

Getting Back to Nature

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EVALUATIVE PROPERTIES ARE often thought to be problematic. E.g., they are said to be “unverifiable,” to “play no role in observation,” to be “queer,” to suffer from a “location problem,” and indeed “not [to be] in this world at all.”¹ These charges differ in detail, and there are a variety of ways of responding to them.² However, one general way of vindicating evaluative properties is to show that they are either natural properties or suitably explainable in terms of other natural properties. In this paper, I argue that such a naturalistic vindication of evaluative properties can go farther than many have thought. In section 1, I lay the groundwork for my discussion by distinguishing between thick and thin evaluative properties and by clarifying the concept of natural properties. In sections 2, 3, and 4, I defend the claim that thick evaluative properties are natural properties, while I leave a discussion of thin evaluative properties for another time.

1 Natural Properties through Thick and Thin

Let me begin with Bernard Williams’ distinction between thick and thin evaluative properties. According to Williams, the thick is “world-guided”; it is sensitive to features of the world, in a way that the thin is not. Consider Williams’ examples of thick evaluative properties: treachery, brutality, and courage.³ We might say that an act that is courageous if it has some determinate relationship with the agent’s feelings of fear. To take one case, we might think that Alice acts courageously solely in virtue of the fact that she acts while feeling fear, though neither too much nor too little.⁴ In contrast, if we think that Alice acts courageously solely in virtue of the fact that she acts while

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¹See [Ayer \(1936/1946; Chapter 6\)](#), [Harman \(1977; Chapter 1\)](#), [Mackie \(1977; Chapters 1 and 5\)](#), [Jackson \(1998; Chapter 1\)](#) and [Blackburn \(1988\)](#) respectively.

²Useful overviews include [Darwall et al. \(1992\)](#) and [Smith \(1994; especially Chapter 2\)](#).

³[Williams \(1985; p. 129\)](#). Also see [Quinn \(1987\)](#), [Scheffler \(1987\)](#), and [McNaughton and Rawling \(2000\)](#).

⁴E.g., Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a-1118a. Of course, the distinction between the thick and the thin does not depend on the particular details of Aristotle’s account of courage, though they are useful by way of illustration.

sipping 20-year-old scotch or while feeling a deep yearning for tuba lessons, then we have not understood what courage is. The thick maps on to certain characteristic features of the world and not on to others; in particular, it maps onto characters and acts undertaken in light of a certain amount of fear. In contrast, the thin does not appear to be world guided in quite this way. A strawberry is good in virtue of being red and juicy; a boil is bad in virtue of the very same facts; a violin concerto can be good or bad even though it is not even capable of being red or juicy.⁵

Now let me turn to the notion of a natural property. Michael Smith gives voice to a common point of view when he writes that natural properties are those “which are the subject matter of a natural or social science,” adding that “the social sciences include psychology, and will therefore encompass facts about human wants, needs, and well-being quite generally.”⁶ Though this characterization is helpful as a rough approximation, it threatens to do little more than push the question back to what counts as a natural or social science and to why this distinction matters.⁷

So let me borrow an expression from Geoff Sayre-McCord and say that a natural property is one that has “explanatory potency” while a non-natural property is one that does not. That is to say,

A property P is natural just in case there is some observational fact F such that the best explanation of F invokes P but would not be the best explanation of F otherwise.⁸

By adopting this way of distinguishing natural from non-natural properties, we avoid the further questions raised by the standard way of distinguishing them. To begin with, we avoid difficult questions about what counts as a natural or social science. While distinguishing between sciences and non-sciences is a worthwhile task, all we need be concerned with here are best explanations of observational regularities. When trying to diffuse skepticism about evaluative properties, we need not be concerned with, e.g., whether or not history counts as a *real* science, etc.⁹

⁵Two minor qualifications are in order. First, Williams did not use the term “thin” in opposition to “thick,” though it is hard to imagine what else would serve as a contrast class. At any rate, the term “thin” has stuck in discussions of Williams’ ideas, and I shall use it here. Second, Williams speaks of thick *concepts* rather than thick *properties*. Obviously, the precise nature of the relationship between concepts and properties is beyond the scope of this paper. I shall simply assume that the relationship is close enough to allow talk of thick properties as well as thick concepts.

