

Hedonic Naturalism

Contemporary naturalism and the explanatory power of hedonic properties

David Brax, Department of Philosophy, Lund University

A brief history of hedonism and naturalism

The more or less official history has it that meta-ethical naturalism took a beating in the early twentieth century¹, was largely ignored during the next fifty years or so, largely due to the dominance of non-cognitivism², and that it then managed to stage a comeback when it was realised that a priori accessible analyses was not the only route by which to establish property identities, or even meaning equivalences³. The story does not end there, but the consensus about how it should be written pretty much does. No matter what your verdict on the validity of Moore's arguments in *Principia Ethica*⁴, his treatment of naturalism forced naturalists to specify their claims and contemporary naturalism is a simultaneously better defined and more diverse set of theories because of it.

Related to this development, or at least parallel to it, *hedonism* was put into serious disrepute. As recent writings on the subject⁵ have reminded us, hedonism was a widely accepted view in the late nineteenth century, and was abandoned for a number of reasons, some of which have since been seriously challenged. *Naturalist* hedonism was thus doubly challenged, both on account of its content and its form, as it were. The naturalist fallacy argument *and* the open question argument were directed at it,

¹ Important arguments (in the sense "influential") were developed by Moore, Ayer, and Ewing. See Sturgeon "Ethical Naturalism" in the Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (p 91-120)

² This history is present in Philippa Foot's "Does moral subjectivism rest on a mistake" and "Natural Goodness".

³ Sturgeon, Boyd, Railton, Jackson etc. Largely as a spin-off from natural kind semantics, as developed by Kripke (Naming and Necessity) and Putnam (the Meaning of Meaning)

⁴ A subject on which Moore himself took a rather dim view (see "a reply to my critics" and preface to the second edition)

⁵ Crisp (2005), Katz (2005), Mendola (2006)

not only by implication: it was explicitly treated as an *example* in those arguments. The naturalistic counter-argument that Moore stacked the cards against naturalism by considering only highly implausible versions of it⁶, is thus not available to the naturalist hedonist.

The Case Against Hedonism

One of the reasons hedonism was abandoned was the failure to deliver a method to account for relevant outcomes for consequentialist theories of rightness. Never an actual *argument* in favour of hedonism, it was held as a clear *advantage* that it could make moral counting possible. When the so-called “introspectionist” program, the idea that you could measure your level of wellbeing by pure self-awareness, failed, this advantage was lost. On the other hand, the argument has been made that hedonists need not cater to utilitarianism, and that its plausibility both predates it and would outlive its decline⁷.

A second blow to the hedonist cause came with Moore’s attack on Mill. Even if pleasure were the only thing truly desired, i.e. if classical *psychological hedonism* were true, this would not establish the truth of hedonism about the good. While equating “desired” with “desirable” is surely a mistake, it was not a mistake that Mill committed⁸. While no proof, and no conceptual entailment exist between mere psychological facts about desire and desirability, the only *evidence* of desirability is still the existence and persistence of desire for that object.

Third: other things than pleasure turn up in evaluative introspection. *Intuitionists* like Ross and Moore managed to convince that the things we value for their own sake are not all reducible to the pleasure they bring. In other words: even granted that psychological hedonism would yield *some* evidence for evaluative hedonism, appeal to intrinsic desires, even informed ones, does not bear it out: psychological hedonism is demonstrably false. That is, *even if* psychological principles were relevant to the question of what is good, this particular link between psychology and ethics does not support hedonism. Even such reductionist views as *evolutionary* accounts of morality typically argues that what’s good for us is what is important to our survival, and

⁶ Both Nicholas Sturgeon and Frank Jackson have traded on this argument

⁷ Nevertheless, however independent from morality this theory of the good may be, it is what give morality its point, even though the point need not consists in a simple maximising or favouring relation. Katz 1986, 2005)

⁸ For this interpretation, see Millgram and Katz, below

pleasure, while usually a good guide in that respect, is simply not the only thing on that list. The hedonist, then, needs to either abandon its psychological basis, or find a new one. Hedonists are in something of an uphill struggle.

