

Chapter IV: SYNTHETIC NATURALISM AND THE ARGUMENT FROM MORAL EXPERIENCE

Synthetic naturalists attempt an experientially based, *a posteriori* account of morality and its significance. With a few exceptions,¹ this is the point to which naturalism in ethics has come at the end of the twentieth century.² Naturalistic moral philosophy has been urged in this direction by repeated criticisms of other types of naturalism which relied more heavily on the structure of logic and language.³ Like any other philosophical theories, synthetically naturalistic theories are subject to scrutiny to determine whether they are internally consistent and do not contradict any known facts. Like any other naturalistic ethical theories, they are subject to examination as to their adherence to the dogma of naturalism: that only principles, properties or terms that are accessible to science can be employed. A peculiarity of *synthetic* naturalist theories, however, is the fact that they claim not to take an *a priori* approach to understanding what morality and moral concepts are. This means that statements asserting fundamental truths about morality are not self-evidently true, nor do they gain their justification from the fact that they follow logically from or are analytically equivalent to other kinds of true statements. According to the synthetic naturalist, in order to describe the nature of morality one can and must appeal to experience,

¹See II.C.4b.

²See II.C.4c, D.1-2.

³For those other types of naturalism, see I.B.1-2. For the criticisms, see II.B-C. For how a synthetic approach is thought to overcome them, see II.C.5.

with the constraint that all principles, properties and terms involved are appropriate for use in scientific explanations.

As was shown in the critique of Michael Ruse's evolutionary naturalism in the last chapter, however, there can be significant disparity between the descriptions of the nature of morality provided by a synthetic naturalist theory, and the nature of morality as it is often held by people. To what extent this is problematic, and what (if anything) this means for naturalism, will be the focus of discussion in this chapter.

A. The Argument from Moral Experience

1. SYNTHETIC NATURALISTS AND COMMONALITIES IN MORAL EXPERIENCE

a. Causal theories of reference: looking to moral speakers for the meanings of moral words

Aside from reliance on the *a posteriori* rather than the *a priori*, critical commentators Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons have identified five other distinctive features of the synthetic approach to naturalism.⁴ Four of these have already been discussed to varying extents in this thesis. One is the synthetic naturalist's reliance on the fact that a single entity can be represented or referred to with two terms which are not synonymous.⁵ A second is the distinction made between reductive and nonreductive forms of naturalism.⁶ A third is the claim first defended by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam that some *a posteriori* assertions can be true necessarily, in the sense

⁴Horgan and Timmons (1991), 450-2.

⁵See I.C.3, II.C.5, D.1.

⁶See I.B.3, II.D.2.

that they are true 'in all logically possible worlds'.⁷ Fourth is the view, based on recent developments in the philosophy of mind, that some properties (moral properties in this case) might be 'functional' properties in the same way that the mind is said by some philosophers to be a 'function' of the body.⁸ As has been shown in the relevant sections, not all synthetic naturalists utilise all of these claims; however, all of these claims are distinctive to synthetic naturalism and are not used in support of logical or semantic naturalism.

One final distinctive feature of synthetic naturalism discussed by Horgan and Timmons has not yet been discussed explicitly in this thesis. They discuss a particular approach to understanding how terms in languages refer to entities, an approach embodied in 'causal theories of reference'. This import from Kripke's philosophy of language⁹ is encapsulated by Horgan and Timmons with the description that with respect to certain types of terms (moral terms in this case), their 'reference is "grounded" by relevant causal hookups between speakers and the world'.¹⁰ A degree of clarification of the nature of these 'causal hookups' is provided by Kripke himself:

'In general, our reference depends not just on what we think ourselves, but on other people in the community, the history of how the name reached one, and things like that. It is by following such a history that one gets to the reference.'¹¹

So, according to causal theories of reference, certain entities in the world are responsible for causing a term to be used by any given speaker in a certain way. Although these entities include the actual referent itself, predominantly these entities are comprised of other people who use that term. As stated in one discussion of this type of theory, 'a speaker within a

⁷See I.B.2a. The seminal works referred to are Kripke (1972) and Putnam (1975). Kripke (1980) and Horgan and Timmons (1991) explore some of the implications of this point.

⁸See II.D.2.

⁹Kripke (1971), (1972).

¹⁰Horgan and Timmons (1991), 452.

