on the other hand were told that it was "not causing unnecessary harm" then we would recognize some of the colloquial sense of "good" in the proposed definition. Even in this latter case it would however be possibly to raise some doubts, whether the definition answers to our common linguistic practise. We might for example raise the concern that while "not causing unnecessary harm" indeed answers to some of the ways we use good; it still seems to lack a context from which to derive the normative force we normally attribute to a thing we call good. Because when we say "x is good" we imply that there is something about x that makes it something that ought to be perused. Thus, even this synthetic approach has an openness, in the sense that we can reasonably ask whether a definition answers to the linguistic practise, in this case how we derive practical conclusions from factual observations. As for Railton (1986: 188-192), he argues that there exist a social rationality, just as there exists an individual practical rationality based on wants and needs. It is because of this rationality that a moral good can count as a cause to take action rather than to remain indifferent. In this way then, some of the openness for synthetic proposals, such as that of Railton, is thought to have moved towards a conceptual closure, since yet one desideratum has been met. A complete closure is however never obtained, since it is in the nature of synthetic definitions to always be open to further questioning.

The naturalism I will rely on is different from that advanced by Railton. That is because I don't see a need to let ethical terms and concepts play a role in proper scientific theories in quite the same way as Railton suggests, namely that they must play a causal role in theories from, say, the social sciences. As I see it, the only thing needed is that ethical terms, concepts and practise can be accounted for by the other sciences.

Physics can do quite well without chemistry; it has simply no need for chemical terms and concepts to account for physical phenomenon. Chemistry on the other hand would be hard pressed to go along without physics but it also need chemical terms and concepts to deal with chemical phenomenon such as macromolecules. The existence of a chemical phenomenon can however be accounted for in physics, even though there is no practical or formal way to reduce, for example proteomics, to bare physics. If we move another scale on the ladder and look at biology it stands in the same relation to chemistry as chemistry stand to physics. Biological terms and concepts such as ecology and species can't be practically reduced to talk about chemistry but they can be accounted for as entities in a physical and chemical world.

This far I don't expect too much opposition from the reader but the next step might be less well received by some. I submit that the same holds true when we make the move from the natural to the social sciences and controversially, when we make the move to the humanities. I suggest that we live in one world where layers of complexity add up to new layers of complexity to form the intricate web of relations we commonly refer to as "reality". For ethics this means that it will not be reduced, so as to disappear in some other discipline but rather that it is continuous with the other sciences, so that ethical terms, concepts and praxis can be accounted for by them without making ethical terms, concepts and praxis superfluous as explanations within the ethical domain.

Naturalism, thus construed, will seek a place for ethics *in toto* within the confines of our present understanding of nature. The phrase "present understanding of nature" is not meant to be vague but sensitive to the fact that our worldview is in a constant flux. A better explication would perhaps be "the currently best accepted scientific theories" and such theories are those we would encounter if we opened up a contemporary textbook from a scientific discipline. The definition here given seeks a sociological rather than an epistemological justification (if the latter also be had it will be by proxy). It is a way to make appeal to a worldview that I believe to be common among the secularized and scientifically literate parts of the population. I will offer no formal argument to vindicate this worldview in the following sections but instead attempt to articulate what a naturalized ethics could be if

such worldview be had. (See: Karlsson, J. 2011:3-5)

Rachels (2000:90-91) has suggested that naturalism is a way to look at ethics from the outside. A way to step out from the phenomenology and take a distanced look, where we talk about our ethical reasoning rather than making use of it and thus such a perspective will alienate us from the phenomenological aspect of ethics. This seems to be the unavoidable consequence of relating one subject to another. We are asked to be clearheaded and not be caught up in the fray, taking a step back and see how and if the pieces fit together. The crucial question will then be if we can comfortably return to the phenomenology of ethics, without a sense of having been robbed of something essential, by having taken a look at ethics from the outside. The risk of disillusionment and Sartre's *nausea* will therefore be a real possibility when we apply the naturalistic approach.

I (Karlsson, J 2011: 29-31) have in other work noted that naturalism isn't a contraption for metaphysical self-gratification; that taking a step back can indeed reveal a picture we can't reconcile with our thoughts and feelings, as we experience them from within. As I then wrote:

*“Sightings of deceased loved ones will not count as a proof of a sweet ever-after but it will be a testament to the profound and lasting impact that person has had on your inner life. Indeed, to such extent that your brain, unbeknownst to you, summons the person's phantom out of the depths of its resources and projects it defiantly onto the world that has robbed you of that person's presence. For some people that might not be enough, they will insist that if it wasn't grandma's spirit it was just a meaningless mental fluke. They demand the full Monty or else they will have nothing. If that is what they want I'm afraid naturalism will have no acceptable interpretation that will satiate their desire.”*

(Karlsson, J. 2011: 30)

The same will undoubtedly hold true for ethics. A naturalistic account might not hold up to the standard we have decided it must hold up to, if it is to count for us. I fear there is no naturalistic argument that can sway an opponent if he has decided that ethics must have some otherworldly qualities and neither do I have such arguments to offer. What will be on offer is what I hope to be a plausible naturalistic account that gives room for the phenomenology of ethics and vindicates morality and values as natural facts in a natural world. What also will be on offer is a therapeutic approach to “ethics” that will show that some properties attributed to

ethics are ill founded. If this approach suffice or not is perhaps ultimately settled by psychological dispositions rather than philosophical argument. I can only appeal to the immanent nature of our human condition and hope this will have enough force to snap an opponent out of transcendent ruminations and back into the natural world.

One consideration, among many, that nevertheless speaks in favour of ethical naturalism is the possibility of epistemic defeaters. (See: Coop, D. 2003) It seems to be a general feature of ethical deliberations that they are sensitive to facts and if the facts changes so do our ethical deliberations. This is to say that there are no strongly *a priori* moral positions, i.e. positions impervious to empirical considerations. A strong *a priori* would be an analytic truth like  $2+2=4$ , where no change of facts and relations in this world would change our judgement about the truth of the statement.<sup>6</sup> A purely synthetic statement would be that Jones, because he has four stall boxes, with one horse in each, has in total (at least) four horses. In this case changes in the world could change the truth of the statement. Jones could sell his horses or they could die, as could Jones. If such changes took place the statement would no longer be true. Moral discourse is more like this latter (synthetic) than the former (analytic) kind. It seems like whatever moral rule we come up with it remains possible to think of cases where the circumstances invalidate, or at least cast doubt over, the selfsame rule. Similarly, there seems to be no moral judgement that could be impervious to new facts pertaining to the matter. Thus, diverging opinions are a *prima facie* reason to assume that our epistemic warrant is undermined (or that our opponents are morally worse). The same could not be said about strongly *a priori* positions where disagreements would, *prima facie*, indicate that our opponent lacks competence to use the involved concepts. Now, if ethical discourse is indeed synthetic then the default position to assume is naturalism, since naturalistic explanations are explicitly designed to deal with synthetic questions and analytic explanations are not.

Coop (2003) doesn't claim that this is a proof of anything, neither do I. We should rather view it as a consideration, a piece of thought to take along for the rest of the ride, as I develop the case for ethical naturalism.

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6 I doubt that there really exists such a thing as a strong *a priori* in the philosophical sense. If the world had been different, say that every time we added objects two and two we ended up getting five, then our sense of logic would most likely have been different, or if not, irrelevant for our understanding of the external world. If there are any strong *a priori* of this kind they are due to how the world works, not to the dictates of logic. Thus logic is also synthetic, i.e. depending on contingent facts. In this case however, I follow Coop (2003) and thus suspend my own doubts about the strong *a priori* for the sake of argument. My own position would be an outright denial of the *a priori* and thus all non-naturalist explanations would be invalid by default.

## 2.2 Non-Naturalism

In this brief section I will present three different specimens of non-naturalism as a contrast to naturalism. It is my hope that this small digression will help us distinguish naturalism somewhat further by focusing on what it decidedly is not. By pointing out prominent opposing views I also hope to make the term “naturalism” seem more meaningful as a salient demarcation, i.e. occupying a distinct position as a school of thought.

Moral non-naturalism has been characterised as depicting moral philosophy as discontinuous with the natural sciences or more specifically the thesis that moral properties are not reducible to natural properties. As with naturalism so non-naturalism is plagued with different notions of what a natural property is and at least eight different suggestions have been advanced by advocates of non-naturalism. (Ridge, M. 2010: §1) What these suggestions all have in common is a refusal to let the natural property they deem constitutive for naturalism play a role in metaethics. One such suggestion is offered by Shafer-Landau (2007: 62-71) who claims that ethics derives its properties from its genus, which is philosophy. Philosophy, as Shafer-Landau conceives of it, deals with *a priori* questions that can only be answered by intuitions and ethics inherits this property from its genus. Thus ethics is on par with metaphysical questions that elude naturalistic elucidation. At least as far as Shafer-Landau's argument goes. Shafer-Landau's brand of non-naturalism is derived from the idea that there exists a first philosophy. This means that analytic knowledge has primacy over synthetic knowledge, so that the latter is dependent on the former in the sense that synthetic thinking requires analytic thinking as a preamble. If this order of things is true and there indeed exist a sphere of knowledge that is accessible only by pure thought, unadulterated by empirical facts, then a non-naturalistic approach to ethics is a realistic option. Ethics could then reside in the realm of pure thought and elude the world of empirical facts. A naturalistic philosophy would have a hard time finding a point of entry to ethics if this were the case.

Another possible route to non-naturalism is provided by certain types of theology that identifies goodness with something transcendental. It might be a divine will like in divine command theory or something referred to as “the divine nature”. This latter view espouses something like an essentialist approach and identifies the ontology of “good” with the ontology of “god”. The Catholic Encyclopaedia (Fox, J. 1909) explains this as God being the supreme end of all activity, so that God subsumes all other ends and thus becomes the sole end. Fox (1909) writes: “*Thus the attainment of the proximate good in this life leads to the possession of the Supreme Good in the next*”. The sense here appears to be that whatever is

good immanently is so only because immanent goodness secures the one thing that is truly good, without which all other things would lose their goodness, since the property of being good is a derived characteristic that they have in virtue of communicating the one thing that is good in itself. I doubt this even is a coherent idea but that might be disputed.<sup>7</sup> However, what couldn't be disputed is that this isn't a naturalistic idea.

As a final example of non-naturalism we note the position advanced by G. E. Moore (1903) in his *Principia Ethica*, where he stated that “*yellow and good, we say, are not complex: they are notions of that simple kind, out of which definitions are composed and with which the power of further defining ceases*” (Moore, G. E. 1903: §7). Moore rejected supernaturalism and naturalism alike, as a matter of fact he denied any possibility to say something illuminating on the matter beyond “*that good is good, and that is the end of the matter*” (Moore, G. E. 1903: §6). The two main arguments Moore used to advance this position has been widely criticised and we will have cause to return to them during the latter course of our investigation. What should be noted at this point is the central idea of irreducibility; that we with “good” have hit a conceptual rock bottom. The spirit of his thesis seems to have been that there are things that are so basic that we can't get a better understanding of them by looking at their parts, because they are atomistic and thus have no parts; instead, they are the parts other things are made of. Moore's use of “yellow” in conjunction with “good” is somewhat confusing since we can easily define yellow in physical terms but Moore (1903: §10) anticipated this rejoinder and said that “*those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow*”. I don't think Moore's assertion is very convincing but it gives us an idea of what kind of thing he was after when he talked about “good” being a simple notion. He seems to have appealed to our experience *per se* and said that while some objects, like animals, are conglomerates of experiences, other things, like colours, are atomic experiences *simpliciter*.

