Chapter 2
Ethics Naturalized: Ethics as Human Ecology
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Ethics: Modern, Antimodern, and Postmodern

There are issues that separate ethical nonnaturalists from naturalists—issues such as whether ethics has theological foundations and whether a voluntarist conception of free will is, or is not, necessary for a proper conception of moral responsibility. There are also issues that divide naturalists from each other as well as from nonnaturalists: issues of the aim(s) of moral life, issues about the cognitive status of moral statements, about the existence of moral properties, about relativism, convergence, and moral progress.

In this chapter I sketch and defend a particular conception of ethics naturalized, one that explains the role of psychology, and the other human sciences in ethics, and explains why, despite there being ethical knowledge, it does not, as a matter of course, display either convergence or progress in the way some science does.

Modernism is the name usefully given to the view, inspired by enlightenment optimism, that modernity, committed as it is to rationality, is destined to yield convergence and progress in areas where human wisdom is to be had. In part this will be done by discovering the right general-purpose moral theory.

Bernard William’s recent work contrasting Greek ethics with Kantian ethics is antimodern (as is his antimoral theory work). The Greek concept of shame tied morality to where it should be tied—to being seen naked, as it were, in the eyes of others. The modern moral “ought” removes us from other persons to reason’s sacred realm—a secular repeat of religious transcendentalism. Postmodernists are an unruly breed, and one can be antimodern—Williams and MacIntyre are in different ways—without being postmodern. But, if for no other reason than provocation, I claim that the conception I will be recommending is postmodern. It gives up both the idea that time, reason, and experience taken together reliably yield knowledge in moral and political life, and, at the same time, it abandons the concept of “reason” that is questioned, without being completely
abandoned, by the antimodernists. It does so because contemporary mind science has no place for a faculty with the architectural features of reason, as traditionally construed. The architecture of mind, as it is emerging in contemporary mind science, is more like Frank Gehry’s postmodern house in Santa Monica than it is like the modern British Museum or even the high-modern Seagram’s Building in New York. Why I say this will emerge in the course of the argument.

Why Ethics Naturalized Is Not Ethics Psychologized

In “Epistemology Naturalized,” Quine suggested that epistemology be assimilated to psychology. The trouble with this idea is apparent. Psychology is not in general concerned with norms of rational belief but with the description and explanation of mental performance and mentally mediated performance and capacities.

The right way to think of epistemology naturalized is not, therefore, one in which epistemology is a “chapter of psychology,” but rather to think of naturalized epistemology as having two components: a descriptive-genealogical-nomological (d/g/n) component and a normative component. Furthermore, even the d/g/n component will consist of purely psychological generalizations, for much of the information about actual epistemic practices will come from biology, cognitive neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, and history—that is, the human sciences broadly construed. More obviously, normative epistemology will not be part of psychology, for it involves the gathering together of norms of inference, belief, and knowing that lead to success in ordinary reasoning and in science. And the evolved canons of inductive and deductive logic, statistics and probability theory, most certainly do not describe actual human reasoning practices. These canons—for example, principles governing representative sampling and warnings about affirming the consequent—come from abstracting successful epistemic practices from unsuccessful ones. The database is, as it were, provided by observation of humanity, but the human sciences do not (at least as standardly practiced) involve extraction of the norms. So epistemology naturalized is not epistemology psychologized. But since successful practice—both mental and physical—is the standard by which norms are sorted and raised or lowered in epistemic status, pragmatism reigns.

The same sort of story holds for a naturalistic ethics. Naturalistic ethics will contain a d/g/n component that will specify certain basic capacities and propensities of Homo sapiens, such as sympathy, empathy, egoism, and so on, relevant to moral life. It will explain how people come to feel, think, and act about moral matters in the way(s) they do. It will explain how and in what ways moral learning, engagement, and response involve the emotions. It will explain what moral disagreement consists of and why it occurs, and it will explain why people sometimes resolve disagreement by recourse to agreements to tolerate each other without, however, approving of each other’s beliefs, actions, practices, and institutions. It will tell us what people are doing when they make normative judgments. And finally, or as a consequence of all this, it will try to explain what goes on when people try to educate the young, improve the moral climate, propose moral theories, and so on.

Every great moral philosopher has put forward certain d/g/n claims in arguing for substantive normative proposals, and although most of these claims suffer from sampling problems and were proposed in a time when the human sciences did not exist to test them, they are almost all testable; indeed some have been tested. For example, here are four claims familiar from the history of ethics that fit the bill of testable hypotheses relevant to normative ethics:

He who knows the good does it.
If you (really) have one virtue, you have the rest.
Morality breaks down in a roughly linear fashion with breakdowns in the strength and visibility of social constraints.
In a situation of profuse abundance, innate sympathy and benevolence will “increase tenfold,” and the “cautious jealous virtue of justice will never be thought of.”

Presumably, how the d/g/n claims fare matters to the normative theories, and would have mattered to their proposers. Nonetheless, no important moral philosopher, naturalist or nonnaturalist, has ever thought that merely gathering together all relevant descriptive truths would yield a full normative ethical theory. Morals are radically underdetermined by the merely descriptive, the observational, but so too, of course, are science and normative epistemology. All three are domains of inquiry where ampliative generalizations and underdetermined norms abound.

The distinctively normative ethical component extends the last aspect of the d/g/n agenda. It will explain why some norms—including those governing choosing norms—values, virtues, are good or better than others. One common rationale for favoring a norm or set of norms is that it is suited to modify, suppress, transform or amplify some characteristic or capacity belonging to our nature—either our animal nature or our nature as socially situated beings. The normative component may try to systematize at some abstract level the ways of feeling, living, and being that we, as moral creatures, should aspire to. But whether such systematizing is a good idea will itself be evaluated pragmatically.