¹¹Kripke (1971), 79.

language speaking group can trace his use of the term back to the referent of the term by virtue of his connection with other speakers of the language'.¹² Furthermore, causal theories of reference emphasise that they do *not* 'depend upon what an individual or group thinks a term refers to, but on the shared reference accepted by the whole community of speakers of a language that uses it to refer to something'.¹³

Horgan and Timmons describe the pervasiveness of this approach among synthetic naturalists, and explain how particular synthetic naturalists defend and utilise it. In the course of this discussion, the pioneering synthetic naturalist Richard Boyd is recognised by these commentators as one of the most explicit defenders of such a view. In Boyd's own words, 'The reference of a term is established by causal connections of the right sort between the use of the term and (instances of) its referent'.¹⁴ The point here, and the relation to synthetic naturalism, is that a replacement for analytical semantics has been sought by synthetic naturalists in order to organise and provide meanings for our moral terms, and the most significant replacement to date¹⁵ has relied on these 'causal hookups between speakers and the world'. Furthermore, as the above passages show, these causal hookups are rooted in *how people do in fact use those terms*. Kripke's primary indication for determining the reference of terms, again, was 'other people in the community'.¹⁶ More specifically, the proper reference of a term is 'the shared reference accepted by the whole community of speakers'.¹⁷ One straightforward implication of this new approach to semantics is that although synthetic naturalists do not justify their ethical

¹²Powers (1992), 460.

¹³*ibid.*, 461.

¹⁴Boyd (1988), 195.

¹⁵The causal theory of reference is significant enough for Horgan and Timmons, in the review portion of their aforementioned article, to describe it alone as *the* replacement for analytical semantics in the new wave of naturalism.

¹⁶Kripke (1971), 79.

¹⁷Powers (1992), 461.

theories on the basis of the meanings of words, they do not ignore semantics altogether. They do recognise that terms must have senses and referents in order for communication with words to be at all possible. Moreover, any synthetic naturalist, since *a priori* definitions for moral terms are not acceptable,¹⁸ must look somewhere other than analytical semantics to find a basis on which to organise our moral language and thereby understand each other when we refer to moral properties, states of mind, ideas, *et cetera*. Horgan and Timmons claim that in this search for a basis of reference for moral terms, synthetic naturalists must rely on how people actually use the relevant terms. This view is explicitly defended by Boyd.¹⁹ This particular feature, inherent in at least many notable varieties of synthetic naturalism, is very similar to a certain feature in Ruse's theory which facilitated a great deal of the criticisms offered in the last chapter.

b. *Rusean ethics: looking to moral agents for the nature of morality*

In the last chapter, most of the critique of Ruse's theory from the ethical perspective included a comparison of the stated or unstated implications of Ruse's theory with common conceptions of morality held by moral teachers, philosophers and people.²⁰ In many cases the suggestion was made that there is a significant disparity between the way Ruse portrays human morality as people experience it, and the way many people do in fact find morality to be. This type of criticism of Ruse is valid because Ruse's theory rests on a particular description of what people do, as a matter of fact, find morality to be like.²¹ In accordance with this, he says that he knows no other way for people really to understand (and agree with) his characterisation of moral experience than for them to 'examine themselves

¹⁸Boyd (1988), 196; Ruse (1995), 2.

¹⁹Boyd (1988), 195.

²⁰See III.D.2c.iv, which follows upon work done throughout III.D.2.

²¹See III.D.2c.iv, esp. last paragraph.

deeply and carefully'.²² Therefore, for a defence of his thesis Ruse appeals to what he believes to be commonalities in the way people experience morality. Accordingly, many of the criticisms of Ruse in the last chapter are illustrations of the lack of certain commonalities which would (if they existed) have lent plausibility to his case.²³

c. The connection: reliance on commonalities

Ruse discusses commonalities most often in terms of what people find morality to be like on the level of what might be called moral experience. For example, he talks of the 'sense of "right" and the corresponding sense of "wrong"',²⁴ the 'logically odd sense of oughtness',²⁵ and the level of human experience of morality on which there is 'universality and common acceptance of moral norms across *Homo sapiens*'.²⁶ Horgan, Timmons and Boyd, however, talk more often in terms of moral language, as has already been shown. Nevertheless, Ruse does believe that corresponding with our distinctive moral experience there is a 'difference between the language of ethics and the language of other aspects of the human life'.²⁷ And, although Horgan and Timmons refrain from extensive comment on the connection between moral language and any particular experience, they do suggest that, at least from the perspective of synthetic naturalism, 'differences in causal regulation' between humans and some other (mythical) type of moral creature, and thus differences in the meanings of moral words, would be 'due at least in part to... differences in psychological temperament'.²⁸ In other words, a distinctively non-human

²²Ruse (1991), 505.

²³See III.D.2.

²⁴Ruse and Wilson (1986), 426.

²⁵Ruse (1995), 245.

²⁶Ruse (1985a), 233.

²⁷Ruse (1995), 257. Ruse does not delve into the particulars of how he sees moral language and moral experience interrelate, however. See III.C.3.