Semantics and Ontology

Moore has been accused for not distinguishing clearly enough between properties and concepts, and naturalists have since been eager to phrase their rebuttal in terms of this failure. The fact that “goodness” is distinct from any natural concept, does not imply that goodness is not identical to some natural property. All the open question argument shows is that normative statements don’t have the same *meaning* as naturalistic statements, but nevertheless, they could refer to the same property. Both being naturalists in the metaphysical sense, Jackson (1998) and Gibbard (2003) seem to be agreeing that there is no need to add properties, when there are properties available to do all the work required. Richard Boyd (1988) argued that seeing how there is a mutually reinforcing cluster of natural properties that regulates our value discourse, it makes sense to say that this is what value actually means. A second reply, also championed by Frank Jackson (1998, also in collaboration with Philip Pettit 1995) is that there actually *are* naturalistic definitions, or analytical true identity statements, linking natural properties for normative terms, and thus that there is no open question, or at least no open question that settles the matter. One reason is that the analysis is so complex, and of such an intricate networked character, that the fact that we consider its truth an open question does not demonstrate that it is not, in fact, conceptually closed. Whereas the former argument accuses Moore of confusing conceptual analysis with meta-physics, the latter accuses him of misunderstanding the nature of conceptual analysis.⁹

There are thus distinctions to be made: “metaphysical naturalism” is the view that value is a natural property whereas “semantic naturalism” is the view that evaluative concepts are analysable in natural terms. You do not need to be a semantic naturalist in order to be a metaphysical one, the reverse does not hold either. Indeed, non-cognitivists like Alan Gibbard have been known to argue that the property of goodness might very well be a natural property, even though the concept of value is

⁹ Jacksons 1998 naturalist manifest “From metaphysics to ethics” have the subtitle “a defence of conceptual analysis”.

not a natural concept. We can have distinct concepts *of* the same property, so to speak. Error theorists like Mackie might have held that whereas “value” does allow for a conceptual analysis, it is an analysis that cannot be instantiated. Richard Adams (2002) used a semantic argument from natural kinds but reached the conclusion that value is a *supernatural* property.

John Stuart Mill famously argued that to say about something that it is good and to say about it that it is pleasant is, in strict meaning, to say the same thing. This sounds like an overstatement, and if there is anything naturalists have been agreeing with Moore about, it is that in no way are “pleasure” and “goodness” synonyms. But there seem to be meaning equivalences, informative analyses, which do not pass the synonymy test. Meaning analysis is not the only way to establish property identity: a posteriori identities are not statements of meaning equivalences, even if the identities can reach near a priori status through abundant use¹⁰.

Clearly, it’s problematic to argue that “value” means *anything* very specific, seeing how sensible contenders have ranged from expressivism to cognitivism etc. What we have to work with is a rough folk-theory of value, the content of which is captured by what Smith¹¹ calls the “platitudes”, Railton “truims” and Jackson and Pettit “commonplaces”¹². I.e. the concept is, perhaps not *determined*, but somehow *limited* by the things that we believe to be true about value, and which we need anything posing as a candidate property to display or explain. It needs to do so on pain of being a theory about *value* at all: even if there is some elbow room for a theory about value on this approach, there still are restrictions on what the theory must account for. The argument has also been made¹³ that evaluative concepts have rather diverse content, given in different contexts and put to different uses (something we should expect for networked concepts: if for instance motivation is an essential feature of evaluative concepts, they will overlap conceptually with other motivational concepts), any specification need to *disambiguate*, and point to the phenomena it aims to provide a theory for.

¹⁰ See Peter Railton below.

¹¹ The Moral Problem (1994)

¹² Jackson & Pettit (1995)

¹³ See, for instance David Lewis (1989)

If hedonism is to be worked into a theory of value, it must be of such a disambiguating, even *revisionist*, kind. The naturalist here, as the physicalist/functionalist in the philosophy of mind, must argue that there is really nothing that is left out, no residue to be accounted for that is not already accounted for in a round about way by the naturalist theory offered. Normativity can be conceptually linked to value, even though value is not essentially normative. Normativity concerns, lets say, “what to do”, and the value of something does not settle what to do, even if it is conceptually true that the value of something is a reason, but what figures as a reason actually better be natural. Hence, barring question begging, there is no failure to account for the normative in naturalism, since it is not clear from the outset that it is required to. Leonard Katz wrote in 1986:

Immediately experienced pleasure can *ground* reasons for action without itself essentially belonging to the order of reasons. It is itself a reason only as it is something that can enter into reasons. (p 105)

Metaphysics

So, what does it involve to say that “value” is a natural property? It’s not enough, of course, to say that all good things are “natural” things, or even that its goodness depends on nothing but its natural properties. That merely amounts supervenience claim, and few would doubt that. It would be a mistake, a “Fallacy” even, non-naturalists say, to move from the fact that natural properties “regulates”, say, our use of normative terms, to the conclusion that those natural properties are identical to the properties of goodness. Of course, natural properties are normatively significant and it might even be that some particular natural property is the *only* normatively significant property. Still, that does not imply that the property in question is identical to the property of *normative significance*¹⁴. If there exist only one normatively significant property, this fact would not imply that this property *is* normative significance. If that property is what *makes* something good, it just cannot be identical to the property of goodness. Goodness does not make things good. Or so goes the argument. But what is

¹⁴ This insistence on value as “normative significance” is present in McNaughton/ Piers-Rawlings recent paper.

this argument? What is it that natural properties necessarily fail to do, which disqualifies them as normative properties?