⁶Smith (1994; p. 17). Since I follow Armstrong (1980) on the relationship between properties and states of affairs, Smith’s distinction between the two in the rest of this passage is of no importance here. See also, e.g., Moore (2003), Brink (1989; p. 22), Rachels (2000; pp. 74–91), Smith (2000b; p. 23), and Copp (2003).

⁷For further criticisms of this way of distinguishing between the natural and the non-natural, see Lemos (1994; pp. 120–124), Griffin (1996; pp. 37–51) and the exchange between Smith (2000a) and Griffin (2000).

⁸Sayre-McCord himself does not discuss explanatory potency as a test for whether a property is natural, though it seems a fine fit to me. See Sayre-McCord (1988a; pp. 261–263). Ridge (2003) appears to accept this understanding of natural and non-natural properties. It is also close to the empirical characterization of natural properties suggested by Copp (2003) and adopted by Stratton-Lake and Hooker *Forthcoming* among others. One qualification is in order: The foregoing test applies to first-order properties only. Some higher-order properties which do not themselves have explanatory potency can be vindicated by being explained in terms of other first-order properties that themselves have explanatory potency, though that is the subject of another paper.

⁹It is reasonable to suppose that properties that have explanatory potency are also *among* the properties

Given this (admittedly somewhat sketchy) background, we have a credible story about why the distinction between natural and non-natural properties matters. Non-natural properties can be seen to be metaphysically suspect because one does not need to posit their existence in order to explain anything we see, hear, taste, etc. In principle, it would be possible to give a complete account of every event that ever has occurred, is occurring, or will occur without once invoking non-natural properties. So positing these properties would be, at best, superfluous and, at worst, mystifying. Moreover, non-natural properties can be seen to be epistemologically suspect because we lack any plausible account of how we come to know when these properties are instantiated. Since these properties do not have a role in our best explanations of observational regularities, we have no reliable guarantee that we can track them. Sceptics seem justified in being suspicious of non-natural properties, and to the extent that we can show evaluative properties are not non-natural, we significantly undermine the grounds for skepticism about them.¹⁰

Yet once we characterize natural properties in this way it is easy to think of thick evaluative properties which *appear* to be natural. Consider some examples. First, the property of being oppressive: The opposition to the institution of slavery in the United States grew during the time between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Some argue that this fact is best explained by the fact that slavery became more oppressive during that time. That is to say, oppressiveness has explanatory potency. Again, consider the properties of being cruel. It is plausible to explain the actions of a tyrant by reference to his cruelty and the actions of an excellent ruler in terms of his being just. Yet again, consider the property of being honest and kindness. The former engenders trust, and the latter encourages friendship.¹¹ Indeed, there appears to be a strong *prima facie* case for saying that thick evaluative properties play a role in a wide variety of explanations of observational regularities. Nevertheless, this *prima facie* case has come under attack recently. In the remainder of this paper, I shall defend it from the most powerful three versions of this attack.

2 On Not Being Regular

Some maintain that there are no regularities for thick evaluative properties to explain. Take honesty; a moment ago I repeated the (apparent) platitude that honesty engenders trust. But, e.g., Brian Leiter claims that this is not so. Rather, Leiter tells us that “honesty just as often engenders not trust, but annoyance, bitterness, or alienation; people, as is well-known, do not want those around them to be *too* honest.”¹² Call this “the no-regularity criticism.”

that are part of the ontology of the natural and social sciences, so it is not necessary to reject the standard characterization of natural properties as at least a *partial* characterization. More importantly, is it necessary to rely on it in what follows.

¹⁰For further discussion of this point, see the authors discussed in footnotes 1 through 5 as well as Russell (1910), Strawson (1949), Sayre-McCord (1986), Railton (1992), Smith (1994), Hampton (1996), Miller (2003), Dancy (2006), and Sturgeon (2006).

¹¹See, of course, Sturgeon (1984; p. 245), Railton (1986; p. 10), Sayre-McCord (1988a; p. 276), and Brink (1989; p. 187)

¹²Leiter (2001; p. 95).