²⁸Horgan and Timmons (1991), 465. They are careful to point out that even if this is the case, it is doubtful that only one psychological feature is relevant.

psychological experience as regards morality would very probably cause the mythical creatures' moral language as well to be different from ours. Boyd too relates his moral theory ultimately to human experience by tying what we believe about morality at a very basic level to various kinds of experiences of need.²⁹

So, although there is variation in the ways synthetic naturalists refer to the commonalities among moral beings upon which their theories depend (some discussing things more often in terms of language and others more often in terms of experience), a clear connection between Ruse's theory and those of many other synthetic naturalists is a reliance on such commonalities. If Ruse were to withdraw his commitment to such commonalities, he would no longer have a basis on which to defend his meta-ethical theory, for his theory arises precisely out of the way in which morality is held by him to be experienced by people. He would then have to offer his meta-ethic only to those people, if any exist, who share his experience of morality, rather than as the one general truth of the matter for all moral subjects. Likewise, if synthetic naturalists like Boyd were to withdraw their commitment to such commonalities, they would be opening the door to an indefinite number of ways in which morality could be experienced, and therefore an indefinite number of ways in which moral terms could be used. This would mean that no particular reference for any given moral term could be established, and so their task of replacing the disfavoured analytical semantics would have failed. So, this connection among synthetic naturalists is a strong one, and therefore provides a worthwhile focus for critical examination.

Since on some common views-- as the citations from Ruse, Boyd, and Horgan and Timmons in the beginning of this subsection attest-- moral

²⁹Boyd (1988), 204.

experience is logically prior to the language we use to represent it,³⁰ hereafter discussion will be in terms of moral experience (how we find morality to be) rather than moral language (how we talk morally or talk about morality). However, for those of a contrary view, the discussion can be reinterpreted in terms of moral language just as sensibly. The fact that there is this connection between Ruse's theory and other synthetic naturalist theories, together with the fact that it was this particular feature of Ruse's theory which facilitated much of the last chapter's critique, opens the possibility that the strategy of critique which featured in that chapter can be generalised for use with respect to other synthetic naturalist theories.

2. FOCUSING CRITIQUE OF SYNTHETIC NATURALISM ON ITS CLAIMS OF COMMONALITIES AMONG MORAL AGENTS

a. *General form of the argument*

It may be the case that there are other ways for synthetic naturalists to determine the meaning of moral terms besides what Horgan and Timmons have called the 'causal regulation theory', which relies heavily on commonalities among moral beings. Or, if this theory of semantics is not used, there may be a way in which to lend plausibility to a synthetic naturalist theory that does not rely on commonalities in the moral experience of people. However, to judge from two separate reviews of meta-ethical theories (one by Darwall, Gibbard and Railton and another by Horgan and

³⁰However, it is not necessarily *chronologically* prior: any given person might learn and use the language of morality before, or even in the continuing absence of, ever having the experience. By *logical* priority here is meant that on some common views, a statement regarding moral experience does not logically presume a statement regarding moral language; whilst a statement regarding moral language often presumes one or more statements regarding moral experience. Any controversy which might arise at this point does not compromise the present argument, however, but merely affects the decision as to which terms to use in its presentation. The argument must be made in terms of either moral experience or moral language, and the former has been chosen here; but the point would be the same either way.

Timmons), the leaders of naturalism in the post-analytic scene are philosophers such as David Brink, Richard Boyd, Peter Railton, Gilbert Harman, Simon Blackburn, and Richard Brandt.³¹ Each of these do make claims which exhibit dependence on such commonalities.^{32,33} It is in the context of the many theories with such a reliance on commonalities among moral agents that this discussion continues.

The final argument of the last chapter suggested that although Michael Ruse's evolutionary approach to synthetic naturalism describes an experience which he claims is fundamental to morality and common to humanity, there are several reasons to believe that this contradicts many people's experience of morality. This being the case, those whose moral experience differs widely from Ruse's characterisation are not likely to see any plausibility in equating the description Ruse provides with morality.³⁴ This sheds doubt on the possibility that what Ruse portrays is actually fundamental to morality and common to humanity as he says. But, as has been shown in the last section, Ruse is by no means alone among synthetic naturalists in his significant reliance on supposed commonalities in moral experience. A general and simplified statement of an argument applicable in any such case is:

³¹Horgan and Timmons (1991) discuss only Boyd and Brink; Darwall, Gibbard and Railton (1992) describe all of the above.

³²Evidence of this is widespread, e.g. Harman (1975); Blackburn (1987), 55; Railton (1995a), 268-75; Brandt (1996), 201. For examples of particular claims that are stated as commonalities in moral experience, see, e.g. Blackburn (1984), 188 on the moral state of mind being an attitude; Brink (1986), 37 on the kind of emotive force that attaches to moral judgments; Boyd (1988), 184-5, 204-16 on the similarity between moral beliefs/methods and scientific beliefs/methods.

³³To what extent one's dependence on commonalities of moral experience is important to one's claims must be shown in each particular case, as was done very briefly with respect to Ruse and Boyd in the two parts of the last subsection; the importance of this will be discussed towards the end of this subsection.