The conditions for naturalism

If we want to be naturalist we need to cut out a role for the property of value to play, and to argue that this role exhaust the importance, or at least accounts for everything we need to account for when it comes to value. Is it debunking? Only if we undermine the naturalist position from the outset, something non-naturalists are naturally prepared to do. Naturalists, it seems, take an experimental approach. The reliance on synthetical identities relies on analogy between meta-ethics and science that have been questioned¹⁵. It is true that the analogy is question begging, but it is chosen to illuminate how value *could* be treated as a natural property. Possibly, this question must be begged, at least if any theory shall be given a chance to even leave the ground, and the justification of thus begging it can only be made on basis of what the resulting theory ultimately succeeds in delivering.

Moore claimed that the basis of hedonism is “almost entirely due” to the misconception that pleasure is somehow involved in the definition of good. If this is true, he said, hedonism is based on the naturalistic fallacy: “the failure to distinguish clearly that unique and undefinable quality which we mean by good”. Sturgeon replied that Moore cannot just help himself to the notion that value claims is “no business” of the natural sciences.

Hedonic naturalism and the relevance of psychology

In this paper, hedonist naturalism is defended. It is not a semantic thesis, even though it does argue that the semantics of ‘value’ allow us to treat it as a natural concept. A large part of the defence is based on psychology¹⁶. The fact that not only pleasure figure as ultimate objects of our deeply held desires does not establish that it is not, in fact, the ultimate source of motivation¹⁷. The pre-occupation of the *objects* of desires in classical theories of value, even in classical hedonism, mind, probably gives an incorrect picture of how motivation works. The role of pleasure in the motivational

¹⁵ For instance by Ball (1991)

¹⁶ In this paper the psychological grounds are treated very abstractly

¹⁷ The central role of pleasure in motivation has been established in the field known as “affective neuroscience” by people such as Kent Berridge. An overview of this field exists in Leonard Katz encyclopedia article on “Pleasure”.

system is not restricted to its occurrence as a reliable object of pro-attitudes, but as an ultimate prerequisite for desires to form at all. It might even be true have that people are *systematically misattributing* value, given the essential intentional nature of hedonic experiences and our tendency to assign properties to intentional objects rather than subjective states, and in defence of the hedonic thesis, add that they do so in a predictable manner, the explanation of which invokes hedonic processes. How our emotional learning functions cannot always be accessed consciously or accounted for by the agent. Human beings are adept at confabulations from the flawed information we got, which lead us to develop all sorts of theories of value. With a theory of this behaviour in place, we can deflate the expectations that our dearly held substantial intuitions are the end point of normative justification, and bring the attention back to the basic testament of the experience of value.

Whereas psychological hedonism in its classical formulation is surely wrong, then, it is still precisely because of its role in psychology that pleasure is a candidate property in ethics as well as in meta-ethics. This should hardly come as a surprise: no matter what you think about the causal powers of evaluative properties it is clearly something that can enter into our considerations and at least the *representation* of which have the power to move us to action. Secondly, it seems uncontroversial that there is such a thing as “feeling good”, and that this is a natural feature of a certain class of experiences, namely pleasures. If value is to be a natural property then, psychological properties seem to be the best candidates around.

The naturalist part

The more difficult project concerns how to show that this fact, if it is a fact, amounts to *identifying* pleasure with goodness. Would any sort of psychologically based explanation *count* as identifying value? The argument here, as it should be pursued by any aspiring naturalist, is that something counts as identifying value precisely if it fills a certain role¹⁸, just in the way that something *counts* as water if it is what regulates our uses of the concept, and fits the “water” role such as it is defined in folk-theory. Some things count as identifying a property, but there is, certainly, a limit to how

¹⁸ See the functionalist approach in Jackson and Pettit (1995), Jackson (1998), Smith (1994) and David Lewis on theoretical and psychophysical identifications (1999). See also Horgan and Timmons various collaborations for a critical assessment of this claim.

much of our everyday conception that can be revised before we are starting talking about something else. Michael Smith, for one, argues that it would take *something like inconsistency* between our conceptual expectations, to make us give up on any one of them. This is very strong and seemingly unfounded claim the hedonist will do well to challenge. In particular, as we have seen, the hedonist need to be able to undermine the non-hedonic *substantial* platitudes that Smith seems to assign exemplar status in how we learn evaluative concepts. Indeed, the hedonist need not deny that non-hedonic entities are the exemplars that we learn evaluative concepts by, but only deny that this learning is based on their intrinsic properties, rather than their hedonic impact.