Overall, the normative component involves the imaginative deployment of information from any source useful to criticism, self and/or social
examination, formation of new or improved norms, and values; improvements in moral educational practices, training of moral sensibilities, and so on. These sources include psychology, cognitive science, all the human sciences, especially history and anthropology, as well as literature, art, and ordinary conversation based on ordinary everyday observations about how individuals, groups, communities, nations-states, the community of persons, or sentient beings are faring.8

The standard view is that descriptive-genealogical ethics can be naturalized but that normative ethics cannot. One alleged obstacle is that nothing normative follows from any set of d/g/n generalizations. Another alleged obstacle is that naturalism typically leads to relativism, is defeasible, and/or is morally naive. It makes normativity a matter of power—either the power of benign but less enlightened socialization forces, or the power of those in charge of the normative order, possibly fascists or Nazis or moral dunces.

Both the standard view and the complaint about naturalistic normative ethics turn on certain genuine difficulties with discovering how to live well and with a certain fantastical way of conceiving of what is “really right” or “really good.” But these difficulties have everything to do with the complexities of moral life—of life, period—and have no bearing whatsoever on the truth of ethical naturalism as a metaphysical thesis or on our capacity to pursue genuinely normative and critical ethical inquiry.

A Minimalist Credo for the Ethical Naturalist

It will be useful to provide a minimalist credo for the ethical naturalist. First, ethical naturalism is nontranscendental in the following respect: it will not locate the rationale for moral claims in the a priori dictates of a faculty of pure reason—there is no such thing—or in divine design. Because it is nontranscendental, ethical naturalism will need to provide an “error theory” that explains the appeal of transcendental rationales and explains why they are less credible than pragmatic rationales, possibly because they are disguised forms of pragmatic rationales. Second, ethical naturalism will not be the slightest bit unnerved by open question arguments or by allegations of fallacious inferences from is to ought. With regard to open question problems, ethics naturalized need not be reductive, so there need be no attempt to define “the good” in some unitary way such that one can ask the allegedly devastating question: “But is that which is said to be ‘good,’ ‘good’?” To be sure, some of the great naturalists, most utilitarians, for example, did try to define the good in a unitary way. This turned out not to work well, in part because the goods at which we aim are plural and resist a unifying analysis. But second, the force of open question arguments fizzled with discoveries about failures of synonymy across the board—with discoveries about the lack of reductive definitions for most interesting terms.

With regard to the alleged is-ought problem, the smart naturalist makes no claims to establish demonstratively moral norms. He or she points to certain practices, values, virtues, and principles as reasonable based on inductive and abductive reasoning.

Third, ethical naturalism implies no position on the question of whether there really are, or are not, moral properties in the universe in the sense debated by moral realists, antirealists, and quasi-realists. The important thing is that moral claims can be rationally supported, not that all the constituents of such claims refer or fail to refer to “real” things. Fourth, ethical naturalism is compatible a priori, as it were, with cognitivism or noncognitivism. Naturalism is neutral between the view that “gut reactions” or, alternatively, deep and cautious reflection, are the best guide in moral life. Indeed, ethical naturalism can give different answers at the descriptive level and the normative level. Emotivism might be true as a descriptive psychosocial generalization, while a more cognitivist view might be favored normatively.9

Progress, Convergence, and Local Knowledge

So far I have argued that neither epistemology naturalized nor ethics naturalized will be a psychologized discipline simpliciter; neither will be a “chapter of psychology.” Both will make use of information from all the human sciences and in the case of ethics from the arts as well, for the arts are a way we have of expressing insights about our nature and about matters of value and worth. The arts are also—indeed, at the same time and for the same reasons—ways of knowing, forms of knowledge. Norms will be generated by examining this information in the light of standards we have evolved about what guides or constitutes successful practice.

I have also sketched a brief credo for the ethical naturalist—one that captures what at a minimum anyone needs to be committed to to count as one, a credo that leaves open the possibility of different answers to question about moral realism and antirealism and about cognitivism and noncognitivism.10

So far I have been working with the proposal that ethics naturalized can go the same route as epistemology naturalized. But things that are alike in many respects are not alike in all respects. Quine himself is skeptical of a robust, naturalized ethics, arguing instead that ethics is “methodologically infirm” compared to science11 and that both naturalized epistemology and science, unlike ethics, have an unproblematic, uncontroversial end, truth and prediction—a goal that is simply “descriptive.”12
These ways of characterizing the situation of ethics on the one side and epistemology and science on the other are both off target. Doing science at all and then doing it the ways we do it, and for the reasons we do it, involve a host of normative commitments. Nonetheless, I do think we need an account for the often observed fact that ethical wisdom, insofar as there is such a thing, fails to reach convergence in the way epistemic norms and scientific knowledge do. By "science" I mean, for ease of argument, to restrict myself to areas like anatomy, physiology, inorganic and organic chemistry, and physics without general relativity or quantum physics. Convergence in epistemology and science is, over long periods of time, thought to be correlated with, tracking ever more closely, "the right ways to collect and utilize evidence" and "the truth about the way things are." So there is both convergence and progress.

In the rest of the chapter, I explain why the lack of convergence about ethical matters, insofar as there is such lack, and the difficulty with applying the concept of progress to moral knowledge is something we ought to accept and that it harms neither the naturalistic project nor the idea that there is, or can be, ethical knowledge. In effect, I will argue for a certain asymmetry between epistemology naturalized and science, on the one side, and ethics, on the other, although I have been emphasizing some of their similarities.

A way to state my general idea is this: the links between any inquiry and the convergence and/or progress such inquiry yields is determined in large part by the degree of contingency and context dependency the target domain exhibits and the way the end or ends of inquiry are framed. The basic sciences, due to the univocality and consistency of their ends, and to the nonlocal nature of the wisdom they typically seek, converge more and give evidence of being progressive in ways that ethics does not. The explanation has to do with the fact that the ends of ethics are multiple, often in tension with each other, and the wisdom we seek in ethics is often local knowledge—both geographically local and temporally local, and thus convergence is ruled out from the start. Indeed, even in one and the same geographic and temporal location, different groups occupying that location might hold different norms and values, and this lack of local convergence might be sensibly thought to be good, not simply tolerable.13

Some naturalists take the refinement and growth of moral knowledge over time—for the individual and the culture—too much for granted. For example, most neo-Piagetian models emphasize the invisible hand of some sort of sociomoral assimilation-accommodation mechanism in accounting for the refinement of moral knowledge over time. Others emphasize the visible processes of aggregation of precedent, constraint by precedents, and collective discussion and argument that mark sociomoral life. One can believe that moral knowledge exists without thinking, that it grows naturally over time, that it has increased in quality and quantity in the course of human history.