However, there are two reasons that the no-regularity criticism fails. To begin with, it assumes that the following form of reasoning is valid:

A certain quantity of X causes event E , and a greater quantity of X causes, not E , but F which is deeply at odds with E . It follows that there is no regularity with respect to E to be explained by X .

But this form of reasoning is *not* valid, as many everyday examples make clear. A certain amount of exercise will cause me to be healthy, but a greater amount of it will cause me to be unhealthy (as a result of excessive strain on my body). Exposure to a certain amount of a virus will make me resistant to it, but a greater quantity will cause me to succumb to it (as a result of overwhelming my immune system). Once again, a certain amount of solar radiation will nurture life on some of the planets that orbit it, but a greater quantity will destroy any such life that might be there (as a result of changing the average temperature of the planet). In short, the mere fact that different quantities of a property call forth different responses does not provide us with reason to believe that the property does not explain any regularities. On the contrary, many unproblematic natural properties do this very thing.

Perhaps advocates of the no-regularity criticism would claim that what I have said involves an uncharitable interpretation of their position; perhaps they would maintain no more than this: Honesty does not regularly engender trust because it can be combined with, say, cruelty in such a way that it engenders, say, distrust instead.

Nevertheless, this revised interpretation does not rescue the no-regularity criticism. For the regularities between *many* properties can be suspended by the presence or absence of other unproblematic properties. There is a certainly a regularity between striking a match and its lighting – even though this regularity will not manifest itself if the match is wet, if oxygen is not present, etc.. Nevertheless, even if one wishes to concede ground here, one can do so without any risk. E.g., one might claim that the thick evaluative property that plays a role in explaining observational regularities with respect to trust is not honesty but rather non-malicious honesty. This property will work just as well, if not better.¹³

There is a second reason to reject the no-regularity criticism: It often relies on a questionable interpretation of the relevant thick evaluative properties. E.g., Leiter confuses honesty with several other distinct properties – e.g., tactlessness, cruelty, and impertinence. Crudely put, one is honest to the extent that one does not lie and, more generally, to the extent that one does not deceive.¹⁴ Offering opinions indiscriminately, stupidly, maliciously, or hatefully is another matter altogether and can be done without being honest at all. The problem with a person who tells me I'm ugly and moronic is *not* that she is honest. Rather, the problem is that she is being heartless. Equally, the problem with a person who tells others that I wet the bed is not that she is honest. The problem is that she is abusing my confidence.

¹³This reply raises some interesting questions about the connections between this attempt to vindicate thick evaluative properties and the position known as moral particularism. While these questions are orthogonal to this paper, see [Dancy \(2000a\)](#) and [Dancy \(2004\)](#). Given the inclusion of evaluative “hedge phrases,” I assume that the list of hedges is not infinite. For worries along these lines that I cannot address here, see [Hooker \(2000\)](#) and [Little \(2000\)](#).

¹⁴Once again, Aristotle is useful for illustrating this point. See his *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127a – 1128a.

3 The Impotence of Being Earnest

Let me turn to a second criticism. According to this criticism, we do not *need* to invoke properties such as honesty, cruelty, and earnestness in order to explain the relevant observational regularities. Rather we need do no more than invoke *beliefs* about these properties.¹⁵ The properties themselves are superfluous. Call this “the explanatory-impotence criticism.”

Consider a plausible candidate for explanatory impotence: There are behavioral regularities to be explained in communities where the idea of being a witch is taken seriously. But we would be strongly inclined to favor an explanation of such regularities in terms of *beliefs* about witches, rather than in terms of witches themselves. E.g., the creepy sensation that Samuel Sewell felt when a supposed witch walked by is better explained by the fact that he *believed* that this is a witch, rather than by the fact that someone really was a witch. By the same token, Leiter writes, “what people believe or perceive to be ‘just’ probably does engender allegiance, whereas the regularity collapses when we talk about real justice, which is often a threat to privileged groups.”¹⁶

Several comments are in order. First, a defender of thick evaluative properties need not deny that *some* regularities are best explained solely in terms of beliefs about a property rather than the property itself. One loses nothing by conceding that we are better off explaining behavior in terms of beliefs about witches, rather than witches themselves.

