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Reyes Espinoza
info@ubiquitypress.com

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Abstract

The field of Ethics in philosophy is confusing for many, even those having worked in the field a few years. Thus, the field of Meta-ethics may be even more confusing. Meta-ethics, in a nutshell, is arguing about how to argue about Ethics. A question to ask in this field is what are moral properties? That is, what makes claims about morality true or false? Peter Railton takes them to be naturalistic properties (facts in the natural and social sciences) that play an explanatory role in empirical theories. Railton's ethical naturalism is one such theory of morality. Here I will focus on an objection to Railton's theory. Neil Sinclair claims that instrumentally rational people might sometimes not agree with Railton's definition of moral rightness; moral rightness being identical with satisfying the objective interests of a group of people. Based on this, Sinclair argues, one should reject Railton's claim that moral properties are identical with facts in the natural and social sciences. My argument allows for exceptions in Railton's theory such that it preserves his definition of moral rightness and allows for instrumentally rational agents to sometimes disagree with his definition of moral rightness. Editor's Note: Honorable Mention Paper, 17th Annual Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference (2013)

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Cover Page Footnote

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Reyes Espinoza

University of Texas at El Paso

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Abstract

The field of Ethics in philosophy is confusing for many, even those having worked in the field a few years. Thus, the field of Meta-ethics may be even more confusing. Meta-ethics, in a nutshell, is arguing about how to argue about Ethics. A question to ask in this field is what are moral properties? That is, what makes claims about morality true or false? Peter Railton takes them to be naturalistic properties (facts in the natural and social sciences) that play an explanatory role in empirical theories. Railton's ethical naturalism is one such theory of morality. Here I will focus on an objection to Railton's theory. Neil Sinclair claims that instrumentally rational people might sometimes not agree with Railton's definition of moral rightness; moral rightness being identical with satisfying the objective interests of a group of people. Based on this, Sinclair argues, one should reject Railton's claim that moral properties are identical with facts in the natural and social sciences. My argument allows for exceptions in Railton's theory such that it preserves his definition of moral rightness and allows for instrumentally rational agents to sometimes disagree with his definition of moral rightness.

Peter Railton's interpretation of moral properties is that they are supposed to participate in good empirical theories just like facts in the "the natural and social sciences, [for example, how facts in] biology and psychology" participate in good empirical theories (Sinclair 417). I will defend Railton's view against critiques raised by Neil Sinclair in *Two Kinds of Naturalism in Ethics*. The main problem that I will explore is whether or not the postulation of moral properties is necessary to explain certain sets of "natural and social facts" (Railton 157).

Sinclair argues that moral properties are not identical with naturalistic (including social) facts (Sinclair 417). Sinclair ends up thinking this because he can imagine a situation where the objective interests of a group of people would go unsatisfied and at the same time this would be rationally approved of by the right kind of people (socially rational people), hence moral wrongness would not be identical with not satisfying the objective interests of some groups of people (Sinclair 433). As stated above, I will defend Railton's explanatory account of moral properties from his ethical naturalism against

Sinclair's critique of it. I will argue that instead of abandoning Railton's method and keeping his definitions of moral rightness and wrongness (as Sinclair suggests we should do (Sinclair 436)) one is best to interpret the conflict of objective interests of agents as a limitation of morality akin to limits that we encounter in nature. For example, there is a limit when having to choose to walk left or right to reach the same destination; the limit is you cannot walk in both directions at the same time.

First, I will briefly cover the necessary portions of Railton's ethical naturalism: reforming naturalistic definition, the a posteriori requirement, subjective interests, reduction basis, objectified subjective interests, objective interests, Lonnie's case, intrinsic non-moral goodness, the social point of view, and social rationality. Secondly, I will analyze and criticize Sinclair's interpretation of Railton's moral properties. Thirdly, I will bring up objections to my criticism of Sinclair. Fourthly and lastly, I will conclude by holding, like Railton, that moral properties are "(identical with) some naturalistically respectable property" (Sinclair 420).

