ROBUST ETHICAL REALISM, NECESSARY TRUTHS AND THE MIRACLE OF MORALITY

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ABSTRACT

Non-naturalists about the normative face the problem of providing a metaphysical explanation for the supervenience of the normative on the natural. Recently, Gideon Rosen has argued that non-naturalists can side-step this problem by rejecting strong supervenience and the view that normative truths are metaphysically necessary. Rosen proposes to take normative truths to be normatively necessary, where normative necessity is different from and irreducible to metaphysical necessity. I argue that if Rosen is right, that creates a deeper problem for robust ethical realism (the view that there are mind-independent, non-natural moral facts). According to robust ethical realism, it is a normative fact that persons are an especially valuable kind of being. But if Rosen is right, that is a metaphysically contingent fact. The existence of persons is also contingent. According to robust ethical realism, then, there is a striking match between what the normative facts happen to be and the kinds of beings that happen to exist. Persons could have failed to exist and they could have failed to be valuable, but it just so happens to be a fact about the natural world that they exist and a normative fact that they have value. Given that this match is accidental, it amounts to a miraculous coincidence. To the extent that commitment to unexplained coincidences counts against a view, robust ethical realism faces a problem.

Keywords: Normative realism; Metaphysical necessity; Supervenience; Coincidence; Persons.

Introduction

Strong supervenience is the view that there cannot be a normative difference between two metaphysically possible entities that are exactly alike in every non-normative respect. Strong supervenience is troublesome for non-naturalist views about the normative. Naturalists seem to have the upper hand when it comes to explaining why the normative strongly supervenes on the non-normative. According to naturalism, normative facts can be reduced to natural facts and that explains why there cannot be a normative difference without a natural, non-normative difference. Non-naturalists, in contrast, hold that normative facts cannot be reduced to natural facts. If normative facts and natural facts are different in kind, it is not clear why there cannot be a change in the normative features of something without there being a corresponding change in its natural

features. That metaphysically necessary connection between facts and properties of radically distinct kinds requires an explanation. And, many argue, non-naturalists are unable to offer one.[2]

Recently, Gideon Rosen (2017 and 2020) has argued that non-naturalism not only fails to explain strong supervenience but that it is actually incompatible with it. However, Rosen is a friend of non-naturalism. He argues further that non-naturalists can safely reject strong supervenience. Doing so commits non-naturalists to the view that normative truths are metaphysically contingent but that is not a problem. In order to account for our moral practice and the practice of moral theory, it is enough to take normative and moral truths to be normatively necessary, where normative necessity is distinct from and not reducible to metaphysical necessity.

I will argue that even though Rosen's argument falls short of a proof that non-naturalism and strong supervenience are incompatible, it is quite strong. At the very least, given Rosen's argument, non-naturalists cannot simply help themselves to the view that normative truths are metaphysically necessary – they must earn it. Contrary to Rosen, however, I will argue that taking normative truths to be metaphysically contingent creates a serious problem for non-naturalist ethical realism.

The problem is the following: morality as we know it ascribes value to persons – sensible and intelligent beings who are endowed with practical rationality, are capable of moral knowledge and are morally responsible for their actions. It is morally wrong to kill a person for no particular reason or to torture another person to further some private goal of ours. And it is morally right or commendable, in many circumstances, to take measures to protect the life of other persons or to promote their well-being or their flourishing. Morality, as I will say, is *receptive to persons*. However, if moral and normative truths are metaphysically contingent, it is quite possible for things to have been different. The normative facts could have been indifferent or even hostile to persons. Assuming that the existence of persons is also metaphysically contingent, it is simply an accident that the actual world is such that persons exist *and* that they have value. That is, there is a remarkable match between the content of the normative facts and the kind of beings that actually exist. On the one hand, the normative facts ascribe value to persons and, on the other hand, persons happen to exist. Given that this match is accidental and could have failed to take place, it amounts to a remarkable coincidence. If this match was indeed a stroke of luck, it would be nothing short of miraculous. To the extent that commitment to unexplained coincidences counts against a view, non-

naturalism faces a problem. I will refer to this problem as the miracle objection to non-naturalism.

In the next section, I present in more detail the kind of non-naturalist realism my argument targets. In sections 3 and 4, I discuss Rosen's argument for the incompatibility of non-naturalism and strong supervenience. In section 5, I present the miracle objection. In section 6, I distinguish it from other objections to non-naturalist realism that appeal to remarkable coincidences, including evolutionary debunking arguments and Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument. Finally, in section 7, I consider some possible replies to the miracle objection.

Robust Ethical Realism, Necessary Normative Truths and Essentialism

The argument I am going to present targets the ethical realist that is also a robust normative realist. Robust *normative* realism is the thesis that there are non-natural truths or facts concerning what we have reason to do that are mind-independent. These truths are mind-independent because they obtain independently of all our actual or hypothetical normative beliefs, attitudes or practices. And they are non-natural because they cannot be reduced to natural facts and, as such, are causally inert.