It has been suggested that the role, the playing of which makes it a candidate, should *itself* be worked into property form and identified with valuableness. But the argument can be made that it is in fact pleasure that dictates and modulates the workings of the role, rather than the other way around. For this reason, pleasure is the more fundamental property. Boyd (2003) pointed to the fact that the property that best fits our water concept is in fact not H₂O, but a very dilute carbonic acid. Still, H₂O is the more basic scientific property that *explains* the behaviour of water. Similarly, pleasure and hedonic properties have the ability to *explain* the antics of value concepts, thus giving it a clear advantage as the basic natural property tracked by those concepts. If pleasantness and the function came apart, would the goodness stay with pleasantness or, instead, accrue to whatever else performs the function? I will, for know, leave the question how to evaluate value claims in possible worlds to one side, partly because I just don't know how to settle them one way or the other. It is a contingent fact that pleasure plays the role it does, but if the theory we have been considering is the right way to do value theory, the identity is an a posteriori identity, and thus the fact that value is identified by the function it performs does not say anything essential about value (again, the parallel is to a posteriori identities).

The approach suggests that not only can we find out what property value *is* by following these indications, we can also *find things out* about it, in a way that we could not if value-theory was merely a matter of explicating features of the concept. Folk-theory is never entirely free of fault, but neither is it ever entirely wrong: it is a preliminary to be replaced by more careful investigation and by the entities and

connections that turn up in such an investigation. If it is acceptable to do value theory in this fashion, then we have a way to argue that “value” tracks pleasure and that, therefore, value and pleasure is the very same thing. This, again, does not imply that value *means* pleasure.

Explaining the other part

A theory of value, or the possibly distinct issue of a person’s good, we have said, should explain the features that we take value (or value judgements) to display. The perhaps biggest problem is that value, or statements about it, has both a descriptive and a prescriptive side¹⁹.

It seems to be essential to statements of the good that they function as a sort of recommendation. It might even be argued that it is a competence requirement for the term to realise that this is the case. There is not much of a problem, though, to see how a descriptive statement might come to function prescriptively and vice versa, given that there is a strong connection between the things believed to be good and their engaging with our preferences and other sanctions. We quickly learn approximately what things are at hand when someone says it is good, even if we do not agree. If you know what kind of things some one judges good, you can use his statement about value as pure descriptive information. It’s clear, then, that evaluative concepts have this dual function, and that whether you take its prescriptive or its descriptive side as primary and try to account for the remaining part, is a theoretical choice it takes a full theory to justify.

Peter Railton and revisionist definitions

Peter Railton (1989) and Richard Boyd (1988, 2003), suggested that we can be “tolerably revisionists” about concepts such as these, and that our hope in identifying a property relies on this tolerance.

In his paper “Naturalism and prescriptivity”, Railton, rather than painstakingly making the naturalist case from scratch starts out with a “what if” approach to the subject. Whether naturalism is plausible or not depends on the plausibility of the

¹⁹ Indeed, this is the “moral problem” in the title of Smiths 1994 book, see also Railton (1989), and below.

candidate property-identities it puts forward. Ever the test-pilot in such cases, hedonism is an excellent way to start working this theory out²⁰.

Most judgments about the goodness of particular things, Railton writes, are synthetic statements, and synthetic statements typically concern natural properties, our knowledge of which derives from experience. If this is true, how in the world does the property of being good fit into the world of natural facts? How do we get to know about it? One reply is to deny that “good” refers²¹ at all, and thus that it just doesn’t fit in. The alternative approach, which Railton sets out to explore, is to seek an “epistemically respectable explanation of value discourse”. Agreeing to the dual nature of value statements, this particular approach

...treats the cognitive character of value discourse – its descriptive side, as we have called it – as essential to it, and then seeks to account for the prescriptive force of value judgements as arising from the substantive content of such judgments.

This approach treats value properties as natural properties, and thus has no problem fitting them into the natural world or with making synthetic value claims. The remaining problem, then, is to find the proper connection to some commending force. Railton suggests that hedonistic naturalists can meet this challenge. He also notes that the only other naturalistic candidate that can accommodate motivational force is a theory cashed out in terms of desires, which strikes me as precisely right: pleasure and desire are the natural properties for which a case can be made that they are “evaluative” in nature, due to their essentially “valenced” character.