³⁴In Ruse's case, moral experience is claimed to be a set of felt rules in accordance with effective altruism, rules which are accompanied by senses of prescriptivity, universality, and nonsubjectivity. These are intended as descriptions of human experience of morality. If moral rules are not 'felt' by one in the way Ruse describes, or if the particular rules felt are not in accordance with Ruse's claims, then the Argument from Moral Experience may be employed against that theory.

Insofar as any theory exhibits a reliance on supposed commonalities in the moral experience of moral agents, and insofar as the views of moral agents contradict this, such a situation renders the particular theory implausible.

This is the thrust of what might be called an Argument from Moral Experience. That it is a gross simplification of an argument can be illustrated by means of four different types of counterargument, any of which the synthetic naturalist can employ when accused of falsely supposing certain things to be common elements of the human experience of morality.

1. Synthetic naturalism relies on the findings of science; and since these are incomplete at any one time, so must the theory be. Any false characterisation of morality may be corrected by future advancements, just as inconsistencies between a scientific theory and experience can be corrected by advancements in scientific theory.

2. There is no guarantee that any given moral agent will be of sufficient (a) mental capacity and (b) moral maturity or aptitude, to dissent properly from the theory offered by the synthetic naturalist.

3. The first 'insofar' in the above encapsulation of the argument is vague. There would have to be a standard set up by which one can measure the degree of reliance which a theory has on the commonalities it supposes to exist among people.

4. The second 'insofar' is also vague. There would have to be a standard set up by which the degree of dissent from a particular supposed commonality can be properly evaluated.

Responding to these four kinds of counterargument will create a more precise picture of the form an Argument from Moral Experience takes. Rather than seeking to undermine the logic of the argument, each of these counterarguments serves to remove pressure that the argument would otherwise place on the synthetic naturalist. The first does this by looking to a greater body of knowledge than was originally offered by the naturalist. The second looks to the possibility of the dissenter being incapable of making the argument properly. The third and fourth look to the difficulty of the different kinds of quantification necessary for the argument to yield a specific result.

The first counterargument places a certain constraint on the Argument from Moral Experience: namely, that the argument restrict itself to the theory *as currently proposed*. The synthetic naturalist can argue that because of the unpredictable nature of scientific enquiry,³⁵ a critic of an ethical theory that is based on scientific enquiry cannot look into the future and claim that under no conditions could an advancement ever be reached which would resolve present appearances of inconsistency. But, on the other hand, neither can the synthetic naturalist look into the future and claim that such an advancement will indeed be reached. If the naturalist's response to a critic is that the currently proposed theory does not provide all the explanation necessary to understand the matter fully, the synthetic naturalist has the responsibility to provide the rest of the explanation, or else admit a step of faith. When and if further information arrives, 'the theory as currently proposed' changes, and so the critic must re-evaluate the new theory. Otherwise, if no changes are made to the inconsistent theory, the original criticism stands. So, the first objection to the Argument from Moral Experience is met with the condition that any particular criticism of an

³⁵See Medawar (1984), essay #2, entitled 'Can Scientific Discovery be Premeditated?'

ethical theory is explicitly admitted to affect the relevant theory only as it is currently presented.

The second counterargument ostensibly creates a greater problem for the critic. Since the Argument from Moral Experience ultimately depends on the mental and moral aptitude of moral agents (because they find morality to be different than what is claimed by the theory in question), there is a chance that a dissenting argument might proceed not from a true difference of experience of morality, but rather from an insufficient aptitude in one or both of these areas. The problem with using this argument against a critic, however, is that once the subject of insufficient aptitude is broached, the same problem of quantification which the naturalist has raised in relation to other issues for the critic (see counterarguments 3 and 4) arises here for the naturalist. The question becomes: How are mental aptitude and moral aptitude measured? Biologist Stephen Jay Gould has documented some of this century's failed attempts at quantifying mental aptitude, and he suggests that the prospect is no more promising today.³⁶ Even if Gould is wrong, and some reasonably accurate measure of mental aptitude is either available today or will be in the near future, this does not preclude criticism of naturalistic theories on the basis of moral experience. Rather, this standard of mental capacity measurement would serve as another dimension which must be taken into account in both the presentation *and* critique of ethical theories. The naturalist cannot put forth an ethical theory as if to a community of approximate mental equals if there are relevant mental differences that can affect the understanding of morality and moral theories. In short, if the naturalist argues that a particular critic is mentally incompetent, support must be provided for this in the form of a process through which that assertion can be demonstrated or otherwise defended. This must include, among other things, a description of the types of mental

³⁶S. Gould (1981).

incompetence which are relevant and the particular way in which critics might fall short. Otherwise, the naturalist's accusation of a critic's mental ineptitude is not a valid philosophical criticism because there is no way in which it can be scrutinised or evaluated.

