



TWO CHALLENGES FOR REDUCTIVE NATURALISM

Questioning the Normativity of Moral Facts when Reduced to Natural Facts

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Abstract

Reductive naturalistic moral realist theories, or reductive naturalist theories for short, make the metaethical claim that moral facts are real and reducible to natural facts. Thus descriptions of what we ought to do, from a typically other-regarding or social perspective, can justifiably be held as real facts reducible to natural facts. In this thesis I identify two related challenges to which reductive naturalist theories must face up. These challenges both concern normativity. The first asks whether moral facts, when reduced to natural facts, can still be normative in any adequate sense. The second asks specifically whether moral facts can, after their reduction, still be adequately normative for individuals.

I assess the answers to these questions as given by a particular reductive naturalist theory: that of Peter Railton. I first argue that Railton successfully defends the general normativity of moral facts as reducible to natural facts, since social groups always have a strong reason to abide by moral standards as much as they can.

However, I also argue that Railton does not succeed in justifying the universal rational demand that many of us believe moral facts to place on individuals. On Railton's view, individuals can, from their own perspective rationally break and disregard moral rules when their interests make this beneficial. I argue that this normative limitation of Railton's moral facts constitutes a problem for his reductive project, to the effect that there seems to be more to morality than his theory is able to reduce to natural facts. I finally argue that we ought to reject his theory as it stands, as opposed to modifying our understanding of moral facts to allow their complete reduction on Railton's theory.

Introduction

Reductive naturalistic moral realism is a metaethical position according to which moral facts exist and are reducible to natural facts about the world and ourselves.¹

Moral facts are generally understood as facts about what is right or wrong to do, or what one ought to do or not to do from some other-regarding perspective.² Reductive naturalist realists then argue that such facts are reducible to natural facts, just as facts of chemistry may be reducible to facts of physics.³ This is, at least, the sense of reductive naturalism I will analyze.

In this thesis I want to address two central challenges to reductive naturalistic moral realism. Both concern the normative force of moral facts. The first challenge is then whether a fact can still be called genuinely normative when reduced to mere natural facts about the world and its (human) inhabitants, or whether they hereby lose their normative character. Reductive naturalist theories about normativity generally need to explain a) what ‘normativity’ means when it is reduced to a natural property and b) defend this sense of normativity in the face of our actual use of normative claims.⁴ Because moral facts are a kind of normative fact, reductive moral naturalism, claiming that moral facts can be reduced to natural facts, needs an answer to these questions too.

The second challenge is closely related to, yet distinct from the first. It concerns whether moral facts can, when reduced to natural facts, still be rationally binding for individuals. To elaborate, the question asked is if a moral fact could, under reductionist naturalism, make a binding demand on individuals’ actions and/or motivations based on (instrumental) rationality, *irrespective of their actual beliefs and motivations*. One could call this a specification of the question posed above, but in my analysis of reductive naturalist answers to both questions it should become clear why it is useful to distinguish them and yet ask them both (in order). It turns out that the reductive naturalist may answer the first question affirmatively and the second negatively, and be coherent in doing so. This subtlety will have consequences for my assessment of the theory.

In my thesis I will analyze these two challenges and their possible solutions by posing them as questions to one particular reductive, naturalistic moral realist theory: that of Peter Railton. I will argue that Railton’s theory does not offer a complete solution to the problems posed. In particular: because it fails to make moral facts rationally binding for individuals, it does not stand up to the second of the above challenges. I will argue that this limitation of Railton’s theory is problematic, and that we ought to reject Railton’s reductionist theory as it stands.

¹ Matthew Lutz and James Lenman, ‘Moral Naturalism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/naturalism-moral/> (Visited June 19th 2020).

² Peter Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, *The Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), 189-190.

³ *Ibid*, 184-189.

⁴ Derek Parfit, ‘Non-Analytical Naturalism’, *On What Matters: Volume Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 326.

1: Can moral facts be reduced to natural facts? The normativity challenge

Defining 'Natural'

In order to properly address these questions, it is necessary to clarify some central terminology. The first, and perhaps most important, is what is meant by a 'natural fact', and what it takes to be 'reducible to natural facts'. What 'natural' means will have consequences for what it takes to be reducible to natural facts. Depending on what we think a natural fact is, it might be anywhere from easy to definitionally impossible to prove that a moral or normative fact could be reduced to a natural fact.

Railton, however, himself does not supply a clear definition of 'natural' in his paper 'Moral Realism'.⁵ He instead argues that normative-, and subsequently also moral facts are reducible to what he assumes are uncontroversially 'natural' facts.⁶ The exact definition of 'natural' remains implicit.