Robust *ethical* realism accepts the truth of robust normative realism and adds that there are mind-independent moral facts that are normative in a *reason-implying sense*. A fact is normative in this sense only if entails that someone has a reason to act in a particular way (Parfit, 2011b, 267-8). According to robust ethical realism, if an agent S morally ought to do A, then there is a reason for S to do A (consisting either in the fact that S morally ought so to act, or in the considerations that ground that fact). Call this the thesis of *moral rationalism.*

Robust ethical realism thus characterized has been espoused by a number of philosophers such as Shafer-Landau (2003), FitzPatrick (2008), Parfit (2011a and 2011b), Enoch (2011, see especially Ch. 4) and Scanlon (2014).[3]

Robust ethical realists usually take normative truths to be metaphysically necessary and that allows them to account for strong supervenience. For instance, in explaining why the normative supervenes on the natural, Enoch draws an analogy with juridical facts. Two persons who do not differ in age cannot differ with respect to whether or not they can legally purchase alcohol beverages (within a jurisdiction). Legal drinking status supervenes on age (within a jurisdiction) because the law (in that jurisdiction) determines that only people above a certain age can drink. In

the same way, according to Enoch, normative properties supervene on natural properties because there are normative principles that specify that if something has certain natural properties then it has certain normative properties (ENOCH, 2011, 143–5). Given that strong supervenience applies to every metaphysically possible entity, Enoch takes the relevant normative principles to be metaphysically necessary truths.

According to this view, strong supervenience is entailed by the fact that there are general normative truths that are metaphysically necessary. However, one may very well wonder how do we establish that these normative truths hold in every possible world. At this point it is instructive to consider how robust ethical realists would react to someone who resists the claim that normative truths are metaphysically necessary and, therefore, rejects strong supervenience.

Consider a true moral claim, such as the claim that it is morally wrong to kill someone in order to obtain a financial advantage. Given robust ethical realism, this entails that anyone to whom moral requirements apply has a reason (presumably a decisive reason) not to kill another person, even when doing so would result in financial gain. Assume that to be a normative truth. We can now ask whether this normative truth holds in every possible world. Suppose that someone gives a negative answer:

> That normative truth is contingent. There are possible worlds in which it does not hold. After all, I can readily conceive of a world in which it is false. Consider, for instance, a world w that is just like the actual world in every non-normative respect but in which the only fundamental, mind-independent normative truth is that anyone has reason to do whatever he or she would decide to do after deliberating in a procedurally correct manner in light of the relevant information – so that all reasons were internal in Williams' sense. Assume further that there are persons in w that even after deliberating procedurally in a perfect manner would not hesitate to kill someone else to gain some money. These persons have no reason to refrain from killing.

How can a supporter of robust ethical realism reply? She has to insist that w is not metaphysically possible, even though it is conceivable and even though taking w to be possible does not betray any conceptual incompetence or confusion. At this point, the robust realist is likely to point out that, as we know since the work of Kripke and Putnam, conceivability is not a reliable guide to possibility. Someone who does not know what water is may find no obstacle to conceive of a world where there is water but no

H_2O. And taking such a world to be possible need not indicate any conceptual incompetence or confusion. It indicates, rather, that one does not know what water is – one does not know its essence or its nature. Once one came to know what water is, one would no longer take that world to be metaphysically possible. One would see that it is inconsistent with at least one essential truth about water.

The same could be said about w. It may seem possible for someone who does not fully know what a normative reason is. But once one came to fully grasp the essence of the reasons, one would see that w is not possible – that it is inconsistent with at least one essential truth about normative reasons. Robust ethical realists must hold, then, that pure normative principles corresponding to moral demands are built into the nature of normative reasons. Someone who thinks that we have no reason to refrain from killing other people does not fully know what it is for a fact to be a reason for an agent, just as someone who thinks that water is an element does not know what it is to be water (ROSEN, 2017, 864).

Rosen's Argument Against Strong Supervenience

The starting point of Rosen's argument against strong supervenience is the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity developed by Fine (1994a and 1994b). According to Fine, for any item *x* (an object, property, relation, etc.), there is a set of truths that obtain in virtue of *x's* nature or identity. These are essential truths about *x*. Essences determine what is metaphysically possible and, consequently, what is metaphysically necessary. The metaphysical possibilities are the logical possibilities that are compatible with the essences of all things. The metaphysically necessary truths are the truths that follow from essential truths. So, for instance, the fact that it is in the essence of water that water is H_2O explains why it is a metaphysically necessary truth that water is a compound. In Fine's notation, the claim that it lies in the nature of water that water is H_2O can be represented in the following way:

$$\Box_{water}\ Water = H_2O$$

With that notation in view, we can provide the following essentialist account of metaphysical necessity:

For *p* to be metaphysically necessary is for there to be some items *X* such that $\Box_X p$

Importantly, for Fine, we can speak not only of the essences of individual items, but also of the essences of set of things. It is not part of my nature that you and I are of the same species, for my essence makes no reference to you, and vice-versa. But we are both essentially humans. It lies in our essence to be members of the same species (ROSEN, 2020, 209-210). So:

$\Box_{you, me}$ There is a species to which you and I both belong (if we exist).

Someone who understand my essence but does not understand your essence can fail to appreciate that the claim that we belong to the same species is a metaphysically necessary truth. But someone who understand both my essence and your essence can see that.

The second premise in Rosen's argument is a certain conception of the disagreement between naturalists and non-naturalists about the normative. Ethical naturalism is not the view that the normative supervenes on the natural, because non-naturalist also accept supervenience. It is also not the view that normative or moral terms can be analytically defined in non-normative terms – most naturalists concede that Moore was right in holding that these definitions cannot be provided. It is also not the view that we can specify naturalistic sufficient and necessary conditions for the instantiation of normative properties. Non-naturalists can agree that we can specify these conditions: their point is that doing so does not tell us what it is for an action to instantiate the properties at stake. What characterizes normative naturalism is the claim that these naturalistic sufficient and necessary conditions do tell us what is for an action to instantiate a normative property. In other words, they provide *real definitions* of normative properties and relations.