With respect to moral aptitude the situation is even more complicated than in the case of mental aptitude, for in addition to the requirement of defence and quantification placed on the naturalist, many standards by which moral aptitude might be judged will be prejudiced in favour of one or another ethical theory. For instance, to judge moral aptitude on the basis of the content of one's genetic code may be appropriate if Michael Ruse's theory is correct, but not if it is incorrect. To judge it on the basis of one's degree of adherence to societal norms may be appropriate if a particular sort of culture-based morality is correct,³⁷ but not if the nature of morality is otherwise. So, to raise the issue of the possibility of a critic's moral incompetence will be begging the question unless a standard can be arrived at which does not prejudge matters of controversy in ethics. Since this essentially involves looking for matters of commonality among moral agents, which is precisely the matter at issue with the Argument from Moral Experience, one must avoid a vicious circle which can develop: the critic raises questions regarding the commonality of certain features supposed by a naturalistic theory, the naturalist in turn raises questions of the critic's aptitude on the basis of a particular standard, and the critic raises further questions regarding the commonality of the features underlying that standard, and so on. If the naturalist brings up the possibility of a critic being of insufficient moral aptitude, it is the naturalist's responsibility to defend this point, which will not be a simple matter on account of the high probability of controversial meta-ethical assumptions underlying any such

³⁷Specifically, the kind of theory which proposes that *x* is good or right if it conforms to the norms of a given society *s*.

position. Therefore, the second counterargument against the Argument from Moral Experience, while certainly posing worthwhile questions, creates problems that are at least as significant for the naturalist as they are for the critic. Indeed, only after the naturalist provides a set of criteria for mental and/or moral competence, and defends his accusation of a critic in terms of those criteria, can a critic understand or respond to such an accusation.

The third objection to the Argument from Moral Experience calls for a quantification of the degree to which a theory depends on its claims regarding commonalities among moral agents. This objection, like the first, can be met by placing a limit on what can be said by the critic. In order for the Argument from Moral Experience to present a worthwhile criticism, it must be accompanied by a demonstration of what elements of the theory are threatened by the falsity of the supposed commonality. In some cases these elements may be unnecessary to what the theorist sees as the core of the theory, and can be discarded if found to imply false conclusions. In other cases, these elements may actually be at the centre of the theory, in which case the theory must undergo more extensive revision or else be abandoned. This stipulation, however, is essentially the same as in any programme of argument-- critique-- rebuttal, and poses no new problems for the Argument from Moral Experience as long as arguments presented are accompanied by a demonstration of the aspects of the criticised theory which have implied the false commonality. This is the quantification requested by the third objection, and provided that it is included, this objection is met.

For an example of the demonstration required here, one can take the criticism of Michael Ruse's ethical theory in the last chapter. Ruse's theory was broken down in that chapter into four classes of several elements each, such that criticisms could be precisely attached to the respective elements of the theory. First, presuppositions of sociobiology were described;³⁸

³⁸III.B.1.a-d.

second, the particular version of the naturalist paradigm Ruse adheres to was outlined;³⁹ third, the logical progression by which he makes his claim was separated into four premises and a conclusion;⁴⁰ and fourth, implications were drawn from certain premises and described in their own right.⁴¹ Criticisms were delivered to Ruse's theory in the context of these particular elements. Because of this, those elements of his theory which are called into question by the criticisms offered in that chapter can be clearly seen, and so this does away with the imprecision which otherwise would bring about an objection on the naturalist's part.

The fourth and last predicted counterargument to the Argument from Moral Experience as phrased generally is a call for quantification of a second variable, (the first being the degree of dependence of a theory on the commonalities it implies). The second variable is the degree to which moral agents disagree with the supposed commonality. The question the naturalist might pose is this: Does one dissenting voice render a theory untenable, or is there some percentage (and what is it?) of humanity that can dissent and yet allow a theory still to maintain a level of plausibility? In raising this question the naturalist seeks to provide some room within which to manoeuvre in a situation where a supposed commonality has some degree of real or apparent exception. Technically, the answer to this question is that the Argument from Moral Experience permits no unresolved dissent at all. If the representation of morality by the naturalist is such that a certain commonality is relied upon, then the existence of any dissenter *A* means that, strictly speaking, such is not a commonality. This having been said, it is by no means the end of discussion for *A* to dissent. As a naturalist would undoubtedly be quick to point out, there are more contingencies than mental or moral incompetence that could result in an inconsistency of any given

³⁹III.C.2.

⁴⁰III.C.3.