Moral Network Theory

The best way to explain these points is by discussing a specific account of moral learning recently proposed by a fellow pragmatist and naturalist, Paul Churchland.14 I call Churchland's view "moral network theory."15 First, I will offer a brief reconstruction of the d/g/n component of moral network theory. Then I will address the tricky problem of extrapolating from moral network theory as a credible model of moral learning, habit and perception formation, moral imagination, and reasoning to the conclusion that the process yields convergence, leads to progress, and yields objective knowledge, now pragmatically understood. Still, I will insist that the worries I raise offer no solace to those who think that the naturalist has no resources, no perspective, from which to make judgments about what is good and right.

Acquiring knowledge, according to moral network theory, "is primarily a process of learning how: how to recognize a wide variety of complex situations and how to respond to them appropriately. Through exposure to situations—situations that include talk—moral perception, cognition, and response develop and are refined. According to moral network theory, there is a straightforward analogy between the way a submarine sonar device that needs to learn to distinguish rocks from mines might acquire the competence to do so and the way a human might acquire moral sensitivities and sensibilities.

One way to teach the mine-rock device would be simply to state the rule specifying the necessary and sufficient characteristics of rocks and mines. The trouble is that these are not known (indeed it is part of the mine producers' job to make them as physically nondistinct as possible. Despite these efforts at disguise, there are bound to be (or so we hope) subtle features that distinguish mines from rocks, so it would be good if the device could be trained in a situation where it starts by guessing mine or rock and then, by being clued into the accuracy of its guesses, develops a profile for recognizing rocks from mines. Indeed this can be done with connectionist networks (figure 2.1). Eventually the mine-rock detector (which, of course, never becomes perfect at its job) comes to be able to make judgments of kind very quickly, based on a small number of features, and it responds accordingly. One might compare the acquisition of the skill involved in that of learning to recognize a partially concealed toy or animal for the kind of toy or animal it is (figure 2.2).

According to moral-network theory, the fundamental process is the same in the case of moral learning. Children learn to recognize certain
Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2
prototypical kinds of social situations, and they learn to produce or avoid the behaviors prototypically required or prohibited in each.” Children come to see certain distributions of goods as a fair or unfair distribution. They learn to recognize that a found object may be someone’s property, and that access is limited as a result. They learn to discriminate unprovoked cruelty, and to demand or expect punishment for the transgressor and comfort for the victim. They learn to recognize a breach of promise, and to howl in protest. They learn to recognize these and a hundred other prototypical social/moral situations, and the ways in which the embedding society generally reacts to those situations and expects them to react:”

The observations here are no less ampliative (although they are possibly more complex) than judging that it looks like rain, that the peach is not ripe yet, that the air conditioning doesn’t sound right, that Jane is shy, that the fans are in a frenzy, that Bob is impatient. These are the sorts of discriminative judgments we learn to make with ease, but not one of them is an observation sentence.

To indicate how complex the learning problem the child faces in just one domain, consider learning to tell the truth—learning, as we say, that honesty is the best policy. One thing we know for sure is that we do not teach, nor do we want to teach, the child that he has a categorical obligation to “tell the truth whenever the truth can be told.”

With respect to truth telling the child needs to learn:

1. What truth telling is (why joking and fairy tales are not lies).
2. What situations call for truth telling.
3. How to tell the truth.

Perhaps this sounds simple; it is a short list, after all. But consider the fact that we consider it important that novices learn to distinguish among situations that seem to call for truth telling, not all of which do—or which do but not in the same way. Consider just four kinds of situations and what they require in terms of discrimination and response.

1. Situations that call for straightforward truth telling: “The cookies were for dessert. Did you eat them all, Ben?”
2. Situations that call for tact: “So, Ben, you are enjoying school, aren’t you?” (said by teacher to child in front of parents).
3. Situations that call for kind falsehoods/white lies: “Kate, I got my hair cut a new way for the party tonight. How do you like it?” (one preteen to another). “Kate, don’t you think I’m getting better at soccer?” (said by one teammate to another—and supposing Kate does not think Emily has improved one bit over the season).
4. Situations that call for lying/misinformation, depending on who is asking: “Little boy, what is your address?” (asked by a stranger).

How exactly a child or an adult responds to a novel moral situation “will be a function of which of her many prototypes that situation activates, and this will be a matter of the relative similarity of the new situation to the various prototypes on which she was trained.” Situations will occasionally be ambiguous, and there will be disagreements about what is occurring. “What seems a case of unprovoked cruelty to one child can seem a case of just retribution to another.”17 Moral ambiguity creates mental cramps of various sorts that lead to reflection, discussion, and argument, as does disagreement among persons about how to describe a certain act or situation. These, in turn, lead to prototype adjustment.

Two comments are in order before we proceed further. First, it should be emphasized, in case it is not obvious, that the moral network theorist is using the concept of a prototype in a very broad but principled sense. Indeed, Churchland argues that the prototype activation model is general enough to account for perceptual recognition and scientific explanation—for example, inference to the best explanation is (roughly) activation of “the most appropriate prototype vector” given the evidence.18 So prototypes cover both knowing how and knowing that. And what Churchland calls “social-interaction prototypes underwrite ethical, legal, and social-etiquette explanations.”19

We explain, for example, why the Czech driver stops to help the man with the flat tire by explaining that there are Good Samaritan laws—rules to be applied in certain situations—in the Czech republic. Conversely, the existence of the relevant social expectations expressed in such laws explains why the Czech driver sees a person with a flat as someone in need of his help and sees helping as something he ought to do—perhaps for prudential reasons, perhaps because samaritanism is deeply ingrained. The sort of sociomoral learning that takes place in the Czech republic, but not in (most parts of) America, means that Czech drivers just stop to help people stuck on the side of the road and that seeing drivers stuck on the side of the road engages certain feelings—either fear of the law if one is observed not stopping or a moral pull to help if the ingrained disposition involves some sort of genuine compassion or fellow feeling.