This “experimental” approach to value theory gives us some conceptual leeway, which makes it possible to meet arguments based on conceptual grounds

The striking thing is that the development of scientific theory has shown us how claims which seemed logically or conceptually true when matters were viewed in a strictly philosophical way could nonetheless come to seem empirically false as a result of the effort to construct powerful explanatory empirical theories. (p 156)

²⁰ It should be noted that Railton himself does not find the hedonistic version of the theory that he himself put forwards in this article plausible.

²¹ Even if it could do so by “association”

The OQA does not apply directly to a naturalist theory put forward on such methodological grounds. Naturalism as a method is based on experience and does not claim that the identities it tracks are strictly analytic or incontestable. Identities, even necessary identities can be synthetic, a posteriori. Such identities, Railton claims, can *become* conceptually closed, given time and consensus, which, in value theory, has yet to happen. And, we might add, probably wont. A concept thus sensitive to empirical investigation is capable of undermining substantial intuitions and thus not fixed by the intentions of agents, even though it is, of course, governed by those intentions. Railton argues that the concept of value, if hedonism or any sort of naturalism is to be successful, needs to be *revised*. Even so, revisionism will reach a point were it is better to say that rather than revised, the concept have been abandoned. There is no sharp line between “tolerable revisionism” and such abandonment. The naturalist needs to show how his account of goodness qualifies as a tolerable form of revision. And the way to do so is obviously to show how the candidate property fits with our expectations, how it explains what we believe about value.

In “the view from nowhere”, Nagel, wrote that it begs the question to assume that this sort of explanatory necessity is the test of reality for values. To assume that only what has to be included in the best causal theory of the world is real is to assume that there are no irreducibly normative truths. But the naturalist perspective is not to assume this from the outset, but to argue the case from the success of its examples: it is experimental, i.e. it is *supposed to* beg the question at this point. Railton suggests that we, rather than rule out naturalism from the start, should see how far we can go in understanding this domain of judgment and knowledge

by applying to it a form of inquiry based upon empirical models, and asking where the judgments and knowledge-claims of this area might fit within a scheme of empirical inquiry.

(p 160)

That we need to actually beg the question in this way, might not be an ideal situation, but Railton notes that we are, after all, answering to a situation in meta ethics were no alternatives are convincing enough as pure conceptual analyses. The present state of meta ethics calls for experimental measures.

A value naturalist can use naturalistic epistemology and semantics to explain access to value properties, and thus give value a causal explanatory role²². The question is whether we can thus explain the features value is supposed to have. “Good,” Railton notes, has a distinctive role in deliberation and action, and it must be shown that the property we are reducing it to is a plausible player of that role. To achieve a *vindicating* reduction of good, as opposed to an *eliminating* one, the naturalist needs to identify it with a natural property, or complex of such properties, that “to a significant extent, permits one to account for the correlations and truisms associated with ‘good’ – i.e., is at most tolerably revisionist – and that at the same time can plausibly serve as the basis of the normative function of this term.”

5 Steps to a hedonistic revision of the value concept

Railton devises a 5 step-plan toward a theory of the good, which a naturalist hedonist should follow. The theory’s content is that Happiness is the psychological property that underlies our discourse about a person’s good. Now, given that we value other things, why not say that goodness reduces to, that “good” *tracks*, some broader constellation of ends?

The hedonist can offer a model for the evolution of our values, which is (to save time) more or less the conditioning model for desires: Desires that makes us act in a way that make us happy, gets reinforced. Most of these desires will have immediate objects other than happiness, and will involve intrinsic interest in ends other than happiness.

Next step is the *explanatory role* of the property in question. This off course is a given, as shown in the conditioning model²³. If our substantive ends is explained by this conditioning process, pleasure has an explanatory role in this matter.

Normative role: Can happiness, play a normative role? Is there a sufficiently tight connection between happiness and recommending force? Is there, a close enough connection to motivation²⁴? Railton thinks such a connection can be effected by the experience of happiness. “On a substantive conception of happiness (...) the

²² See for instance the long running battle of Sturgeon vs Harman

²³ The explanation is informative only given the substantive conception of happiness. If happiness were merely the satisfaction of desire, it would not explain the evolution of desires (for that role depends upon the shaping of desire by the experience of happiness)

²⁴ How close “close enough” is, depends of course on whether you are an internalist or an externalist, but remember that even if happiness is always motivating, statements, or even knowledge, about it might not be.

connection between happiness and what we find motivating is not logically tight”, it is not definitionally true, but it is still as tight “as need be”. There is a psychological, and maybe metaphysical connection such that we are drawn to happiness. Of course, the hedonist can say that the experience of happiness is always, necessarily, motivating, but in a defeat able way.