According to Fine and Rosen, φ provides a real definition of F iff $\Box_F \forall x$ (Fx ↔ φx), that is, if, and only if, it lies in the essence of F that something is F if, and only if, it is φ. On this account, normative naturalism is view that the nature of normative properties determines naturalistic sufficient and necessary conditions for their instantiation.

Rosen argues that the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity and strong supervenience together entail normative naturalism thus understood and are, therefore, incompatible with non-naturalism.

Take a normative property N. Let a, b, … be all the metaphysically possible acts that are N and let D_a, D_b, …. be their nonnormative description in the world in which they are N. According to Strong Supervenience, any two acts that are exactly alike with respect to their non-normative features

must be exactly alike in every normative respect. So, Strong Supervenience guarantees that:

(1) $\Box \forall x$ (x is N $\leftrightarrow$ (Da(x) $\vee$ Db(x) $\vee$ ...))

Given the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity, it follows that:

(2) $\exists y \Box_y \forall x$ (x is N $\leftrightarrow$ (Da(x) $\vee$ Db(x) $\vee$ ...))

If we assume that N is the only normative property at play, we can conclude that:

(3) $\Box_{N, P, Q, ...} \forall x$ (x is N $\leftrightarrow$ (Da(x) $\vee$ Db(x) $\vee$ ...))

That means that it lies in the nature of N, together with the nature of other non-normative properties P, Q, ... that an act x is N whenever one of the disjuncts in the right-hand side obtains.

At this point, Rosen appeals to what he calls the principle of separability, which tells us that "when a truth is grounded in the essences of several things collectively, it is a logical consequence of the essences of those things taken individually" (ROSEN, 2020, 213). Given that principle, the equivalence of N and the long disjunction must follow from two propositions, one grounded in the nature of N and another grounded in the nature of the non-normative properties P, Q, and so on. So, (3) follows from:

(4) $\Box_N \forall x$ (x is N $\leftrightarrow$ φx) and

(5) $\Box_{P, Q, ...} \forall x$ (φx $\leftrightarrow$ (Da(x) $\vee$ Db(x) $\vee$ ...))

Given that (5) concerns only the nature of non-normative properties, φ must be wholly non-normative. And then, (4) provides a real definition of N in wholly non-normative terms.[4]

This assumes that N is the only normative property or relation at stake. If we relax this simplifying supposition things become a little more complicated. Suppose that in order to appreciate the equivalence stated at (4) one needs not only to fully understand the nature of N but of other normative relations or properties, X, Y, ..., so that (4) is not the case, but rather:

(6) $\Box_{N, X, Y, ...} \forall x$ (x is N $\leftrightarrow$ φx)

If the essence of property N makes reference to the other normative properties X, Y, ... (so that you cannot fully understand the nature of N if you do not understand these other properties), then a full understanding of the nature of N would include the understanding of X, Y, and so on. In that case, (4) would be true. So, in order to hold (6), the non-naturalist must hold that the nature of N makes no reference to X, Y, …, and yet the nature of these properties plays an ineliminable role in grounding the equivalence presented in (6).

If (6) is correct, then it is not the case that each normative property or relation is separately definable in non-normative terms. But the normative facts as a whole are fixed by non-normative facts together with the nature of normative properties and relations. According to this view, one who knows the non-normative facts and knows the nature of the relevant normative properties and relations is in a position to know all the normative facts.

Rosen holds that this is incompatible with non-naturalism:

> The non-naturalist's distinctive commitment [...] is that someone who knows the natural facts and the essences might still be in the dark about the synthetic principles that connect the normative facts to their nonnormative grounds. Even if Supervenience does not entail the separate definability of the normative properties, it does entail naturalism in this somewhat more capacious sense. (ROSEN, 2020, 215)

I don't see why non-naturalists would accept that. It seems that it is open to the non-naturalist to claim that her view is exactly that it is not the case that each normative property is separately definable in non-normative terms and, nevertheless, that given a full understanding of the essence of the whole net of normative properties one can present fully non-normative conditions for the application of each normative concept (although at this point the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism begins to blur.). Therefore, it seems to me that non-naturalists can disarm Rosen's argument by holding that even though the nature of N makes no reference to other normative properties, the nature of these properties plays an ineliminable role in grounding the equivalence presented in (6). Whether or not this is a viable option is not clear. Rosen himself claims that "the possibility strikes me as bizarre, and I can think of no remotely plausible cases that would illustrate it." (2020, 214-215). But Leary (2017) has argued for exactly that view.[5]

That goes to show that Rosen's argument is not a proof of the incompatibility of non-naturalism and strong supervenience. One could also resist Rosen's argument by denying the principle of separability, the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity or the account of real definition at its base. But whether or not these possible replies are in the end viable is an open question. That is, even though Rosen argument does not prove that non-naturalist must reject strong supervenience (decisive proofs are extremely rare in philosophy), it does succeed in posing a problem for non-naturalism. The claim that normative truths are non-natural facts *and* that normative truths are metaphysically necessary cannot be taken for granted. It is incompatible with a number of *prima facie* plausible claims. That is all we can hope to establish here.

Normative Necessity

The case for the incompatibility of non-naturalism and strong supervenience can be made stronger by showing that we do not have to suppose that normative truths are metaphysically necessary in order to make sense of our moral thought and practices.

