

What Grounding Can and Cannot Do for Non-Naturalistic Realism about Moral Properties

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It is widely assumed that objects and acts have their moral properties in virtue of their nonmoral properties. It is also common to think that moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties and that, accordingly, there can be no change in some set of moral facts M without a change in some set of nonmoral facts N . Taken together, a picture emerges in which moral facts hold solely in virtue of nonmoral facts.

I wish to raise a concern about the idea that the truth value of moral judgments can be ‘fixed’ by nonmoral facts. If certain nonmoral facts make moral judgments true, the next question is to ask why *those* facts do so; what makes it true that a given moral fact m supervenes on a given nonmoral fact n . Indeed, attempts to ground the normative in the non-normative seem to run up against the ‘Normative Relevance Argument’ (Heathwood 2012; Väyrynen 2013). This metaphysical reincarnation of Moore’s (1903) ‘Open Question Argument’ (i.e., the semantic point that it is always something that can be discussed and denied whether some given non-moral feature of things is the property that determines whether they have a moral property) states that normative facts cannot hold solely in virtue of natural facts, because the claim that some set of non-normative facts F makes, say, something wrong is incomplete as an explanation of why the action is wrong without some further account of where F gets the wrong-making force it bears. Explaining a normative fact n by a set of non-normative facts F presupposes that F has normative relevance, without which it could not explain n . However, the fact that F is normatively relevant is itself a normative fact which cannot be explained by F . The explanation needs a further normative fact to be complete. It seems, therefore, that there can be no explanation of any normative fact that doesn’t involve a further normative fact. Without such a fact, there would be a *residual open question* as to why this particular non-normative state of affairs generates that particular normative state of affairs.

On the face of it, the non-naturalist has a tougher time in shouldering this burden than most of her colleagues. According to the supervenience objection against moral non-naturalism, then, moral non-naturalism cannot explain why moral properties supervene on properties from which they are distinct without making commitments that count significantly against the view. In fact, it has been argued that the non-naturalist’s core commitments force her to accept the metaphysical bruteness of the moral supervenience connection – that she cannot, within her framework, adequately explain the impossibility of moral differences without non-moral base differences

Could some ideas developed in metaphysics about grounding be of help for the non-naturalist? Recent literature on moral non-naturalism includes many attempts to shoulder this explanatory burden by means of grounding. In this paper, I evaluate what grounding can and cannot do for non-naturalism about moral properties. It turns out that grounding is a helpful explanatory device for the non-naturalist that allows her to counter desk rejections of the view because of alleged ‘extravagancies’. By contrast, pursuing the explanatory strategy of grounding does not, I argue, do much work for the non-naturalist in countering more fundamental objections to the doctrine. If non-naturalism about moral properties is looking for new weapons to win the real metaphysical war, grounding will not be of much help.