The second comment is that the prototype activation model designed to explain moral learning must explain our notion of morality itself. Morality does not pick out a natural kind. What is considered moral, conventional, personal, and so on depends on the complex set of practices, including practices involving the use of certain terms, that have evolved over time in different communities. If one asks for a definition of “moral” in our culture, it will be framed initially in terms of rules designed to keep humans from harming other humans—in terms of conflict avoidance and resolution. If, however, one looks to the meanings that reveal themselves in ascriptive practices and in response to verbal probes of a more complex
sort, one will also find that we think of the moral as having an intrapersonal component. That is, there are norms governing personal goodness, improvement, and perfection, as well as norms governing self-respect and self-esteem, that are not reducible to conformity to interpersonal moral norms. This point will matter for what I say later.

So far I have sketched moral network theory as a descriptive-genealogical-nomological theory. It is a credible theory, and possibly true. Indeed, there are two aspects of the view that I find particularly compelling and fecund. The first is the idea that moral responsiveness does not (normally) involve deployment of a set of special-purpose rules or algorithms that are individually applied to all, and only, the problems for which they are designed specifically. Nor does moral responsiveness normally involve deployment of a single general-purpose rule or algorithm, such as the principle of utility or the categorical imperative, designed to deal with each and every moral problem. Moral issues are heterogeneous in kind, and the moral community wisely trains us to possess a vast array of moral competencies suited—often in complex combinations and configurations—to multifarious domains, competencies that in fact and in theory resist unification under either a set of special-purpose rules or under a single general-purpose rule or principle. This is what I meant earlier when I suggested that contemporary models of mind do not leave any obvious place for a traditional faculty of reason or, for that matter, for a process of rational rule governance as traditionally conceived. The architecture of cognition is neither that of the modern faculty psychologist nor of the high modernist, rule-following, serial von Neumann device. Connectionist “reasoning,” neural network “reasoning,” is at best a façon de parler, since really all such systems can do is rooted in recognizing and responding to patterns. Networks do pattern recognition, as it were; they do not “reason” in any traditional sense of the term. The architecture of mind is postmodern.

The second feature of the view that I like is this: the theory is, as I call it, a moral network theory, but the total network comprises more than the neural nets that contain the moral knowledge a particular individual possesses. Whatever neural net instantiates (or is disposed to express) some segment of moral knowledge, it does so only because it is “trained” by a community. The community itself is a network providing constant feedback to the human agent.

The neural network that underpins moral perception, thought, and action is created, maintained, and modified in relation to a particular natural and social environment. The moral network includes but is not exhausted by the dispositional states laid down in the neural nets of particular individuals.

Normativity

It is time to see how moral network theory—as an exemplar of the sort of d/g/n theory likely to be offered up by the naturalist—can handle the normative issue. Churchland himself raises the worry in vivid terms.

What is problematic is whether this process amounts to the learning of genuine Moral Truth, or to mere socialization. We can hardly collapse the distinction, lest we make moral criticism of diverse forms of social organization impossible. We want to defend this possibility, since ... the socialization described above can occasionally amount to a cowardly acquiescence in an arbitrary and stultifying form of life. Can we specify under what circumstances it will amount to something more than this?

Churchland claims that “an exactly parallel problem arises with regard to the learning of Scientific Truth” since almost no scientific learning is firsthand, and even that which is occurs within a research tradition with a particular orientation, set of methods, and so on. Nonetheless, despite overblown views of Scientific Truth and the Correspondence to the Real held by certain scientific thinkers and hard-core metaphysical realists, Churchland insists that “there remains every reason to think that the normal learning process, as instanced both in individuals and in the collective enterprise of institutional science, involves a reliable and dramatic increase in the amount and the quality of the information we have about the world.” And, he claims, the same is true of moral knowledge:

When such powerful learning networks as humans are confronted with the problem of how best to perceive the social world, and how best to conduct one’s affairs within it, we have equally good reason to expect that the learning process will show an integrity comparable to that shown on other learning tasks, and will produce cognitive achievements as robust as those produced anywhere else. This expectation will be especially apt if, as in the case of “scientific” knowledge, the learning process is collective and the results are transmitted from generation to generation. In that case we have a continuing society under constant pressure to refine its categories of social and moral perception, and to modify its typical responses and expectations. Successful societies do this on a systematic basis.

Churchland then asks:

Just what are the members of the society learning? They are learning how best to organize and administer their collective and individual affairs. What factors provoke change and improvement in their typical
categories of moral perception and their typical forms of behavioral response? That is, what factors drive moral learning? They are many and various, but in general they arise from the continuing social experience of conducting a life under the existing moral framework. That is, moral learning is driven by social experience, often a long and painful social experience, just as theoretical science is driven by experiment. Moral knowledge thus has just as genuine a claim to objectivity as any other kind of empirical knowledge. What are the principles by which rational people adjust their moral conceptions in the face of unwelcome social experience? They are likely to be exactly the same “principles” that drive conceptual readjustment in science or anywhere else, and they are likely to be revealed as we come to understand how empirical brains actually do learn.²⁵

The core argument is this: moral knowledge is the result of complex socialization processes. What keeps moral socialization from being “mere” socialization has to do with several features of sociomoral (and scientific) life. “Mere” socialization is socialization toward which no critical attitude is taken, for which there are no rational mechanisms that drive adjustment, modification, and refinement. The reason moral socialization is not (or need not be) “mere” socialization has to do with the fact that there are constraints that govern the assessment and adjustment of moral learning. We are trying to learn “how best to organize and administer [our] collective and individual affairs.” Social experience provides feedback about how we are doing, and reliable cognitive mechanisms come into play in evaluating and assessing this feedback. So there are aims, activities to achieve these aims, feedback about success in achieving the aims, and reliable cognitive mechanisms designed to assess the meaning of the feedback and to make modifications to the activities.