If Moore were right ethical naturalism would be impossible because the essentialist leaning of his ontology is not commensurable with a naturalistic worldview and this, more

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7 The reason why I doubt the coherence of the idea that “good” is a part of a god's nature is that “good” seems to be an attributed characteristic rather than an essential one, i.e. logically predicative. As the theological story goes I can find no warrant to say that the God of the theologians is good because it is a god. Rather, it seems to be the case that their God has created humans to have their ultimate good in it; then theologians, having identified God as the supreme good of man, name God good. Then follows that for their God to be good there must be such creatures as humans that have their good in this God, else the attribute “good” could not be attributed to this God and thus “good” can't be an essential part of God's nature. If “good” however is an attributed quality, then it is an empirical question to determine what could possibly count as a good *qua* man, much to the dismay of the analytically minded theologian.



than his formal arguments directed against naturalism, is the chief bone of contention for a contemporary naturalist. Naturalism requires that concepts like “good” can be accounted for within the natural order of things, that it can be related to physics, biology; anthropology or at least ethnography. A free-floating essential “goodness” *simpliciter* is not a thing that can be accounted for within this framework with any stretch of imagination. To talk about “goodness” in Moore’s sense, within a naturalistic framework, would force us to postulate that “good” was like energy; i.e. a fundamental building block of the universe. An extravagantly unwarranted hypothesis indeed, given our present understanding of nature!

After this brief digression into non-naturalism I now intend to return our attention to ethical naturalism and advance my own brand of naturalism as a viable alternative and this will be our topic for the remainder of this essay. Before we move on, however, let us remind ourselves that there were many different ideas about what a naturalistic account of ethics should entail. We have settled for a form of naturalism that is suited to our question and that is essentially an existential one. We therefore motivated our choice of method by prudential reasons derived from our desire to find meaning in the sense of meaningfulness but not by a formal argument for our interpretative scheme. We appealed to the need for the growing number of secular and scientifically literate individuals to find a language fit for talking about ethics that is sensitive to their world-view and which can be accommodated by moderate and progressive religious believers alike. The merits and demerits of this essay are to be judged on that goal and that goal alone because it has no further ambitions than this.

### **3. Ethics Defined**

Are we, within the broader framework of naturalism, as outlined above, at liberty to articulate and ascribe any meaning as we deem fit, to ethics? I think not, because the norms established by successive generations of competent language users compels us to recognize inherent constraints, as to what can reasonably be denoted with the term “ethics”. It might indeed be the case that “ethics” is tied up with some notions that could prevent a naturalistic interpretation, since such an interpretation would violate basic semantic rules of what is ordinarily meant by “ethics”. The occurrence of any prior conceptual constraints is thus a crucial point to be addressed before we can move on. Neglecting this question would be tantamount to sneak a Trojan horse inside the term to hijack it from within. That would be a merely rhetorical operation, which neither would elucidate nor clarify the matter at hand.

Now, there are broadly three ways in which we could go about and tap into the

established meaning of a concept. We could use lexicographic definitions, we could use etymological derivation and we could analyse ethical discourse in terms of discourse.

A standard dictionary definition of “ethics” is “*moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity*” and “*the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles*”.<sup>8</sup> (Oxford Dictionary of English: *Ethics*) So “ethics” is either denoting the principles that guide a person’s conduct or knowledge, in the colloquial sense, about such principles. It seems that this is only directing our investigation further down the road, because now we need to try and answer what those principles might be like. If there are any conceptual constraints bound up with ethics, they are sure to be found at the base level of those principles of which ethics concerns itself, since “ethics” in and by itself has no such lexicographic content.

Etymological derivation is seldom reliable when it comes to establishing the synchronic meaning of a word but it should nevertheless not be ignored, because sometimes the genealogy of a word directly restricts its present usage.<sup>9</sup> The English “ethics” is derived from the Greek “τὰ ἠθικά”, which more or less has the same meaning as the English word “ethics” and “τὰ ἠθικά” is, in its turn, derived from the Greek “ἦθος” that denotes something that is customary or habitual. (Liddell&Scott: ἠθικός, ἦθος) If any difference should be noted, between the source and target language, it is that in Greek the term originally lay closer to the English “customary/habitual” and only later came to acquire the specific meaning of “ethics”; that is, referring to the principles that guide human conduct or knowledge about those principles. The etymological inquiry thus leaves us with the same uncertainty as the lexicographic definition and we are therefore forced to look to ethical discourse for guidance.

Ethical discourse can broadly be divided into two categories, one constituting the non-specialist discourse and the other constituting the specialist discourse. The former is what is practised on a daily basis by people employing ethical terms, concepts and praxis. The latter is by and large the domain of professional philosophers. Unfortunately there is no agreement among philosophers, about what nature those principles of which ethics are concerned have. It has been suggested that it is principles about reasons with intrinsically action guiding features,

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8 We will be none the wiser if we look up “Moral” in our dictionary because the answer we will get is “*standards of behaviour; principles of right and wrong*”. (Oxford Dictionary of English: *Moral*)

9 We could look at words derived from personal names such as *Hippocratic* or historic titles such as *Caesarean* (adj.), where the source words directly restrict the present usage by supplying a historical reference to the semantic field.

that it is a special kind of reason that can be had by all regardless of psychological disposition; that it is reasons that is universally prescriptive, that it is reasons derived from hypothetical imperatives, that it is reasons derived from a common standard for right actions or that it is reasons provided by supernatural forces. The list also include reasons advanced by different ethical theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, feminist ethics, ethics of care and different permutations and intermediary forms of these and other schools of moral thought. (Karlsson, J. 2011: 26) It therefore seems quite safe to say that though there certainly are types of philosophical ethics that are impossible to reconcile with naturalism, there is no reason to consider those a central or indispensable part of ethics proper. Philosophical discourse is simply not clear and unified enough to be able to infuse “ethics” with some auxiliary notion over and above the general meaning of “ethics” as presented in a standard dictionary. It should of course be noted that philosophers don’t operate with purposely idiosyncratic notions of what ethics is but rather try to reforge, in a philosophically rigorous manner, what they take to be folkish notions. It therefore seems that it is the popular understanding of “ethics” we must turn our attention to.

### **3.1 Folk Theories as Defining Criterion**

Sadly, there is precious little research done on popular conceptions of ethics as a phenomenon. As far as I know there is only a handful of studies up to this date that have addressed this question more directly, those that I have managed to acquire will be referred to in the next section. We are thus bound to chiefly rely on indirect evidence when we try to establish what the popular notion of ethics might be. Studies with indirect bearing on our subject are of two kinds, either they address moral development in a vein similar to that of Lawrence Kohlberg<sup>10</sup> or they rely on folk theories of ethics as a means to frame popular conceptions of ethics.

The research that follows Kohlberg tells us how moral reasoning develops over a lifespan,

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<sup>10</sup> Kohlberg’s phases for the development of moral judgement seem to hold their ground as a valid way to portray how cognitive development plays out in moral reasoning across cultures and sexes, though his detailed typology is probably incorrect. (see Gibbs, J. *et al.* 2007: 491) Simply put, the development goes from reference to the self (childhood), to reference to the established social order (adolescence) and ends up in reference to ethical concepts and terms (adulthood). This reflects the general cognitive development in healthy humans where reasoning becomes more abstract as the cognitive faculties develop. It is nonetheless interesting to observe that the flawed detailed typology proposed by Kohlberg fails the universality test since it incorporates philosophical metaethical reflection, a practise that evidently isn’t an omnipresent part of popular moral discourse (Gibbs, J. *et al.* 2007: 452-3). However, these phases are less informative for our current purpose, since they are mainly concerned with how the mode of reasoning develops, not with the subject matter or function of moral reasoning *per se*.

while folk theories take an interest in the cognitive content of that reasoning, mainly in its mature stages. Theories of moral development can't tell us anything about the specific content of ethics, over and above how our cognitive abilities define what kind of reasons are accessible to us, during the different stages of our cognitive development.

It seems that folk theories would be the more promising route if we wish to tap into the content of "ethics". And folk theories are also the source philosophers often have used when they have tried to tap into the popular understanding of ethics, even though few philosophers have ever used the specific label "folk morality".<sup>11</sup> Folk theories are perhaps best understood as more or less innate instrumental ways of talking and thinking about the things that surround us. Folk physics tells us that things if dropped will fall to the ground and folk psychology tells us that two toddlers pulling at the same teddy bear both have a desire to have it. But a crucial question is if these folkish ways are purporting to posit the existence of theoretical entities or not. (See: Dennett, D. 1989:7-11, 52-53) Folk theories have mainly been an independent topic within the philosophy of mind, where the main interest has been a folkish theory of mind. There have however also been some interest in folk physics, lately we have even heard about such a thing as a "*folk science*" purported to encompass popular and widely held pre-scientific theories encapsulated in our common way to think and talk about things (e.g. Shermer, M. 2006).

To better understand how a folk theory is established and used it might be instructive to see how this approach has been deployed in the inquiry into folk psychology.<sup>12</sup> I will only rely on the formal method that is employed within this field and avoid any specific references to how it is done on a case to case basis.

We begin by establishing  $T$  that denotes a theory.  $T$  is constituted by the  $T$ -terms  $T[t_1...t_n]$  that play the causal role within the theory, while all other terms in language are denoted  $O$ -terms. The  $O$ -terms are thought to correspond to some existing  $x$  that realises the  $O$ -term. What is now needed for  $T$  to refer is that  $\exists!(x_1...x_n)T(x_1...x_n)$ , which means that for each element in  $T$  there exists one corresponding  $x$ . In this way we are able to translate our theoretical terms into an empirically testable hypothesis. Next we need to find the elements

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11 The one that coined the term "folk morality" is allegedly Frank Jackson (See: Lenman, J. 2008: §4.3) who developed a theory of moral functionalism in line with what will be discussed later in this section. Joyce (2007: 192) uses the term "folk notion" and claims that usage of folk notions is defensible as long as they capture "*the everyday moral practise*".

12 The term *folk psychology* might also refer to a particular set of cognitive abilities or a theory of behaviour represented in the human brain. (See: Ravenscroft, I. 2010). None of these senses are intended in this essay.

(*T*-terms) of our folk theory (*T*) and this is done by collecting all the everyday commonsense platitudes concerning the causal relation between the elements (*T*-terms). It is these causal conjunctions between the elements that constitute the pivotal point, since the *T*-terms are thought to correspond to some *x* that plays this causal role. A causal relation established between two *T*-terms thus necessitates the same casual relation between the corresponding *x*:es if the theory (*T*) is to refer. (Hutto, D. 2011: 131-132 & Laydman, J. 2009: §3.2 & Ravenscroft, I. 2007: §3) Put in the simplest possible terms we can understand folk theories, or rather the transition of a folk theory into a theory (*T*), as a translation of a statement made in a scientifically inept language to statement made in a fully-fledged scientific language. By “scientific language” we are to understand a conceptual framework in which we can express strict casual laws with both explanatory and predictive power and a pre-defined certainty or probability. The underlying assumption is of cause that such a translation serves to improve the scientifically inept language and that the ultimate end of both of these language games is the same, namely to discover causal relationships.

How does this concern ethics? Even though the claims made in the philosophical literature about the theoretical underpinnings of ethics are *legio* there has been precious little written about the general method used to establish them. However, in essence, the method most frequently used has been similar to that employed by those that take an interest in folk psychology.<sup>13</sup> Purported platitudes about the relationships between ethical terms and concepts are gathered into a theory (*T*), thereafter the causal properties of these terms are translated to free variables (*x*), whereupon a frenetic search of *x*:es that fills the functional role of the ethical terms ensue. Some philosophers claim to have found them; others claim that they can’t be found. To see how this strategy have been used we can illustrate with five examples from seven prominent philosophers; namely Joyce, Mackie, Sayre-McCord, Smith and the trio Darwall, Gibbard and Railton.