If it is, say, morally wrong to kill someone in order to obtain a financial advantage, then, according to robust ethical realism, we all have a reason to refrain from doing so. And if we have reason to refrain from killing other persons, that does not seem to be an accident. We are inclined to say that if a course of action involves killing someone, then we *must* have a reason to refrain from pursuing it. This claim holds with a kind of necessity. If strong supervenience is false and, therefore, normative truths are metaphysically contingent, the species of necessity at stake here must be different. According to Fine (2002, 267) and Rosen (2020, 218-219), normative truths are metaphysically contingent but *normatively necessary.*

A proposition p is normatively necessary at possible world w iff p is true at w and for any wholly non-normative proposition q, the counterfactual "if q had been the case, p would still have been the case" is true at w (ROSEN, 2020, 219). A normative truth is normatively necessary when it would have been true no matter how things had been. That is, it would have been true no matter what we had done, no matter what have happened, no matter what the laws of nature were, etc. The claim that a proposition is normatively necessary in this sense is perfectly compatible with the claim that it is metaphysically contingent. There may be possible worlds that are exactly like the actual world in every non-normative respect but in which different normative truths hold and are normatively necessary. Normative necessity cannot be reduced to metaphysical necessity.

The crucial point is that taking normative truths to be normatively necessary but metaphysically contingent leaves our normative thought and practices unscathed. Consider ordinary, first-order, normative thought. An agent that is capable of deciding in light of reasons must also be able to make normative judgments about what she should do had the circumstances of action been different. This kind of thinking requires normative truths that are modally robust: that would still have been true had things been different. But these truths need not be metaphysically necessary. Normatively necessary truths will do just fine. By definition, truths that are normatively necessary would still hold no matter what anyone had done, no matter what anyone thinks, no matter how things had gone, and so on.

One could argue that counterfactual normative thought covers all metaphysically possible worlds. If you are asked to assess a hypothetical action there is no need to ask yourself in what possible world the action took place. Suppose that you are asked to consider whether the fact that a course of action will result in Pete experiencing terrible pain is a reason for Pete not to take that course of action. If you believe that it is a fact that we have reason to avoid pain, you need not consider whether Pete inhabits our normative world or a different one in order to answer the question. It seems that if we have reason to avoid pain, then Pete has a reason to avoid the action in question regardless of which possible world he calls home. But that objection fails. Suppose that I ask whether it is possible for a human perform a 10 meters high jump. I can easily answer that question without asking myself in what possible world the jump is taking place. But that does not show that the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary. There may be possible worlds in which the laws of nature are different and humans can jump that high. In answering the question, however, I consider only the possible worlds that are physically (or naturally) possible relative to the actual world – that is, the possible worlds in which the actual laws of nature hold. In a similar way, when answering a normative question about a hypothetical action, we consider only the possible worlds that are normatively possible relative to the actual world – where a world $w*$ is normatively possible relative to w iff every proposition that is normatively necessary at w holds at $w*$ (ROSEN, 2017, 868).

The claim that normative truths are metaphysically contingent is also compatible with the case-based methodology usually applied in moral and normative theory. According to this methodology we test candidates for moral principles (which, according to robust ethical realism, entail corresponding normative principles) by considering hypothetical cases and asking whether the principle would give the right verdict about that case –

if it does not, then we have a counterexample. This approach to moral theorizing does not presuppose moral and normative truths to be metaphysically necessary. It makes perfect sense if we assume that its aim is to identify normatively necessary principles. Finding a hypothetical case in which the principle does not hold amounts to showing that it is not the case that it would hold no matter how things had been. That is, it amounts to showing that it is not normatively necessary. Whether or not the relevant principles are metaphysically necessary is beside the point. As Rosen puts it, a philosopher who accepted the view that normative truths are normatively necessary but metaphysically contingent "would conduct their first order inquiry in moral theory just as we actually do" (Rosen, 2020, 221).

If the argument of this section is correct, then nothing in normative thought or in our moral practices presupposes that normative truths are metaphysically necessary.

The Miracle of Morality

According to Rosen, robust ethical realists should reject strong supervenience and with it the view that normative truths are metaphysically necessary. Rosen is a friend of non-naturalism and believes that replacing metaphysical necessity with normative necessity is a step in the right direction: it gets rid of a central metaphysical objection to non-naturalism (the problem of explaining strong supervenience) and, at the same time, gives us everything we need to make sense of normative thought. I will argue, however, that rejecting metaphysical necessity exposes robust ethical realists to a serious objection. That is clearly a problem for those non-naturalists that, following Fine, explicitly deny strong supervenience.[6] But if Rosen's argument for the incompatibility of non-naturalism and strong supervenience is successful, it is a problem for any form of robust ethical realism.

According to robust ethical realism, moral facts are tied to corresponding irreducible, mind-independent normative facts about our reasons for action. If it turns out that we have no reason to perform an action A, then the claim that we are morally required to perform A cannot be true. We can approach the problem I want to raise by attending to the fact that there are conceptual constraints on what the moral facts may turn out to be that are not mirrored in the normative domain.

Consider such statements as "genocide is morally abominable", "it is morally wrong to torture another human being" and "altruistic acts are, *ceteris paribus*, morally recommended". If someone engaged in moral

reasoning came to the conclusion that these claims were false and that diametrically opposed moral judgments were true, she would not have made a very surprising discovery. Rather, had she come to the conclusion that torture was morally acceptable and that altruistic acts are never morally recommended, that would prove only that she made a mistake in her reasoning or that she no longer grasps the relevant moral concepts. The claims above are moral platitudes that establish boundaries to the set of possible moral truths. They are what Shafer-Landau and Cuneo call *moral fixed points* (2014). If there are moral fixed points a realist need not admit that every possible moral proposition is a viable candidate for moral truth because accepting certain moral propositions is a condition for one to count as a competent user of moral concepts (SHAFER-LANDAU, 2012, 11-12).

