Science, Ethics and Observation[1]

JAMES LENMAN

Abstract
This paper examines the idea that ethics might be understood as a domain of straightforwardly empirical inquiry with reference to two of its defenders. Sam Harris has recently urged that ethics is simply the scientific study of welfare and how best to maximize it. That is of course to presuppose the truth of utilitarianism, something Harris considers too obvious to be sensibly contested. Richard Boyd's more nuanced and thoughtful position takes the truth of the ethical theory – homeostatic consequentialism – he favours to be determined by what best explains the success of moral practice over its history. But what is to count here as success is too theory dependent for this to be helpful. From consideration of both Harris and Boyd, the conclusion emerges that once we have satisfied ourselves by ethical reflection about what we ought to do, it may then be a straightforwardly empirical question how to do it, but that arriving at that point, the core concern of the moral philosopher, is far less clearly a straightforwardly empirical affair.

1. Introduction

In Richard Boyd's classic manifesto for what came to be known as Cornell Realism, his 1988 essay 'How to be a Moral Realist', we find this striking passage.

> Of the challenges to moral realism we are considering, two are straightforwardly epistemological. They suggest that the role of moral intuitions and of reflective equilibrium dictate (at best) a constructivist interpretation of morals. As we saw in section 4.2, it would be possible for the moral realist to respond by assimilating the role of moral intuitions and theory to the role of scientific intuitions and theory-dependent methodological factors in the

[1] This paper develops some thoughts I adumbrated rather breathlessly in a footnote (pp. 66–67) in James Lenman, 'What is Moral Inquiry?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume **81** (2007), 63–81. It was written for the Royal Institute for Philosophy Conference on 'Human Experience and Nature' at the University of the West of England, 30th August-2nd September, 2011 at the kind invitation of Havi Carel and Darian Meacham and was read a second time to the University of Hull Philosophy Department in December 2011. I am grateful to lively audiences on both these occasions. I am grateful also to Nick Zangwill for comments on an earlier version.

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> realist account of scientific knowledge, but this response is viable only if it is possible to portray many of our background moral beliefs and judgments as relevantly approximately true and only if there is a satisfactory answer to the question: 'What plays in moral reasoning, the role played in science by observation?' Let us turn first to the latter question.
>
> I propose the answer: 'Observation'[2]

But more on that story later.

Cornell Realism is after all quite old news. A bit 1980s. Now, as the new century lurches into its difficult teens, the latest thing is experimental ethics. After centuries of lack of real progress in moral philosophy, our understanding of ethics is in the course of being transformed by new insights from experimental psychology and neurology. Or so it is widely believed and asserted. This has produced some interesting interdisciplinary possibilities. Perhaps indeed too, some interesting *anti*-disciplinary possibilities. For I think it is fair to say that some of the brasher and more confident experimentalists conceive the future relationship between empirical science and traditional moral philosophy less in terms of a partnership and more along the lines of a take-over bid. The days of arid armchair theorizing are at an end. Ethics is off to the lab.

Of course there is a tradition in philosophy that thinks this simply cannot be right and that is the tradition comprising those who are impressed by Hume's famous observations about the impossibility of inferring an 'ought' from an 'is' and the by arguments against naturalism aired by such philosophical luminaries as G. E. Moore and R.M. Hare. The new experimentalist's standard complaint is that these arguments are fallacious. Rather than concern myself here with adding to the oceans of ink already spilt adjudicating that issue, I shall approach the fray from a somewhat different direction.

2. Harris

I want to focus for now on a recent addition to the more popular and polemical side of the experimentalist literature, Sam Harris's recent book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human*

[2] Richard Boyd, 'How to be a Moral Realist' in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181–228. Reprinted in Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (eds.), *Moral Discourse and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105–135 (page references to latter), 124.

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Values.[3] Note the subtitle: how science can *determine* values. Not *influence*. Not *inform*. Harris is very much a take-over bid man. Like Boyd, he is out to defend a pretty robust form of naturalistic moral realism. Moral questions have answers, he claims, and it is an empirical matter, a matter for science, what those answers are.