Joyce (2001: 30-34) adamantly insists that popular discourse presupposes an unavoidably reason-giving quality that is attached to ethical arguments.<sup>14</sup> The functional role

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13 As mentioned in n.11 there is one philosopher that makes explicit use of this methodology, namely Frank Jackson. I have however not read Jackson’s original work and therefore have to pass him with an honorary mentioning. For a brief discussion of his view see Lenman, J. 2008: §4.3. What Jackson tried to do was apparently to reduce moral facts to non-moral facts by converting what he called “mature folk morality” into Ramsey sentences where the free variable *x* is a non-moral entity. If Jackson is right old school naturalism will be vindicated since moral facts would then turn out to be purely descriptive and in essence not normative, though Jackson didn’t try to reduce morality into one simple non-moral fact like “pleasure” but sought a more complex set of non-moral facts.

14 Joyce is indebted to a not so often cited article by Richard Garner who claimed “*that we are inescapably*

of moral injunctions is thus to supply reasons that cannot be ignored by any agent, regardless of his or her motives and dispositions. Thus there must exist at least one x that can fill the functional role of universal provider of reasons to act. Mackie ([1977]1990: 30-35) has, in a similar vein, argued that ordinary users of moral language presuppose entities that are objective, intrinsic and prescriptive, thus an account of morality that ignores these features is incomplete. Mackie then sets out to investigate if there is any x that satisfies these conditions. Sayre-McCord (1986: 22) notes that, on a general level, morality requires that what we mean when we make moral claims must be “*literally true*” when it is “*literally construed*”. An account of morality, that doesn’t aim at debunking, thus has to find some x that can satisfy this literalistic construct or else fail. Smith (1994: 4-13) makes an explicit point out of showing that “*features that are present in ordinary moral practise as it is engaged in by ordinary folk*” necessitates an “*objectivity and practicality*” and the task he sets for philosophy is then to discern if there are any x to which these refer. Finally we have the renowned trio Darwall, Gibbard and Railton<sup>15</sup> (1992: 179, 186) that, in a co-written article review metaethical theories of the past century, make explicit reference to “*the seeming truisms of common sense moral thought*” and “*important elements of commonsense morality*” in their critical evaluation of contemporary metaethical theories. A criterion for a successful theory is thus, according to these three authors, that it conforms to and explains “*commonsense morality*”, whatever that now might be.

This enumeration of philosophers only serve as an illustration of a prevalent way of thinking about and framing metaethical questions. The list could easily have been extended but for our purposes it is quite sufficient to show that the methodology employed in folk psychology is utilized in metaethics as well. I do, however, not claim that this is an omnipresent feature of all metaethical thinking, nor do I claim that the method of folk psychology, when adopted, is deployed in a copy and paste manner. How much of commonsense morality is deemed commonsensical enough to constitute a platitude is a matter

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*bound is an indispensable part of the institution of morality, as it is understood by those who seriously participate in it*” (Garner, R.1990: 139 my emphasis).

15 In the seminal article *Moral Realism*, written by Railton (1986), there is no explicit mentioning of “commonsense moral thought”. Railton even describes his theory as “*reforming*” (1986: 204). However, in his concluding remarks (1986: 207) he describes ethical theories as “*not an artificial contrivance of philosophers but an organic result of the personal and social uses of moral evaluation*”. Theories of ethics are thought to be on par with theories of the empirical sciences and what they purport to explain is the body of observations that constitute their field of study. That this is to be interpreted as an explanation of commonsensical moral evaluations is clear by the structure of the theory he has developed. For a discussion of Railton’s naturalism see section 2.1.

of degrees and exactly how it is to be translated into a proper theory (*T*) is not confined to literalistic representations of platitudes. Regardless of these reservations, about the extent to which folk theories have decided the scoop of metaethics, there remain fundamental objections to be raised against each and every attempt to do metaethics along these lines and to these objections we shall now turn.

Hutto (2008:132-135, 141-142 & 2011: 180) has highlighted some inherent problems concerning folk theories as they have been applied to the theory of mind in psychology and I maintain that these same problems, with due modification, apply to metaethics as well. My criticism is thus indebted to Hutto but I'm not certain that he would share my interpretation of his insights or my application of them to the matter at hand. Nevertheless, just as with folk psychology, folk ethics is built on the assumption that platitudes derived from commonsense morality is term-introducing, i.e. that platitudes can be translated into *T*-terms that in turn can be aggregated into a proper folk theory (*T*). Naturally people hold a belief in terms such as "good/right" and "bad/wrong". That is true by the mere fact that people use these terms as signifiers in ethical discourse. The same hold true for every content word present in the English language, because people surely believe in such things as "spoon", "fast" and "unicorn". Quite naturally people hold an implicit belief in these entities as conceptually valid entities; else they could not fulfil the functional role of content words, since they would then have been devoid of meaning. It is however quite another thing to advance these words as positing theoretical entities. A *T*-term is defined on other terms than content words, the former is supposed to constitute an explanatory nexus of causal linkages within a theory (*T*), while the latter is supposed to uphold a functional role in situated communication by being a modicum in a language game.

Perhaps the difference is made more evident if we consider such a word as "mutation" that can be both a *T*-term and a content word. As a *T*-term it denotes the material process of natural selection that explains the diversity of living organisms but as a content word it merely expresses "change". Thus, both a creationist and a scientist can speak of "mutations" in living organisms but only one of them is committed to introducing a *T*-term. It would be a strange world indeed if people, when using content words, were systematically introducing *T*-terms. In such a world, words such as "fast" would be required to come with a theory of speed and movement and "spoons" would postulate an explanatory nexus for the causal efficacy of cutlery, whatever such an ontological behemoth might be. It therefore seems legitimate to call the whole idea of folk theory into question on the ground that "*it hardly follows that in*

*believing in beliefs,<sup>16</sup> the folks are thereby 'positing' the existence of mental states (or any other ordinary things) as theoretical entities"* (Hutto 2011: 133).

It could nevertheless be argued that postulating implicit theoretical commitments can explain how and why people use moral terms. A belief in some categorically action guiding feature of reality, as Mackie ([1977]1990) postulated, could perhaps explain why people think moral reasons apply even for those that hold opposing views.<sup>17</sup> It could then be said that people perhaps doesn't hold these theoretical commitments on a conscious level but that their existence none the less provide a functional explanation of moral discourse. This is however not a valid argument for the simple reason that it is both question begging and an argument from incredulity. It simply says that we can't imagine any other reason how ethical discourse could be grounded and therefore we postulate our favourite theoretical entity as a candidate for that role. Even if we looked past the weakness of the argument it would still fail for the simple reason that it says too little. It would only offer us a way to articulate how ethical discourse could be grounded in principle but says nothing about how it is grounded in practise, for that we would need a thoroughgoing empirical investigation of ethical terms and practise but that is still wanting. (See: Hutto 2008: 180)

Finally, we also need to ask ourselves how folkish these purported folkish platitudes really are. How do philosophers ascertain platitudes, by what method do they distinguish a truism from what is not a truism in these matters? The answer is that they probe their own intuitions but surely this is an awkward way to establish what commonsense morality is! What folks believe and not believe isn't a matter of the intuitions of any particular individual but an empirical fact about cognitive content represented in the minds of countless millions. If we were to use the terminology of research methods in the social and behavioural sciences (see: Stangor 2007: 85-108, 238-253) we would see that the *interrater reliability* is close to null, since philosophers are notoriously prone to disagree about their intuitions and that holds equally true for what is thought to be commonsensical in metaethics. We must also call into question the *external validity*, when the sample size is most often not any larger than one or two individual philosophers, while the purported result of this intuition probing is said to have

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16 Hutto is referring to "beliefs" as mental states and people using this as an explanation of behaviour, e.g. "He took up his wallet because he believed he had put the note there."

17 I very much doubt that this hypothesis can play such an explanatory role as Mackie (1977), and in a modified form also Joyce (1991), maintained. If people really held that morality has such force as to unconditionally bind people then arguments would be in higher demand than bullets, but they aren't, so evidently people seem to have more modest expectations of what moral reasons can accomplish.



universal applicability. Taken at face value, intuition probing thus seems to have more in common with soothsaying than serious investigation; that is, if it is intended as a method to measure folkish beliefs and attitudes.

But let us for the sake of argument grant that intuition probing really could reveal a commonsense platitude about morality. Would this platitude exist because people had earnestly and independently contemplated the metaethical question or would it be because people relied on what they had learned to be a proper answer to such a question? If it be the latter there would be circularity in the line of reasoning employed, since the source would be dependent upon inculcated theories that have originated not in the hearts and minds of people in general but in the intelligentsia. People could simply draw explanations from what is the public intellectual domain, a domain heavily influenced by the philosophers themselves. (Hutto: 2011: 141-142) For folkish platitudes to be really folkish we would need unadulterated folkish thinking that pre-dates philosophical discourse but I can't see an easy way to control for the risk of contamination by subjective idiosyncrasies and distinguish a real folkish platitude from one that bears its name, simply by virtue of having been heralded as such by someone that purports to have found a folkish platitude fit for being transformed into a theory (*T*). Perhaps it could be done by extensive cross cultural and historical research but no one has, to my knowledge, made any attempt to take on that daunting task. Thus, if there is no research that can substantiate these claims we have to consider them for what they truly are, namely wholly unsubstantiated claims that doesn't merit any serious attention until some grain of evidence can be presented in their favour.

We must conclude that it is far from certain that ethical language is suited for being analysed as having scientific ambitions and thereby tries to identify causal elements and schemes. We must also conclude that philosophers with folk theoretic ambitions have used method ill-suited for their task, so even if their approach had been correct they lack the methodological means to pursue their goal. Folk theory thus seems like a misplaced attempt to define ethics and we shall therefor have to continue our search for a suitable definition of ethics along a different path.

Having dealt at some length with the methodological problems involved in using intuitions as a reliable guide to establish folkish platitudes, let alone construing these as a theoretical construct, it now seems a good time to turn our attention to the scant empirical studies that nevertheless have been conducted in this field. Perhaps they can provide some information that can help us define the subject matter of ethics beyond the lexicographic

definition we already have.

### **3.2 Empirical Data on Popular Conceptions of Ethics**

As far as I know the entire ontology of ethics, as represented in the folkish mind, has never been studied scientifically. I assume that part of the reason for why this is so, apart from a lack of interest from philosophers and psychologists, is that there is no easy way to frame the question and even less so to construct a survey questionnaire to determine a majority view. There have nevertheless been a few studies conducted with a similar ambition, though not all-encompassing in scope. These have concerned themselves with a particular aspect of the folkish ontology of ethics, namely if folk believe ethics is objective, i.e. if folk believe there are objectively true ethical statements, in a manner reminiscent of factual propositions such as the capital of country x is y.