It should come as no surprise that the propositions that establish the conceptual boundaries to any moral system have, so to speak, certain thematic affinities: they are about how persons should be treated; they forbid, in all but exceptional circumstances, actions that impose suffering on other persons or that threaten their lives and they require or at least encourage actions that protect their lives and promote their well-being or, at any at rate, reduce their pain and suffering. Given that prescriptions along these lines constraint the set of conceptually possible moral truths, any system of rules that qualifies as a moral system must be averse to the destruction of human life and to the suffering of persons and receptive to the protection of human life and the promotion of well-being. One could say that, as a conceptual matter, morality (the set of all moral facts) is receptive to persons:[7] it ascribes value to persons, to their lives, to their well-being and to their flourishing, shuns that which leads to their destruction, to their suffering and to their coarsening, and commands those that fall under its authority to behave accordingly.[8] It is not conceptually possible for there to be moral facts but for morality to be indifferent or even hostile to persons. It cannot be a moral fact, for instance, that the lives and the well-being of human beings are morally worthless and there is nothing morally reprehensible in destroying a human life or imposing terrible suffering on others in order to further our private goals.

Now, given the connection that robust ethical realism postulates between moral facts and mind-independent normative facts, if there are moral facts, normative reality must be similarly receptive to persons. That is, if there are moral facts, it must be a fact (independent of our attitudes, beliefs and practices, actual or hypothetical) that we have reason to do that which will protect human life and well-being and to labor against misery and suffering wherever we find it (to exactly the same extent that morality requires that from us). But whereas the moral facts, if there are any, could

not have turned out to be radically different from what they are according to our person-friendly view of morality (given the conceptual constraints just discussed), it seems that, as far as conceptual constraints go, normative reality (the set of all normative facts) could have turned out *not* to be receptive to persons.[9]

Sharon Street claims that if normative truths are wholly mind-independent, they could have turned out to be *anything* (Street, 2008, 208). And, although it may be an exaggeration to claim that the normative truth could turn out to be anything, there is a point to be made here: as far as only conceptual constraints are at stake, it is quite possible for the mind-independent normative truth not to line up with morality's demands. Perhaps we cannot make sense of someone who claims that we have reason to torture another human being even if we would not get anything thing out of it and would actually suffer as a result of doing such a terrible thing. But it could be, as far as only our normative concepts are concerned, that we had no reason to refrain from killing a stranger to whom we were indifferent when that would further a private goal of ours, that we had no reason to see that our children survive and live happy lives if we happen not to care about them, that we had no reason to mitigate the suffering of others if that would not be to our advantage or that we had no reason to refrain from imposing terrible agony on a stranger when doing so would benefit us. All of these are conceivable possibilities.[10] And if a sufficient number of them turned out to be the case, normative reality would not be receptive to persons in the same sense as morality is. It would not command us to respect and protect human life, to promote well-being or to mitigate suffering. Rather, if something along the possibilities just outlined was true, normative reality would be indifferent to persons as such and concerned mainly with the promotion of the private goals of individuals, even if these happened to be inimical to the efforts of protecting human life and well-being.

Of course, one could hold that even though these are conceptual possibilities they are not metaphysical possibilities because normative truths are metaphysically necessary. But we are now assuming that Rosen's argument is successful and that non-naturalist should take normative truths to be metaphysically contingent. So, we should accept that these are genuine possibilities.

With that in view we can formulate the *miracle objection*. According to robust ethical realist, although the normative facts could have been different, the actual normative facts are receptive to persons (for, in the actual world, moral facts obtain). But persons are a highly specific kind of being that could easily have failed to exist. Assuming that the existence of

persons is also metaphysically contingent, it is simply an accident that the actual world is such that persons exist *and* that they have value. Persons could have failed to exist or they could have failed to have value. That is, according to robust ethical realism there is a remarkable match between the content of the normative facts and the kind of beings that actually exist. On the one hand, the normative facts ascribe value to persons and, on the other hand, persons happen to exist. This match, however, cannot be explained. According to robust ethical realism, normative facts are non-natural and mind-independent. Because they are non-natural and, therefore, non-physical and because the physical world is causally closed, they cannot produce any effects on the physical world. In particular, normative facts cannot in any way shape the physical world so as to produce the kind of being they deem valuable.[11] And because they are mind-independent, they cannot be determined by our attitudes and beliefs – we cannot make the normative facts receptive to ourselves. A remarkable match that is accidental and cannot be explained amounts to a remarkable coincidence. So robust ethical realism entails that a striking coincidence took place.[12]

The strength of this objection may become clearer if we compare robust ethical realism to an analogous view. Imagine someone who, unaware of our evolutionary history, believes that humans beings simply popped up on Earth fully formed as a species. Call this view the spontaneous generation view. The fact that our planet is well-equipped to meet our basic biological needs should be quite astonishing to this person. There is a striking match between our needs and capacities and what our world can provide. Given that we can imagine humans popping up in a different planet that was not suited for us and that according to this view there are no explanation why we happen to exist on Earth, this match is a remarkable coincidence. Indeed, it is nothing short of miraculous.

To the extent that commitment to miraculous coincidences counts against a view, robust ethical realism faces as much of a problem as does the spontaneous generation view. If it simply happens to be the case that we exist even though the universe could be devoid of persons and it simply happens to be the case that our lives and our well-being are valuable even though the normative facts could have been different, that match is nothing short of a miracle.[13]

Similar Objections

We should distinguish the miracle objection from similar objections that appeal to remarkable coincidences.