It does become clear from Railton's arguments that he believes facts within the sciences that supervene on physics, such as chemistry, to be at least reducible to natural facts.⁷ He also refers to a property being 'sui generis', being a kind of property distinct from natural properties, as being a property "over and above any constellation of physical properties".⁸ Thus we can infer that Railton assumes natural facts and properties to be purely physical. 'Natural' would then mean something like: in/about the physical world, i.e. describing the physical properties of objects. This looks like an underlying metaphysical, particularly physicalist, interpretation of 'the natural'. A fact or property would then be 'reducible to natural facts' if it were reducible to physical facts and/or properties of objects. Notably, this does not necessarily preclude facts in chemistry, sociology, psychology, etc., from legitimacy, as they could still be called 'reducible to natural facts' on my interpretation.⁹ Railton will later argue the same of moral facts.¹⁰ The question then becomes whether facts like this ought not to be eliminated if they are reducible to other facts. It is to such a question that I will now turn, by addressing Railton's definition of 'real'.

Railton's Definition of the 'Real'

We now have something of a definition of 'natural' and 'reducible to natural facts'. However, reductive naturalist realism about morality does more than just claim that moral facts are reducible to natural facts. Being a form of realism, it claims that such moral facts are 'real', that we are justified in accepting them as facts about what the actual world is like.¹¹

Being a form of naturalist realism, it also claims (in contrast to eliminativism) that moral facts are a part of our best scientific picture of the world.¹² Thus, it becomes necessary to outline criteria which justify holding any facts to be 'real' in this sense, while at the same time claiming that at a metaphysical level they can be brought back down to natural facts.

⁵ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 163-207.

⁶ Ibid, 184-200.

⁷ Ibid, 183.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 165.

¹¹ Tristram McPherson, 'Against Quietist Normative Realism', *Philosophical Studies* 154, no. 2 (New York: Springer, 2011), 223-224.

¹² Ibid, 224.

Railton does offer clear criteria for holding a fact to be 'real'.¹³

It must first be *independent* in the sense that "*it exists and has certain determinate features independent of whether we think it exists or has those features, independent, even, of whether we have good reason to think this*". Secondly it must have the potential for *feedback*, meaning "*it is such - and we are such - that we are able to interact with it, and this interaction exerts the relevant sort of shaping influence or control upon our perceptions, thought, and action.*"¹⁴ A fact is thus real if its mind-independent features can, wittingly or not, impact our interactions with-/functioning in the world.¹⁵ This fact could then allow us to explain certain experiences by virtue of those facts having these features and capacities.¹⁶ We are therefore at bottom justified in holding certain facts to be real based on their explanatory value.

We could call this criterial definition of 'real' functionalistic.

Functionalistic in the sense that real facts are those with an explanatory function in natural science/inquiry, in attempting to create an account of the world as congruent as possible with our direct experiences.^{17 18}

For example: Railton compares the notion of a moral fact to the notion of 'valence' in chemistry, claiming that both can justifiably be called real in spite of being reducible to natural facts, because they state or *systematize* these other facts in an explanatorily useful way.¹⁹ Similarly, his claim is that when something is morally wrong, the wrongness is real because it allows us to explain experiences and social events in a way that un-conjoined, unsystematized, facts cannot. He claims that the wrongness is reducible to the natural facts it thus conjoins.²⁰ I will now go on to lay out those facts which Railton proposes to be the reduction-basis of moral facts.

Railton's Proposed Reduction

Railton begins by explaining non-moral value in terms of individual, instrumental rationality, in relation to natural facts about (human) agents' individual interests and their environment.²¹ An objective non-moral good for an individual is, roughly, what an ideally rational and informed version of the individual would want them to seek.²² So, say that I am physically so constituted that I have a 'sugar deficiency', which leaves me fatigued and unable to do any of the things I want to do. Yet I am unaware of this deficiency and actually wish to greatly limit my sugar intake.

The sugar deficiency is a seemingly natural fact, while my want to complete certain tasks and my want to limit sugar intake are both psychological facts reducible to natural facts. My 'ideal self', knowing all of these facts (unlike me), would then likely want me to seek sugary foods despite my aversion, as this will help me fulfill many of my goals. Therefore sugary foods, especially those I do not know to be sugary, will be objectively in my interest (i.e. 'good').²³

Objective interests are reducible to natural facts. For one, they reduce to physical facts about one's body and environment, which are natural facts. Secondly, they reduce also to psychological facts

¹³ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 171-172.

¹⁴ Ibid, 172.

¹⁵ Ibid, 172-179.

¹⁶ Ibid, 178-179.

¹⁷ Victor Kumar, 'Moral Judgment as a Natural Kind', *Philosophical Studies* 172, no. 11 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 2888.

¹⁸ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 172.

¹⁹ Ibid, 183.

²⁰ Ibid, 183-184.

²¹ Ibid, 185-189.

²² Ibid, 173-174.

²³ Ibid, 174-175.

about one's already present wants and beliefs.²⁴ These may not be natural, but they are themselves reducible to natural facts, so objective interests still reduce (though mediately) to natural facts.

Railton also proposes the existence of a mechanism of (human) learning, the 'wants/interests mechanism', which aligns the motivational states (wants) of agents with their objective interests.²⁵ For instance, if I feel highly energized after unknowingly eating something sugary, I may start to at least associate that specific food with feeling energized. I will then start to crave it when I feel fatigued, and may eventually even realize that sugar is what I need in those situations (maybe I read the food's packaging). Either way, my 'wants' will have been adjusted based on my objective interests.