Naturally the critique against folkish common sense platitudes that ended the preceding paragraph will bear down on these studies as well, for none of them control for the possibility that folk use common culturally determined theories rather than their own intuitions. Western culture is after all permeated with enlightenment theories about indelible rights bestowed upon man by nature or some sort of deity and these bear all the hallmarks of objective truth. If these are the sources of folkish intuitions they are not so folkish after all but a cultural artefact and as such only a conventional way to speak about ethics, not central to ethics *per se*. An analogy could be the story about Wittgenstein who told a friend: “*Tell me, why do people always say that it was natural for men to assume that the sun went around the earth rather than the earth was rotating?*”. His friend replied: “*Well, obviously, because it just looks as if the sun is going around the earth.*” To which the philosopher retorted: “*Well, what would it look like if it had looked as if the earth were rotating?*”.<sup>18</sup> The point is, of course, that it would have looked no different, from our perspective, if the sun had revolved around the earth and not the reverse. So when people talked about the sun rising and setting they were not reporting a theory about astronomy, self-evident from their primary experience of the relation between the sun and the earth. They were rather drawing upon culturally ingrained conventions about astronomy but these were by no means essential for the language game where they separated day from night, sunrise from sunset and determined the time of day by looking at the position of the sun. A culturally determined convention in metaethics would be

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<sup>18</sup> This story figures in many places on the web, this version is taken from <http://blog.creativethink.com/2009/07/good-old-wittgenstein.html>. I have however been unable to retrieve the primary source of this anecdote, if there is such to be found.

equally insignificant for the fundamental structure of ethical discourse because it would say nothing about what ethics essentially is.<sup>19</sup>

But let us look past this difficulty and assess what these studies have to say. These are empirical and thus less prone to methodological weakness than philosophical intuition-probing, if the aim is to determine what people believe and think. To begin with, we have a study performed by Shaun Nichols (2004) that investigated if an objective versus non-objective moral stanza had any differential effect on moral judgement.<sup>20</sup> The objective and non-objective moral stanzas were made dependent variables and as independent variables Nichols used characteristics of moral judgement that is well established within psychology. These characteristics are first and foremost that people make a clear distinction between moral and conventional rules, identifying them as different types of rules. Moral rules are considered less mutable and more serious than conventional rules. Additionally, moral rules are not dependent upon personal authority (if a teacher says it's in order to leave a class without asking for permission children tend to think this is in order, the same does not go for murder). Finally, moral rules elicit different types of justifications compared to conventional rules. Nichols hypothesised that if an objective stanza is an essential feature of folkish moral thinking then the lack of such a stanza would lead to some measurable effect on the moral judgement of those that display such a stanza compared to those that don't. However, in the four experiments Nichols reported no such effects were detectable. Moral non-objectivism didn't make people consider moral rules as a mere convention nor did it prevent them from distinguishing a moral justification from a justification for a convention. Thus Nichols (2004: 23) concludes: “[a]pparently people can be nonobjectivists about certain types of transgressions while still treating such transgressions otherwise very much like moral violations, and very much in the same way as objectivists treat them”. Since people of both camps display identical functional efficacy in moral judgement, without significant differences, it seems unlikely that objectivism should be considered an indispensable constituent of ethics. At least for the type of unqualified absolutist objectivism Shaun investigated.

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19 This is not to say that culturally determined conventions are of no interest but these interests are historical, ethnographic and sociological, not philosophical.

20 Objectivist answers were considered answers that affirmed statements like “It is okay/not okay to  $\phi$  because you feel like it, so one person is right and one is wrong”. Non-objectivist answers were considered answers that affirmed statements like: “There is no fact of the matter about unqualified claims like [as above]. Different cultures believe different things, and it is not absolutely true or false that it is okay to  $\phi$  just because you feel like it”. (See: Nichols, S. 2004: 7-8)

Another but related question, addressed by Goodwin and Darley (2008), is how consistent the distinction between objectivists and non-objectivists really is and what might cause it. The question of consistency was apprehended by Nichols (2004: 21) as he hypothesised that people could be variously objective in their answers depending on the graveness of the moral questions posed. However, in Nichols' study this possibility was never put to the test. Goodwin and Darley (2008: 1358), on the other hand, made a major finding in this area as they discovered a clear link between how strongly a person agreed with an ethical statement and what degree of objectivism they endorsed for that particular issue, so over and above the already established difference in objectivism between individuals they found an issue dependant difference within individuals.<sup>21</sup> This is a decisive departure from how philosophers traditionally have thought in this matter since objectivism and non-objectivism have been held to be monolithic constructs of the "either or" and not of the "both and" kind.

A second equally important finding was that the claim of objectivity strongly correlated with how people reported that they grounded their ethical views. Goodwin and Darley (2008) offered three different types of grounding their subjects could subscribe to; divine being, moral self-identity and last but not least pragmatic consequences. Naturally there was also the option to choose none of the three supplied alternatives. The result of a regression analysis showed that the number of groundings subscribed to was a good indicator of the variance in objectivism, explaining 37% of the total variance. The variance in their objectivism index, which ranged from one (non-objectivism) to three (objectivism), was however not that pronounced between those who had subscribed to one (2.58), two (2.77) or all three (2.94) groundings; most marked, though not dramatic, was the difference between these groups and that which didn't subscribe to any grounding whatsoever (1.87). (Goodwin, G. & Darley, J. 2008: 1353-1354) I find Goodwin's and Darley's results intriguing, because they seem to indicate that claims of objectivity is correlated more strongly with factors not endemic to ethics but to religion, self-identity and practical convictions.

Ethical judgement thus seems to work independently of any particular grounding and not even the absence of grounding causes a radical shift in this pattern. Might it be that objectivity in ethics is like the sun revolving around the earth? A culture dependent artefact, bolstered by some secular and religious ideologies, put forward as an explanation for the

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21 Goodwin and Darley used a measure for objectivism that differs from that used by Nichols. In their study objectivism was a weighted index that combined the degree of mistakenness attributed to someone that disagreed with the participant, with if the participant deemed the question to have a correct answer. For details see the sections for experimental design for experiment one to three in their paper.

phenomenon of ethics, in the likes the geocentric world-view once was offered as an explanation for the movement of the stellar bodies, yet none of them endemic to the phenomenology they purported to explain. The research of Goodwin and Darley at least seems to open up this interpretation as a possibility. If they are right we would be wise to contemplate the possibility that when people say that ethics demands objectivity what they really are saying is that “my religion/self-identity/practical conviction demands that ethics is objective” but that is quite another matter with which I have no quarrels.

One might still raise the objection, based on the two previous studies that objectivism is the majority position, supported by roughly 70%, a similar figure was also obtained in another study by Sarkissian *et al* (2011) but this study casts some doubt over how stable that figure really is. When Sarkissian and colleagues altered the conditions of the stories told to the participants to include people (and aliens), in radically different settings from that of their own and told them that these were judged both by their own peers and peers of the subject, then subjects felt significantly less secure about the objectivity of the moral judgements that were passed. The methodology in this study differed from those in earlier studies and its results might be open to interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Yet I think, if the other arguments I have provided have failed to convince, that it should give pause for thought for anyone that is impressed by what appears to be a majority vote. What cognitive content lies behind this objectivism and how malleable and perhaps fleeting its support might be should ward us from thinking that there lies strength in numbers, before we are reasonably sure about what those numbers represent.

So what shall we conclude from these empirical investigations? They all set out to investigate one aspect of moral ontology, namely the objectivity of moral judgements. Though they diverged in their exact methodologies they converged in their result, didn't they? Yes they did, at least as far as we need to be concerned because our question to their material is different from theirs. We were asking if there were any elements in the popular understanding of ethics that seemed indispensable to people in such a way that it could not sensibly be

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22 I am somewhat weary about the methodology in this paper since it did not call the attention of its participants either to the agent or to the act in the stories they were told but to the one passing the judgement upon the act and agent. I deem it possible that the subjects understood the questions as being posed relative to culture rather than relative to moral judgement and thus answered in terms of sociological truths than moral truths. In a control study performed by Sarkissian *et al* (2011: 497-500) I see this fear somewhat justified as subjects both showed a high degree of disagreement with the statement that “*at least one must be incorrect*” in a moral controversy (i.e. a high degree of relativism for moral judgement), while they at the same time thought that one set of beliefs were poorly justified (i.e. a high degree of non-relativism for moral justification).

ignored in our attempt to define the subject matter of ethics. The one parameter (i.e. objectivity) these studies investigated turned out to lack casual correlation with ethical efficacy, be best explained by factors external to ethics and be easily manipulated. Thus, while there certainly exist a belief in objective moral values this belief is far from omnipresent and seems external to ethics rather than being an internal element of the same. Interesting as these research results might be they can't tell us what we need to take into our definition of ethics, though they certainly ward us from taking aboard cargo that doesn't belong to our shipment.

#### **4. A Naturalistic Understanding of Ethics**

Imagine yourself being a naturalist from Mars doing an excursion to earth to study Homo sapiens. Undoubtedly you would find many behavioural similarities between humans and other animals, they all feed and procreate, some live in groups and build nests too. Yet others, such as ants, domesticate other animals and plants and have a rich social and material exchange. No enumeration of these properties would however suffice to give an accurate characterization of the ecological niche occupied by the human species. That is to say, explain why humans manage to maintain their existence by doing the things they do, without being overrun by other species that do similar things. I find the answer to the ecological question quite obvious, as would probably our Martian naturalist.

The sheer complexity of human civilization vastly out-competes any other species on this planet. If you raise your gaze from this paper and look around you in the room where you are sitting, you will notice a wealth of objects and institutions that not just simplify your life but also make it possible. Undoubtedly all of these will be manmade but you are most likely not among the persons that made them. You sit on a chair that you have not built, and you read a paper you have not written, all this in a house constructed by others and protected from fire and burglary by people that doesn't own either it or anything in it. If you feel ill and make a call to a hospital someone you don't know will try their best to help you but if you fall and break a leg on the pavement that call will probably be made by someone else you don't know, an unknown bystander. If you on the other hand heard of a bystander that didn't make such a call when someone else were hurt, you would deem him a disagreeable person and vent your dislike of his behaviour. These things are so mundane that we often are blind to their existence and our mind is not turned to them unless they cry out to us through their absence. The staggering number of predictable interactions and institutions necessary just to enable a simple vegetable to be bought in a grocery store is stupefying. Yet countless billions of vegetables, and other products, smoothly find their way to grocery departments all over the

world each day. How does that miraculously happen and why don't zebras do it too? This and countless other puzzles concerning human behaviour that would baffle our Martian observer as well as it ought our human philosophers, could be more readily addressed, I believe, if we considered them to be base fact about human behaviour, rather than an endpoint of some elaborate intellectual or cultural project.

When and if we read works written about metaethics we are told to look for abstract principles or convoluted contrivances inherent within our practical reason. Seldom, if ever, are we told to look at the mundane and obvious, the thing that permeates every vein of human existence and guides our personal actions and emotions. In short, a thing without which the human way of living would become unintelligible. Why does human do the things they do and feel the things they feel? A sociologist that has taken this question serious is Christian Smith who wrote that: "*The relational ties that hold human lives together, the conventions that occupy people's mental lives, the routines and intentions that shape their actions, and institutions within which they live and work, the emotions they feel every day – all of these and more are drenched in, patterned by, glued together with moral premises, convictions and obligations*" (Smith, C. 2003: 8). Smith points us to the rather obvious fact that without a normative web, both internalised and shared between individuals within a society and between societies, no form of convention or institution nor the routines and intentions had by those who populate these would make any sense whatsoever. Indeed, much of our individual emotional repertoire only makes functional sense if we have such a normative web surrounding us. Smith (2003: 8-20) provides a host of examples of this phenomenon ranging from deference from picking our noses in public to how we choose to spend our vacation and a CEO defending his decision to lay people off a few weeks before Christmas.