Consider first the evolutionary debunking argument put forward by Street (2006). She holds that according to a plausible scientific account of the origins of some of our central normative convictions they are the product of an evolutionary process that is insensible to normative truth (in such a way that it would produce the same normative convictions even if they were false) and that, therefore, it would be an incredible stroke of luck if these convictions happened to match the normative truth. The point is that if normative truth is independent of our convictions and our normative beliefs are the product of a process that is insensitive to the truth, then it would take a miracle for these beliefs to be true.

While both the evolutionary debunking argument and the miracle objection claim that robust ethical realism postulates the occurrence of an amazing coincidence, the coincidences in question are different. According to the evolutionary debunking argument, the striking match postulated but not explained by robust realism is a match between our beliefs and normative truth.[14] According to the miracle objection, the match is between the content of normative facts (that to which they ascribe value) and the kind of beings that happens to exist.

This distinction is important. The standard reply to the evolutionary debunking argument misses the target when it comes to the miracle objection. The standard reply consists in denying that evolutionary pressures had an extensive influence over our normative beliefs. Realists who offer this reply argue that the debunkers have failed to show that most of our normative beliefs are the product of the blind influence of evolutionary pressures. They hold that while evolutionary forces may have had some influence over our normative beliefs, our current normative convictions are largely the product of forms of normative reflection that are sensitive to normative facts. According to these philosophers, our current understanding of our evolutionary history is perfectly compatible with the view that evolution did not directly produced most of our normative beliefs but rather equipped us with the raw materials necessary for the development of a capacity that reliably tracks normative facts – in the same way in which evolution did not directly equipped us with mathematical or modal beliefs, for example, but rather provided us with the raw materials necessary for the development of a capacity to get to know mathematical and modal facts.[15] If we have that capacity, then it is not by chance that our normative beliefs correspond to the normative truth. And then the debunking argument fails. Even if that strategy succeeds as a reply to the evolutionary debunking argument, it does not address the miracle objection. Robust ethical realists still hold that the normative dimension of reality is receptive to persons and that persons exist, even though things

could have been different in both respects. There still is a remarkable and fortuitous match between the content of the normative facts and the kind of beings that exist and it remains unexplained.

Another objection to robust realism that appeals to a remarkable coincidence is Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument. Bedke (2009) argues that given robust ethical realism, it would take a cosmic coincidence for our normative beliefs to align with the normative truth. Our normative beliefs are part of or supervene on the physical dimension of reality. Given the causal closure of the physical world, our normative beliefs are fully physically caused. According to robust ethical realism, normative facts are non-natural and causally inert. So, they cannot play any role in the production of our normative beliefs. Bedke concludes that it would take an amazing cosmic coincidence between the causal order and the normative order for our normative beliefs to correspond to the truth (Bedke, 2009, p.190).

Much like the debunker, Bedke points to the fact that the robust realist is committed to an unexplained striking match between our normative beliefs and the normative facts. Bedke's argument also makes no suppositions about the content of the normative facts. The miracle objection is different on both accounts and for that reason some replies to the Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument miss the target when it comes to the miracle objection.

One could argue, as Shafer-Landau does (2012, 29-39), that Bedke's argument proves too much: it shows that it would take an incredible coincidence for our modal or mathematical beliefs to be true (after all, these too are causally inert, mind-independent truths). The same cannot be said about the miracle objection. It does not generalize to modal or mathematical truths because there is no striking match between the content of these truths and the kind of beings that exist. The miracle objection depends on a supposition about the content of normative facts, namely, the supposition that they ascribe value to persons (a kind of being that could have failed to exist). That is why the miracle objection applies only to robust *ethical* realism and not to robust *normative* realism as such. If one holds only that there are mind-independent, non-natural normative facts, without making the further assumption that these facts ascribe value to persons in particular, then the objection has no force.

Possible Replies

The problem for robust ethical realism is as follows. According to this view, reality has two independent and isolated dimensions: the normative

dimension (constituted by normative facts) and the physical dimension (constituted by physical facts and all the other natural facts that supervene on the physical). As things are now, the robust ethical realist holds, the normative dimension ascribe value to persons and, in the physical dimension, persons happen to exist. There is, therefore, a match between the two dimensions of reality. Things could have been different: the normative dimension could have failed to ascribe value to persons and, in the physical dimension, persons could have failed to exist. But they just so happen to align. That unexplained match amounts to a coincidence and commitment to coincidences counts against a view. One way to avoid the problem is simply to hold that the match between the two dimensions can be explained. If an explanation is available, then it is not a lucky coincidence.

The normative truths that need explaining (those that are receptive to persons) are either fundamental normative truths or they are derived from more fundamental normative truths. In both cases the prospects of robust realists succeeding in providing an explanation are not very bright.

If the truths in question are fundamental, then, given that they are realistically construed, they do not admit of an explanation. They cannot be explained by appeal to our beliefs, attitudes or practices, because they are supposed to be mind-independent. They cannot be explained by the non-normative facts, because they are normatively necessary and would hold even if those facts were completely different. And if they are fundamental, they cannot be explained by deeper truths because, by definition, there are none. As Shafer-Landau (2003, 48) puts it: "If some standard is true, irreducible, and to be construed realistically, then nothing makes it true; its truth is not a creation, but instead a brute fact about the way the world works".[16]

What if they are not fundamental? In order to do away with the problem, one would have to explain the normative truths that correspond to the moral value of persons by appeal to more fundamental normative truths that do not ascribe value to persons as such. Doing that would explain away the coincidence. Suppose, for instance, that the only fundamental, mind-independent normative truth is that anyone has reason to do whatever he or she would decide to do after deliberating in a procedurally correct manner in light of the relevant information – so that all reasons were internal in Williams' sense (WILLIAMS, 1981). If normative truths corresponding to moral demands could be derived from this fundamental truth, then the realist could plausibly claim that the match between the normative facts and the kind of beings that exist is not an objectionable coincidence.