⁴¹From premise 3, III.D.1b-c, 2.b-c; from premise 4, III.D.1d.

person's view with the theoretical prediction. For examples, a communication breakdown, lack of information, misunderstanding, insufficient introspection, and perhaps even one's ulterior psychology could be responsible for the disparity. A way in which to discover and remedy these or other possible contingencies is through thought and rational discussion. Discussion directly aids communication and information and may correct a misunderstanding. Together with thought, it may also promote the necessary introspection and dispel extraneous prejudices which can produce dissent which is in principle resolvable. Differences which persist after rational discussion, or in situations where (if such can be shown) no limiting factor affects the understanding of the critic, are to that extent still *unresolved*.⁴² Any unresolved inconsistencies between the moral experience of a dissenter and the prediction of a naturalist theory tell against the theory, because the theory involves a claim to commonality as part of its basis.⁴³ Hence, a complicated programme of quantification of dissent is not necessary in order for the Argument from Moral Experience to be effective in pointing out faults in a theory. What *is* necessary, is attention to any reasoned dissent, and the continuing attempt to resolve it. If this is the way in which moral philosophy is practised, then an obstacle to the Argument from Moral Experience is removed, and the fourth objection to it no longer stands.

This resolution of the fourth potential objection to the Argument from Moral Experience can be viewed in the same way that Darwall, Gibbard and Railton recommended similar objections to the Open Question Argument be resolved. They claimed that the Open Question Argument

⁴²As with any description of an argument, its success assumes that the dissenter is being honest and open-minded, which of course may not be the case in practicality.

⁴³Whether the theory should be abandoned because of that counter-evidence, even if the faults are serious (quantification of which is described in the last two paragraphs) is another question, which requires an enquiry into whether another theory or possible revision exists which does not experience such problems.

should be recognised as a serious criticism whenever it was presented within certain conditions, and so no quantification of the percentage of the population dissenting is needed or even helpful; but, at the same time, the Open Question Argument should be seen in any particular case as an argument whose surety requires continuing discussion.⁴⁴ The present argument, in the same vein, is that the fourth objection to the Argument from Moral Experience is met, as corresponding objections to the Open Question Argument were, if the argument is not viewed in a misleading fashion. It is neither dependent for its validity on the number of people presenting it, but nor is it a weapon to be used once and for all with utter conviction in any particular instance. It is a tool which can be applied by even a single dissenter, but must be continually applied and tested by attempting to resolve the dissent rationally.

In summary, all of the four counterarguments to the simplified statement of the Argument from Moral Experience are helpful to an understanding of the particular boundaries and conditions within which the argument can properly operate, without undermining its validity in general. The first objection the naturalist might offer is met by assuring that the argument is claimed to be relevant only to the theory in its current form and complexity, and does not make any statements regarding the possibility of advancements, additional information or modification which might resolve any present inconsistencies. The second objection actually places a difficult responsibility on the naturalist who raises it, to provide some non-prejudicial standard by which to judge the mental or moral competence of the critic. Should this be provided in any case, the critic will be able to be measured for this supposed shortcoming, and the validity of the Argument from Moral Experience will depend on the results of that test. (If the standard of measurement itself is disputed, then determining the validity of the critic's

⁴⁴See II.C.3a.

argument will have to await the outcome of *that* dispute). The third objection a naturalist might offer to the Argument from Moral Experience is met if the critic's use of the argument includes a precise demonstration of the elements of the naturalist's theory that are called into question by the lack of the proposed commonality. This will serve to quantify the reliance of the naturalist's theory on the particular points that the critic is calling into question. The fourth potential objection is met if the critic's argument is admitted to be valid whenever presented within the foregoing guidelines, and so a particular number of people do not have to dissent in order for the argument to be valid. However, at the same time, any particular presentation of the Argument from Moral Experience requires discussion on the matter in order to be decisive, rather than being a peremptory statement of fact. As long as the critic of naturalism adheres to these stipulations and presents arguments in this way, the Argument from Moral Experience is not undermined by any of the objections listed in the beginning of this section.

b. The Argument from Moral Experience as a proposed strategy for critique of synthetic naturalism

To the extent that synthetic naturalism relies on claims that moral agents possess certain commonalities in the way they experience morality or hold the nature of morality to be, the general form of argument in the foregoing section can be employed in critique of synthetic naturalism. The Argument from Moral Experience can be used to assess the validity of these claims to commonality, within the guidelines and limitations outlined above in the responses to the four kinds of objections. The ethical critique of Michael Ruse's naturalistic theory in the last chapter shows that this kind of argument does have utility with respect to at least some synthetically naturalistic theories, and the connection made in this chapter between Ruse's ideas and the 'causal theory of reference' held by other synthetic naturalists

suggests that this kind of argument may actually have wide applicability within the meta-ethical category of synthetic naturalism.⁴⁵

Even though Arguments from Moral Experience, concentrating as they do on claims to commonality among moral agents, have a wide theoretical applicability within contemporary naturalist meta-ethics, this does not license a general prediction here of the results of that application. No foretelling of the fate of synthetic naturalism one way or the other just because of the relevance of this strategy of critique can be done without begging the question. As was stated in the response to objection 1 above, and as is implicit in the many pages of analysis and critique that were necessary with regard to Michael Ruse's particular theory, this kind of argument must be applied to each different theory, and prospects for an inductive generalisation regarding the validity or otherwise of synthetic naturalism are limited by the fact that there are many different claims which naturalists might make to having found commonalities in the moral experience of people. By way of analogy, G. E. Moore went so far with respect to his own argument against *semantic* naturalism, to say that if one 'will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case' the argument renders the semantic naturalist theory implausible.⁴⁶ Although his argument, or contemporary reformulation of it, has been successful with respect to semantic naturalism in general, which might seemingly vindicate Moore's inductive leap, many critics have come to agree that such prediction was improper.⁴⁷ It is therefore widely believed now that Moore should have restricted himself to the more modest claim that his argument was *applicable to*, rather than *a refutation of*, semantic naturalism in general. Whether application of the argument would refute all theories to which it

⁴⁵See A.1c.