Tolerable revisionism: We must be able to capture, directly or indirectly, most of the central intuitions in this area, and lessen the force of those that are not captured. The indirect route goes via the psychology of desire. The hedonist say that, despite appearances, these other ends owe their hold upon us to the role they have played in the creation of happiness. “To take our theoretically unexamined intuitions at face value”, Railton writes, “would be to misunderstand the character of our own motivational system” (p 169).

The hedonist should be able to explain why certain things are valued in some societies but not in others, and quite generally shift the task from directly or indirectly capturing intuitive judgments (ala Mills chain of justification) to the task of explaining intuitive judgments *away*. This does not mean that these intuitions are somehow ill-founded, but rather that they are founded on something else than facts about values.

Vindication upon critical reflection: Can the reductive account retain its pre-reductive functions, descriptive and normative? The thing about reductive accounts, Railton argues, is that they might reveal the nature and origin of this area of discourse *to be such that we are led to change our views about whether the phenomena to which that discourse purports to refer are genuine, or about whether we are willing to allow the properties which that discourse effectively tracks to regulate our decision normatively* (p 173)

This is an important test, surely. It is not by definition that happiness matters, it is just a deep fact about us and about the quality of the experience of happiness. The attractiveness of happiness and aversiveness of pain is the basis of hedonism, and, ultimately, what supports the hedonist’s claim for a “sufficiently tight connection between the underlying descriptive content attributed by his reduction and the commending force that accompanies genuine acceptance of a judgment that something is good for one”. (P 173)

Railton's conclusion is that the hedonist revisionist strategy can accommodate both the descriptive and prescriptive side of discourse about a person's good. Can the strategy be generalized to other versions of naturalism? Possibly those that appeal to desires. As we have said before, a naturalist account of the evaluative must display a strong enough connection to motivation, and show how the property in question actually function in our motivational system.

Leonard Katz and the importance of empirical science

Hedonism is an expression of the natural (and, in this case, as I hope to show, *partially* justified) temptation to ground purpose and norms in what exists simply and in its own right among the contents of the world. (p 27)

In a sadly forgotten dissertation completed in 1986 called *Hedonism as the metaphysics of mind and value*, Leonard Katz developed what arguably is one of the most ambitious post-Moorean hedonic projects to date. Katz appeals to the vagueness of our evaluative concepts²⁵. Where later writers have used *water* as their analogy, Katz takes *matter* as his. Matter is something that we find out things about via a careful scientific enquiry, and we are prepared to adjust some of our preconceptions about it in face of scientific argument. Modern physics, outlandish as it may seem have not yet compelled philosophers to say that there is no such thing as "matter" even though our "folk conception" of matter has obviously very little to do with the facts of the matter. Matter might be considerably different from what we thought it was like. For reasons practical, rather than theoretical, so Katz argues, we are considerably more conservative when it comes to ethics. Possibly justifiably so. But this should not result in our being conservative about *meta-ethics*.

Value distinct from morality

The matter whether our well-being is a matter of natural fact seems relevant in this matter. Katz argues that whereas the *normative* character of morality seems an unlikely thing to just find lying about in the natural world, the matter of what is good does not seem too strange as a natural property. Katz calls his view "Philosophical

²⁵ As did Railton (1989). Another user of this sort of argument, and perhaps the originator of the approach, was David Lewis (1999)

hedonism” and claims that it occupies a middle ground between naïve realism and scepticism about morality: morality has a derivative, but still metaphysically founded point, derived from the more basic facts about the value of our lives (p 27-8).

Katz notices that it is often said that the value of a person’s life lies not in what we find in the world, but rather in *how we take* it. And this, he admits, rings true. This importance of how we ‘take’ it, though, should not suggest any form of meta-ethical relativism: the ‘taking’ it is still *something*. I.e. even though very different things are liked, say, this liking might *itself* be always the same. The “good things in life”, the typical things we list as goods are brought together not by any intrinsic property of theirs but by their relation to *our* good. This human value, unlike the derivative value of external things, appears to be a real property, possessing *its own* intrinsic unity. This unity is not deriving from external things, and is not constituted by any accidental direction of our conception or will.

Response dependence

This matter merits some further attention. The position and role played by *responses* is a big and fascinating chapter in the philosophy of value. “How you take it” seems indeed to be an conspicuous feature of the human good. Some have argued that value belongs to the object of the response, but is still *response-dependent*, others that there needs to be a *normative* relation between the object and the response such that the object somehow *merits* the response. Still others have claimed that the response is veridical, so that it registers a property that belongs to the object itself, and hence that the response is like a perception of the value of the object. The suggestion made by Katz, with which I am in full agreement, is that not only is the unity of value explained by the response, but the value itself belongs to the response. Value is response-dependent in the strong sense that value is a property of the response, not to the object responded to.