One problem with this suggestion is that it is unlikely that normative truths corresponding to every moral demand could be derived from such an impoverished set of fundamental normative truths. In particular, it seems very likely that some people will not be motivated to act morally after engaging flawlessly in fully informed procedural deliberation. If that proved to be the case, moral rationalism (one of the constituents of robust ethical realism) would be false. If this suggestion was the only way in which realists could react to the moral coincidence objection, it would have already succeeded in presenting a serious problem for robust realism. It would have shown that it is not possible to disentangle the defense of robust ethical realism from the task (which many take to hopeless) of deriving moral reasons from non-moral, purely procedural starting points.

Another problem with the Williams-inspired suggestion is that even if normative truths corresponding to every moral demand could be derived from such a humble starting point, this particular characterization of the normative reality would still be inimical to robust ethical realism. According to the suggestion under consideration, all normative truths, with the exception of the fundamental one, are mind-dependent. In particular, they depend on what our motivations would be in a hypothetical situation. Given that according to robust ethical realism moral facts are tied to corresponding normative truths, that would make the moral demands that apply to us mind-dependent as well. But that is something robust ethical realists deny.[17]

Of course, this does nothing to show that realists are unable to provide an explanation of the fact that the normative dimension of reality is receptive to persons in terms of more fundamental normative truths. The point is rather that the miracle objection poses a challenge to robust realism. It presses robust realist to provide such an explanation. And it is not at all obvious if and how it could be provided. Indeed, part of the appeal of robust ethical realism comes from the fact that it can seemingly dispense with the need to derive moral reasons from non-moral starting points. Robust ethical realists can hold that it simply is a fact, which proper practical reflection can disclose but not explain, that we all have reason to respect life and to care for the well-being of our peers. If the miracle objection is cogent, however, this apparent advantage of robust ethical realism is illusory. Robust realists cannot afford not to ground person-friendly normative truths on further normative truths on pain of rendering the existence of morality a miracle. If an explanation of person-friendly normative truths is forthcoming, then the challenge to robust ethical realism posed by the miracle objection can be met. Until then the problem remains.

Conclusion

If we take normative truths to be metaphysically contingent, then robust ethical realism faces a problem. If the normative dimension could have failed to be receptive to persons and persons could have failed to exist, then it is a remarkable coincidence that the actual world is one in which the normative facts are receptive to persons and persons actually exist. Robust ethical realism is committed, then, to a striking coincidence and that counts against it. To use Enoch's expression, a view that is committed to a coincidence it cannot explain loses "plausibility points" (ENOCH, 2011, 165). To the extent that rival theories avoid commitment to that coincidence, they have an advantage over robust realism at this point.

This is an immediate problem for realists like Fine and Rosen who explicitly deny that normative truths are metaphysically necessary. But if Rosen's argument is successful and non-naturalism is incompatible with strong supervenience, then all forms of robust ethical realism are threatened by it.

Notas

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[2] See, for instance, Blackburn (1985), Dreier (1992) and McPherson (2012).

[3] The objection to robust ethical realism that I am going to present is compatible with robust normative realism. If the objection is successful, it poses a problem to robust ethical realism that is pressing even to those who are willing to accept robust normative realism and believe that the metaphysical and epistemological challenges to that view can be coped with. If I am right, then Enoch's claim that once we have satisfactorily addressed metaphysical and epistemological objections to robust normative realism there should be no obstacle for us to accept robust ethical realism as well (ENOCH, 2011, 90) is false.

[4] Rosen's argument is similar to Jackson's (1998) argument from supervenience. But there are important differences. Jackson's argument assumes (i) that the long disjunction on the right-hand side of (1) is itself a natural property and (ii) that necessarily coextensive properties are identical. Rosen's argument does not rely on these assumptions. It assumes (a) that two necessarily coextensive properties are identical when it lies in their essences to be coextensive and (b) if it lies in the essence of a normative property N that it is instantiated when any of the description in the long disjunction is satisfied, then there must be some non-normative property φ that these descriptions share, such that it lies in the essence of N that N and φ are coextensive. These suppositions are not uncontroversial, but they are different from Jackson's highly problematic assumptions.