⁴⁶Moore (1903), 16.

⁴⁷See II.C.3a.

was applied, should have been left to be decided by the application of the argument to particular theories.⁴⁸ Accordingly, only the more modest claim is made here regarding the presently proposed strategy of critique of *synthetic* naturalist theories of ethics.⁴⁹ What can be said at this point is that the peculiarities of synthetic naturalism are such that the Argument from Moral Experience is well suited to critique of this kind of ethical theory. This has been shown both in general (by means of a significant common thread among prominent synthetic naturalists, a thread which the argument targets),⁵⁰ and in a specific case (Michael Ruse's evolutionary naturalism).⁵¹

B. Conclusion

The point just made forms the final premise in a single line of reasoning throughout this thesis. This line supports the point that by means of only one precise way of defining and subdividing *naturalism* can that approach to ethics be understood sufficiently to place historical and contemporary critique of it in correct perspective, to explain and demarcate the current surge of interest in naturalism, and to suggest an appropriate way forward for critique. In this section an explanation will be rendered of how the present project has yielded the above conclusion.

Naturalism as an approach to ethics has been criticised adamantly from different perspectives in the history of philosophy.⁵² Moreover, the two most common and significant kinds of criticisms have survived to the

⁴⁸Moore's contribution in *Principia Ethica* was application to the theories of Herbert Spencer and Henry Sidgwick.

⁴⁹For more on this point, see II.E.Intro.

⁵⁰See A.1.

⁵¹III.D.2.

⁵²Introduction.B., II.B-C.

end of the twentieth century (with clarification and/or modification) and are consistently able to withstand attempts of naturalist moral philosophers to undermine them.⁵³ Accordingly, each of these two significant kinds of criticisms has been commonly claimed to render naturalism invalid as an approach to ethics.⁵⁴ Naturalism in ethics, however, far from experiencing a dearth of popularity in contemporary moral philosophy, has rather enjoyed a rejuvenation of interest.⁵⁵

One might simply see this situation as a paradox in contemporary meta-ethics, but this characterisation fails upon closer analysis of the documented criticisms of naturalism. The first of the two types of criticisms concentrates on demonstrating the invalidity of a particular claim which is often used by naturalists to support their theories: namely, that premises consisting of nonmoral terms can be used logically to derive conclusions containing moral terms.⁵⁶ The second type of criticism concentrates on demonstrating the invalidity of a different claim, which is also commonly used by naturalists in support of their theories: that moral terms can be defined, or their meanings exhaustively expressed, using solely nonmoral terms.⁵⁷ Moreover, the current naturalistic trend in moral philosophy does not depend on either of these statements explicitly⁵⁸ or implicitly.⁵⁹ In fact, most contemporary naturalists are united with the critics of naturalism in rejecting the two statements.⁶⁰ Instead, these naturalists defend the statement that the results of enquiry into facts or actual states of affairs are necessary and sufficient to explain the principles, properties and terms used in moral experience and moral discourse.⁶¹ Therefore the situation with

⁵³II.B.2, C.3-4.

⁵⁴ibid.

⁵⁵II.D.1-2.

⁵⁶For the claim, I.B.1; for the critique, II.B.

⁵⁷For the claim, I.B.2; for the critique, II.C.

⁵⁸II.C.4c-5.

⁵⁹I.C.

⁶⁰II.B.3 and II.C.4c-5, respectively.

⁶¹I.B.3, II.D.1-2.

naturalism is not a paradox; rather, three distinct viewpoints are being considered 'naturalism' in various contexts.

That there are three different naturalisms does not follow from this set of circumstances; seeing naturalism in this way is a confusion.⁶² The three statements defended by respective groups of naturalists (and denounced by respective groups of critics) correspond to levels on which naturalism can be justified: the *logical*, *semantic*, and *synthetic*.⁶³ The logical relation between these is such that the second can be true even if the first is false, and the third can be true even if the first two are both false.⁶⁴ Once this is realised, the apparent paradoxes, and any confusion surrounding the relevance of the two main lines of historical criticism of naturalism, disappear. Naturalism is a single meta-ethical position, with a workable definition agreeable to naturalists regardless of the level of justification they choose.⁶⁵ However, the level of justification chosen determines what types of criticisms are appropriate for the naturalist. A *logical naturalist* is susceptible to the first (logical) line of criticism of naturalism; a *semantic naturalist* is susceptible to the second (semantic) line of criticism of naturalism.⁶⁶ These two are not interchangeable, and here lies the distinction between the two historical lines of criticism of naturalism (attributed often to David Hume and G. E. Moore respectively), and the reason for the limited applicability of each.