If we go to Crete during our vacation we do this because we have a certain view of what is good and pleasant to do when we are off duty and we obviously share this view with millions of others that do the exact same thing. We could have spent our free time poisoning our neighbours cat or helping the less fortunate by volunteering to do work for a homeless shelter but we don't, at least this holds true for such a great number that the exceptions seems somewhat exotic. While on the plane to Crete for a vacation we defer picking our noses, because we share a sense of propriety and dignity that prohibit such acts. If we still get caught doing it we feel embarrassed and the one seeing us will look upon us with disfavour. Had this normative web of propriety, dignity and cleanliness not been there we would have picked our noses, urinated and defecated in public, without any more qualms than public breathing now

gives us. Finally, if we happened to be the CEO that had laid off workers a few weeks before Christmas we would, irrespective of our inner motives for this act, try to give reasons for why this act was necessary just then; reasons that would make us look less heartless and not lacking a charitable spirit. This giving of reasons would be an utter waste of time had there not been a norm saying that laying people off just before a major holiday is mean spirited and nothing a good person would or should consider doing. Had this norm not been there it would have been nothing strange saying that “I waited until Christmas just to see their sad faces”. Given that the norm is there such a response could well have provoked a holiday lynch-mob to assemble at our doorstep. With these and countless other examples of the same kind Smith (2003: 22) draws our attention to the fact that: “[a]ll social institutions are embedded within and gives expression to moral orders that generate, define and govern them”. Put bluntly, morality is an inescapable element of the social order, and not just any element but the element that enables and maintains social order.

Another sociologist that has taken an interest in morality as a primordial phenomenon is Zygmunt Bauman. As Bauman (1995: 80) pointed out, it is not thanks to society that we are moral but thanks to moral we are societal. He traces the foundation of morality to an “*unfounded foundation*”, a state that is so primordial from the viewpoint of the moral subject that morality even pre-dates ontology, a being before being. This is a paradox if we view the world from an ontological perspective but if we look at the world as moral subjects we know this must be so, because there is no self without the other. We are relational, and through this psychological interdependence our being is born. The moral life is, if we give license for a metaphor, the birth canal of our psychological being. Bauman draws from the writings of Løgstrup to talk about an “*unspoken demand*” that the presence of the other presents us with. Our minds persistently direct us to an unsettling sense of responsibility for the well-being of the other, without and before any verbal demands have been spoken to us. We know not whence it came but we know that it is here and this unspoken demand is haunting our thoughts and calls for action. (Bauman, Z. 1995: 96-104)

Let us for a moment attend to the literary world of us humans and turn our minds eye to cultural manifestations such as literature and performing arts. Few artistic creations in these fields would make any sense whatsoever, without ethics as the focal point of interest in the narrative. Take three contemporary examples from popular culture, *Star Wars* by George Lucas, *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling and the *Lords of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. All three utilise the dichotomy between good and evil as the driving force in the narrative. There would



be no dramaturgical point in having two values free Forces, two morally indifferent schools of magic or a Mordor as sunlit as the shire of the hobbits. I'm not calming that every artistic work is settled as comfortably in a morally dichotomised universe as these are, on the contrary many artistic works thrive by exploring ambiguities, such as Shakespeare's Hamlet who is driven half mad by the moral qualms facing him when he contemplates taking his own life: "*To be, or not to be: that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?*". Nevertheless, without there being a moral ambiguity to start with, even these, the most famous lines in western literature, would echo hollow and lose their meaning. What has been said about these literary works also holds true for a great many works in the visual arts such as *The Shootings of May Third 1808* by Goya; a silent indictment against the atrocities committed by Napoleon's forces. Human art, as well as society at large, thus seems to thrive by articulating and exploring a moral domain that utterly permeates most aspects of the human existence.

Perhaps the omnipresence of ethics is made even clearer if we look at some mundane examples taken from my own everyday experience. Yesterday, while on a staff meeting, the chairs around the table all became taken and the few latecomers were left with only a few chairs lined up against the wall. Some of them then went away to get another table to extend the present one, whereupon some of those that already had their place secured spontaneously arose to help the latecomers carry the new table into place. After the meeting, since it had begun to rain, offers were extended to those that had walked, to get a lift by those that had taken their cars to the meeting. These and countless similar nondramatic scenes are acted out ceaselessly every second around our globe without a verbal demand or command ever passes a lip.

If it be doubted that these things occur more or less spontaneous it is worth noting that also toddlers perform similar acts before they have learned how to speak. (Warneken & Tomasello 2007a) What seems to be required is just that the toddlers comprehend a situation to the extent that they understand what helping would entail in that moment. If that requirement is fulfilled the impulse to act, "the unspoken demand", seems to spontaneously arise. The saliency of the "unspoken" is perhaps even more evident if we look at similar research (Werneken *et al.* 2007b; Greenberg, J. *et al.* 2010) that has been performed with chimpanzees. As with infants the main requirement seems to be that the chimpanzee understands that there is an opportunity to cooperate or help. If the understanding is there the

act seems to follow through that very understanding. As Greenberg *et al.* (2010: 879) write in their study: “*chimpanzees helped without any kind of ‘requesting’ or ‘soliciting’ by the recipient*”. The point here is not that a human moral psychology is present in other species but rather that, which we, following Løgstrup, have called the “unspoken demand” is capable of speaking to adult humans in a conference room, human toddlers fresh from the cradle and chimpanzees alike.

At its base experiential level moral judgements seems to precede both language and conscious thoughts. The need of the other seems to have an inherent efficacy on the human (and in some cases also the animal) psyche to elicit moral impulses that demand action once they are perceived. Perhaps it is this intangible presence of what we find so tangible that provoked David Ross (1998: 255) to pronounce moral truths “*evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself*”. Ross is not alone among philosophers having expressed some rather remarkable things about the apparent *a priori* status of morality. Recall Kant’s amazement over the “*moral law within*” and the common claim among moral non-naturalists, that morality is, at base level, somehow irreducible and thus inscrutable.<sup>23</sup> Even a utilitarian such as Sidgwick (1907: III: §3) admitted, though reluctantly, that “*moral truth is more analogous to sense perception than to rational intuition*”, but he shunned the term “*moral sense*” since he thought that it would suggest “*a capacity for feelings which may vary from A to B without either being in error*”. Such a notion, he thought, would be incommensurable with how moral deliberation operates and thus “sense” had to give way for “reason” in his chosen terminology.

The *a priori* nature of moral judgements has even more direct empirical support, beyond the evidence I’ve hitherto presented. This evidence comes from the field of psychology where the relations between moral reasoning and moral intuitions have been extensively investigated. (See: Haidt, J. 2001; Haidt, J. & Bjorklund, F. 2008a; Haidt, J. & Bjorklund, F. 2008b) Most famous is perhaps the phenomenon of “moral dumbfounding” when subjects fail to find any justification for their moral judgement, while they at the same

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23 It is well worth to quote Kant (1898: 260) in full “*Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence*”. Kant is here evidently talking about the moral law as something that is preceding reason and is an object of direct experience. For a man putting so much emphasis on the rational requirement of moral deliberation this is a bold statement and also a statement, I think, that ultimately undermines the reason centred philosophical position Kant ended up defending.

time maintain that their judgement is correct. This occurs experimentally but most of us have probably witnessed this very phenomenon both in ourselves and in others; something seems morally clear to our own minds but arguments to justify this judgement can't be called to mind.

There are other data besides moral dumbfounding that support the judgement-first-reasoning-last model. Chief among these are findings that indicate that when people are confronted with new data they selectively search those data for information that support their prior judgements. Consequently, our moral judgements guide our reasoning and not the reverse. Another factor to weigh in is the human propensity to apply *post-hoc* reasoning about unconscious and semi-conscious phenomenon even when introspection is incapable of yielding any insight into inner motives. This effect is most dramatic in split-brain patients whose left brain, through the language centre, generates explanations about activities initiated and executed by the right brain, from which it has been surgically severed and lacks privileged access too. (Haidt, J. 2001: 821-822) Under experimental conditions confabulation has been documented in healthy adults in what has been dubbed *choice blindness*.<sup>24</sup> (Johansson, P. *et al.* 2005:116-119)

*Post-hoc* reasoning; i.e. that we supply rational motives to thoughts and acts that we have no introspective or direct observational access to, is consequently not a case of special pleading for ethics but a phenomenon we should expect to occur if moral impulses indeed precedes moral reasoning. The fact that we apply reasoning in ethics is therefore in and by itself no indicator that ethics is derived from reason alone.<sup>25</sup> Moral judgements thus seem to arrive before we know if there are any reasons that speak in their favour. If reasons appears *post hoc* in relation to our moral judgement and this also, at least to some extent, is accessible through introspection, it might explain why some philosophers have described ethics *in toto* as *ad hoc*; i.e. without a justifiable foundation (e.g. error theorists) while others, like G. E.

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24 *Choice blindness* is the phenomenon when subjects fail to recognize that the object that they have chosen has been swapped and replaced by a different object. When prompted to explain their choices (of the thing they actually never chose) they nevertheless give explanations for their "choices". This means that the explanation they give must be *post hoc*; else they would have chosen differently in the first place or recognized that their choices have been manipulated.

25 This is one of the reasons I remain sceptic of metaethical theories that make too much fuss about the rational structure of ethical arguments, e.g. Shafer-Landau (2007) that tries to argue for ethical non-natural realism solely on the basis that moral arguments look like philosophical arguments and philosophical arguments are inherently realistic in nature. This line of reasoning falls short if for no other reason, so for the reason that ethics didn't start with philosophical reasoning but was there long before there existed a philosophical discourse and a realist interpretation of a phenomena can hardly be dependent on a discourse that the selfsame phenomena predates.

Moore (1903: §15), have pronounced it indefinable and unanalyzable .

Let us sum up the two main points made this far. Firstly, ethics is a salient feature of human existence, it permeates and gives shape to social life and institutions in both the public and private sphere, and it also imbues artistic culture with some of its most potent themes. Secondly, ethics presents itself as an *a priori* in the human consciousness and in human culture. It is a given in the sense that it didn't originate at any definable point in human history and it has no human architect or cultural originator. Rather, it is much like language, a phenomenon that permeates human existence without being a human contrivance, it was there before history began and no single human or group of humans can choose to be non-lingual or non-ethical. The same holds true, among other things, for basic arithmetic (Ifrah, G. 2001: 23-34) and aesthetic (Pinker, S. 2003: 404-409) sensibilities as well. They, as language and ethics, are part of what it is to be human, as much as being vertebrate and bipedal are.

#### 4.1 Ethics as Ecology

We began the previous section by asking how a Martian naturalist would characterise humans and one thing that would have to go into his *Fieldguide of Homo Sapience for Extraterrestrials*, in the light of what has been said, and would be a characterisation of morality as a part of human ecology. A standard definition of ecology is the study of the environment in which an organism lives, which contains, as one of its constitutive elements, the interactions between conspecifics, since that is one of the things that “*provide[s] the external component of an entity's fitness*”<sup>26</sup>. (Sarkar, S. 2009: §1)

In theatre we define the genre of a play by observing how the actors interact with each other and the props on stage; similarly, species ecology is, so to speak, a description of how various forms of interactions sets the scene for what kind of play that species is playing in the theatre of life. The most obvious examples come from observations of a species adaptation to its physical environment. A fish makes as poor a bird as a bird makes a poor fish. Their adaptations determines their ecological niche and that fixes their *modus vivendi*, so that we can describe their traits as having their *raison d'être* by merit of the very ecological niche they

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26 In ecology “fitness” is often used to describe an organism's capacity to produce viable offspring. There is some controversy surrounding this interpretation of fitness where some argue for a gene centric fitness and others for an organism centric fitness. It is a controversy over what unit natural selection operates on, is it the gene or the organism. (Dawkins, R: 1989: 179-194) This controversy is however not about whether an individual can be fit for its environment in the non-technical sense but about how fitness should be construed in evolutionary terms. My usage of fitness is in the former non-technical sense and I mention this controversy only in passing lest someone thinks that what I write presupposes an organism centric view of evolution. As it happens I believe the gene centric view of evolution makes most sense but that is another story.

inhabit. This reasoning is circular and has to remain so as long as we look at species synchronically rather than diachronically. Purely descriptive ecology concerns itself only with the synchronic viewpoint; it looks to what is the case rather than to how what it now the case came about. It is a way to make sense of what we see at this moment, namely birds having wings are avian while fish having fins are aquatic.<sup>27</sup> It is the interplay of what kind of thing the organism is and the environment in which it lives.