Thus my objective interest is not only independent of what I currently think or want, but also provides feedback that can alter my behavior based on what my interests are.

This means my objective interests figure well into explanations of changes in my motivations, and my objective interests can be called 'real' facts on Railton's view.²⁶

Normatively speaking, the objective interests of individuals can imply what those individuals 'ought to do' from their own, instrumentally rational perspective: those actions that maximize their objective interests would be instrumentally rational for them to perform. Railton then uses this model of individual instrumental rationality and objective (non-moral) interests to develop a moral parallel.²⁷

First, instead of instrumental rationality from an individual's point of view, morality relies on instrumental rationality from a specifically social point of view.²⁸ Railton dubs this 'social rationality', which corresponds with "*what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information*".²⁹ So instead of an individual's instrumental rationality normatively 'demanding' action based on their own objective interests, social rationality bases 'demands' on what action(s) maximizes the objective good for all individuals involved. In addition, what produces the greatest objective good for all involved is calculated impartially; i.e. everyone's interests are of equal weight.³⁰ For instance, it may be that lying is (under most circumstances) detrimental to trust within a group of people that rely on each other for their individual interests. Thus lying will (usually) do more harm to the group from a social perspective than the 'good' it provides the liar. This makes lying (usually) socially irrational and therefore (usually) morally wrong.

The resulting socially rational demand or standard would be reducible to natural facts under Railton's understanding of the term, as it encompasses no more than individual instrumental rationality applied to objective interests of individuals with simply a more social/impartial goal in mind.³¹

²⁴ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 173-174.

²⁵ Ibid, 181-184.

²⁶ Ibid, 174-180.

²⁷ Ibid, 184-200.

²⁸ Ibid, 190.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 191.

³¹ Ibid, 190-191.

What Remains of Normativity: Criterial Oughts

Having laid out what Railton's moral facts reduce to, and how we are now in the position to ask whether and how moral facts, being both real and reducible to natural/physical facts, are normative. Railton argues that normative facts are a real, but reducible to natural facts: meaning that a fact about what we ought to do is reducible to natural facts, yet has its own irreplaceable explanatory value.³² To assess this claim, we must look at what Railton understands by 'normativity'.

Railton analyzes normative matters in terms of what he calls 'criterial oughts'.³³

The basic idea is this: in attempting to explain why a given roof broke down, it would be useful to say (if true) that the rafters "ought to have been 2x8's at least, not 2x6 [*emphasis added*]".³⁴

This sentence is explanatory because it points out a failure to fulfill a certain practical standard, and thus explains the phenomenon of a collapsing roof by reference to said standard. It could be rephrased as: 'If the roof is to not collapse, its rafters must be (or ought to be) at least 2x8.'

The 'criterial ought' tells us that if we fail to meet the practical standard of building roofs with 2x8 rafters, the roof will be unstable and we can expect it to collapse. Therefore it also tells us that, if we have a goal or interest in creating stable roofs, we ought to give them rafters of 2x8. It is in this sense that the statement of mere natural facts in conjunction also states a normative fact about what we 'ought' to do.

This 'criterial ought' is a fact independent of our wants and beliefs, which can be reduced to natural facts; in this case the physics of roofs and their stability. It is also capable of giving feedback through the consequences of practical errors; i.e. collapsed roofs, from which we could learn and make our actions more effective in roof-building.

Still, the 'ought' is purely hypothetical: we only have reason to abide by the standard of rafters being 2x8 if we have an interest in creating stable roofs.³⁵

Analogously, the moral standard based on social rationality is also a criterial ought. Just as we ought to build roofs with 2x8 rafters if we take on a sort of 'architectural point of view' with a goal of stable roofs, so we ought to act socially rational if we take on a social point of view impartially concerned with 'everyone's interests'.³⁶ Why would one take on these practical perspectives, leading rationally to normative conclusions?

Criterial oughts are normative for an agent in the sense that they rationally 'demand' certain actions and choices as long as a 'criterion' obtains. This criterion is for the agent in question to have a certain interest, which implies the demand. The implication results from an instrumentally rational viewpoint, as was the case with objective interests: given an interest, instrumental rationality 'demands' an action because it would best serve that interest. What the normativity of a fact reduces to is this *relation of implication*.

Railton thus refers to the normativity of objective interests as the 'relational objectivity of value(s)', and to the reduction-basis of normative facts as 'relational' generally.^{37 38}

After moral facts are reduced to natural facts, what is then left of their normativity is this: moral facts place demands on agents to act or choose in a socially rational way if and when the agents have an interest which is (best) served by socially rational acts. The normativity consists in the relation between social rationality as a standard for- and demand on action, and any interest that would make following the demand instrumentally rational.

³² Railton, 'Moral Realism', 185-186.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 185.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 190-191.

³⁷ Ibid, 173.

³⁸ Ibid, 183.