A take-over bid man then. Indeed, he makes it clear, philosophy is not his favourite subject: 'I am convinced that every appearance of terms like "metaethics", "deontology", "noncognitivism", "antirealism", "emotivism" etc. directly increases the amount of boredom in the universe.'[4] I do not quote this to an audience composed mostly of philosophers so we can be offended by it or so that we can sneer knowingly. It is actually perfectly true that a vast amount of modern moral philosophy is breathtakingly boring. But no less true that all of it is not. These things are a matter of taste but surely anyone who is bored by the – largely jargon-free – writings of, say, Judith Thomson or Robert Nozick or Bernard Williams must surely be someone who is simply not interested in the subject at all, from whatever disciplinary perspective. And while it is true that there is also a lot of boring literature out there, reading a certain amount even of boring literature, in philosophy as elsewhere, is a price we sometimes have to pay for knowing what we are talking about.

Harris's evident contempt for moral philosophy may account for the oft-imperfect knowledge of it that is often on display. Perhaps the most egregious example comes right up front on p. 2 where he tells us that: 'The goal of this book is to begin a conversation about how moral truth can be understood in the context of science.' This is of course a very odd claim indeed. *Begin* a conversation? *Really*? For of course the conversation, and a very lively conversation it has been, about how moral truth can be understood in the context of science has being going on now for a *very* long time and Harris has joined it at a very late point.

Harris's dim view of moral philosophy is puzzling for a further reason. He wants to claim that ethics is entirely a matter of empirical science and in particular of neuroscience and he himself is a neuroscientist by training. But in fact there is not very much neuroscience in this book and rather a lot of what can only be described as moral philosophy.

A central philosophical agenda of Harris's is a defence of utilitarianism. He thinks there are answers to moral questions and he

[3] S. Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (London: Bantam Books, 2010).

[4] Ibid., 197.

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thinks those answers are all about human well being. The arguments he deploys are familiar though he shows little sign of recognizing that they have a history. Thus he follows Mill[5] in urging repeatedly that apparent conflicts between a utilitarian conception of morality and other important values can be largely mitigated by insisting on an understanding of human well being that is sufficiently rich and deep. And he follows Ross[6] and others in his heavy reliance on the kind of comparative thought experiments where we seek to illuminate the intuitive intrinsic value of well being by comparing in our imagination a world where everyone is happy with a world where everybody is miserable. Though of course the latter thought experiment can at most establish that well being is at least one of the things that we should value, a conclusion that falls some way short of utilitarianism, and the continued application of the same comparative method, in the hands of Ross himself, took that far more careful philosopher some way beyond it.

In deploying such arguments Harris is appealing constantly to moral intuition. He is perfectly upfront about this: 'While moral realism and consequentialism have both come under pressure in philosophical circles, they have the virtue of corresponding to many of our intuitions about how the world works.'[7] However he doesn't have much to tell us about how he thinks intuition itself works. He tells us on p. 36 that just as we all have an intuitive physics, much of which rigorous scientific investigation has shown us is wrong, likewise we each have an intuitive morality much of which is, once again, clearly wrong. But his utilitarianism is clearly grounded in appeal to intuitions in which he clearly does repose some trust, inviting the question, how does he think he is able sort the wheat from the chaff?

Talk of 'intuitions about how the world works' sounds like Harris has in mind something more robustly substantive than the linguistic intuitions at play in conceptual analysis. But at least much of the time he talks as if something along the latter lines is just what he thinks he is up to. To contest utilitarianism is, he claims, to 'misuse words'.[8] Well being is 'the only intelligible basis' for morality.[9] Disconnected from

[5] J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 2.

[6] D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter 5.

[7] Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 62.

[8] Ibid., 19.

[9] Ibid., 28.