If the example of adaptations and the physical environment makes more or less intuitive sense we shall now turn to what is perhaps less intuitive, though by no means counterintuitive, namely the social environment as a part of a species ecology. Think of ants (or any other eusocial insect) with their sterile casts and highly specialised division of labour; their habitat, foraging and child rearing all being communal projects. What determines what it is to be an ant, besides being small, eating leaves and other such things, is the social structure of the ant colony. An ant is not just any ant, it is a specific type of ant; it is a worker or a male or a soldier or a queen. The distinct casts have their special adaptations that are motivated by the role they fill and the role they fill is defined by these adaptations. Being an ant is to fit into this social hierarchy and being able to thrive in that social environment but not without it. The life of the anthill is your *modus vivendi* in this world, that is, if you happen to be an ant.

Eusocial insects like ants are a clear example of how the interactions between conspecifics form a part of a species ecology. Ants can even be likened to the cells of a body, where each performs its assigned function in consort with the other cells and each is dependent on the other, since they form their own biotope by the climate they create within a body. In the ant colony the different functions of defending, foraging, procreating and controlling the physical environment are outsourced from one single organism to the colony as a whole. There is a beautiful genetic economy<sup>28</sup> that could explain this extreme form of sociality, where even the role of procreation is delegated to one single individual, properly named the queen, and every other member of the society coming together to help her preserve her lineage that also is theirs. However, regardless of the causes of the eusociality in ants, the

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27 Indeed, not all birds are avian nor are all fish aquatic. These counterexamples show us that the circular synchronic outlook can't be the entire story, some important piece is missing to make the picture complete. The explanation of why our synchronic viewpoint is incomplete as a standalone explanatory model is to be found in the diachronic outlook or, as it is commonly known, evolution.

28 The "beautiful genetic economy" I have in mind is that based on Hamilton's rule in conjunction with the genetic makeup of haploid species. But there are also other theories that are candidates for explaining eusociality in insects. (See Futuyama, D. 1998: 598-601)

fact that it is there, here and now, defines what it is to be an ant, to the same extent that does the physiological and anatomical tokens we take to be defining of the species. How ants interact with each other is as important as are the facts that they have six legs and lay eggs.

Let us now use the ecology of the close knit societies of the eusocial insects, as a conceptual jumping board to the world of the vertebrates and thus us humans. Our social environment, as well as that of other vertebrates, could not adequately be described in the same terms as that of insects.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, there is a social environment for vertebrates as well as there is one for ants. The pattern of social habits displayed by a specie does not cease to define it in terms of ecology just because these habits are less hierarchical and rigid than what is found among the invertebrate species. We don't need modern biology to grasp some of the truth in this for as Aristotle famously wrote: “[...] *man is by nature a sociable creature and he that is unsociable by nature and not by chance is either less or more than a man [...]*” (Aristot. Pol. 1.1253a<sup>30</sup> *my transl.*). In the same paragraph Aristotle makes an interesting observation about the connection between man's moral faculty and his societal nature by pointing out that it is in virtue of being moral man is societal. He also points out that society is necessary for man's survival and that society is primary to man, since if society ceased to be so would man. The cessation of society would mark the end of distinctively human activities and capacities; and activity and capacity are the properties by which we individuate man as well as all other animals.

Aristotle's characterisation seems to be correct as long as we look at man synchronically, since *Homo sapiens* during its entire history has been societal and each member that has been born into our species have been born with the communal life as a going concern. This turns our attention back to present day biology and the concept of ecology, because ecology sets out to characterise the interplay between the faculties that belongs to a species and the environment these faculties has evolved to interact with. If we are to listen to Aristotle, man's environment *par excellence* is society and his activities and capacities are uniquely adapted to facilitate life in that environment. Interestingly, Charles Darwin (1871: 158-159) suggested something very similar to Aristotle in *The Decent of Man*, namely

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29 Biology is messy, thus there is an exception to this rule, and one eusocial vertebrate exists so there happens to be one species of vertebrates that actually mimics the social life of ants. This is the naked mole rat, *Heterocephalus glaber*. (See Futuyama, D. 1998: 598)

30 “[...] ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον, καὶ ὁ ἄπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἥτοι φαῦλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος.”

that our progenitors' evolution of "*intellectual and moral faculties*" marked the endpoint of their evolutionary journey to becoming fully human. Darwin mused that these faculties allowed for man "*to keep with an unchanged body in harmony with a changing universe*" and are the explanation as to why man, but not beast, can live in every corner of the globe (and nowadays space) without a need to change the characteristics of his own species, as to adapt to the varying external conditions. Man lives in a society and it is the society rather than man himself that adapts to the varying external conditions nature throws in his way. What man needs to master to live and to live well is thus not nature red in tooth and claw but the social world he is immersed in and through the changing fortunes of his society his own fate is sealed. So we find ourselves in the midst of a web of mutual dependences where society requires morals and man requires society. None of them can exist independent of the other, because morals requires man as an agent and society requires moral men; and man, regardless of if he is moral, requires society if he is to live and thrive.

Thus, whatever else ethics might be it is at least this, namely, a constitutive element in man's nature as a biological creature. He is a social animal and ethics has its *raison d'être* by merit of the ecological niche men inhabit. This is also my suggestion for an ontology of ethics, an ontology framed by what can be known about *Homo sapiens* as a species, something that could be reasonably grasped<sup>31</sup> by our Martian naturalist and communicated to any intelligent being across the galaxy, as long as they have a grasp of biology. It is a naturalized ethics in the sense that its point of departure is the part of the natural world that is most readily at hand if our aim is to describe a biological creature such as ourselves, namely the ecological characteristics that is manifest all around us. Present day ecological facts are in their turn the result of the natural history of a species and its environment; thus natural history functions as an ultimate cause to what present day ecology is. Taking this view on ethics also offers a neat solution to a long-standing dispute within philosophy about what a moral property is and that will form the topic of our next section.

## **4.2 Moral Properties and Supervenience**

If there is such a thing as moral properties they will have to supervene on non-moral properties and this is not entirely unproblematic as G. E. Moore (1903) tried to show by his

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31 *Reasonably grasped*: To understand other species ecology is something that demands critical attention and a fair amount of experimentation; yet there will be the risk of misunderstanding data. The evidence is whoever out there in the manner of lives animals lives and how they interact with each other and their physical environment. A keen observer can therefore get at least a rudimentary understanding of what kind of creature he has encountered simply by observation.

“open question argument”. Later R. M. Hare (1964: 82-93) diagnosed this openness as a peculiar feature of how evaluative language works, arguing that a naturalized ethics would rob moral language (as well as evaluative language in general) of its function, which is to commend or deplore.<sup>32</sup> Moore (1903: §27) famously argued that questions like “is pleasure good?” are open ended in a way that “is an equilateral triangle a regular polygon?” is not. This fact Moore took to indicate that the naturalistic philosophers of his day, that tried to identify good with some natural property, were committed to a fallacy; the fallacy to try and establish an identity between some natural property like “pleasure” and a moral property like “good” when no such identity is to be found. It remains, as Moore said, an open question whether some natural property is a good or not. Hare (1964: 91-93) argued that this must be so because of the semantic function played by evaluative terms. If we try to reduce “good” to “pleasure” and don’t sneak in a single iota of evaluative connotations in the latter, then we have lost the function of commending and are stuck with a natural property that is unable to perform the function moral language is supposed to fill. If we on the other hand keep some element of evaluative language in the term “pleasure” we have not successfully reduced it to a natural property.

The problems of supervenience of moral facts upon natural facts, as it has been framed by Moore and Hare respectively, are not without merit. There truly seems to be something awkward about saying that “good” is identical to x natural property. The lingering doubt we can feel when confronted with the question “is x good” seems to be inherent in the phenomenology of our moral experience or as Bauman (1995: 103) succinctly put it “*insecurity without escape is the foundation of morality*”. We also experience a fundamental difference between evaluative and descriptive language and to try and fuse them into one seems odd and not answering to how ethical terms function in real communication. Supervenience thus poses a difficulty if we think of it as a way to simply reduce ethical terms into some non-moral term (pleasure) or set of complex terms (maximizing the satisfaction of preferences for every concerned party). Each such endeavour would require not only that we reform moral language to comply with new lexicographic rules but also that we reform moral phenomenology to line up with these new criteria. However, naturalism, at least as I envision it, need not rely on the crude form of reduction that was attacked by Moore and later Hare.

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32 The same worry is also voiced by other commentators such as Barry Stroud (1996: 51) who writes that “*to restrict oneself to reduced or non-evaluative terms alone, would be in effect to eliminate the evaluative vocabulary altogether*”.



In the outline of the naturalised ethical ontology I previously sketched I promised a solution to the problem of supervenience. How can moral properties be natural and descriptive yet moral and prescriptive? They can by not being dislodged from the ontological framework of a naturalized ethics. The crux of the matter is, as I see it, *how* moral properties are supposed to supervene on non-moral properties and not *what* non-moral property they supervene upon. For any property to supervene upon another there must be a meaningful relation between them. Traditional attempts to naturalize ethical terms has ceased upon some non-moral property that, explicitly or implicitly, frequently enters into ethical deliberations, such as “pleasure” and “pain”. The former is then said to be the same as “good” and the latter the same as “bad”. How this supervenience comes about has however been left a complete mystery in the traditional naturalistic accounts. It is this unclear nature of the proposed supervenience that leaves naturalistic accounts vulnerable to critique such as that launched by Moore and Hare. At least in my mind, this has left an air of arbitrariness over the whole affair of how moral and non-moral properties can be equated.<sup>33</sup>

My proposed solution is to use a quite different approach and not ask what x non-moral property is supervened upon by a moral property but to ask in what manner moral properties can supervene on anything. Again, this brings us back to ontology because we need to know what kind of thing morality is before we can ask *how* it can supervene, let alone on *what* it can do so. As Paul Bloomfield (2001: 51) have suggested; if morality exists in virtue of what kind of creature Homo sapiens is, then the non-moral properties Homo sapiens has will provide the supervenient base for what is a good for him. If morality, on the one hand, is depicted as a view from nowhere, something above or beyond the fact that we are the kind of creatures we are, then the problem of supervenience have a real bite. If on the other hand the moral point of view is a characteristic of Homo sapiens, then we need not worry about how moral properties can supervene. The situation will be similar to that of brain and consciousness, where the latter supervenes on the former by arising from it and at the same time being a part of it.

We are looking at a threefold supervenience on three distinct non-moral facts. (a) The evaluative standard supervenes on our ecology, by means of it being a functionally based biological system. Either we behave as good (functional) specimen of our kind or we don't

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33 For example see Railton (1986:204-205), who doesn't shy away from the somewhat arbitrary nature of this kind of naturalistic theories of supervenience but openly admits that it is a question of reforming definitions. He nevertheless maintains that his definition meets important desiderata by generating answers that fit moral phenomenology and at the same time is able to play an explanatory function in genuine empirical theories.

behave as good specimen (dysfunctional) of our kind. (b) The normative force supervenes on our cognitive and emotional capacity to respond rationally to further our own functionality and that of others. That is, the evaluative standard that resides in our ecology intersects with our cognitive and emotional motivating systems and thus it becomes a motivating factor that influences human behaviour. (c) The moral facts supervene on our evolved nature *in situ*, i.e. what it is to be a good specimen of *Homo sapiens* supervenes on the intersection of evolved nature and environment. Had we not evolved into social primates our ethics, had we had any, would have looked radically different.