The Challenge: Robust Normativity

Before my first question for Railton's reductive naturalism can be answered, we must take a critical look at the sense of normativity which Railton defends. So far we've seen that his criterial oughts imply normative demands based on certain interests, and that moral facts are such criterial oughts. Yet criterial oughts are, on their own, purely hypothetical. Without an interest in 'being socially rational', there is no reason to act in accordance with that standard.

And therein could lie an issue. If a fact's normativity cannot constitute a strong rational demand on an agent, the objection could be raised that a fact's normativity is 'trivial' to the agent in the sense that it would not give any positive information as to what they should do.³⁹ It would not be very interesting to learn that moral facts are real and reducible to natural facts, if they then had no bearing on how we as humans ought to live.⁴⁰ The criterial view of normativity runs the risk of portraying all normativity as something purely hypothetical: given a certain goal, there are facts about what to do. But what if one doesn't share those goals? The challenge is thus whether Railton can defend the 'robust normativity' of moral facts. This is best understood in opposition to merely formal normativity. Formal normativity applies to any fact that states a rule or standard one can violate or fail to meet. The rules of chess are formally normative facts, since it is possible to make an 'wrong' move under those rules, but there is no external reason any one person needs to follow them.⁴¹

Of moral facts we seem to think they are 'robustly normative': that the standards they state always apply, because there is a continuous, presumably rational, reason to follow them. Morality, we think, needs to be more than a set of rules and standards which agents only sometimes happen to have reason to follow. When we make normative claims, we are referring to something less hypothetical than this.

Railton's Answer

Railton argues that criterial oughts can in fact be more than just purely hypothetical. This is because certain interests obtain constantly, based on specific features of the agent in question. This is what Railton refers to as a goal or interest being 'contextually fixed'.⁴²

For example: the demand to build a roof with rafters of 2x8 can be called 'robustly normative', at least from the perspective of a roof builder. Since the interest in stable roofs implies the demand, and roof builders are (for the sake of argument) agents of the kind which always have that interest, they always have instrumentally rational reason to follow the demand. The context of a roof-builder's 'essential' goals fixes the interest that implies the demand.

Just as building roofs without 2x8 rafters gives them the potential to collapse, Railton argues that deviation from social rationality as a standard has the potential to produce negative feedback, namely at the level of social arrangements. Social arrangements have a potential for unrest and instability corresponding to their deviation from social rationality.⁴³ This potential for instability would result from the possibility that members of the social arrangements rebel against perceived unfair treatment, or that infrastructures break down due to socially irrational norms, procedures and structures that leave many members vulnerable.

A timely, though perhaps soon overplayed, example would be the systematic racism addressed in recent Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of US police. Countries like the United States have come to experience great social instability as a result of certain

³⁹ Derek Parfit, 'The Triviality Objection', *On What Matters: Volume Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 342-344.

⁴⁰ McPherson, 'Against Quietist Normative Realism', 224.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 232.

⁴² Railton, 'Moral Realism', 185.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 191-192.

groups receiving systematically unfair treatment in society, arguably because of social structures ‘infected’ by prejudices which cause them to generally favor certain races/ethnicities, as well as a more concrete system of government and police that licenses immoral use of power and violence against those it deems expendable or threatening.⁴⁴

As these victimized groups become aware of- or less consciously react to said unfairness, this socially irrational quality of the social arrangement leads to unrest and instability, which in turn constitutes a form of negative feedback to society. Based on this feedback, the society could then ‘learn’ by fixing systematic issues, whether it itself recognizes the social irrationality in them or not. Current events following Black Lives Matter protests suggest that this may already be taking place.⁴⁵ Thus a wants/interests mechanism functions at a societal/interpersonal level, and the immorality of norms and social structures would have an explanatory role in the account of changes in the aforementioned norms and structures. Said social irrationality explains, more clearly and concisely than some long causal chain of historical, judicial (etc.), and economical facts, why such a strong and wide-spread public outcry resulted ‘from the death of one black man.’ It is also this explanatory power which makes us justified on Railton’s view to hold moral facts as real, while being reducible to natural facts. The independent features of moral facts, stating what is socially irrational and how this can affect social arrangements, explains both social instability and changes in social norms and structures.

So social rationality constitutes a rational demand to (social) change based on an interest in the stability (and perhaps general ‘wellbeing’) of social arrangements. And, as the building of stable roofs seems a contextually fixed goal for roof builders, the building and sustaining of stable social interactions/arrangements seems to be a fixed goal for social arrangements (most prominently societies) themselves. Beyond this being intuitively plausible, it is already suggested by processes of social change pointed out by Railton. These seem to advance whole social arrangements towards more socially rational norms in a sort of ‘learning’ from the negative feedback of social instability.⁴⁶ For instance: in their development, societies have seemingly come to broaden their spheres of moral concern more and more, to the point that in many modern societies it would be highly controversial to limit moral concern to anything less than the human species.⁴⁷ This should demonstrate that the main respondents to feedback from standards of social rationality are social arrangements, suggesting that it is mainly their interests which are addressed by said feedback and the encompassing process of (social) learning.

