



# Ethics // Spring 2026

## Handout 13

### Naturalism and realism: Railton

**THE PROJECT.** Railton's view will contain the following elements:

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Realism: Moral statements are true or false regardless of our attitudes.

Objectivity: Moral properties are objective, but relational (to be explained further).

Supervenience: There is no change in moral properties w/o a change in natural (physical) properties.

Naturalism: Moral theory is continuous with scientific theory.

Bivalence: For a moral statement  $p$ , the claim ' $p$  or not- $p$ ' isn't known a priori.

Fallibilism: We have moral knowledge, yet we're also mistaken about many moral matters.

Universality:  $S$  might not have a reason to  $\phi$ , though the proposition 'It is morally right for  $S$  to  $\phi$ ' is true.

Pluralism: There is no one valid moral code.

**FACT AND VALUE.** Aligning naturalism with realism is difficult, in the first place, because of the fact/value distinction. Once all the natural (scientific) claims are made about  $X$ , there may still be a question, 'But is  $X$  right or good?' That's the Open Question gambit we saw earlier in Moore.

Railton's response is rather complex. Its essence is this: we have to allow that a free rider (=the Sensible Knave) will have goals *we* recognise as not moral. The Knave may be adept at moral reasoning, may accept various moral propositions 'One ought to  $\phi$ ', yet fail to act on them accordingly. Thus we deny that at the individual level, moral propositions are motivating. Nevertheless the Knave still may see the point of goodness: he may, e.g., agree that justice serves the interest of the society, that many people do well when they act justly, though himself he fails to do so. In general, we might say, our goals are served by moral reasoning, yet on particular occasions, with certain individuals, it might not be rational to adopt such reasoning.

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**OBJECTIFIED SUBJECTIVE VALUES.** Often we recognise a conflict between what  $x$  desires and what is desirable for  $x$ . Semantic intuitions point to a principled difference: the former is just a fact about  $x$ 's occurrent state. It's not even a relational fact about  $x$  and the desired entity  $y$ . In principle, you may establish this fact just by scanning the relevant parts of  $x$ 's organism. Desirability of  $y$  for  $x$ , however, is a highly theoretical fact about  $x$ , the species he (it) belongs to, the patterns of behaviour of  $x$  and the species as a whole, the long-term prospects of satisfying the desire for  $y$ .

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This distinction may be reproduced in terms of 'interest'.  $x$  has a subjective interest in  $y$  if  $x$  desires  $y$ . On the other hand,  $x$  has an objective interest in  $y$  if  $y$  is desirable for  $x$  (or: having  $y$  is so etc.). As we know very well, the two interests often clash with each other: what we desire is what is not desirable for us, and vice versa. A large segment of our practical deliberations is dedicated, in fact, to figuring out what is desirable (in contrast, what is desired is nearly always plain to see). A rational agent (some of us, on some occasions) would also engage in the 'objectification' of his subjective interests—that is, in bringing his desires in line with what is desirable. Or to use Railton's example, to transition from Lonnie to Lonnie-Plus.

**NORMATIVE MORAL REALISM.** As Railton himself admits, the value realism just sketched is not properly moral realism. The same procedure of objectification must be exhibited, if possible, with regard to specifically moral norms (Railton prefers debating 'normative moral realism', rather than 'moral-value realism', because he believes that the former is more difficult to defend than the latter).

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The key premiss is that norms, i.e. facts about how things should be, are just a certain type of facts of how things are. Consider individual rationality. We may have the following:

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(13-1) (Bobby Shaftoe believes:) If I want to get rich, I should sail to America.

A practical inference (a modus ponens) then suggests to BS that he *should* sail to America. This belief and the corresponding maxim he might adopt would be a result of a conscious deliberation perhaps. But in many cases, we adopt heuristic rules of thumb, either through early and repeated exposure to certain costs and benefit, or even innately.

Let's, finally, move to the moral domain. Unlike a rule like (13-1), a moral rule is expected to be concerned with the interests of a group of individuals, but not from a perspective of any one particular individual. Such a rule must be 'non-indexical'. Thus a moral counterpart of (13-1) might be: 21

(13-2) If we want to get rich (that's our non-indexical interest), then we (or some of us, or just BS) should sail to America.

The interests that figure in these hypotheticals will be objectified interests already discussed. Therefore, the explanation why groups would adopt moral norms runs parallel to the explanation why Lonnie or Bobby Shaftoe would adopt their respective indexical rules. 22

**LIMITATIONS.** One clear limitation of this approach is that it doesn't provide any direct response to the free rider. We don't expect that social rationality will always coincide with individual rationality. But Railton has two lines of argument to counter this worry. First, we already *are* concerned with impartial justification, as shown by sacrifices in the name of religions and ideologies. So moral sacrifice is not a concept alien to us. Second, the task of institutions is precisely in figuring out the arrangements that would reconcile social goals with individual goals. 30  
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