Second, a defender of this strategy need not deny that in the case of at least some evaluative properties, beliefs about these properties play some kind of mediating role in the best explanations of the relevant phenomena. Think for a moment about a phenomenon such as relative prices. E.g., imagine that the price of Battlestar Galactica action figures has gone up relative to the price of Firefly action figures. According to orthodox microeconomic theory, it is this change in relative prices that best explains why I buy more Firefly action figures than I would have if the relative prices remained the same.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the relative prices effect my behavior only to the extent that I have beliefs about them. That is, if I had different (i.e., false) beliefs about the relative prices, then I would act differently. But does it follow that the best explanation of my behavior would invoke *only beliefs* about relative prices, rather than relative prices themselves? Does it follow that economists need to reform their ontologies in light of these facts and stop talking about prices, just as we have stopped talking about witches? Clearly, not. Indeed, if we accept belief-desire psychology or something close to it, *all* explanations of human actions will involve mediating beliefs about certain properties.¹⁸ So such an invocation does not, in and of itself, have worrying implications for thick evaluative properties.

Let me consider a brief rejoinder to what I have just said. One might insist that there

¹⁵Though this criticism is usually phrased in terms of beliefs, it could just as easily include other propositional attitudes. E.g., that I hold my breath while passing a cemetery can be explained in terms of my *desire* to avoid being cursed by the dead. However, for the sake of brevity, I shall ignore this point here.

¹⁶Leiter (2001; p. 96). See also Harman (1977; Chapters 1 and 2) and Audi (1997; Chapter 5).

¹⁷E.g., Heyne (1980; p. 13ff).

¹⁸On belief-desire psychology, see Smith (1987), Kim (1996), and Dancy (2000b).

is the following important dis-analogy between, say, properties like relative prices and properties like cruelty. On the one hand, wide-spread consensus about relative prices is possible – indeed, in most cases, it is actual. If I need to have information about the relative prices of Battlestar Galactica action figures and Firefly action figures, I only have to consult an efficient market for these commodities. On the other hand, there is not a similar wide-spread consensus about cruelty, and there is no way to achieve it. So goes the rejoinder.

While there is something to this, as stated it is too strong to be plausible, and weaker statements of it are not worrisome. To begin with, the rejoinder is too strong in as much as it assumes that there is no way to achieve a wide-spread consensus about thick evaluative properties. To be sure, there appear to be two kinds of obstacles to achieving such a consensus, yet neither is insurmountable. First, there are some distorting influences that can stand in the way of consensus about such things as cruelty. E.g., if I believe that cats are automata who cannot feel pain, then it is plausible that I will think that lighting a cat on fire is not cruel. But the problem here is my false belief that cats are automata. This is a false belief that can be corrected, and when it is, it seems clear that lighting the cat on fire *is* cruel.¹⁹ Similar false beliefs about cruelty can be removed in similar ways.

Second, there are at least some deeper questions about the nature of cruelty that resist consensus. E.g., does cruelty always involve an attempt to cause pain, or does it sometimes involve not pain but rather an attempt to show disrespect for another? Questions of this sort might not be resolved solely by removing distorting influences such as those mentioned a moment ago. Nevertheless, difficult questions of this sort are hardly unique to ethical theory. I see no reason to believe that we are much less likely to reach reflective equilibrium about them than about other interesting concepts that are not evaluative.²⁰

Furthermore, the rejoinder is also too strong in as much as it assumes that there is not actual wide-spread consensus about many thick evaluative properties. Surely, almost everyone will agree that inflicting pain on another for sport is cruel. Likewise, almost everyone will agree that standing up for what one believes in the face of stern resistance is courageous. True, we do not agree about every case, and it is par for the course for us to focus on the hard ones. To take an especially vivid example, there was a great deal of public disagreement over the question of whether the 9/11 terrorists were brave. But we should not allow the hard cases to distract us from the wide-spread consensus about many thick evaluative properties. This is especially true in light of the fact that non-theological ethical theory is a relatively underdeveloped area of inquiry and has been pursued rigorously for a fairly short period of time. It is no surprise that hard cases remain.²¹

A final point remains to be made about this rejoinder. Up until now, I have said

¹⁹Putting aside worries raised in Putnam (1962), of course!