These reliable cognitive mechanisms include individual reflection and collective reflection and conversation. Now it is important to understand what our reflective practices are ontologically. They do not involve the deployment of some rarefied culture-free faculty of reason. Dewey puts it best: “The reflective disposition is not self-made nor a gift of the gods. It arises in some exceptional circumstances out of social customs... [w]hen it has been generated it establishes a new custom.”²⁶ We need to recognize that our practices of reflection are themselves natural developments that emerged in large measure because they were useful.²⁷ Our reflective practices, from individual reflection to collective conversation and debate, are themselves customs that permit “experimental initiative and creative invention in remaking custom.”²⁸ The choice “is not between a moral authority outside custom and one within it. It is between adopting more or less intelligent and significant customs.”²⁹

I think of these Deweyan points as extensions of moral network theory’s general line about moral knowledge.⁶⁰ But this idea that to be rational,⁶¹ self-conscious, and critical are developments of natural capacities, they are things we learn to be and to do, not transcendental capacities we simply have, is still not well understood or widely accepted. But it is true. Critical rationality is a perfectly natural capacity displayed by Homo sapiens socialized in certain ways—fancy, yes, but nothing mysterious metaphorically.

So far I have tried to extend the picture of moral learning favored by moral network theory, indicating how it can account for complex prototype activation and for our rational practices themselves as socially acquired and communally circumscribed in structure and content.

**Moral Progress and Moral Convergence**

I now speak about two concerns with the picture of normativity that Churchland paints in the name of moral network theory. The first concern has to do with the strong similarity alleged to obtain between scientific and ethical knowledge, the second with the problematic view of moral objectivity, convergence, and progress that the too-tidy analogy supports.

My main reservation has to do with Churchland’s overly optimistic attitude about the capacities of the moral community to arrive at high-quality moral knowledge⁶² and with the failure to emphasize sufficiently the local nature of much moral knowledge.

First, there is the overly optimistic attitude about moral progress. Both Paul Churchland and I are pragmatists, so I agree with him completely when he says that “the quality of one’s knowledge is measured not by any uniform correspondence between internal sentences and external facts, but by the quality of one’s continuing performance.”³³ I also agree with him when he writes of sociomoral knowledge acquisition that “what the child is learning in this process is the structure of social space and how best to navigate one’s way through it. What the child is learning is practical wisdom: the wise administration of her practical affairs in a complex social environment. This is as genuine a case of learning about objective reality as one finds anywhere. It is also of fundamental importance for the character and quality of any individual’s life, and not everyone succeeds equally in mastering the relevant intricacies.”³⁴

Here is the rub: what the child learns about “the wise administration of her practical affairs” is a complex mix of moral knowledge, social savvy, and prudential wisdom. These things overlap in important ways, but they do not overlap in all respects, and they are worth distinguishing. Once they are distinguished, it is easy to see that these things are typically in some tension with each other. The demands of social success and prudence
can compete with each other and with the demands of morality. If most knowing is knowing "how," then what the sociomoral community must do is teach people how to resolve such conflicts. Communities of possessive individualists learn one form of resolution, Mother Teresa's nuns a different one. Practical success may come to both communities as they see it, but one might argue that moral considerations are hardly improved or developed equally in both communities. This may be fine, the way things should go, all things considered. But it is important not to think that when Churchland writes that "we have a continuing society under constant pressure to refine its categories of social and moral perception, and to modify its typical responses and expectations" that the "constant pressure to refine" is primarily working on the moral climate. The reason we should not think this is simply because there are too many competing interests besides moral ones vying for control of our sociomoral responses: simple self-interest, prudence, concern with economic, social, and sexual success, and much else besides. Furthermore, it is in the interest of different individuals and social groups to train others to believe (and even to make it true up to a point) that their being well and doing well involves conforming to norms that produce disproportionate good for the trainers.

A different but related point comes from reflecting on the ends of ethics. I certainly do not think that the ends of science are simple or unambiguous, but I suspect that they do not display the inherent tension that the ends of ethics do. What I have in mind goes back to my comments about the two sides of ethics: the interpersonal, concerned with social stability, coordination, prevention of harms, and so on; and the intrapersonal, concerned with individual flourishing, personal goodness, and the like. The tension between impartial moral demands and what conduces to individual flourishing is ubiquitous. Moral ambiguity is endemic to the first steps of ordinary moral life. We wonder how spending so much on luxuries could possibly be justified given the absolute poverty that exists in many places in the world. Much recent philosophical attention has been given to this tension between the more impartial demands of morality as we are exposed to it and the goods of personal freedom, choice, and integrity that we also learn. There are conceivable ways to remove the tension, remove just one of the dual ends of moral life from the way we construct our conception of it. But this seems an unappealing idea. It seems best to leave the tension as is. It is real, and more good comes from having to confront it again and again than could come from simply stipulating it away. But one consequence of leaving the causes of moral ambiguity in place is that we will often rightly feel a certain lack of confidence that we have done the right thing. This suggests that we are often, at least in the moral sphere, in situations where we have no firm knowledge to go on.

A related consequence of the fact that the very aims of ethics are in tension is this: interpersonal ethics requires that we cast the normative net widely and seek agreement about mechanisms of coordination and about what constitutes harm. The requirements of intrapersonal ethics create pressures to cast the net narrowly. We think it is good that different people find their good in different ways. It is good that the Amish construct Amish virtue the way they do, and it is good that some communities think that benevolence is the most important individual virtue, while others think that humility or peace of mind is. One problem that often occurs, and that this picture helps us understand, is that wide-net policies, such as U.S. abortion laws, can not only conflict with the ways some individuals and groups find ethical meaning but also undermine their sense of their own integrity by virtue of their complex commitment to both the larger culture and the values of their group.

The interpersonal side in casting its net more widely may well yield relatively global moral knowledge: it just is wrong to kill someone except in self-defense. But the idea that different persons find their good in different ways will require acknowledgment that much, possibly most, ethical knowledge is local knowledge. It is knowledge possessed by a particular group—Catholics, the Amish, secular humanists, Hindus, Muslims—and it is hugely relevant to the quality of the lives of the members of the group that they live virtuously as they see it.