Railton's ethical naturalism

Railton provides his reader with "reforming naturalistic definitions of non-moral goodness and moral rightness" (Railton 170). In a sense, the definitions are based upon features of the natural world (including social facts). Railton takes it as a given that coming up with such definitions is part of "theory construction" (Railton 170), and Railton is attempting to sketch out a theory of "moral realism," where moral realism is realism about moral value or moral norms (Railton 157). I will be concerned with Railton's explanation of moral norms, questions of moral rightness and wrongness (Railton 157). To conclude this explanation of reforming naturalistic definitions, they are to be judged as good definitions only in an a posteriori manner because they are synthetic claims, claims about the world (Sinclair 420).

Here I will cover the different types of 'interests' that Railton outlines. Subjective interests are the "wants or desires [of a person,] conscious or unconscious" (Railton 151). They are also the secondary qualities, "akin to taste" (Railton 151). Thus, I may want sugar because it is sweet and I crave sweetness. Here we have two instances of secondary qualities and a few primary qualities. First, a primary quality is what fuels the secondary quality. In this case, the sweetness of the sugar (the secondary quality) exists because of the composition of the sugar (the primary quality). But the sweetness is also desired by me not only because of the sugar's composition, but also my composition (taste receptors), my surroundings (environment), which make it so that I react, or am disposed to perceive sugar as sweet, and, hence, desire it (Railton 151). Another way of putting this is that the secondary qualities supervene on the primary qualities (Railton 151). Here we can take this to mean that the secondary qualities happen because of the primary qualities. Railton calls this "complex set of relational,

dispositional, primary qualities the *reduction basis* of the secondary quality” (Railton 151).

Now, let us talk about Regular Lonnie.¹¹ Regular Lonnie is a traveler who, unbeknownst to him, is being followed by Lonnie plus (+), where Lonnie + is Regular Lonnie, but with special powers. Lonnie + has “unqualified cognitive and imaginative powers, and full factual and nomological information about [Regular Lonnie’s] physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history and so on” (Railton 152). Also “his instrumental rationality is in no way defective” (Railton 152). Instrumental rationality is choosing the appropriate act that would advance one’s ends (Railton 147). The objectified subjective interests for Regular Lonnie are what Lonnie + would want Regular Lonnie to have. For example, Regular Lonnie is dehydrated and needs water, but Regular Lonnie desires milk, which would upset his stomach. Lonnie + would want Regular Lonnie to have water (Railton 152).

Regular Lonnie’s story leads us to objective interests. In the example above water would be the objective interest of Regular Lonnie. In other words, water is the reduction basis “in virtue of this complex, relational, dispositional set of facts” (Railton 152). Water is a primary quality that would hydrate Lonnie, even though he does not desire it. In general, objective interests, in this case, are that which Lonnie + would want Regular Lonnie to want. A quick note here on the use of Lonnie +, it is not the fact that Lonnie + wants Regular Lonnie to want water, but the fact that water is the primary quality that is good for Regular Lonnie’s health that is the “truth-maker” (Railton 152).

This now positions me to talk about intrinsic non-moral good. Intrinsic non-moral goodness is an objective interest of a person without reference to another objective interest of that person (Railton 153). With this in mind, in Regular Lonnie’s case, water is intrinsically non-morally good for Regular Lonnie. For Railton, intrinsic non-moral goodness is inextricably tied to social rationality, but first I will discuss the social point of view.

Simply put a social point of view is the taking into account of the perspectives of more than one person, but it is crucial to Railton’s conception of social rationality. An idealization of social rationality is “what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under the circumstances of full and vivid information” (Railton 161). This definition is similar to what objectified subjective interests were described as above. The main difference is the social point of view. From here we can say a little bit about what moral rightness and wrongness are. Moral wrongness will be a deviation from social rationality and moral rightness will be to approximate social rationality (Railton 161).

I have so far ignored some very important parts of Railton's ethical naturalism such as the wants/interests mechanism, the criterial explanation (and the extended version of it), among others, but what I have provided thus far will allow me to now analyze Sinclair's opposition to Railton's interpretation of moral properties.