A moral fact on Railton’s view states a criterial ‘ought’ consisting of standards of social rationality, which standards apply if and when an interest obtains that makes it (instrumentally) rational to follow them. One such interest, we now see, is an interest in social stability. The need for social stability is then contextually fixed by the instrumentally rational perspective being that of a social arrangement. Thus social arrangements have a continuous, rational reason to follow standards of social rationality as best they can: minimizing social instability.

Moral facts can then be called robustly normative for social arrangements: they apply to them constantly and universally, stating standards which the social arrangements always have reason to follow. They are also reducible to natural facts. As mentioned, social rationality is reducible to other facts which again reduce to natural facts. Similarly, the other part of its reduction basis; the effect of

⁴⁴ Philip V. McHarris, ‘The George Floyd Protests – and Riots – Are a Rebellion against an Unjust System | Philip McHarris’, *The Guardian*, sec. Opinion (June 4th 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/04/george-floyd-protests-riots-rebellion> (Visited on June 19th 2020).

⁴⁵ Poppy Noor, ‘What the George Floyd Protests Have Achieved in Just Two Weeks’, *The Guardian*, sec. US news (June 8th 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/08/what-have-protests-achieved-george-floyd-death-police-funding-statues> (Visited June 19th 2020).

⁴⁶ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 197-199.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 197.

social rationality on social stability, is comprised of sociological and psychological facts which themselves reduce to natural facts. Thus moral facts are reduced, mediately, to natural facts.

It is in this sense that Railton can say moral facts state 'how we as humans ought to live'. Practically all humans comprise social arrangements. Social arrangements ought to be as socially rational as possible, but their social rationality is reliant on the socially rational conduct of their human constituents. Thus, from the perspective of the social group, all – or as many people as possible – ought to act as socially rational as possible.

Railton's moral facts are therefore real and normative in a relevant sense, even after a reduction to natural facts. So he is able to answer my first question affirmatively.

2: Can moral facts be reduced to natural facts? Normativity for Individuals

A Recap of Railton's Answer to the First Question

As we've now seen, Railton was able to answer my question concerning the overall normativity of moral facts affirmatively. He argues first that the objective interests of individuals are real facts, reducible to natural facts.⁴⁸ He then proposes a reduction of moral facts to criterial oughts which, given an interest in social stability, constitute a normative demand for the objective individual good of all involved to be maximized in an impartial way.⁴⁹ This is called the demand or standard of social rationality, and together with facts linking social irrationality to potential social instability (and social rationality to social stability), it makes up the reduction-basis of moral facts.⁵⁰ Since the components of this reduction-basis are themselves reducible to natural facts, moral facts are as well.⁵¹ Since the immorality of norms and social structures figure into our best explanations of instances of social unrest and societal change, we are also justified to hold them as real.⁵² Finally, I conclude that since social arrangements seemingly have it in their 'nature' to aim for as stable a social arrangement as possible, as a roof builder does for stable roofs, the interest in social stability is contextually fixed by the perspective of social arrangements. This means that moral facts are robustly normative for social arrangements, these groups of individuals always having reason, collectively, to be socially rational.

A Deeper Challenge: Morality as Rationally Binding for Individuals

However, I argue, Railton is not able by his account of moral facts to justify their (robust) normativity as completely as a moral realist should. Namely: he is not able to claim that his moral facts constitute instrumentally rational obligations *on individuals* regardless of their existing beliefs and motivations.⁵³ Because of this, the reduction of moral facts to natural facts is incomplete: it does not manage to reduce all of what we understand as – and what matters to us about – morality to natural facts.

To see why this is, we need only recall that the perspective through which the goal of social stability is contextually fixed, enabling a robustly normative demand, is also that of a social arrangement. It has thus so far only been argued that social arrangements, as entities comprised of individual humans, carry instrumentally rational obligations to strive for social rationality. It has been shown that moral facts are robustly normative *for social arrangements*.

But for a fact to imply a similar normative demand on an *individual's* decisions and actions, it must (also) imply an instrumentally rational demand from the individual's perspective. The interest in social stability, or any other interest implying the same rational obligation, must then also be contextually fixed by this perspective. To avoid confusion with the general issue of robust normativity in my first question, I will refer to this as moral facts/oughts being 'rationally binding' to individuals. By this I mean that individuals have, from their own instrumentally rational perspective, a continuous (overriding) reason to be socially rational in their actions, regardless of their actual beliefs and motivations.

⁴⁸ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 172-184.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 185-191.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 190-192.

⁵¹ Ibid, 172-184.

⁵² Ibid, 190-200.

⁵³ Ibid, 201.

Since all Railton gives us about the consequences of socially rational conduct is its effect on social stability, which matters mainly to social arrangements, moral facts being ‘rationally binding’ to individuals seemingly requires their interests to align with that of the social arrangement they take part in. But the interests of an individual are independent of- and may at any time differ from those of a social arrangement. It may at times be true that it is in one’s interest to contribute to social stability. I will, in favor of Railton, assume that social stability is a collective good that every member of the social arrangement benefits from. Still, as with all collective goods, it is only in the individual’s interest to contribute to social stability to the degree that their actions have definite consequences for the good’s existence.