It seems to be a general feature of nature that small and seemingly insignificant processes over time can accumulate to perform quite marvellous feats. From nature's bareness came life, from her blindness came sight, from her deafness came hearing, from her slumber awoke consciousness and (so I maintain) from her indifference came morality. Giving an account of morality as a product of the natural history of conscious beings is to invoke an explanation by means of what Daniel Dennett (1996: 74-76) called cranes as opposed to skyhooks. A skyhook is the equivalent of a *deus ex machina* where a complex phenomenon is supposed to have arisen from something even more complex. This is opposed to the crane that laboriously adds layer upon layer and thus creates an edifice of staggering complexity but by simple means and by incremental steps; not saltation. Natural history is a crane's business through and through, so if ethics is to be part of natural history and thus become properly naturalized, it will have to be explainable by the same processes as other natural phenomena. If this is done, then the commending function of evaluative terms can be retained even though we allow for supervenience, because the non-moral properties of *Homo sapiens* gives rise to the moral properties in quite the same way as the properties of the senseless neuron gives rise to the properties of consciousness. Concerning the open question argument, posed by Moore, it will suffice to say that we might lack knowledge of exactly what those relevant non-moral properties are and even if we knew them, we would by that not gain any direct knowledge as to how they combine with external factors to produce what is an unquestionable human good. Moral questions will in this epistemic sense always remain open since man isn't omniscient.

This moral ontology is however not free from possible reproach. Joyce (2007: 171-172,176) has raised four general objections against using evolved functions as a basis for

morality and I will deal with these in turn.<sup>34</sup>

(1) Joyce claims that acting in such manner as to not secure our own ends (as biological creatures) is primarily to wrong ourselves. Morality on the other hand seems to imply another type of scale, which doesn't measure out praise or blame based on self-harm but on if we harm or help others. To this we reply that while it is necessarily so that there is an element of self-harm in moral wrongdoings, since this makes a man less fit to coexist with other men, this fact doesn't subtract the ramifications for others having a dysfunctional member in their group. By acting dysfunctional as a human being I also affect those that share my social environment. I cannot see why a murderer, undoubtedly harming others, but also harming himself by alienating himself from the requirements of communal living, should not awake both reproach and pity. Pity for his shortcomings as a human and reproach for the damage he has caused others. Hanna Arendt (1996: 264-265) remarked on the execution of Eichmann that even if his own role in the final solution was due to bad luck and not genuine ill will, his acts would still speak for themselves. If he weren't prepared to share this earth with all his fellow men then all his fellow men won't be prepared to share this earth with him and this is the one and only reason to why he had to be hanged. I think that the relationship between self-harm and harm of others is just as simple as that. That we are to pity for our shortcomings don't absolve us from the reproach of others. The acts we have done, which has caused suffering for others, remains our own even if we through them have victimised ourselves. As the dictum goes; two wrongs don't make a right.

(2) Joyce also raises concerns for how being or not being a "*flourishing example of humankind*" (2007: 171) can be the object of praise and blame. He uses the example of a heart that fails to pump blood and question the normative force of evolved functions on the ground that a failed heart hardly can be said to have transgressed and deserve punishment. To this we reply that while the normative standard (as explained in (a)) surely is the same for both a failed heart and a non-flourishing example of humankind, the normative force (as explained in (b)) is quite different. A heart we pronounce healthy or unhealthy while a person is pronounced moral or immoral. That there is a link between health and morals is nothing new, it is a thought that was advanced already by Plato (Norman, R. 1998: 16-21) and has been looked upon favourably by contemporary authors such as Richard Norman (1998: 174) and

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34 There is also this strain of critique against naturalized ethics; that it is a form of scientism and that naturalism, by addressing ethics overreaches the explanatory boundaries of the natural sciences into the domain of humanities, where it does not belong (e.g. Stenmark, M. 2001:34-77). A thorough discussion of this issue would however take us far into the domains of epistemology and the philosophy of science. For the sake of brevity I will not dwell upon this matter here.

Paul Bloomfield (2001: 25-55). We need not shy the parallel between health and ethics but Joyce surely has a point in that we don't condemn a failing organ in the same manner as we condemn a human failing to act morally. But as I have suggested, there is a difference between a normative standard and a normative force. The former is external and inert while the latter is internal and active. The normative force is there to guide action, while the normative standard is there because of the hard realities in our external world. Even if we utilize the same or at least a similar standard in medicine and ethics, the normative forces that supervene on this same standard is not the same because the types of actions they are supposed to guide are different. Physical organs are amenable neither to praise nor reproach but to medical treatment, thus the normative force of a medical diagnosis directs us to take medical action. A self-conscious moral being on the other hand is highly amenable to praise and reproach and thus the normative force of our moral diagnosis directs us to take moral action, i.e. to praise or to blame.

(3) Joyce's third worry is that evolved functions are only one possible biological standard that can act as a backdrop for ought-claims. The thought goes like this; suppose I am a human and as such have an evolved moral function by merit of my ancestors' natural history but at the same time I might be a born killer by merit of my developed neurology, say by only being able to take pleasure from the suffering of others. Now, what is it that makes the one natural standard trump the other in my practical deliberation? Joyce maintains that whatever claims we might advance to favour the moral standard (e.g. that it's more fundamental to our constitution etc.), there is no such claim that could give it the "trumping quality" of being an overriding imperative. The underlying assumption in this argument is that morality requires some sort of inescapable quality attached to it that will override all other considerations. My retort is that the underlying assumption is manifestly false and that morality neither requires nor implies a trumping quality. I have stated my reasons for doubting that there is any theoretical assumptions whatsoever that governs our moral deliberation throughout section three and a deliberative trumping quality is certainly such a theoretical assumption.

Here might be the place to grant that this assumption have been advanced, perhaps most clearly by Plato who thought that if one could see the ideal moral truths then one would be compelled to follow them. Likewise, there is the religious belief in a final judgement that has been thought to imbue moral considerations with some sort of inescapable quality. I for one doubt if there is even any sense to be made of these claims. As long as we allow more than one consideration to enter our deliberative thoughts there is no way of controlling which

one will come out triumphant, as long as we don't have complete control of the belief and desire structures that are already there. Finally, the practise of moral exhortation seems to belie any thought of moral triumphalism, since the whole point of commending and reproaching is to steer an inherently uncertain process in one direction rather than another. Thus, if anything, our ethical discourse presupposes an open ended outcome where the triumph of the moral point of view is one among many possibilities.

(4) The final bone of contention Joyce offers us is in the form of a counterintuitive thought experiment. Let us assume that moral judgements is epistemically justified by facts of human evolution, then follows that new discoveries about human evolution should alter the way we think about particular moral issues. But surely it seems absurd that a new discovery about the evolution of our hominid ancestors should alter our thoughts about whether, to use Joyce's example, The Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece. We are quite likely to agree with Joyce and find the whole affair counterintuitive. Though there are counterexamples, that would make a general dismissal of evolution as a direct source of moral judgements less likely,<sup>35</sup> I think the main problem with the thought experiment is that it addresses the question of justification in an inverted fashion by not distinguish between ultimate and proximate explanations. Moral properties as well as the normative standard and force don't supervene in an elliptical fashion so that episodes from our species natural history carry specific normative content into the present. Our natural history is the ultimate explanation of the proximate sources of morality. It is what we are and not how we became what we are that is the proximate cause and the source we turn to when we try to determine what is a human good.<sup>36</sup>

Let me give an example. If it were discovered that we had evolved a sense of caring for our offspring, because in times of starvation it was an evolutionary advantage for our

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35 Imagine that it was discovered that a group of people had a different evolutionary history than the rest of us, so that they had evolved parasitic characteristic. They made a living by being dishonest, thieving, conspiring and maliciously scheming to take the lives and fortunes from the rest of us. Would such a discovery alter our view that we should treat all people as equals? Most definitely I would say! Racist rhetoric exploits this and debunking racism consists in no small part of showing that we are all the same. I submit that this is one way in which our understanding of our evolutionary history can have a direct impact on how we intuit the rights of others. The same line of thought is found in religious origin accounts with a racist bent as is evident in the Loving v. Virginia case from 1967 where the judge ruled against mixed race marriages based on that "*Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages*". (Loving v. Virginia 388 U.S. 1 (1967))

36 A similar argument is offered by Dennett (1996:470-471) in response to the reduction of ethics to gene self-interest advocated by Ruse and Wilson.

ancestors to have a well fed child or two as available foodstuff, that would not imply that it is a human good to eat children. It would be the ultimate explanation for why we care for our children, the gruesome scaffoldings of our natural history but it would not be a source of normativity. The proximate explanation for why we care for our children is that we are thus made as to care for them. We feel love and affection quite irrespective of how our natural history made this trait possible. The normative arise from the fact of the matter as it stands; namely, that caring for one's offspring is a human good because it is constitutive for a human being to care for its offspring and a failure to do so is a failure to be fully human. Not being fully humans will in turn have ramifications for how we interact with other humans and we will attract their praise or blame accordingly.

As a final note to this paragraph; there remains still to be seen whether the proposed ontology of ethics, with its supposed supervenience on non-moral properties is supported by how moral discourse operates. By supported I mean if the moral ontology that has been outlined here is mapped by how ethical terms and concepts function in human communication. As far as I can tell there is one main prediction that follows from our ontology and that is that ethical terms, concepts and praxis should be anthropocentric and anthropomorphic down to their very core. By this I mean that ethical discourse, according to the predictions of our ontology, ought to operate with an exclusively human standard for ethical evaluation and that the things discussed should be an exclusively human affairs. This implication, along with a few associated questions, will be the topic of our next section.

## **5. Moral Discourse**

What is the content of moral discourse? The Swedish philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö (2000: 11-13) has supplied the succinct answer that moral questions are practical questions. A practical question is about action; the “when and how” of putting our bodies to use. Practical problems have practical solutions and moral discourse is what happens when a practical question becomes encoded in symbols (i.e. language) and shared within a community. Nature abounds with practical questions, every organism has to wrestle with them, in one way or other and each such question finds a practical solution. Should the pride of lions hunt the gazelle and risk injury and waste energy or let it pass and risk starvation? Seeing the gazelle poses the question, beginning the chase or rearing still is the answer. There is however no way for the lions to symbolically encode and deliberate over this question within the pride. For man the situation is different, though the framework is the same, a practical problem

arises and the only way it can be solved is through a practical response.<sup>37</sup>

The practical nature of moral questions poses a problem for moral discourse if we think in terms of Humean psychology, where “reason” and “passion” are kept compartmentalised; the former being inert and passive, the latter energetic and active. If we combine this with the idea that moral discourse is committed to investigating only facts and relations, while the answer is practical, then we cannot account for how the former could contribute to the latter. (See Hume, D. 2007:12, 16-17) Yet, the whole point of a moral discourse intersecting between the practical problem and the practical solution seems to be that it could, in some way, be conducive to the latter.<sup>38</sup> Thus, if Hume is right the state of moral discourse will be dire indeed!