Moral network theory, with its postmodern mental architecture, goes badly with naive enlightenment optimism about moral progress and convergence. Progress and convergence might come our way, but they will not come by way of some natural dialectic of reason (conceived again in the enlightenment sense) and experience. The network will no doubt yield some workable ways to "organize and administer" our "collective and individual affairs." But for reasons I have suggested, there is no remotely reliable guarantee that these "workable ways" will be morally workable. The pragmatist needs to be sensitive to different and conflicting senses of "what works."

In closing, I comment on Dewey's insight that "moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological, and historic knowledge placed in a humane context where it will illuminate and guide the activities of men." What is relevant to ethical reflection is everything we know, everything we can bring to ethical conversation that merits attention: data from the human sciences, history, literature and the other arts, from playing with possible worlds in imagination, and from everyday commentary on everyday events. Critique is perspectival, not transcultural or neutral; it originates in reflection from the point of view of this historical place and time.
One lesson such reflection teaches is that if ethics is like any science or is part of any science, it is part of human ecology concerned with saying what contributes to the well-being of humans, human groups, and human individuals in particular natural and social environments. Critique, on the view I am defending, can be as radical as one wishes. It is just that it will be perspectival. It will originate from here and now, and not from some neutral, transcultural, or transcendental perspective. When we engage in the projects of self-understanding and self-criticism by looking to other moral sources—within our tradition or from another culture—we obviously challenge our own modes of self-understanding. Less obviously, but no less truly, when we criticize an alternative way of being or acting, our own ways of being and acting are changing in the dialectic of critique. But all critique is immanent. Its meaning and outcome is source dependent.

Thinking of normative ethical knowledge as something to be gleaned from thinking about human good relative to particular ecological niches will make it easier for us to see that there are forces of many kinds, operating at many levels, as humans seek their good; that individual human good can compete with the good of human groups and of nonhuman systems; and, finally, that only some ethical knowledge is global, most is local, and appropriately so. It might also make it seem less compelling to find ethical agreement where none is needed. Of course, saying what I have said is tantamount to affirming some form of relativism. I intend and welcome this consequence. But defending ethics naturalized, a pragmatic ethic conceived as part of human ecology seems like enough for now. So I will save the formulation and defense of the relativism I favor until some later time.

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Notes

1. See B. A. O. William, Shame and Necessity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The antitheory side comes out most clearly in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). I think that the search for a general-purpose moral theory is a waste of time. The French postmodernists Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard reject moral theory as well. But they make the misstep from the premise that there is no single moral theory to the conclusion that moral discourse is to be shied away from.

2. F. Jameson, Postmodernism (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991). Some identify postmodern architecture with class commercialism. The Trump Tower is then the perfect icon. I am using postmodern here to get at the ideas that there are none of the usual rooms (certainly no room for pure reason) and that traditional ideas of function are abandoned or reconsidered. This is what is happening as we see another way to conceive of mental function than the serial, programmable, reasoning model that dominated cognitive science for its first twenty years. Its replacement, connectionist models that work but are not yet fully understood, seems to me, at any rate, like the Gehry house.


4. I am not sure whether there are laws of the human mind that are relevant to ethics, but the “nomological” holds a place for them should some turn up.

5. To my mind the best work in naturalized epistemology is that of Alvin Goldman. See Epistemology and Cognition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Liasons: Philosophy Meets the Cognitive and Social Sciences (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). Goldman never tries to derive normative conclusions from descriptive premises. Furthermore, he continually emphasizes the historical and social dimensions of epistemology in a way that Quine does not.


7. Richard Rorty convincingly suggests that the formulation of general moral principle has been less useful to the development of liberal institutions than has the gradual “expansion of the imagination” (through works) like those of Engels, Harriet Taylor and J. S. Mill, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Malinowski, Martin Luther King Jr., Alexis de Tocqueville, and Catherine MacKinnon. (Rorty, “On Ethnocentrism,” in Philosophical Papers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1: 207.

8. Critics of naturalized ethics are quick to point out that notions like “flourishing,” “how people are faring,” “what works for individuals, groups, nation-states, the world, etc.” are vague and virtually impossible to fix in a noncontroversial way. This is true. The pragmatist is committed to the requirement that normative judgments get filled in by conversation and debate. Criteria of flourishing, what works, and so on will be as open to criticism as the initial judgments themselves. It is hard, therefore, to see how the criticism is a criticism. The naturalist is open to conversational vindication of normative claims, she admits that her background criteria, cashed out, are open to criticism and reformulation, and she admits that phrases like “what works” and “what conduces to flourishing” are superordinate terms. Specificity is gained in more fine-grained discussion of particular issues. But in any cases, there is no ethical theory ever known, naturalist or nonnaturalist, that has not depended on abstract concepts. Thin concepts sometimes yield to thick concepts: “That’s bad.” “Why?” “Because it is immoral.” Now one can be in and often does stop here. But one can go on in any number of directions: “Why is it immoral?” “Why should I care about something?” And so on.

9. Bernard Williams thinks, as I do, that the descriptive underdetermines the normative. But there is a relevance relation. See his Shame and Necessity for an evaluation of the positive and negatives associated with shame versus guilt cultures. This work that has—indeed that requires as its data base—sophisticated psychosocial-historical knowledge. Allan Gibbard’s recent work—Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990)—links the descriptive and normative. Gibbard describes his “expressivist view” as noncognitivist, but I find it more useful to think of it qua normative proposal, as cognitivist, as a rational reconstruction of what is involved in moral competence, where what is involved is expressing our allegiance to norms that have been vindicated by assessments in terms of aptness, in terms of what it makes sense to think, feel, believe, and so on.
The attempt to draw a distinction between the unproblematic ultimate ends of truth and prediction that guide science and epistemology and our ultimate ethical values that sit "unreduced and so unjustified" tries to mark a distinction where there is none and represents yet another remnant of positivistic dogma.