[5] Leary holds that there are *sui generis* non-natural normative properties whose essence cannot be specified in non-normative terms. Nevertheless, there are "hybrid properties whose essences specify both natural non-normative sufficient conditions for their own instantiation and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of certain *sui generis* normative properties" (LEARY, 2017, 98). No principle specifying non-normative sufficient conditions for the instantiation of a *sui generis* property N follows from the essence of N by itself. It does follow, however, from the essence of certain hybrid properties. For instance, it could be "part of the essence of being in pain that (a) if one's C-fibers are firing, then one is in pain, and (b) that if x is a painful experience, x is bad (where badness is a *sui generis* normative property)" (LEARY, 2017, 98). Leary's view explains strong supervenience while preserving the claim that we cannot provide real definitions of *sui generis* normative properties in non-normative terms. This view, however, faces some problems. Leary postulates hybrid properties in order to explain the necessary connections between natural and normative properties that are entailed by strong supervenience. In particular, those connections are to be explained by the essences of hybrid properties. But it seems that the essences of hybrid properties can offer no such explanation. Consider some necessary truths that are explained by the essences of the properties involved. "If something is made of H_2O, it is water" and "If something is a cat, it is a mammal". The first is explained by the essence of water, because it lies in the essence of water that water is *identical* to H2O. The second is explained by the essence of cat, because it lies in the essence of cat that cats are a *species* of mammal. These relations explain why it is impossible for there to be water that is not H_2O or a cat that is not a mammal. We would expect there to be similar explanations available in the case of necessary connections between natural and normative properties. For instance, if it lies in the essence of pain that if something is painful, then it is bad, we would expect there to be an explanation of why it is impossible for something to be painful but not bad. But no explanation is available. Non-naturalist cannot hold that being painful and being bad are identical, or that being painful is a species of the genus badness, or that being painful is a way of being bad – all of these suggestions are incompatible with the claim that "the normative is distinct and deeply different in kind from the natural" (LEARY, 2017, 81). It seems that the essences of hybrid properties cannot explain necessary connections between the normative and the natural. See Toppien (2018) for a criticism of Leary's view.

[6] That seems to be Scanlon's case. See Scanlon (2014, 41, note 40).

[7] Since humans are the only known species of persons, I will use "person" and "human" interchangeably in what follows. I assume, however, that any agent that is endowed with practical rationality (meaning she can identify reasons for action and act for those reasons), is capable of moral knowledge (that is, capable of distinguishing right from wrong, virtue from vice, good from bad) and is morally responsible for her actions is a person.

[8] To say that morality is receptive to persons is not to say that it gives free rein to our desires. Sometimes morality demands that we refrain from satisfying certain desires. Sometimes it requires sacrifices we do not want to make. To say that

morality is receptive to persons is simply to say that it deems each and every person highly valuable.

[9] Talk of normative reality may not be welcomed by some robust normative realists. Parfit, for instance, holds that there are mind-independent normative truths, but that these truths have no ontological implication, meaning that they need not be part of the spatio-temporal world nor part of some non-spatio-temporal part of reality (PARFIT, 2011b, 486). And Scanlon holds that the conditions for something to exist are "domain-specific" in the sense that there are no conditions of existence that apply across all domains of inquiry (SCANLON, 2014, 22-27). The conditions for physical entities, numbers and normative relations to exist are different and there is not a sense of "the world" in which physical entities, numbers and normative relations are all part of the world (SCANLON, 2014, 24). Despite these metaphysical reservations, both Parfit and Scanlon are normative realists who hold that there are normative truths that are independent of us and that we may be able to discover. I will use "normative reality" or "the normative dimension of reality" to refer to the set of all these truths or facts. To claim that the normative reality could have been different is just to say that the members of this set could have been different. What the ontological consequences of asserting that a certain normative statement is true are, or if there are any, is irrelevant to my argument.

[10] And some of them have been taken seriously as candidates to normative truths by some philosophers. For instance, according to Williams' internalism about normative reasons (see WILLIAMS, 1981), claims like these could turn out to be true about some especially perverse agents.

[11] Some realists challenge the view that non-natural normative facts are causally inert. Shafer-Landau, for instance, holds that "moral facts might causally explain our moral beliefs, even if there is full causal determination by natural forces of our moral beliefs, and even if, as non-naturalists claim, moral facts are neither type-identical nor token-identical to natural ones" (Shafer-Landau, 2012, 27). Even he would agree, however, that non-natural facts cannot be directly causally responsible for the existence of a certain kind of being. As he sees things, the only thing normative facts could explain are our normative beliefs: "The only thing that we might need moral facts to causally explain are our beliefs about them (SHAFER-LANDAU, 2012, p.28). By explaining our beliefs, normative facts could explain our actions, but they could never explain why we exist.

[12] Hussain (2019) presents a similar objection. He argues that normative demands apply to persons in such a way that if persons did not exist, normative demands would have no application. Given that persons happen to exist, there is a match between the normative dimension of reality and its natural dimensions. Hussain's argument is supposed to create a problem even if we assume normative facts to be metaphysically necessary and applies to robust normative realism as such, not only to robust ethical realism. The problem I am presenting is different on both accounts. It is compatible with normative realism and does not arise if we assume normative facts to be metaphysically necessary.

[13] The miracle objection is a problem for robust ethical realism, but in no way a refutation of the view. As Enoch points out, brute and unexplained coincidences are not impossible. But the fact is that coincidences put pressure in us to look for an explanation. We should opt for the theory that, among other things, best explains what needs explaining. If robust ethical realism is committed to a coincidence it cannot explain, it "loses plausibility points" (ENOCH, 2011, 165). How serious the problem posed by the moral coincidence is turns on how remarkable the coincidence is and on the ability of rival theories to explain it away.

[14] Rosen discusses a similar epistemic objection to his form of non-naturalism (which denies strong supervenience and the claim that normative truths are metaphysically contingent). See Rosen (2020, 229-231). This objection is also different from the miracle objection, which is not at all an epistemic objection.

[15] For replies to the evolutionary debunking argument along these lines see, for instance, Parfit (2011, p.520), Shafer-Landau (2012), FitzPatrick (2014a and 2014b) and Cuneo (2018).

[16] The view that fundamental normative truths are brute is shared by other realists. See, for instance, Rosen (2020, 223) and Heathwood (2017).

[17] Indeed, this kind of subjectivism regarding our reasons is explicitly denied by many robust ethical realists. See Shafer-Landau (2003, Ch. 7), FitzPatrick (2008, 180-1) and Parfit (2011a, Ch. 3).

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