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experience, talk of value is 'empty'. [10] The connection between what is interesting and the experience of conscious beings, and that between importance and well being, hold 'by definition'.[11] Most striking of all is Harris's short skirmish with the open question argument:

> If we define 'good' as that which supports well-being, as I will argue we must, the regress initiated by Moore's 'open question argument' really does stop. While I agree with Moore that it is reasonable to wonder whether maximizing pleasure in any given instance is 'good', it makes no sense at all to ask whether maximizing well-being is 'good'. It seems clear that what we are really asking when we wonder whether a certain state of pleasure is 'good' is whether it is conducive to, or obstructive of, some deeper form of well-being.[12]

Such passages might suggest that we are engaged in a form of conceptual analysis and that the basic intuitions at play are linguistic. But that would be misleading. For Harris happily allows that it is quite open to people with different goals and different moral commitments to define these words in different ways: 'I might claim that morality is really about maximizing well-being […] but someone else will be free to say that morality depends upon worshipping the gods of the Aztecs.'[13] The Aztec has his definition, reflecting his goals, we have ours and we might doubt if ours has any special privilege. We might indeed, says Harris: 'Is it possible to voice such doubts in human speech? Yes. But that doesn't mean we should take them seriously.'[14]

So it looks as if it is not, after all, an issue quite about intelligibility. We define the concepts one way given our goals. Strange and alien creatures might define them differently given theirs. We can understand what they do but we should not take it seriously. What is the force of this claim? Here Harris simply seems to baulk. To press further at this point would be an absurd and unreasonable demand for what he calls *radical justification*. Here he presses certain analogies. Health is the goal of medicine and it itself we define in terms of certain goals, longevity, freedom from pain and so on. Questioning or justifying these goals is really no business of

[10] Ibid., 62.
[11] Ibid., 32, 64.
[12] Ibid., 12.
[13] Ibid., 35.
[14] Ibid., 36.

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medicine. Science likewise is defined, he says, with reference to certain a certain goal, that of understanding the universe. It is not a scientific issue whether this goal is correct or justified but that is not a reason to question it or take seriously rival goals.

> We might observe that standard science is better at predicting the behaviour of matter than Creationist 'science' is. But what could we say to a 'scientist' whose only goal is to authenticate the Word of God? Here we seem to reach an impasse. And yet no one thinks that the failure of standard science to silence all possible dissent has any significance whatsoever; why should we demand more of a science of morality?[15]

As a case for a robustly naturalistic version of moral realism, this isn't fabulously impressive. You know what? If Dr Crazy want to redefine the practice of medicine not in terms of its traditional goal of promoting health, but in terms of a new goal of maximizing the number of cancer cells in the world, nobody will take him seriously. Of course not. But to explain that we don't need to suppose that there are objective moral truths that underwrite our goals and our definition and not his. It is enough that our goals are ours and his are not ours. Then all we need is simple instrumental reasoning. Given that our goal is health, let's encourage everyone to eat their greens. And of course doing that is simply doing medicine. Or if Professor Crazy wants to abandon science devoted to understanding the universe and redeploy all the resources currently devoted to that to some other goal, again we will recoil. Why will we do so? Because we are curious creatures and we really care about understanding the universe, we ignore Professor Crazy and get on with our science. But in doing that we need not rely on any supposition that our goals find an echo in some normative reality that his do not. Once again they motivate us as his do not because they are ours and his are not.

Now suppose the following. Suppose we have somehow settled that utilitarianism is true. Suppose, in other words, we have simply finished doing normative ethics. We have arrived at the end of inquiry in a shared and stable state of reflective equilibrium and the utilitarians have won. We know that all that matters is determining what particular actions, what general policies will best promote well being. That kind of inquiry will not look much like moral philosophy. It will be simple scientific inquiry perhaps of familiar kinds. I would guess some of it will look very like, will in fact be, economics. Some of it will be medicine. According to Harris an awful lot of it will be

[15] Ibid., 37.

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neuroscience. Ethics, the investigation of what is good and right, if we feel like calling these successor inquiries ethics, will then be thoroughly naturalized.