An analysis of Sinclair's critique of Railton's moral properties

Sinclair takes Railton's account of moral rightness (and moral wrongness) to be "response-dependent" (Sinclair 424). From here on out, like Sinclair, I will only use the example of moral wrongness. Response-dependent here means that moral wrongness obtains when certain sets of natural or social facts affecting a certain type of person make a certain type of person react in certain sorts of ways. This is how Sinclair puts it: " ϕ is morally wrong iff ϕ is disposed to elicit R_1 [disapproval] from P [people that are instrumentally rational] in C [when considering equally the objective interests of all those potentially affected by ϕ]" (Sinclair 425). However, Sinclair tells us, this says nothing about the "nature" of moral properties, but there appear two possible candidates for moral properties to be identical to (Sinclair 425).

For Sinclair moral properties are supposed to be identical to one of two types of properties, either (A) dispositional properties (DP), of which there are two versions, or (B) the categorical grounds of dispositions (CGoD), where the former is roughly the reactions of people to moral situations and the latter is that moral property (action or event) which makes people react (in our case) with satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Sinclair rejects Railton's interpretation of the explanatory role of moral properties in good empirical theories, that is, that they can explain certain natural or social phenomena because, he argues, moral properties do not end up being identical to either DP or CGoD.

To explain it another way, Sinclair rejects the explanatory role of moral properties in Railton's ethical naturalism because, he claims, Railton's method (discovering moral properties in an a posteriori way) does not yield an identity relation between moral properties and DP or CGoD (Sinclair 435). Furthermore, according to Sinclair, because of this non-identity relation between moral properties and DP or CGoD, moral properties do not causally interact with "observable non-moral" phenomena (Sinclair 417). Therefore, moral properties cannot participate in good empirical theories as Railton claims.

Before continuing further, I feel I need to give a more complete definition of both DP and CGoD in order for this analysis to be fully accurate. Here I present the definitions of both dispositional properties (both versions of it) and the categorical grounds of dispositional properties: A. *dispositional properties* of which there are two versions, AV1 or AV2: AV1 "a highly idealised hypothetical situation [(socially rational people

contemplating the objective interests of all those affected)] [that brings] about an actual situation [(for example, a revolt)]” (Sinclair 428) or AV2 the reactions of certain idealized agents in certain idealized circumstances (Sinclair 429) **or** B. the *categorical grounds of dispositions* are “certain properties that make it the case that” socially rational agents react in certain sorts of ways (Sinclair 430).

Sinclair rejects A and B because of three scenarios he constructs that do not yield an identity to moral properties as Railton has conceived of them. I will be defending B (the CGoD) because it seems that is what Railton has in mind when he talks about moral properties. Also, CGoD can still be true even if DP is false, thus DP is of no concern to me at this point. As stated above, figuring out the identity relation is an a posteriori matter. Thus, I will present how Sinclair concluded that moral properties were not identical to CGoD.

Sinclair presents three interpretations of what it means to discount the interests of a group of people, which he then evaluates as not identical to the property of moral wrongness, but which Railton seems to think that there is an identity (Sinclair 431). First, he equates moral wrongness to not satisfying the objective interests of some groups of people. Second, he equates moral wrongness to not counting equally the objective interests of some groups of people. Third and lastly, he equates moral wrongness to both not satisfying the interests of some groups of people and not counting their interests equally. I will only concentrate on the first case because Sinclair’s claims about two and three derive from the first. Thus, if the first yields an identity the other two possibly being false would not affect the first, but it seems more reasonable *prima facie* that if the first is true the other two stands a good chance of also being true.

