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**NATURE, VALUES AND OBLIGATIONS: THE NATURALISM  
DEBATE IN METAETHICS**

*Theses of the doctoral dissertation*

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## **I. Choice of the topic and the aims of the dissertation**

In my doctoral dissertation I present the conceptual framework and standpoints of the naturalism debate in the 20th century. The investigated naturalism problem is the problem of the relation between natural features investigated by scientific approach and moral ones. The core of the problem is that, while it seems certain that nature influences moral evaluation and right human behaviour through the biological and psychological set-up and the societal environment of humans (therefore according to the naturalism moral features are identical to natural features), at the same time it seems also unequivocal that this impact from the natural set-up and the societal environment does not mean or it cannot be derived that moral features would be identical to natural features (this is the standpoint of anti-naturalism).

The metaethical naturalism debate has been developed alongside the debate on George E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in the 20th century. It was Moore's book what brought up the naturalistic fallacy and open question arguments the most effectively. The formerly applied argument techniques came up again in the debate after conceptualizing these arguments. One of these techniques is the argument linked to Hume's name, according to which moral features cannot be derived from statements refer to natural features. To the debate created by these points of view, to the naturalism debate, all of the significant analytic philosophers have made a contribution in the 20th century. Nowadays in this debate it is not only about changing arguments about the formerly set standpoints, but during the last 20-30 years new or forgotten points of view came up and the previous framework of the debate has been defined in a different way as well. Therefore the standpoints of the metaethical naturalism debate can be conceptualised in such a conceptual framework that was not characteristic to the two thirds of the century, moreover, a new taxonomy of the theory was described what was previously non-existent.

My aim is to elaborate this contemporary debate, more strictly, to define the conceptual framework of the contemporary metaethical naturalism debate, and to place the contemporary theories within this framework. I do not have the intention to describe an own point of view.

## **II. The method of elaborating the debate**

Alongside the above mentioned aims when discussing the theories I equivalently rely on historical, thematic and author-centred approach. Analysing metaethical naturalism debate demands the description both of the former and the new, fitted concepts and theories as well. As the task is threefold, the methods need to be diverse. Consequently, when exposing the problems which characterized the first two thirds of the 20th century I mainly apply historical

approach, and when conceptualizing the contemporary debate I rely on thematic approach, and eventually, when presenting the theories, I work along the author-centred approach.

### **III. Theses**

#### *1. The particularity of the metaethical naturalism debate*

In the dissertation under the expression 'naturalism debate' I always mean the metaethical naturalism debate, in which the most important problem is the nature of the relationship between natural characteristics and facts what can be investigated by natural sciences and moral characteristics, facts and obligations. Beyond this, naturalism debate also includes in one hand the problem whether the origin of moral should be searched in the world or in the will of a transcendent being, and, in the other, the problem whether moral is connected to the original or the artificial state of the world. In my dissertation I do not deal with the latter two problems.

#### *2. The traditional naturalism debate*

The metaethical naturalism debate was opened by the argument launched in George E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in the beginning of the 20th century. The argument is known in two different versions, from which the one named 'the naturalistic fallacy' was thoroughly used in the first two thirds of the 20th century. According to this naturalistic fallacy argument the naturalist theories make logical fallacy, since they aim to define moral expressions. However, moral expressions cannot be defined, because open questions can be phrased against all these definitions, as moral expressions refer to simple properties and as naturalist identity statements/claims not obviously true statements.

Beyond the naturalistic fallacy argument, against naturalism the so called, and in its original form assigned to Hume, Hume's law argument can also be phrased. According to Hume's law, from statements refer to natural facts moral statements cannot be ensued, since statements refer to natural facts do not contain such moral terms like „ought to”, or since statements refer to natural facts are descriptive, moral statements, in contrast, are prescriptive.

Between the naturalist, and the formed with the help of the above mentioned two arguments anti-naturalist points of view, according to Bernard Williams, one of the most important differences is that while naturalism is perfectly capable to explain moral agreement, but it is incapable to explain moral disagreement, anti-naturalism explains moral disagreement easily, but faces serious problems when explaining moral agreement.

A moral theory, however, ought to be able to explain the possibility of both moral agreement and moral disagreement at the same time. Naturalism and anti-naturalism in the above mentioned forms are both false.

### *3. Conceptual framework of the contemporary metaethical naturalism debate*

Arguments of Moore and Hume can be re-phrased. According to the re-phrased version of Moore's argument, the open question argument, moral characteristics are not identical to natural characteristics, because in actual or modal situation open questions can be put against definitions identifying moral and natural characteristics. According to the re-phrased version of Hume's law, the argument from justification, although moral statements can be derived from empirical facts, from these kind of derivations only those ones are capable to justify acts, which are categorical and derived from the notion of agent.