This means that value, while relative in the sense that the preferred object depends on contingent features of the agent is not *itself* agent relative: and, it can be argued, this is relativism in just the right amount: while being preference sensitive, value is not itself relative. Value is subjective only in the sense that it is a property of subjective states. Subjective states clearly exist objectively, and while essentially being a

property of a subjective state, value is still an *objective* property of that state²⁶. It can reasonably be asked whether response dependence deserve platitude, or “truism”, status, but I think there is good intuitive support for the view that the good, at least good for somebody, depends on that agents ability, manifest or latent, to respond attitudinally. Hedonism, clearly, is ideally suited to make this claim.

The relevance of psychology

Hedonic naturalism seems worth looking into, Katz argues, precisely because of the promise of integrating the thinking we do about pleasure when we do ethics with what else we think about pleasure (in psychology, in metaphysics). This might be true even if we believe that the good that belongs to pleasure is only part of our good, and even if this human good is only one of the many concerns that governs morality. What is pleasure, and what is its place in human nature? What is its role in action and the human good? Katz notes that long before psychology became separated from philosophy, before ethics in particular were severed from psychology or metaphysics, these questions were treated conjunctively. The complete separation of these questions has, he argues, made as much damage to their field as their confusion has. Indeed, the irrelevance of psychological hedonism to ethics, such as exposed by Moore, should not lead to our abandoning empirical approaches to meta-ethics. The naturalist program suggested by Katz, Railton, Boyd etc. is clearly much more sophisticated than that.

The central point, belonging to both ethics and psychology, is that “how good someone feels” is a matter of the state of pleasure of that person. In this sense, minimally, goodness belongs to pleasure not as some extra feature of it, but as part of its natural make up²⁷.

Katz argues that ethical theory is not needed to *support* the testimony of consciousness that pleasure is good, which needs no support, but rather to direct us back to it. The phenomenology of value, as it were, is self-evident but partially loses its focus through socialization, enculturation and our tendency to project. We need to

²⁶ See Mendola (1990).

²⁷ This point have been made by a number of philosophers, like Mendola, Sprigge, Helm, Spinoza and Epicuros

lead our thinking about the good *back* to the immediate experiencing and spontaneous liking and doing which with which our lives began.

How should the hedonist answer the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy? Moore held that any substantive account of the good fails, and must fail, simply by changing the subject, by treating a property distinct from goodness as identical to it. But otherwise, it seems, the hedonist must run afoul of the other horn of the dilemma posed for the reductive or eliminative analyst, i.e. to use in the analysis what we have set out to analyse. The hedonist, Katz argues, should offer something other than such an analysis. The hedonist should offer an *explanation*, an explanation that neither changes the subject nor becomes circular, but rather an explanation, an explication like the ones substantive answers to scientific questions often consists in.

An account of the good, although it needs to keep in touch with it, need not be an analysis of our *idea* of value or good. Rather, an account should be conceived as on a par with scientific inquiry in general, and as such

these inquiries aim at discovering what, among actual things, best answers to these conceptions. The general and vague conception (of matter, of force, of value or goodness, or of whatever) is, in a way epistemically prior. It sets the questions which the appropriate study, at its most fundamental level, tries to answer. But that is no conceptual barrier to our discovering (or to our having good reason to believe we have discovered) that there are few fundamental forces or kinds if value or of whatever, or that the actual things or kinds answering to the general conception reduce to one. And, indeed, that is what we should hold, in the case of the human good, if we come to believe that pleasure alone, among actual things, answers to the intuitive demands that our preexisting conception places on anything that is to be our good (or part of our good). (...) (W)e should not (*pace* Moore), if we come to regard hedonism as a satisfactory theory of the good, count “What is the good?”, “What things are good?” and “What is pleasure?” as quite different questions. For, by hypothesis, we should have come to regard the earlier questions as admitting the same detailed answers as the latter, more precise, one. Neither science nor metaphysical ethics, would, in so doing, appeal to their vague, pretheoretical explananda in an objectionably circular way. (p 109-110)