²⁰See Brink (1989; p. 197–209). One need only think about debate within the sciences over, e.g., the correct monetary models, the nature of the Cambrian explosion, rational-actor theory, and, until recently, Fermat's Last Theorem. Life is a good deal messier in the sciences than one might think. See M. Friedman (1992), Stiglitz (2003); Dawkins (1990), Gould (1990); Friedman (1996), Green and Shapiro (1996); and Singh (1998).

²¹Parfit (1984; pp. 453–454).

nothing about why, say, honesty and cruelty figure in the best explanations of some regularities while, say, witches do not, except in as much as they are represented in beliefs. A large part of the reason for this is the simple fact that the existence of properties such as honesty and cruelty is consistent with our other beliefs about the natural world while our beliefs about witches are not. It is not just that we do not need to invoke witches in order to explain the actions of the residents of 17th century Salem, Massachusetts; it is that if we did invoke such things, we would have to amend substantially our body of beliefs that form the natural and social sciences – beliefs that are at least as well supported as anything else in our cognitive economy. The situation is different with respect to thick evaluative properties. The existence of at least a great deal of thick evaluative properties is not at all at odds with physics, chemistry, economics, and the like. Indeed, return for a moment to honesty. This property is not just consistent with the social sciences, these sciences even offer explanations of why some people are honest in certain situations, how they gain such dispositions, etc. We would weaken the explanatory value of the social sciences if we banished honesty and the like from the realm of unproblematic properties. So the motivation to explain witches in terms of beliefs simply does not extend to thick evaluative properties.²²

4 Simply the Best?

Let me turn to what I shall call “the best-explanation criticism.” In order to motivate this criticism, I need to examine the claim that explanations involving thick evaluative properties are, in at least some cases, the *best* explanation of certain regularities. Earlier, I simply repeated the claim that these explanations are, in certain circumstances, best. But why should one believe this to be true?

The answer I shall defend is that these properties have pragmatic tenacity. Let us say that a property has pragmatic tenacity just in case it is invoked in a best explanation solely because such an explanation is substantially easier to use than the alternatives. Gilbert Harman offers one example of pragmatic tenacity thus understood: secondary qualities. E.g., it is sometimes useful to explain the fact that an object looks green in virtue of the fact that the object is yellow but is being viewed in blue light. Oddly, Harman denies that the same can be said for thick evaluative properties and facts.²³ Sayre-McCord, correctly in my opinion, points out that this is a mistake. If such properties as colors have pragmatic tenacity, then so too do thick evaluative properties.

Even if [...] explanations could eventually be replaced by others that appeal only to psychological, social, and physical factors, without mentioning [evaluative] facts, they would still be useful in just the way talk of

²²Of course, this line of argument does not show that *all* thick evaluative properties are consistent with well-established natural and social sciences. E.g., desert plausibly presupposes a libertarian conception of free will that fits poorly with a causal picture of the universe. Nevertheless, there are several options here. First, one can argue that desert does not really presuppose a libertarian conception of free will. Second, one can argue that it does presuppose such a conception, but that this does not come into conflict with the natural and social sciences. Third, one can deny that desert is a thick property. Fourth, one can concede all of these points and simply do without a conception of desert.

²³Harman (1977; pp. 22-23).

colors remains useful even in light of theories of light.²⁴

To return to an example I discussed earlier, it is sometimes useful to explain the fact that two people have become friends in virtue of the fact that both are honest. So it seems that thick evaluative properties are invoked in the best explanations of certain regularities and, therefore, have explanatory potency precisely because of their pragmatic tenacity.