Here lies also the support and explanation for the fact that the third, synthetic, level of justification is not susceptible to either line of historical criticism, for these target the logical and semantic levels and the synthetic is independent from them.⁶⁷ This justifies the current rejuvenation of interest

⁶²I.B. 1a, 2a, 3a; and also II.A.

⁶³ibid.

⁶⁴I.C.

⁶⁵Introduction.A, I.A.

⁶⁶II.B and C respectively.

⁶⁷II.C.5.

in naturalism despite those criticisms, and calls for a new and different kind of critique levelled at this third level of justification specifically.⁶⁸

A form of critique of naturalism tailored specifically to the synthetic level can be developed if this understanding of naturalism is reached. The synthetic level of justifying naturalism involves a reliance on scientific enquiry (to a greater extent than did either of the other levels) as well as moral philosophy.⁶⁹ This provides a starting point for development of a method of critique. Additional progress can be made by using a case-study approach with an eye to developing a generalisable strategy of critical analysis-- i.e., a strategy that is not limited to the peculiar assertions of one theorist, but has wide applicability within the camp of synthetic naturalism. For instance, Michael Ruse defends his currently influential synthetic naturalist theory on the basis of claims that moral agents in general share certain views about and within morality.⁷⁰ Detailed criticism of these claims raises doubts as to their validity, and therefore to the validity of the ethical theory which arises from them.⁷¹ When the potential for generalisation of this type of argument within synthetic naturalism is explored, the kind of claims that Ruse makes is found to be very common in synthetic naturalism.⁷² The reason for this is that inherent in synthetic naturalism is a rejection of the importance of the analytical tradition of semantics in determining the reference for moral terms. Many, perhaps most, synthetic naturalists have replaced this type of semantics with another, the 'causal theory of reference'.⁷³ For its utility in ethics, this approach depends on precisely the kinds of commonalities among moral agents that can be examined by the type of argument used with regard to Michael Ruse's

⁶⁸II.E. For examples of some recent attempts at this, see II.D.3.

⁶⁹II.E, III.D.Intro.

⁷⁰III.C-D, theme encapsulated in D.2c.iv.

⁷¹III.D, results summarised in E.

⁷²IV.A.1.

⁷³IV.A.1a

theory.⁷⁴ Therefore, testing synthetic naturalists' claims to commonality among people's moral experience and/or moral language is an appropriate way forward for critique of naturalism.⁷⁵ Furthermore, this way forward can only be seen in the light of the logical/semantic/synthetic distinction applied to naturalism, the conceptual difference between these levels and the definition of naturalism *per se*, and accordingly the scope and limitations of past critique of naturalism, all of which elaborated earlier.

Hence, in the contemporary situation where naturalism is very popular and yet extremely variously understood,⁷⁶ only by subdividing naturalism into logical, semantic, and synthetic levels of justification, and by defining it separately from these levels of justification (most commonly in terms of 'science', as has been done here⁷⁷) can three particular advancements be made in contemporary meta-ethics. First, historical and contemporary critique of naturalism can be placed in correct perspective; second, the current surge of interest in naturalism can be explained and demarcated; and third, an appropriate way forward for critique of naturalism can be outlined. The need to clarify and make advancement in each of these three areas has been shown to be significant in recent years. Inadequacies and ambiguities in the meta-ethical literature have been pointed out regarding the definition and subdivision of naturalism,⁷⁸ the understanding of criticisms,⁷⁹ and the explanation of the current surge of interest and appropriate ways forward for critical examination of it.⁸⁰ The point here is that all of these problems, as well as others,⁸¹ can be overcome if naturalism is understood in a certain way, and analysed accordingly.

⁷⁴IV.A.1c.

⁷⁵IV.A.2; specifically with regard to Ruse, see III.D.2c.iv.

⁷⁶Introduction.A, and II.E.2.

⁷⁷Introduction, and I.A.

⁷⁸Introduction.A, and I.B.3a.

⁷⁹Introduction.B, and II.A.

⁸⁰Much of chapter II deals with this; see, e.g., C.5c, E.

⁸¹Three more examples: the common problem of confusing the naturalist claim itself with the level on which support is provided for it (see I.B.1a, 2a), that of using the term

'naturalistic fallacy' indiscriminately to refer to both Hume's and Moore's arguments as if they were the same (see II.B.1, C.2c), and failing to recognise and/or deal with the particular epistemological presuppositions of Moore's Open Question Argument (which has not received remark in this conclusion but was dealt with in II.C.2b).