Why Free Riding Remains Rational

Say that social stability is maintained in part by a critical mass of people consistently telling the truth. This is imaginable, as the assumption that ‘most people (usually) tell the truth’ seems like a prerequisite that stable social relations need to function. It is also assumable that lying, especially with the goal of furthering your individual interests/desires, is socially irrational as it both harms individual people and contributes to undermining the vital trust that social interactions are based on. It does not (usually) take the interests of everyone involved equally and impartially into account, as on such an account it would be clear that the damage to general interests would be higher than the benefits. This social irrationality can factor into an explanation of the potential for unrest and instability that is created by the act (especially when repeated and/or broadly practiced). Thus it seems likely that it is a fact reducible to natural facts that lying (under specified circumstances) is morally wrong, and you ‘ought not to do it’ in the sense of a normative moral ‘ought’.

Yet this ‘ought’ is so far only rationally compelling from a social perspective, because a social arrangement can count any act contributing to social instability as ‘against its interests’ (the more stable the society, the better for the society’s functioning). An individual perspective, meanwhile, leads to wholly different instrumentally rational conclusions in this case: it effectively licenses ‘moral free riding’.⁵⁴ I will now lay out why free riding on the moral conduct of others is seemingly at times rational for individuals.

Social stability implies an instrumentally rational demand not to lie on individuals to the degree that their contributing to social instability (by lying) can be expected to affect their individual objective interests. But the interests of the individual are only so ‘threatened’ when potential for instability actually results.

Potential for social instability, we may assume, is results when ‘enough’ people act in a socially irrational way (and/or act socially irrationally to a high enough degree), and this potential turns to actual instability when additional circumstances obtain.⁵⁵ We may disregard these additional circumstances, as even without them there is a distinct potential for instability, which we may assume constitutes a reason for individuals to expect their interests will be affected. As this assumption only helps Railton against my criticism, broadening the cases in which individuals have reason to act socially rational, I will not support the assumption any further. ‘Enough people’ may mean anything from either a very large- to a small amount of people, and varying degrees of social irrationality can have an effect. Regardless, we can call the potential for social instability ‘significant’ for an individual when the degree (or kind) of instability stands to negatively impact the individual’s interests.

⁵⁴ Garrett Cullity, ‘Moral Free Riding’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 1 (New Jersey: Wiley, 1995), 5.

⁵⁵ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 191-192.

Given this, we see that an individual can only expect ‘significant’ social instability as a result of their ‘morally wrong’ actions if these actions result in potential instability of the correct kind and/or degree. Yet this expectation need not always result from immoral/socially irrational behavior. It will only result if ‘enough people’ act in a certain way, or don’t act in another, which ‘people’ are often not limited to the individual in question. Instead the conduct of many others will more often than not be a major factor in the effect on social stability of an individual’s action.

Thus a given individual need not always expect that their socially irrational actions will effect social instability of the kind detrimental to *themselves*. Consequently: if I lie (under certain circumstances), I likely contribute to (potential for) social instability to some degree. But as long as I can reasonably expect most other people to consistently tell the truth (thus maintaining social stability and trust) my lying will not affect my interests negatively and may in fact be (egotistically) beneficial. This would either be because the moral conduct of others prevents (potential for) instability from arising from my actions at all, or because what (potential for) instability I *do* cause is minimized by the truthfulness of others so as to not be of the degree that harms *my* interests. My lying is still socially irrational, still morally wrong, and still contributes to potential for social instability so that the social arrangement would want me not to. But it is rational from my perspective.

This shows that, on Railton’s conception of moral facts, it can be totally rational for individuals to perform an action even though it is morally wrong.⁵⁶ In explaining why this is, the idea of ‘types of entities’ becomes salient. The features of a type of entity are what ‘contextually fix’ the interest in certain actions for that type of entity, which interest then continuously implies a rational demand, for an agent who is that type of entity, to perform those actions.⁵⁷ So it is with social arrangements, whose interest in social stability is contextually fixed by their naturally (or conceptually) being the type of entity that needs social stability as much as possible to fulfill its central function(s). Individual human beings ‘as a type of entity’, however, do not have it always in their interest to contribute to social stability, or to avoid contributing to social instability.

We have seen this from our free riding example: nothing about individuals precludes socially irrational actions from being in their interest on occasion. This means that moral facts are not rationally binding for individuals considered as entities. Consequently, for an actual individual it is contingent on their current interests, and/or on the conduct of others, whether they have reason to refrain from immoral actions. This is, again, in contrast to social arrangements, to whom moral facts universally constitute binding reasons to make certain choices. We must then conclude that Railton’s answer to my second question is negative.

The Real Problem: Revising Morality or Rejecting Railton’s Reductionism.

I claim that this constitutes a serious problem for Railton’s theory, as it is able to reduce only part of the (conventional) normative content of moral facts to natural facts. I will now elaborate on this claim, while addressing Railton’s (possible) retorts to my criticism.