13. And even if there are shared values in this locale, moral knowledge might be domain specific. This is an idea that has been pressed in different ways by Virginia Held, Rights and Goods (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and Flanagan, Varieties.


17. Ibid., p. 300.

18. Ibid., p. 218.

19. Ibid., p. 216.


21. One issue I have not emphasized here, but discuss as length in ibid, is the way personality develops. One might think that it is a problem for a network theory that it will explain the acquisition of moral prototypes in such a way that character is just a hodgepodge of prototypes. I do not think this is a consequence of moral network theory. One idea is to emphasize the fact that the human organism is having its natural sense of its own continuity and connectedness reinforced by the social community. A self, a person is being built. The community counts on the individual's developing a sense of his own integrity, of seeing himself as an originator of agency, capable of carrying through on intentions and plans, and of being held accountable for his actions. The community, in effect, encourages a certain complex picture of what it means to be a person, and it typically ties satisfaction of moral norms to this picture. Identity involves norms, and the self is oriented toward satisfying these norms. This helps explain the powerful connections that shame, guilt, self-esteem, and self-respect have to morality. Morality is acquired by a person with a continuing identity who cares about norm satisfaction and about living well and good.


23. Ibid., p. 301.

24. Ibid., pp. 301–302. Churchland continues the quoted passage this way: "A body of legislation accumulates, with successive additions, deletions, and modifications. A body of case law accumulates, and the technique of finding and citing relevant precedents (which are, of course, prototypes) becomes a central feature of adjudicating legal disputes." The law is a good example of a well-controlled normative domain where previous decisions produce weighty constraints and norms accumulate. But it is not obvious that the law and morality, despite both being normative, are alike in these respects. In the law, publicity, precedent, and stability are highly valued; indeed they are partly constitutive of the law. Public, stable norms, with precedents, are thought to be good, and essential to successful and reliable negotiation of the parts of life covered by the law. But it is also recognized that the goods of stability, publicity, and so on are perfectly compatible with irrational or immoral laws. So one point is that the aims of the law are not the same as those of ethics (ignorance of the law is no defense; ethical ignorance can be). Another issue arises in the first part of the quoted passage where Churchland frames the issue as one of humans' confronting "the problem of how best to perceive
the social world, and how best to conduct one's affairs within it." This is, I think, just the right way to see the problem. But there is a telling difference between, for example, learning about legal reality or how best to perceive the causal, temporal, spatial structure of the world and how to conduct one's affairs in this (these) world(s). The difference is simply this: these latter structures are relatively more stable and relatively more global than the moral structure of the world is. This is one reason that Piagetian developmental stage theories have had some success with space, time, causality, conservation, and number, while Kohlberg's extension of Piaget's model to the moral sphere has turned out to be a dismal failure, an utterly degenerate research program despite many true believers.

25. Ib1d., p. 302.
27. In all likelihood, the capacities for reflection are rooted in the architecture of a system attuned to both similarities and differences, the latter producing cognitive adjustment of various sorts, including proto-reflection.
29. Ibid., p. 58. It is an illusion to which moral theorists are historically, but perhaps not inevitably, prone that their pronouncements can move outside the scope of human nature, conduct, and history and judge from the point of view of reason alone what is right and good. This is a silly idea. The key to a successful normative naturalism is to conceive of "reasoning" in the cognitive loop as a natural capacity of a socially situated mind-brain and to argue for the superiority of certain methods of achieving moral knowledge and improving the moral climate. Arguments for the superiority of certain methods and certain norms need to be based on evidence from any source that has relevance to claims about human flourishing.
30. We might also compare the view being floated to Allan Gibbard's norm expressivist view in Wise Choices. For Gibbard, norms express judgments about what it makes sense to feel, think, and do. Norm expression involves endorsement, as it does in classical emotivism. But it is endorsement that can be rationally discussed among conversants—endorsement that can be "discursively redeemed," to give it its Habermasian twist (p. 199). Talk of the literal truth or falsehood of normative utterances generally—and normative moral utterances specifically—to one side, there is still plenty to be said on behalf of the rationality or sensibility of particular normative claims. There are conversational challenges to be met, facts to call attention to, consistency and relevance to be displayed, and higher-level norms that govern the acceptance of other norms to be brought on the scene. We will need to explain whether the norms we endorse forth a particular act, require it, or simply allow it. And we may be called upon to explain the point behind any of our norms.