Stevenson (1937: 21-24) offer us a way out of this Humean dilemma by bringing our attention to the emotive meaning of words. As it happens, words do not only, with Stevenson’s terminology, convey “descriptive” but also “dynamic” meaning. As we recall, Hume thought there were two kinds of clauses, those with prescriptive and those with descriptive content and that there was no way to bridge the gap between them.<sup>39</sup> But Stevenson teaches us that there are no such two conceptually distinct classes of words as Hume suggested. Words can be descriptively equivalent but have different degrees of dynamic force or they can acquire different dynamic force depending on pragmatics and rhetoric (i.e. intonation, gesture, juxtaposition, figurative speech etc.). Consider: “The bombardment of our enemy’s position resulted in collateral damage/civilian casualties/murder of innocents” and a further example: “The Department of Energy plan to expand the use of atomic energy/nuclear power/thermonuclear energy”.<sup>40</sup> There are no differences in the descriptive content of these propositions yet their emotive meaning differ.

Emotive meaning is indirectly linked to action by potentiating the chance of affective

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37 I encourage whoever thinks that moral questions are theoretic to come up with an example where such a question starts and/or ends within the confines of theoretical reason. There will always be some practical concern that gives birth to moral questions and there will always be some sort of act (speech is also an act, e.g. performatives) that constitute the answer.

38 In essence this is the same concern Hare (1964: 91-93) raised against naturalism; namely, that we by reducing moral terms to pure descriptive clauses lose the functional role of moral language.

39 To be fair, Hume (2007: 16-17) didn't say that it was impossible under all conditions but that the transition requires “that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given [...] how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it”.

40 These examples are easy to multiply: “embryo/feats/unborn child”, “euthanasia/assisted suicide/manslaughter”, “charity work/unpaid labour”, “duty/requirement/demand”.

responses that in turn are directly linked to action. This explains the functional role moral discourse have in humans, because it provides a link between the rational element of moral discourse and the practical outcome it is supposed to facilitate. If words were practically inert, moral discourse would be as effective between humans as it is between a man and the lion that has chosen him as a dietary supplement. As we all know moral considerations are impotent when directed at inanimate objects, like falling rocks that hits us and bad weather that ruins our crops. We can't describe the trajectory of an inbound object by moral laws because the emotive meaning of "hit/damage/hurt" can't be carried through to that object. Luckily most humans differ from inanimate objects in their degree of receptiveness to emotive meaning.

This will bring us to a partial conclusion, namely that "[e]thical statements are social instruments" (Stevenson C. L. 1937: 31). They are social in the sense that they can only play a causative and thus explanatory role within a human context. It is only within this context moral discourse can be made intelligible and this sets it apart from a discourse with no dynamic content. This seems to be in line with what we said earlier about the normative force that supervenes on our cognitive capacity to respond emotionally and rationally. Our way of using ethical terms and concepts seems to fall neatly in line with an ontology that presupposes nothing more and nothing less.

It is no trivial thing to observe that words and sentences aren't spoken as from nowhere but that they have this dual function of being both descriptive and emotive. A practical conclusion is therefore never arrived at as the formal conclusion in a syllogism where the premises are devoid of emotive meaning. Hume correctly realized this but he failed to see that passion is contained in the manner which we speak and in the valence of the words we choose. It is by virtue of the dual emotive and descriptive meaning of words that a practical conclusion can be arrived at. Logic or formal reasoning in general, fails to retain the emotive meaning because of its abstract view from nowhere and thus practical conclusions appears inscrutable for a cold logician.<sup>41</sup> However, moral deliberation, as a lived practise, is a cornucopia of vividness in its perspectival depictions and it reverberates with potent passions. If it had been otherwise Hume's "facts and relations" would have left us as uninspired and cold as the boulder rolling downhill, ready to break every bone in our fragile bodies, remains

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41 Stevenson (1937: 22) said, to the same effect that "*we can't determine whether a word is used dynamically or not, merely by reading the dictionary*". This is a general problem when we translate between natural and formal languages. The latter loses sight of functions inherent in natural languages and thus we fail to make a complete translation, as would be required if formal treatment should be meaningful.



unimpeded by our desperate pleading and wailing. Humans are, thank goodness, not boulders. We care about pleading and wailing because we are the kind of creatures we are or as Philippa Foot (1972: 315) wrote, “[i]f he himself is a moral man then he cares about such things, but not “because he ought””. That is to say, we care about certain ends because those ends are “the kind of ends that arose devotion” (ibid. 314) and that is after all everything that is asked for in a moral deliberation between two moral women as opposed to the futile deliberation between a man and the rock falling at his head.

But there is more to the story than emotive responsiveness. Deliberation is after all also something cognitive, an exchange not just of impetus to act but impetus bound up with understanding. Thus, while asking “is x a good?” undoubtedly is to ask to be influenced (Stevenson 1937: 30), since the question would be meaningless if we couldn’t be moved, this dynamic aspect is however not all that can be said about moral discourse. For when we ask practical questions, they don’t stand in the vacuum of a totality of all possible agent relations and all possible acts. As Geach (1956: 41) pointed out that “[e]vent’, like ‘thing’, is too empty a word to convey either criterion for identity or a standard of goodness”. Thus “is x a good?” asked *simpliciter* is as empty a phrase as “is one metre high?” or “is one hour long?”. Geach (1956: 33-34) observed that “good” and “bad” is always (logically) attributive and never predicative. A “good/bad car” can’t be divided into “x is a car” and “x is good/bad” any more than “a small dog” can be divided into “x is a dog” and “x is small”, because then “a small dog” would be less than “a big ant” and “a good killer” would be better than “a bad argument”. This being so, we are led to understand that moral questions being practical questions asked by humans must be construed as, again following Geach (1956:40), questions about our manner of acting as man *qua* man.<sup>42</sup> Again, this seems to fit well with our proposed ontology, where we observed that the evaluative moral standard supervenes on our ecology; i.e. asking moral questions are to ask for how a good exemplar of Homo sapiens should act by virtue of being a Homo sapiens. Giving an account of what being a Homo sapiens entails in terms of ethics will however have to await another occasion.

## 6. Concluding remarks

At journeys end it might be time to reflect over what we have been able to say about ethics within these few pages. We began contemplating where to go by taking out the bearing

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<sup>42</sup> Foot (1988: 235-238) argues along the same lines in an article written against the consequentialist concept “good state of affairs” saying that “good” is devoid of meaning outside morality. She then identifies the *qua* man perspective from whence “good” derives its meaning as the classic virtues, an idea I find appealing though I will have no opportunity to develop this line of thought here.

for our naturalistic journey, largely by reckoning which roads we must avoid to travel if we wished to come to journey's end; thus both reductionism and idealism had to go. We settled for an ontology of ethics without metaphysics as we could find no sufficient warrant for metaphysical commitments inherent in moral terms, concepts and praxis. Rather, ethics stood firm as a natural fact in its own right. We continued by arguing that our own nature is a sufficient foundation for ethics to be both scientifically and philosophically sound. We need not have fits of ethical *nausea* and despair over whether ethics is an exercise in futility and lacks foundations. It is founded and founded well, so we have no more cause to doubt it than we do human bipedalism and stereo-vision, they are all part of human nature and thus of nature herself.

With the help of sociologists such as Smith and Bauman and some philosophical observations made by Aristotle we were able to identify ethics as a primal feature of man as a social creature and this view was strengthened by psychological data, presented by Haidt, that identified ethical judgement with pre-rational intuitions. With the aid of biology we were able to identify this primal feature of human-hood as a salient aspect of human ecology and this in turn helped us see that ethics is a result of the natural history of our species and thus is as natural a fact as any other biological fact about humans. This made it possible for us to understand how moral properties can supervene on natural facts and still retain their normative force, because ethics itself is a natural fact that binds the normative and the descriptive spheres together in man as a biological creature. When we rounded off our exploration of ethics we concluded by again turning our attention to the language of morals and asked if the naturalistic conception we had offered could find support in the manner ethical discourse functions and is conducted. Guided by the practical nature of ethical questions and statements we highlighted the emotive function of ethical discourse as an explanation of why it is effective as a language game. We also listened to Geach who taught us that ethical terms seem to logically entail a *qua man* perspective; i.e., there is only sense to be made of ethical discourse if we understand ethical terms taking their meaning as *X qua man*, while no sense can be made of ethical terms taken *simpliciter*.

As all natural phenomena, so also ethics proved to be contingent but it didn't turn out to be a mere convention or a manmade contraption. Contingencies come in degrees as do all dependencies and the necessary conditions for a naturalistic ethics could only be satisfied if there are such creatures as humans who can and by natural disposition do give a damn. Being able to give a damn and what the damn should be given about proved to be laid into the hearts

and minds of man from without, by no lesser agent than Mother Nature. She has given birth to a creature for which there can be things that are good or bad by virtue of the nature she has bestowed them. She also made them thus that they can be moved by their good and repelled by their bad. As a final gift she gave them a small measure of understanding by the light of which they could seek what is good and guide their fellow men to this shared end.

Is this a satisfying answer to our original question; is it enough for the believer and non-believer alike? As I started out writing, the answer to this question might be more a matter of psychological disposition than rational persuasion. I would anyhow like to highlight some features that I find particularly appealing with the view that has been advanced here. First of all it is compatible with a modern worldview and can explain ethics within the confines of our best scientific understanding of how the cosmos is ordered. Second, it offers an embodied understanding of ethics that grounds the phenomenon in our very being without reducing it to arbitrary thoughts and feelings. Ethics can thus remain a part of us without being synonymous or analogous with our personal likes or dislikes, it both transcends our individual existence and is realised by it. Third, if ethics indeed is *man qua man*, as we maintain it is, then there is a common platform from which people of all beliefs can start their pursuit of what is good and true. Religious feelings might make this pursuit more pressing from a personal point of view but religion will not determine the content of what can count as a human good because that will be determined by what can possibly count as a good *qua man*.

Is this then all there is to it? Isn't it a too thin foundation, a point of view that threatens to topple our indelible rights and our impervious dignity? I'll tell you what; on a sunny day walk out and take a good look at that giant nuclear furnace up on high. One day it will start to expand and slowly burn away the crust of the earth and all that is on and in it. It will make your indelible rights delible and your impervious dignity pervious; by consuming consummating and thus return us to the stardust from whence we once came. Before that day comes you may call upon whatever unshakable foundation you wish to sway your fellow men and yourself but the sun shall not be swayed by those foundations and this we all know. In the meantime man will toil and sweat on this our pale blue dot that orbits the sun and it seems, at least to me, she'd be wise if she tried to gain some by the Talents Mother Nature has entrusted her, instead of burying them in the ground and look to the heavens for a greater treasure. When all is said and done I find it impossible to give a more profound answer to why ethics should concern us, than that we are thus made as to be concerned. No deductive proof, no

constraints of practical rationality, no revelation of divine will and no naturalistic philosophy will move him who will not be moved. This holds true for the stone as well as for the sun and the amoral man. They are forever beyond the reach of ethical concerns and neither indelible rights nor impervious dignity will change that.

However, mankind as a whole has a more pressing predicament than trying to move the few that cannot be moved. For while *Homo sapiens* is moral, she is also many other things, some of which counteract her ethical nature and hinders her from seeking her own good. There are many voices speaking and calling out to her, so she needs to discern among those voices and ultimately decide which to heed and follow. The ethical voice may be one among many but it is the one voice *Homo Ethicus* wishes to follow. It speaks from the part of her nature, which she wishes to affirm and build her life on, because it sustains her good and infuses her lives with purpose and meaning. Yet, she has to wrestle with the other parts of her nature, as well as the voices of other men who think they have found a good and call out for others to follow. It is my hope that the ontology of ethics that is on offer here can somewhat assist in the pursuit of what is good and true, by showing that there really is such a thing as a moral right and a sound point of departure for the pursuit of it.

*[...] Man who man would be,  
Must rule the empire of himself; in it  
Must be supreme, establishing his throne  
On vanquished will, quelling the anarchy  
Of hopes and fears, being himself alone.*

-Percy Shelly "Political greatness"

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