To begin with, Railton himself notices that his moral facts cannot constitute rational demands, in the sense of overriding reasons, on individuals “*regardless of their contingent desires.*”⁵⁸

However, he argues, “*rational motivation is not a precondition of moral obligation*”, as on his account of moral facts “*what it would be morally right for me to do depends upon what is rational from a point of view that includes, but is not exhausted by, my own.*”⁵⁹ He goes on to point out that there are perfectly objective reasons to care about a social point of view and its normative conclusions,

⁵⁶ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 201.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 185.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 201.

⁵⁹ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 201.

even if not every individual always has these reasons.⁶⁰ This may be true, but it does not change that Railton's moral facts fail to be rationally binding for individuals *as entities*.

Railton attempts to deny that this limited normativity of moral facts is a problem. He argues that the normative authority of moral facts is not lost as long as we let go of the demand that, for moral imperatives to be applicable to individuals, individuals must have reason to obey them. He further notes that we may be wrong to expect that reasons (moral or non-moral) ever be more than hypothetical in the first place.⁶¹

It would seem that Railton is here arguing for a deflated sense of normativity: one which states that the normative authority of a fact/demand cannot be construed as anything more than its having the characteristic of being a standard one can fail to meet.⁶² But if moral facts are no more than standards we can fail to meet, and which we can only *happen* to be motivated to obey, then any normative fact (including moral facts) is no more normative than the rules of chess.⁶³ It might be added that on this view moral facts are entirely trivial. For instance: telling you what I believe is morally wrong would tell you nothing necessarily about what you can expect me to do, as you do not know my motivations.⁶⁴ I may recognize killing is morally wrong, but understand nothing by this that gives me reason not to do it, as I simply adore murder. One could argue that if this is my moral view, I do not really have a substantive, informative or positive moral view at all.⁶⁵

If these conclusions seem counter to what we have concluded of Railton's view on normativity before, it's because they are. Railton's own relational reduction-basis for moral facts seems to imply that they *can* be more than just hypothetical. Namely: social arrangements always have reason to be socially rational, because it is always in their interest to maximize social stability; i.e. that interest is contextually fixed by the type of entity they are.⁶⁶ And yet he goes on to argue that reason (and by extension normativity) cannot be more than hypothetical, seemingly with the goal of quieting worries that moral facts are not rationally binding enough for individuals.⁶⁷ It must be either one or the other: either moral facts are invariantly reason-giving for social arrangements but just cannot be so for individuals, or such strong rational demands are impossible and morality cannot but be trivial on Railton's view.⁶⁸

Of the above, the most promising track for Railton to take, I believe, is the former: moral facts *can* be as robustly normative as we previously concluded (for social arrangements), and some individual humans have it in their interest to act morally as well, but only contingently so (based on contingent desires, motivations and external situations). So moral facts do not apply universally to individuals, while they do so apply for social arrangements. Thus moral facts are weaker and effectively hypothetical for individuals as long as contingent desires are unknown. This way, moral facts are at least not totally trivial when reduced to natural facts.⁶⁹

Having gotten Railton's defense out of the way, I will now lay out the problem with even this more promising track. The problem comes down to a lack of universality in the application of the rational demands of moral facts to individuals: i.e. their not being rationally binding for individuals as entities.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 201-202.

⁶¹ Ibid, 203.

⁶² McPherson, 'Against Quietist Normative Realism', 225.

⁶³ Ibid, 232-233.

⁶⁴ Parfit, 'The Triviality Objection', 342-344.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 343.

⁶⁶ Railton, 'Moral Realism', 185-186.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 203.

⁶⁸ Parfit, 'The Triviality Objection', 343-344.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 343-344.

Universality is often required of moral facts for a very particular reason: when I make a moral claim, or ask a moral question, I am typically claiming- or asking ‘what should be done, period.’⁷⁰ For instance, if I contemplate beating a man who has been harassing me, and I ask you whether this would be ‘right’, you may very well answer: ‘No, it’s morally wrong’.

Suppose I then ask you: ‘So I shouldn’t beat him?’

On the most favorable interpretation of Railton’s view, you should answer: ‘That’s not what I said. I said it was wrong, which matters absolutely to our society. But whether that matters to you, I don’t know. So it’s up in the air whether or not you, as an individual person, should do it.’

I think that I would be justified in complaining that ‘you haven’t answered my question at all, then. By asking whether it was right or wrong, I wanted to find out whether or not I should do it. You may as well have told me that beating him would be against the rules of rugby.’

My dissatisfaction with your answer would seem justified by the fact that telling me the rules of rugby or telling me what is moral would apparently make no necessary difference to what I *should* do.

You may then respond: ‘That’s a false equivalence! I may sooner assume you care that something is morally wrong than that it is against the rules of rugby, which is why the answer is more relevant.’⁷¹

But, finally, I would retort: ‘Yes, I do care whether it is morally right or wrong. But I care about that *because* I assume that this implies that I should or should not do it.’