My hunch is that Harris thinks that that is really where we are. Of course there are loads of people out there who are not utilitarians and the argument continues between the utilitarian likes of Peter Singer and the nonconsequentialist likes of Frances Kamm. But the sociological fact that an argument is still going on needn't show that it isn't, in an important sense, over after all. Harris is preoccupied with the conflict between science and religion so it may be apt to compare the dispute between young Earth creationists who believe all living species came into being separately in distinct acts of creation around six thousand years ago and those who believe we are the product of an epic process of branching evolutionary development from a common ancestry over many millions of years. Sociologically, we might say, that argument is still going on. There are plenty of voices still raised on both sides. But really it is over. The creationist case has been defeated. Like the ghosts in the film, these guys just don't know they're dead. They won't shut up but most of us feel abundantly warranted in not taking them seriously. Perhaps that is true of the debate between creationists and Darwinists. Perhaps it is true too of other debates though it is surely a diagnosis to be made with a certain cautious reluctance.

My hunch again is that Harris thinks just this to be true of the debate between utilitarians and their opponents. I suspect he thinks, as many do, that for anyone with a naturalistic mindset, anyone imbued with the scientific spirit, the truth of utilitarianism is just a no-brainer, that all rival views are simply hang-overs from our atavistic superstitious past, irrational nonsense we should simply grow up and shrug off.

It is striking that Harris is happy to embrace the move that is sometimes aired by way of an intended *reductio* of moral naturalism. If a thoroughgoing naturalism is true, why not simply abandon moral concepts that seem to speak of a distinctive domain of moral properties and simply speak in overtly naturalistic terms of the natural properties with which we have identified them?[16] Why not indeed, asks Harris?

> What would it be like if we ceased to worry about 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'evil' and simply acted so as to maximize

[16] See, e.g. D. Parfit, On *What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapters 24–27. It is interesting here to compare Parfit's 'Hard Naturalist' with the 'consistent naturalist' of Prior (see A.N. Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

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> well-being, our own and that of others? Would we lose anything important? And, if important, wouldn't it be, by definition [*there he goes again!*], a matter of someone's well-being?[17]

Fair enough, on his terms. The fundamental point of normative concepts, as I have argued elsewhere,[18] is to negotiate conflict, intra-and interpersonal, over practical matters, conflict over what to do. And if we found ourselves in a position where the normative arguments were just over, where we all agreed on what our practical priorites ought to be, we could give up normative thinking altogether, drop such words as 'ought' from our language and just get on with the serious business of pursuing the good under the guidance of our best science. That much is fair enough. The only problem of course is that it is in fact just a fantasy that that is where we are. Or anywhere like where we are. And nothing Harris has to say in this book amounts to any kind of case to suppose otherwise.

3. Boyd

That's me done with Harris. And I'm ready to return to my original text from Boyd. Boyd, remember, is concerned that his moral realism which depends on 'assimilating the role of moral intuitions and theory to the role of scientific intuitions and theory' is only going to work if there is a satisfactory answer to the question, *What plays in moral reasoning the role played in science by observation?* Boyd thinks this question does have a satisfactory answer and that that answer is: *observation*. This is a bold and interesting claim.

It is worth taking a bit of time to be clear why Boyd should suppose obtaining this satisfactory answer is so important. He is concerned with assimilating the role of intuitions and theory in the moral and scientific cases. Many people of course would say that a controlling role analogous to that of observation in science is played in moral reasoning not by observation but by intuition itself. Only of course those people tend not to be naturalistic moral realists and the puzzle they face is explaining just how that is supposed to work. Boyd, on the other hand, thinks intuitions play a role in moral

[17] Harris, *The Moral Landscape,* 64.

[18] See, e.g. James Lenman, 'The Politics of the Self: Stability, Normativity and the Lives We can Live with Living' in Lisa Bortolotti (ed.) *Philosophy and Happiness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 183–199; James Lenman, 'Humean Constructivism in Moral Theory' *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* **5** (2010), 175–193.