Situation One: Moral wrongness as not satisfying the objective interests of some groups of people

Sinclair states,

A ruling body...might quite possibly be in a situation where, whatever it does, the objective interests of some subset of its citizens would remain unsatisfied. Nevertheless, there may still be some decisions of such a body that would not be disapproved of by instrumentally rational people considering equally the objective interests of all potentially affected individuals under conditions of full and vivid information. (433)

It follows then, he claims, that the property of moral wrongness is not CGoD (certain properties that make it the case that socially rational agents react in certain sorts of ways) because not satisfying the objective interests of some subset of a population is

sometimes not disapproved of by 'instrumentally rational people considering equally the objective interests of all potentially affected individuals under conditions of full and vivid information'.

Criticism of Sinclair's Assessment

As I stated in the introduction, sometimes there are two directions, left or right, and both of them get you to your destination, and let us also say in the same amount of time, with no difference in environment. Let us also add that you have no prejudice against either right or left, all you care about is getting to your destination. In such a case which one should you take? The choice is arbitrary. Both directions yield the same result. But the fact remains that we have to choose one if we are to reach the desired destination.

Similarly, sometimes morality presents us with choices that yield the same result. Say I am instrumentally rational and am walking along a lake when I see two men drowning. Let us also suppose that I have full and vivid information about the lives of the two men, and that I find out that they have led similar sorts of lives and will lead similar sorts of lives. Since I also have full and vivid information I find out that I only have enough time to save one. Once I swim to one and bring him ashore the other one will drown. Now, is it morally wrong for me to save one and let the other drown? No it is not morally wrong. If I only have the ability to save one, then it is not morally wrong for me to let the other one die, it was out of my hands. The morally wrong thing to do would be to save neither; it matters not who I save. The point is that the morally right thing to do is to save one, but it is not morally wrong to let one drown when I save the other.

This example, I contend, can help us figure out what is misleading about the Sinclair's example. Sinclair wants us to believe that not satisfying the objective interests of a group of people is not morally wrong because there are cases when their objective interests cannot be met, and instrumentally rational people with full and vivid information would agree to not satisfy that group's objective interests. I think such a case parallels my drowning example above. There are instances when resources are limited and, all things being equal (e.g. it was not because of fraud, etc.) governments cannot satisfy every group's objective interests. Such cases would not be disapproved of by instrumentally rational people with full and vivid information because such cases are not morally wrong. A situation cannot be morally wrong if the capabilities of agents were being used at their maximum and there was no possible way the agent could have foreseen the situation.

Therefore, the property of moral wrongness remains identical to not satisfying the objective interests of some groups of people, except when the capabilities of agents

involved were being used at their maximum and there was no possible way the agents could have foreseen the situation, and such restrictions prevented the morally responsible agents from satisfying the group's objective interests.

Criticisms of my response to Sinclair

One could object that my drowning example is too different from Sinclair's ruling body example to be a good parallel case. There are many objections that could be brought up against me, but I will only concentrate on this one.

Sinclair's ruling body example has a decision maker and so does mine, the agent making the decision of who to save from drowning. There are objective interests that will not be satisfied just like in Sinclair's example; one man will die regardless of who the agent saves. The greatest difference is the scope. In my example there is one person deciding and two people that might drown. In Sinclair's example there is a ruling body (presumably more than one person), and more people would probably be affected by their decision. This difference is not too cumbersome to my intent with the drowning example. My current example could be used as a sketch to come up with an example of larger a scope that yields the same conclusion. Thus, my example is good enough to parallel with Sinclair's.

Conclusion

Like Peter Railton, I hold that moral properties are "(identical with) some naturalistically respectable property" (Sinclair 420). In the case above moral wrongness is identical with not satisfying the objective interests of a group of people, except when the capabilities of agents involved were being used at their maximum and there was no possible way the agents could have foreseen the situation, and such restrictions prevented the morally responsible agents from satisfying the group's objective interests. My response opposes Sinclair's position that there is no identity between moral properties and natural and social facts. If my criticism of Sinclair stands, then moral properties are that much closer to having an explanatory role in good empirical theories.

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¹ I am slightly modifying Lonnie's story for the sake of making it fit in the essay. I am attempting to retain the meaning, while putting in and taking out a few (hopefully) unimportant details.