The naturalist hedonist claim that all the similarities that obtain and which explains our having a cogent concept about value at all, exist on the level of experience, where it is, despite the causal, contextual and “cognitive psychological” differences, itself always the same. What Katz call *evaluative hedonism* answers the question about the

human good in the spirit of “metaphysical ethics”, that is, it gives this question an answer that is supposed to be decided prior to, and independent of, our particular pursuits and preferences, and our beliefs and conceptions of the good. “Evaluative hedonism” he writes “is the view that pleasure and pain are *in this way* the human good; that they jointly exhaust what is ultimately good and bad in the living of your or my individual human life, and in human existence on the whole” (p 127)

Desire that is explained on a hedonistic model could still (in the ordinary language in which we express the intentionality of desire) be not at all desire for pleasure, but desire for other things instead. (p 73) The arguments for pleasures desirability *must* start from the phenomena of choice and wanting. What other acknowledged indicators are there? The meta-ethicist needs to get serious about empirical investigation into the workings of desires and motivation. Whereas biology underdetermines neuropsychology, which in turn underdetermines psychology and these in turn would underdetermine “any consequence that one might want to draw in ethics” these facts “still have relevance in deciding the overall plausibility of competing views of value, when we look together at all that we believe as it relates to what is our nature and our good. (...) What we want to know is how this relates to the viewpoint that we most centrally have on things, and to the value that goes with this”. (p 165)

Katz is asking us to make something of a cognitive leap, then, since the brute biological facts about pleasure are so closely related to the notions we deal with in ethics. Hedonism, better than any other meta-ethical view, is based on and therefore can provide the mechanism by which value engages with our motivational system and, hence, how value can influence creatures like us. This is the basis for naturalistic hedonism, as he sees it.

Concluding remarks

Richard Joyce recently (2006) made the smug remark that there is something a bit sad about theorists who put forward a candidate property, and tries to argue that it is “close enough” to fit with our value concepts. These suggestions are almost never taken seriously by anyone not already convinced by the position in question. A reply to the theories here might be that, sure, let’s grant that pleasure works precisely as we say it does, that it is indeed what “governs” or “underpins” our evaluative discourse

and practice and that hedonic processes can predict and account for all or most of the value attributions ever made. We might even accept that there is no other competing unity holding these facts together. But so what? Why accept hedonism about value on these grounds? If anything, it seems to imply that there is rather *no* value, or no such property, anyway. Why not be a non-cognitivist, or an error theorist instead? These sorts of objections should, I believe, not bother naturalist hedonists. Being revisionists, naturalist hedonists are bound to meet this sort of challenge, and could indeed agree that sure, given certain strict notions about what value must be, there actually is no such thing as value²⁸, *or*, given that there is a prescriptive function, that there is point to non-cognitivist approaches as well. All the naturalist hedonist can do is offer this case for the identity claim and then say that whether it *counts* or not is up for grabs. There is no *further* step being taken in the argument when we say that all these facts about pleasure and how it relates to our evaluative discourse and practices implies that pleasure and value is the very same property. For the naturalist hedonist, they amount to the same thing.

References

- Ball, Stephen: Linguistic Intuitions and Varieties of Ethical Naturalism, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* no 1 March 1991
- Boyd, Richard: How to be a moral realist in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed Sayre McCord 1988
- Boyd, Richard: Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, no 3, May 2003
- Crisp, Roger: *Reasons and the Good*, Oxford University Press 2005
- Jackson, Frank: *From Metaphysics to ethics*, Oxford University Press (1998)
- Jackson, Frank and Pettit, Philip: Moral functionalism and Moral Motivation, *The philosophical quarterly*, No 45 Jan 1995
- Joyce, Richard: Meta-ethics and the empirical sciences, *Philosophical Explorations* vol 9 no 1, March 2006

²⁸ David Lewis (1989), for instance, believed that strictly speaking Mackie was right, but also that strict speaking was too boring partake in.

Katz, Leonard, Hedonism as the metaphysics of mind and value, Princeton University Dissertation, 1986

Katz, Leonard, "Pleasure" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005)

Lewis, David: Dispositional theories of value, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Suppl Vol 63, 1989

Lewis, David, Psychophysical and theoretical identifications in Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology, Cambridge University Press 1999

Mendola, Joseph: Objective Value and Subjective States, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research no 4, June 1990

Mendola, Joseph: Intuitive Hedonism, Philosophical Studies, no 2, March 2006

Moore, G.E, Principia Ethica, Cambridge University Press 1993

Railton, Peter: Naturalism and Prescriptivity, Social Philosophy and Policy no 7 1989

Smith, Michael: the Moral Problem, Blackwell, 1994

Sturgeon, Nicholas: Moore on Ethical Naturalism, Ethics no 113 April 2003

Sturgeon, Nicholas "Ethical Naturalism" in the Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory (p 91-120)