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reasoning akin to the role they, *intuitions*, play in science. And he thinks they do play a role there. But intuitions in science do not play a grounding role of the sort they are supposed to in ethics by those who think they furnish us with non-inferential a priori knowledge. A distinguished and experienced professor of chemistry may have intuitions, hunches, about chemistry. Presented with novel chemical hypotheses, some will strike him as plausible, others as less so. I too might have such hunches and so might a paleolithic hunter gatherer. But the professor's hunches are worth a very great deal more than mine and perhaps mine are worth a bit more than my Stone Age ancestors. What makes the difference is scientific training and experience. Judgements of theoretical plausibility, made by a trained mind, are, Boyd urges, evidential. But they are not *a priori* and they are not noninferential. Rather they are based on years of scientific education and experience even though the inferential routes by which they are reached are not themselves transparent to the expert subject. Based as they are on scientific training they can be taken seriously and have a role to play in the direction of scientific thought. But for this to be true the theoretical knowledge that underlies them needs to enjoy a sufficient measure of confirmation to be regarded as probably and approximately true.[19] And the ideas to which they lead us, cannot rest for ever on this intuitive support, but must themselves seek confirmation. So it is only because observation is playing the controlling role it does in confirmation that intuition can legitimately play the role it does in theory construction. So if moral intuitions are to share a vindication with scientific intuitions, something, and not just further intuition, has to be playing the same controlling role. Hence Boyd's question.

At this point I had better say a bit more about Boyd's complex and subtle view. As well as drawing here on his 1988 paper I draw also on its continued development in a paper published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 2003, 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism, Part I' (Part II is less relevant to my present concerns).[20] As the latter titles imply Boyd is a consequentialist. He is also a welfarist and hence, like Harris, a utilitarian. His own name for his view is *homeostatic consequentialism*, hereafter HC. According to HC the word 'good' denotes a complex cluster of natural properties relating

[19] See esp. Boyd, *Moral Discourse and Practice*, 112–114.

[20] Richard Boyd, 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism, Part I' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **66** (2003), 505–553.

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to the satisfaction of human needs where the clustering in question is a product of homeostasis, i.e., very roughly, each of the properties in question tend to be favourable to the presence of the others. 'Goodness' so understood is a natural kind term in virtue of this cluster property's causal role. What makes this stuff in particular goodness is that is plays a regulative causal role in our theoretical practice with the concept of goodness in a way that explains the success of that practice, much as is the case with more familiar scientific natural kind terms. This is an *a posteriori* matter, not a matter of conceptual analysis. For the participants in the practice can themselves be mistaken about what they accomplish and how. By appealing to this possibility, we can avoid a worry for simpler forms of analytic naturalism of finding ourselves committed to saying that those who hold different moral outlooks are simply talking past each other. On the contrary such disputing parties are all talking about goodness in just the way in which people who disagree about the chemical constitution of water are all talking about H_2O.

Boyd's understanding of the methology of moral theorizing is more or less conventional. He thinks the core method is the method of reflective equilibrium as canonically described by John Rawls and Norman Daniels. Naturally reflective equilibrium is wide, drawing not just on considerations native to ethics, but on science and the rest of philosophy. As Boyd notes, this might seem an unsatisfactory position for a rigorous naturalist to take. Surely reflective equilibrium is too presupposition-laden to be a method of discovery and is more at home in a metaethical theory of a more modest, 'constructivist', response-dependent sort? But Boyd thinks this concern can be tamed. Again he thinks there need be no difference with the practice of science where our theoretical practice is heavily theory-dependent. In science, this is OK because we have warrant to be confident in the approximate truth of our best current theories, a warrant that derives from the theoretical and practical success of scientific theorizing through its history.

Boyd stresses that our reliance on reflective equilibrium is far from entailing that our ethical knowledge is not genuinely experimental. Political and social history is a central source of data. Thus, for example, we understand 'the dimensions of our needs for artistic expression' because there have been cultures with the leisure to explore them. And the development of early democracies helps us understand 'the role of political democracy in the homeostatis of the good'.[21] But this whole picture again requires that we are able to

[21] Boyd, *Moral Discourse and Practice*, 123.