Recently, Alexander Miller has argued that it is a mistake to allow pragmatic tenacity to play this role. For pragmatic tenacity is merely an artifact of our own epistemic limitations. But epistemic limitations should be set aside when taking stock of the furniture of the universe. Miller concludes that “explanations which invoke moral facts and properties do not count as best *for God*; thus, they do not count as best in the right sort of way for their availability to earn ontological rights for the higher-order properties in which they trade.”²⁵

However, Miller asks too much from the notion of the best explanation. It is not at all obvious what would count as a *satisfactory* explanation for an omniscient and infinite mind, much less the *best* explanation. Yet it is probable that it would have little relevance for creatures like us. E.g., suppose that an omniscient and infinite mind could understand every event in the universe in terms of nothing but physics. Would only explanations of this type count as the best explanation? Would we be forced to deny explanatory potency to the properties of chemistry, biology, geology, astronomy, economics, psychology, and the like? Of course, thick evaluative properties would also lack explanatory potency under this scheme. But who cares? If there is no more reason to be skeptical about the existence of fairness and courage than there is to be skeptical about mitosis and continental drift, then thick evaluative properties appear to be in good company. Indeed, it seems likely that what we now think of as the basement facts of physics as currently practiced are themselves the sort of thing that would not figure in the best explanation of the universe for an omniscient and infinite mind. After all, if some version of super string theory is correct, then even protons, atoms, and molecules would not figure in the best explanation of the universe.²⁶ It would seem that almost every property with which we are familiar is metaphysically suspect!

Requiring that the best explanation to be the best for an omniscient and infinite mind is a mistake. The restrictions that it imposes on our ontology amount to a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* for this proposal. It seems wiser to think of the best explanation in terms of imperfect and finite minds like our own. Given these limitations, considerations of pragmatic tenacity seem justified.

Indeed, there is something of an irony here. Those sympathetic to naturalism are often atheists or agnostics. It would be amusing if they had to postulate God’s existence

²⁴Sayre-McCord (1988a; p. 275). For my present purposes, it not necessary to distinguish between moral properties and thick evaluative properties, though see the end of this section.

²⁵Miller (2003; p. 174). My italics. Presumably, Miller means for us to imagine the closest world in which God actually exists. If not, then his proposal faces an obvious difficult: The proposal is that, for all x , if x plays a role in God’s best explanation, then it is a genuine natural property. But in worlds were God does not exist, this conditional is vacuously true since the antecedent is always false, and there are no natural properties at all! Since there is excellent reason to believe that we live in just such a world, Miller’s proposal must be viewed with caution.

²⁶Greene (2000).

in order to make out the natural/non-natural distinction—especially since God Himself plausibly falls on the non-natural side of things.²⁷ At any rate, the essential role played here by spooky beings suggests that this is not the right way to understand naturalism.

Nevertheless, there is room for concern. It is understandable to think that it is a necessary fact that those properties that actually have explanatory potency are features of reality, that those properties would continue to be natural in the relevant sense even if we were constituted somewhat differently. But imagine that in the near future our minds are enhanced as a result of biotechnological advances. So even though our minds are not infinite, they are now capable of easily grasping explanations of certain relevant regularities without the need to invoke, say, colors. For us, let us imagine, color no longer has pragmatic tenacity. As a result, it no longer figures as part of the best explanation of any regularity. Have colors suddenly become metaphysically suspect non-natural properties? It is not the case that we no longer have the distinct experience of the red of a freshly-cut rose or of the azure of the Aegean Sea. These colors are as vivid as ever. Why should the advances in our cognitive abilities make us doubt the robustness of these properties? While these questions raise interesting problems, they do not raise any *special* problems for thick evaluative properties. For the very same thought experiments can be done with the properties that are essential parts of the social, and at least some of the, natural sciences.

For the purposes of this paper only, I have accepted the usual assumption that what is relevant is the *best* explanation of empirical regularities. Perhaps this is a mistake. Perhaps we ought to think of explanatory potency as a feature of all of the necessary properties of any *good* explanation. Plausibly, requiring that these features are part of the *best* explanation goes too far and leaves us with unnecessary difficulties, as we have seen. Sadly, I do not have room to argue this point any further here.

In this paper, I have defended the claim that thick evaluative properties are natural properties from some of the better known and more plausible objections. I have not assumed that naturalism is the only way to vindicate evaluative properties from skeptical worries. I have merely assumed that to the extent that they can be so vindicated, they do not *require* any special attention. It remains to be seen whether a similar (or dissimilar!) defense of thin evaluative properties can succeed, but that is a question for another time.

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²⁷However, Sturgeon (2003) offers an interesting argument that supernatural beings ought to be considered natural—if they exist.

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