For Gibbard, morality is first and foremost concerned with interpersonal coordination and social stability. Given linguistic capacity, it is natural that the need for coordination will lead eventually to norms of conversation that govern normative influence, to the vindication of specific normative judgments, and so on. It makes sense to develop such norms if our aim is coordination. We expect our fellow discussants to be consistent in their beliefs and attitudes, and thus we can ask them reasonably to show us how it is that their normative system is consistent. We can ask them to say more about some normative judgment to help us to see its rationale. We can ask them to provide a deeper rationale or a reason for taking them seriously as reliable normative judges, and so on. A "reason" is anything that can be said in favor of some belief, value, or norm—any consideration that weighs in favor of it. Since the things that can be said on behalf of almost anything constitute an indefinitely large class, reasons abound in normative life. No set of reasons may yield conviction in the skeptic or in someone whose life form lies too far from our own. But this in no way distinguishes normative life from the rest of life.
31. I am using "rational," "rationality," and their suite without raised-eyebrow quotation marks from here on, since I have tried to explain that I am using them as they will need to be understood from the point of view of postmodern connectionist mental architecture.
34. Ib1d., p. 300.
35. Rawls, Political Liberalism, (New York: Columbia University, 1993), sees the tension as one between the ends of politics and ethics, but the basic point is the same.
36. Stanley Hauerwas has pointed out to me that this example is less plausible empirically than this one: it is wrong to kill someone except when the person is being sacrificed for the sake of the gods.
37. Of course, much of science, even chemistry, biology, and physics, is local. Ecology is local with a vengeance. The generalizations true in tropical and Arctic zones may have no interesting commonalities. The point is that the first few of these aspire to nonlocal generalizations that will be true locally, so if there is any light around, it is traveling at the speed of light.
39. We postmodern bourgeois liberals no longer tag our central beliefs and desires as 'necessary' or 'natural' and our peripheral ones as 'contingent' or 'cultural.' This is partly because anthropologists, novelists, and historians have done such a good job of exhibiting the contingency of various putative necessities, and philosophers like Quine, Wittgenstein and Derrida have made us wary of the very idea of a necessary-contingent distinction. These philosophers describe human life by the metaphor of a continual reweaving of a web of beliefs and desires." Rorty, "On Ethnocentrism," 1:208.
40. Why think of ethics naturalized as a branch of human ecology? As I insist in Varieties, the principle of minimal psychological realism (PMPR) is not sufficient to fix correct theory because many more theories and person-types are realizable than are good and because many good ones have yet to be realized. Moral theories and moral personalities are fixed (and largely assessed) in relation to particular environments and ecological niches, which change, overlap, and so on. Therefore, it is best to think of ethics as part of human ecology—as neither a special philosophical discipline nor a part of any particular human science. Are all ways of life okay? Are the only legitimate standards of criticism "internal" ones? The answer is no. What is good depends a great deal on what is good for a particular community, but when that community interacts with other communities, then these get a voice. Furthermore, what can seem like a good practice or idea can, when all the information from history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and literature is brought in, turn out to have been tried, tested, and turned out not to be such a good idea. So if ethics is part human ecology, and I think that it is, the norms governing the evaluation of practices and ideals will have to be as broad as possible. To judge ideals, it will not do simply to look and see whether healthy persons and healthy communities are subserved by them in the here and now. We require that current "health" is bought without incorporating practices—slavery, racism, sexism, and the like—that can go unnoticed for some time and keep persons from flourishing, and eventually poison human relationships, if not in the present, at least in nearby generations.
41. It seems to me a common worry about naturalism that it will be conservative. One can see why excessive dependence on the notions of the self-correcting aspects of morality might fuel this worry. This is one reason that I recommend rejecting the self-correcting, progressive idea. It is naively Panglossian.

42. This point about the perspectival nature of moral critique is widely granted across philosophical space. See, for example, all of Alasdair Maclntyre's and Richard Rorty's recent work; C. Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentrism," Philosophical Papers II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Hilary Putnam writes, "We can only hope to produce a better conception of morality if we operate from within our own tradition." H. Putnam, Reason Truth and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 216. The point is that there is no other tradition to operate from, no other perspective to take as one begins and engages in the project of moral critique. Of course, the moral source one starts from changes as critique proceeds, and one can modify one's source by adopting the convictions of other individuals or groups.

43. I was continually questioned about this—one that I tried to hold off to another time and place—in both Los Angeles and St. Louis. So for the sake of readers who wonder how the argument would go, here is a sketch that goes with the previous footnote. The overall argument can be correctly read as constituting a defense of some form of normative relativism. The idea that identity, meaning, and morals are all deeply contingent and that our current dilemma is which attitude or attitudes to adopt in the face of this contingency is unashamedly relativistic. The question that invariably arises is how a relativist can make any credible value judgments. A relativist might try to influence others to accept certain norms, values, and attitudes, but this could not be done rationally, since the relativist does not believe in rationality. This is an old debate, one the antirelativist cannot win. The charges against the relativist are indefensible and invariably unimaginative. We are to imagine that the relativist could have nothing to say about evil—about Hitler, for example. Here I can only gesture toward a two-pronged argument that would need to be spelled out in detail. The first prong involves emphasizing that relativism is the position that certain things are relative to other things. "Being a tall person" is relative. Relative to what? Certainly not to everything. It is relative to the average height of persons. It is not relative to the price of tea in China, or to the number of rats in Paris, or to the temperature at the center of the earth, or to the laws regarding abortion. The relativist is attuned to relations that matter, to relations that have relevance to the matter at hand. Even if there is no such thing as "transcendent rationality" as some philosophers conceive it, there are perfectly reasonable ways of analyzing problems, proposing solutions, and recommending attitudes. This is the essence of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a theory of rationality.

The second prong of the argument involves moving from defense to offense. Here the tactic is to emphasize the contingency of the values we hold dear while at the same time emphasizing that this contingency is no reason for not holding these dear and meaning-constitutive. If it is true, as I think it is, that whether consciousness of the contingency of life undermines confidence, self-respect, and their suite depends on what attitudes one takes toward contingency, then there are some new things to be said in favor of emphasizing "consciousness of contingency." Recognition of contingency has the advantage of being historically, sociologically, anthropologically, and psychologically realistic. Realism is a form of authenticity, and authenticity has much to be said in its favor. Furthermore, recognition of contingency engenders respect for human diversity, which engenders tolerant attitudes. This has generally positive political consequences. Furthermore, respect for human diversity and tolerant attitudes are fully compatible with deploying our critical capacities in judging the quality and worth of alternative ways of being. There are judgments to be made of quality and worth for those who are living a certain way, and there are assessments about whether we should try to adopt certain ways of being that are not present in our own. Attunement to contingency, plural values, and the vast array of possible human personalities opens the way for use of important and underutilized human capacities: capacities for critical reflection, seeking deep understanding of alternative ways of being and living, and deploying our agentic capacities to modify our selves, engage in identity experimentation, and meaning location within the vast space of possibilities that have been and are being tried by our fellows. It is a futile but apparently well-entrenched attitude that one ought to try to discover the single right way to think, live, and be. But there is a great experiment going on. It involves the exploration of multiple alternative possibilities, multifarious ways of livings—some better than others and some positively awful from any reasonable perspective. The main point is that the relativist has an attitude conducive to an appreciation of alternative ways of life and to the patient exploration of how to use this exposure in the distinctively human project of reflective work on the self, on self-improvement. The reflective relativist, the pragmatic pluralist, has the right attitude—right for a world in which profitable communication and politics demand respect and tolerance but in which no one expects a respectful, tolerant person or polity to lose the capacity to identify and resist evil where it exists, and right in terms of the development of our capacities of sympathetic understanding, acuity in judgment, self-modification, and, on occasion, radical transformation.