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say what plays the role in moral reasoning that observation plays in science. And to this question, as we have seen, Boyd's answer is: *Observation*. After all goodness as understood by homeostatic consequentialism is a natural property, out in plain view, no less observable than any other.

But there are problems here. Boyd himself thinks we can vindicate his realist understanding of moral inquiry, along lines he takes to be analogous to the case of science, by seeing moral terms as referring to whatever candidate moral properties best explain the success of moral discourse in achieving its aims.[22] But it is just not at all clear that the parallel is convincing, that we really have in moral inquiry a narrative of achievement relevantly comparable to what we can point to in science. A lot has happened to be sure in the way of social and cultural change and some of what has happened has been shaped for better or worse by the work of moral theorists broadly construed (French *philosophes*, English philosophical radicals, etc.) that perhaps clarified, focused and developed our central moral ideas. But plausibly nothing of a kind to make constructivist and other anti-realist understandings of ethics look simply quixotic in the way that like understandings of the causal order of physical nature look simply quixotic.

Moreover, what is to *count* as success or as progress in the ethical case is surely so thoroughly theory-dependent (and in ways it is surely far from obvious are closely paralleled in the case of science) that a debilitating circularity threatens. Suppose we found ourselves in possession of a Tardis and a Babel Fish (i.e. for those innocent of popular science fiction, of a time travel device and a universal translation device) and were thus in a position to invite Plato and Aristotle to tea. Anxious to impress them with the wonders of modern science we tell them about light bulbs, motor cars, atom bombs, aeroplanes, film, TV, space travel, computers, the possibilities of modern medicine. *Golly*, we might expect them to say, *You guys must be onto something. There has to be something in all that physics, chemistry and stuff you believe. How else could you have accomplished all this astonishing stuff*? And of course their warrant for being impressed is *very* theory-*independent*. To be impressed with a scientific culture that has mastered air travel you don't need to know much mechanics, only enough to know that mastering air travel is hard, and Plato and Aristotle, for all their deep ignorance of modern mechanics, sure knew that much. But now we turn to the case of ethics. We tell them how slavery has ceased to be a morally acceptable practice and, while not quite rooted out, is at least illegal more or less

[22] Ibid., esp. 125–128; 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods', esp. 515–19.

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everywhere. We tell them how democracy has grown and spread and developed and opposition to it has come to be more and more morally disreputable. But we might not then expect Aristotle, who rather approved of slavery, to be much impressed and we might expect Plato, who positively deplored democracy, to be positively appalled. As our moral thought has evolved we have come to disapprove of slavery and celebrate democracy and our moral practice has roughly kept in step. Our history might have been different. We might have come to like slavery more and more and to deplore democracy. If in consequence, slavery and autocracy had come to be ever more widespread, we would look back on our history as one of steady moral progress but that would hardly be the sort of vindication Boyd is after. This heavily theory-dependent standard of success in this context surely strips it of the capacity to do any confirmatory heavy-lifting. More or less any evolution in our moral outlook is apt to look, *ex post*, like progress.[23]

Boyd allows that what is to count as an achievement is indicated, albeit defeasibly, by the judgements of expert practitioners.[24] Certainly if we privilege contemporary experts this will lead us to favour the optimistic reading of history where our present disapproval of slavery is evidence of progress. And Boyd seems relaxed about this, happy to characterize the very aims of moral inquiry in practical, substantively moral terms. I too tend to be relaxed about this but this relaxation flows in large measure from my being what Boyd would consider a kind of constructivist. It is not so clear that a more robust realist than I can so credibly relax.