What can be learned from such an exchange is that, if we believe that facts about what is moral are real and reducible to natural facts, we would then expect these facts to be *overridingly* reason-giving to us when we learn them. We are faced constantly with questions concerning how to live and what to do, are perhaps torn by difficult choices of value, and (on a moral realist view) seek out moral facts in an attempt to find the answer to these questions.⁷² Just as we expect, on grounds of the possibility of ‘real’ robustly normative facts, that epistemological facts tell us as individuals what beliefs to hold as true/reliable and why, we expect moral facts to give us as individuals the same positive and relevant answers as to what actions to perform and why. That Railton’s reductive naturalist theory must deny this vital aspect of moral facts to be real, is thus not just “a limitation we can live with”, but rather a lack which would fundamentally change the way many of us live or see our lives if accepted.⁷³

On Railton’s view, moral facts are robustly normative for social arrangements, but are (overridingly) reason-giving for individuals only contingently. This lack of rational obligation on the part of individuals would then seem to undercut many of the uses we find for (supposed) moral facts in daily life, such as self-criticism, criticism of others’ conduct and the answering of normative dilemmas between different values.⁷⁴ This in turn seems to defeat part of the purpose of any moral realist theory. This purpose being to allow us better access to- and understanding of normative facts in regards to interpersonal/social conduct, which can guide us in some of lifes’ most important decisions, and to vindicate our presumption of said facts’ existence in making those choices.⁷⁵ On Railton’s theory, it is not the morality of my action that (instrumentally rationally) should directly affect my choice, but rather whether or not it will (contingently) hurt me to be immoral in this instance, while the opposite could also be true.

This leaves us at sort of a crossroads with Railton’s reductive moral naturalism. We could revise what we understand by morality, sticking to Railton’s moral facts which mostly state normative demands on social arrangements that are only universally applicable to individuals through the eyes of those collectives. This would make Railton’s reduction of moral facts successful. It would then only

⁷⁰ Sharon Street, ‘Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About’, *Philosophical Issues* 18 (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 2008), 223.

⁷¹ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 202.

⁷² Street, ‘Reply to Copp’, 221.

⁷³ Railton, ‘Moral Realism’, 203.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 202.

⁷⁵ Street, Reply to Copp’, 221-223.

sometimes happen that an individual had their own rational motivation to be moral, and many of us may for instance have to give up the authority we attach to moral claims against others. It could always happen to be untrue that an immoral person should not have done what they did in the sense that they themselves had a reason not to do it; that they made a mistake.⁷⁶ The alternative would be to reject Railton's reductionism as it is, leaving open whether reductive naturalism generally could ever do more justice to what we understand by morality, namely at the individual level.

I argue that the latter is the more desirable option.

We can judge the theory by its congruence with long-standing beliefs on the subject of morality. Many people think and have thought that moral claims are authoritative to people in a way that Railton's theory cannot justify.⁷⁷ Letting go of the 'rationally binding for individuals' condition may disrupt what must be morally true in our eyes. We want to say more than that society was right to abandon practices like slavery. We want to say that individuals were right to take these steps, even from their own perspective, even when it hurt their overall objective interests, such that following their moral desire did not weigh up against the pain they faced for it.

Further, Railton's reductive naturalism must be judged in the context of competing metaethical views. There are many other theories that could account for moral facts/rules being rationally binding, for instance those non-naturalist views basing normativity not on instrumental rationality but on the rational consistency of individuals' goals.⁷⁸ In this context, the normative limitation of Railton's theory becomes all the more problematic. It does not do well enough to defend reductive naturalism against competing metaethical views.⁷⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that there are two central and related challenges around normativity that reductive naturalistic moral realist theories in particular must face up to. I have analyzed their ability to meet these challenges, through the example of Peter Railton's theory, and I have further attempted to showcase the merits of his theory in doing so. Railton's moral facts remain robustly normative to social arrangements even when reduced to natural facts, based on a contextually fixed interest in social stability. However, Railton cannot justify the characteristic of moral facts being rationally binding to individuals irrespective of their contingent motivations, beliefs and the conduct of others. Individuals have an extremely limited interest in contributing to the social good, and can thus rationally break moral rules and standards from their own perspective.

This forces us to choose whether to revise our conception of morality, allowing Railton's reduction of moral facts to encapsulate all the normative force it should, or to reject Railton's reductive naturalist theory as it stands. I have tried to argue in favor of the latter option, as Railton's moral facts would greatly disrupt our moral discourse and worldview, making it both intuitively less plausible and less attractive in the context of competing metaethical theories that can justify a more complete normativity. Thus I claim that we ought to reject Railton's theory, and that reductive naturalism needs a better theory to defend it fully against my challenges.

⁷⁶ Street, 'Reply to Copp', 223.

⁷⁷ McPherson, 'Against Quietist Normative Realism', 224.

⁷⁸ Immanuel Kant, 'Second Section', *Immanuel Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A German-English Edition*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, The Cambridge Kant German-English Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53-55.

⁷⁹ McPherson, 'Against Quietist Normative Realism', 224-225.

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