The open question argument and the argument from justification have two particularities. On the one hand, these argument are effective not only against naturalist theories, but against some anti-naturalist theories as well, on the other, the arguments are not effective against all naturalist theories. The arguments, therefore, should be considered not so much as train of thoughts against naturalism, but rather train of thoughts that structure the naturalism debate. It means that theories in the naturalism debate can be grouped by whether they approve the arguments (they are immune to them) or they disapprove them (they are fallible by them).

### *4. Taxonomy*

#### *4.a. Naturalist theories*

The open question argument is approved by none of the naturalist theories, and, those theories, according to which moral properties or facts exist, and moral properties or facts are identical to natural properties or facts (substantive naturalism) are fallible also by the argument from justification. Another group of naturalist theories (methodological naturalism) approves the argument from justification. According to these theories, moral properties or facts or not exist, or at least they are not so significant as the process of taking moral judgements, what is a natural process.

All of the nonnaturalist theories approve the open question argument, but some of them are fallible by the argument from justification. Those theories that claim the existence of moral characteristics or facts, and moral properties or facts are not identical to natural properties or facts (substantive nonnaturalism), are fallible by the argument from justification. Those nonnaturalist theories, however, according to which moral properties do not exist, or at

least they are less important than the process of taking moral judgement (methodological nonnaturalism), are immune to the argument from justification.

Substantive naturalism is represented by two theories, the reformative naturalism and the homeostatic bundle theory. Both theories identify moral and natural properties with each other without eliminating the previously mentioned things, since both theories believe that moral concepts cannot be irrevocably identified with natural concepts.

According to the reformative naturalism (Peter Railton) the statements that identify the two different properties reductively are such synthetic statements that would be advised by the ideal self of someone to answer the question 'what is good for me'. The open question that can be put against the theory is the following: 'Is the advice coming from the ideal advisor self good?'. The theory is also fallible by the argument from justification, as the advice of the ideal advisor self means obligation only for the person whose ideal advisor self gives the advice, for other people not. This way, statements derived from the advice of the ideal self lean on the concept of agent, but mean obligation only for the person whose ideal advisor self gives the advice. Therefore, statements derived from the advice of the ideal advisor self are not categorical.

According to the homeostatic bundle theory proposed by Richard Boyd, moral properties strongly (necessarily) supervene on natural characteristics, and the moral properties are identified with natural properties by natural definitions. Natural definitions are statements justified or failed by empirical discoveries, that state the meaning of moral terms and natural kind terms are identical. According to the theory moral kind terms refer to such bundle of human needs, that their satisfaction is useful for people, i.e., theory believes when identifying moral properties, consequentialist normative ethical theory plays part. The open question that can be put against homeostatic bundle theory is the question can be put in the modal situation, 'Is it good when identifying moral characteristics, consequentialist normative ethical theory plays part?'. In addition, this theory is fallible by the argument from justification, as moral explanations given with the help of natural definitions are *genuin*, but contingent explanations. The real explanatory work is done by natural facts, the role of moral facts is only to choose the explanatory natural facts. Since this work cannot be exclusively done by the moral fact in the definition, therefore categorical statements cannot be deduced from statements refer to natural facts.

Methodological naturalism is also represented by two theories, projectivism and society-centred theory. According to these theories moral properties and moral facts are non-existent,

or, at least they are less important than the process of moral judgement. The process of moral judgement is natural process – according to both theories.

According to projectivism (Simon Blackburn), moral statements project such cognitive states that are reductively identical to special, intrinsically motivating states. Special intrinsically motivating states are altruistic desires what act upon the others' interests and were developed by the evolutionary process. The open question argument can be put against projectivism alongside the identity of biological and rational altruistic motivation. The theory does not distinguish the evolution-driven biological altruistic states and rational altruistic stated based on judgements. Consequently, the so called representational question can be formed, i.e. 'Could the same genetic feature that is represented in other species as behavioural tendency (altruistically motivated behaviour), be represented in the case of a species that has culture and language, and that is capable to conceptual thinking?'. This theory is not fallible by the argument from justification, since according to the theory, moral judgements are the consequences of the fact that the altruistic motivational state is the projection of such a point of view that is commonly shared by all people.