Here Boyd strikes a rather modest note, suggesting we may see ethical theory as in the business of offering, in effect, hypothetical

[23] Here my critique of Boyd is helpfully viewed as continuous, in its concern with independence, with Nick Zangwill's of Boyd's fellow Cornell realists, Nicholas Sturgeon and David Brink, and their contention that moral naturalism draws support from the ability of moral judgements, when conjoined with auxiliary hypotheses, to have observable consequences. (Nick Zangwill, 'Science and Ethics: Demarcation, Holism and Logical Consequences' in *European Journal of Philosophy* **18**, 2008, 126–138). This, they maintain, shows that moral judgements are regular empirical judgements subject to empirical confirmation. Moral judgements can indeed, Zangwill concedes, pass this test, but so too does all manner of garbage. However moral judgements, he goes on to urge, do not pass the stronger and more discriminating test that Ian Hacking, Philip Kitcher and Peter Kosso have proposed, that the evidence for the auxiliary hypothesis be adequately *independent* of the judgement it is proposed to test.

[24] Boyd, 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods', 543–544.

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imperatives: 'Theories of the natures of the good, etc. have […] just the same hypothetical normative import as do our theories of the natures of chemical kinds. 'If you want to achieve the aims of moral practice, classify things this way […].'[25] No doubt there could be many such classificatory schemes corresponding to many competing putative such aims. The question then is whether the choice of aim Boyd would favour can be said to be correct where 'correctness' is to be understood in the sort of robustly naturalistic realist spirit that would be consonant with Boyd's metaethical theorizing more generally.

Intriguingly, these various ethical schemes, on Boyd's account, may come to seem strikingly akin to the systems of thick concepts possessed by unreflective 'hypertraditional' societies as conceived by Bernard Williams,[26] descriptive concepts with an evaluative significance rendered highly stable and determined through never being challenged or contested. Williams allows that the application of such concepts can yield real knowledge but distinguishes such knowledge sharply from anything that would address the reflective questions that arise when we stand back from these determinate conceptual structures and attempt to evaluate them and determine which furnish the best form of human life. But this reflective enterprise – about which Williams is somewhat pessimistic – is an essential and far from completed aspect of moral inquiry. And this is the part of moral inquiry where appeals to intuition appear to play the most pervasive and troublingly central role, a role it no longer seems can be warranted in Boyd's favoured way by grounding it in the success of the practice that has informed it, for this is the part of moral inquiry whose very subject matter is what we are to count as such success.

The difficulty here is borne out by Boyd's rather deflationary take on the 'critical stance' that Robert Adams[27] has alleged his naturalism is ill-suited to accommodate. Boyd's lengthy discussion of this objection concludes by suggesting a division of labour between 'investigations of the metaphysics of morals'– of which his naturalist metaethics are an account – and an in principle distinct process whereby we 'satisfy ourselves that the referents of "good" and similarly approbative moral terms are things we actually admire'.[28] He

[25] Boyd, 'Finite Beings, Finite Goods', 545.

[26] B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), 142ff..

[27] Robert Merrihew Adams: *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 77–82.

[28] Boyd 2003, 545–546.

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doesn't tell us very much about this latter process but this robustly response-dependent characterization of it seems to align him rather more, where it is concerned, with the kind of constructivist approach he seeks in other contexts to abjure.

Ultimately then my problem with Boyd's naturalism is continuous with my problem with the far less nuanced and thoughtful naturalism on offer from Harris. The practice of moral reflection may lead us to believe that goodness is realized by some natural property NG and rightness by some natural property NR. NG might, what Boyd thinks it is, be a homeostatic bundle of properties relevant to human needs. It might be what Moore thought it, experiences of aesthetic beauty and close interpersonal friendship, or what Bentham thought it, simply pleasure. It might be something else. But once we have satisfied ourselves of it being whatever it is, it is then the business of the various human sciences to tell us how to put this moral understanding into practice, what things have NG, what actions and policies have NR. Once we've so satisfied ourselves, everything else is empirical. But the process of getting there, which I take it is the distinctive *métier* of moral philosophers, is something else, something empirical investigation centrally regulated by scientific observation should be expected to constrain and inform but cannot be expected to settle.

University of Sheffield
j.lenman@sheffield.ac.uk

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