According to the society-centred theory by David Copp moral statements can be true in case they correspond to such a societal standard that is justified in that society in which it is a standard, and a standard is justified in a society if the society could be rational to choose that standard instead of other ones. Moreover, the theory claims that a society chooses a standard rationally, when it chooses them according to its needs. Therefore, the open question argument against society-centred theory can be phrased as 'Is it good to satisfy the needs of a society?'. The society-centred theory is not fallible by the argument from justification, since according to the theory, moral statements can be derived from such statements that refer to justified standards, i.e. those standards that are chosen by a society as rational agent, instead of other possibilities.

#### *4.b. Nonnaturalist theories*

All nonnaturalist theories accept the open question argument, but some of them are fallible by the argument from justification. Those theories, according to which moral properties or facts exist and moral properties or facts are not identical to natural properties or facts (substantive nonnaturalism) are fallible by argument from justification. Those nonnaturalist theories, however, that claim the non-existence of moral properties or facts, or at least, they are less important than the process of moral judgement (methodological nonnaturalism) are immune to the argument from justification.

The two theories connected to substantive nonnaturalism are the moral realism and the moral significance theory. According to these theories moral facts are not identical to natural facts, but they are not different, between them there is version of weak supervenience relation.

According to moral realism proposed by Russ Shafer-Landau, moral facts are such mind-independent facts that supervene on natural facts only in particular possible worlds, and, in addition, they are necessarily coextensive. Consequently, within the actual world it is not unambiguous that on which natural facts moral facts supervene. According to the theory, as a consequence, moral facts can be learned via intuition and reliable moral capacity, but non of these cognitive forms are infallible, they simply justify someone's beliefs. As a consequence, the open question argument cannot be stated against the theory. The argument from justification, however, is effective against moral realism, as the theory accepts the instrumental theory of action, according to that, action is the thing which helps to realize mind-independent moral facts, i.e., actions only have instrumental value. Moral realism, therefore, when deriving statements that justify actions, does not rely on the notion of agent.

According to the moral significance theory by Jonathan Dancy moral facts are mind-independents facts of moral significance of the natural facts, and what are result-related to natural facts. The theory claims that moral facts are sensitive to the context, i.e. when changing the context, moral facts change as well, and they could be learnt directly, via particular intuition. The open question argument cannot be placed against the theory, as it is always decided by the context which natural facts have moral relevance. But the argument from justification is effective against the theory. According to the moral significance theory, complex moral facts are obligations consist of combinations of a belief and an imperative, e.g. in the case of the moral fact 'Needy people ought be aided.' people are obliged to 'either help if they believe others needed to be aided, or if they do not believe it, and do not help'. From moral facts, however, this theory is capable to derive categorical statements, but because of ignoring personal integrity, categorical statements is not derived from the notion of agent.

The two theories connected to methodological naturalism are the rationalist constructivism and the sensitivity theory. According to them, moral characteristics and moral facts are far less important than the process of moral belief-making, which, as being a reason-making process is not identical to the natural process.

Rational constructivism can be formed in two ways, as a first, and as a second person theory. According to the first person rational constructivism proposed by Christine Korsgaard, moral statements refer to such mind-dependent, first person moral facts and obligations that are the results of a rational thinking process, and the agent's reflexive belief-making process

is inherent part of the rational thinking process. According to the theory, when making reflexive beliefs, the agents recognise that their practical identity is that make them, and other agents are intrinsically valuable. Therefore, the first person theory defines moral value with intrinsic value. Against the definition, however, the 'Is it good if something has in intrinsic value?' open question can be put. According to the second person rational constructivism proposed by Stephen Darwall, moral facts are results of the process of rational thinking, and that agents have practical authority or moral responsibility is an inherent part of the thinking process. Agents have practical authority and moral responsibility is, naturally, a moral fact, that supposes that agents have practical authority and moral responsibility, an so on. This way, definition of moral facts become a circular definition, that derives statements refer to moral facts from statements refer to moral facts, therefore, it is not fallible by the open question argument. Rational constructivism is not fallible by the argument from justification either, as the theory is capable to derive categorical obligations and need from referring to the notion of intrinsically valuable person, or the notion of a person having practical authority and moral responsibility.

According to the sensitivity theory proposed by John McDowell, moral statements refer to such moral facts, to values, that are not independent form the mind, but they are consequences of the functioning of the practical mind. According to the theory, those natural facts are moral facts that deserve to be perceived as valuable by the moral experience, and it is that experience which is worth to judge the value of natural facts, that, after moral education, is capable to discover moral facts. The sensitivity theory defines moral facts with the help of moral experience, and moral experience is defined by moral facts. As a consequence, the theory is infallible to the open question argument and it is also immune to the argument from justification, since according to the theory, functioning of the practical mind and reactions of moral sensitivity are the second nature of humans, that is the nature of humans as agent, and, from that unconditional, categorical, statements can be derived.