

# Huemer's Clarkeanism

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## 1

When Samuel Clarke gave his second Boyle lectures in 1705, he alleged in favor of his nonreductive, rationalist, intuitionist view that only 'the extremest stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit, can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt' concerning it.<sup>1</sup> Michael Huemer's *Ethical Intuitionism* is offered in the same spirit, though he makes no assurances concerning the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation.<sup>2</sup> Not only are competing metaethical views false, he alleges, those who accept them do not even do so on the basis of rational arguments (240). They are driven by bias (247), cynicism (242), and scientism (244), combined with a desire to be politically correct (albeit not in a 'simplistic way' (245)).

Moreover, the persistence of non-intuitionist metaethical views, he suggests, has a pernicious effect on our society, encouraging vice and immorality (248). According to Huemer, what is important about intuitionism (his favored position) is that the dispute between intuitionism and 'all other views' is that '[a]nti-realist theories about value undermine our moral beliefs, our moral motivation, and even our sense of the meaning of life' (248). He contends that 'anti-realism really boils down to the view that *nothing matters*' (249), despite explicitly acknowledging that most anti-realists would deny this, and apparently forgetting that among his targets of criticism in the book were supposed to be some realist views, as well—of the reductive variety.

Although he calls his view 'intuitionism,' Huemer makes clear early on that what he wants to defend is not an epistemological view at all, but a metaphysical one. The main divide between metaethical views, in

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<sup>1</sup> Clarke (1706, 194).

<sup>2</sup> Huemer (2005) (the capitalized letters come from the title of Clarke (1706)). Further references are to this volume, unless otherwise noted.

his classificatory system, is not between cognitivist and noncognitivist views, or between realist and irrealist views, but between *dualist* views, on which there are two fundamentally different kinds of fact—evaluative and non-evaluative—and *monist* views, which deny this (7). Monist views, according to Huemer, come in four varieties—nihilism, noncognitivism, subjectivism, and naturalism. The advertised strategy of the book is to argue against these competing views, with nonreductive realism (which he calls ‘intuitionism’) the default winner.

Now, my own sympathies in metaethics lie with synthetic reductive views, which fall under Huemer’s heading of ‘naturalism.’ Synthetic reductionism is not a kind of pernicious anti-realism, and it is as far from the view that ‘nothing really matters’ as one can get. It is, rather, a very general hypothesis about the nature of mattering. Synthetic reductionists, after all, are not anti-realists of any kind—we believe that things are right and wrong, that this is so in virtue of the mind-independent world, and that this is something that we can find out about. Some of us—I do—even believe that moral facts have the feature of *normativity*, which makes them very different from non-normative facts.

We are simply friendly to the idea that reductions may be hypotheses with great explanatory value. For example, the hypothesis that some reduction is true is sufficient to explain the supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative, and reductive hypotheses seem to be able to contribute positively to explaining how moral terms manage to refer, and how we manage to find out about moral reality. So reductive realists are hardly the bad guys. As I see it, for the kind of synthetic reductive realism that I favor, anyway, we believe in everything that non-reductive realists do, but are simply more interested in explaining it, and less interested in arguing that it can’t be explained.

Since the *main issue* between Huemer’s nonreductive realism and all other views is supposed to be its dualist metaphysics, the lynchpin of Huemer’s argument by elimination surely has to be his argument that realism with a *monist* metaphysics—reductive realism—simply won’t suffice. Moreover, since Huemer goes so far as to suggest not only that opponents are mistaken, but that they are misled by irrational bias and cynicism, the argumentative burden he bears is especially heavy. But as lynchpins go, Huemer’s is unimpressive.

Actually, he has two lynchpins—sort of. Huemer’s first argument against synthetic reductionism (which by Huemer’s own stipulation, recall, is a metaphysical view) is that an idiosyncratic epistemological view that has been held by some synthetic reductionists is false. So it isn’t even an argument against synthetic reductionism as such at all. Huemer’s second lynchpin is no more formidable; the only *direct*

argument his book contains against synthetic reductive views is that they *seem false*.

## 2

Huemer stipulates that reductionists believe that all moral truths can be known on the basis of observation or by inference to the best explanation (228), and proceeds to spend most of his discussion of reductive views arguing against this thesis. There are a couple of places from which Huemer could have come by the idea that this epistemological thesis is a commitment of synthetic reductionism, so allow me to head them off.

First, he could have noted the following: according to synthetic reductionism, the reductive thesis itself is not analytic. Therefore we must know it in the same sort of way as we know other things. Therefore we must either know it by observation or by inference to the best explanation. This does not look like a good argument, to me. I do think that when we come by the correct reductive view, it will be something that we come to accept in for its explanatory virtues, but Huemer himself thinks that some knowledge derives from intuition, rather than from observation or inference to the best explanation, so he can't think this is actually a good argument. Moreover, what goes for abstruse theoretical claims such as reductive philosophical theories, need not go for all moral knowledge. Though reductive theses are things we come to by inference to the best explanation, in my view we come to them on the basis of moral claims that we independently accept, because they simply seem clear to us on reflection. Since reductionism is a thesis in *metaphysics*, rather than one in *epistemology*, there is nothing barring a reductionist like me from having an intuitionist moral epistemology like Huemer's—even if I do think that reductive theories are themselves abstruse explanatory hypotheses.

A second place by which Huemer could have come by the mixup between metaphysical and epistemological views, is that certain prominent ethical 'naturalists' have insisted for idiosyncratic reasons on formulating their naturalism in epistemic terms. Now, I'm a broad church reductionist: I think that normative properties have some correct analysis in terms of *non-normative* properties, but any property that is not a normative one counts. Others are not so broad church. Nicholas Sturgeon, for example (though note that Sturgeon's view, like Huemer's, is actually non-reductive), has long been very concerned to defend a view that rules out *supernaturalism*—the view that moral properties are divine or ghostly. He and others have appealed to epistemic theses like the one Huemer attacks, in order to draw the line around what counts

as ‘natural’.<sup>3</sup> Because my church is broad, I see no such need to station epistemic barriers at the door.

So what, then, is the connection between reductionism and moral epistemology? Well, in one sense Huemer is right. Reductionism was originally—long ago—supposed to solve the problems of moral epistemology precisely because true reductions were supposed to be analytic. So on such views, we could find out what is good by finding out what leads to happiness, for example. Synthetic reductionist views can’t yield such easy answers. Does that mean that synthetic reductionism is false? Hardly! At worst, it means that synthetic reductive views don’t help with moral epistemology.

But that, I think is also false. I don’t take the view, much maligned by Huemer, that we must understand how our cognitive faculties work, in order to be justified in accepting things on the basis of how they seem to us in the absence of defeating evidence. But I do take the view that, given that we see things with our eyes, it is an interesting question how our eyes work. The sciences of optics, anatomy, and cognitive neuroscience, among others, have contributed to our understanding of it.

I think the same thing about the way in which we come by our moral views: it is an interesting question how it works. Moreover, I don’t think that it becomes less interesting, if we are told, as Huemer (along with Clarke) believes, that it is not a distinctive *moral* faculty, but merely a general source of rational insight. I agree with Huemer that ordinary people are justified in believing that nothing can be both red and green in the same place at the same time, because that simply seems obvious. No one has to understand *how* this process works, in order to be justified in this belief. Still, I think there is an interesting *question* about how it works, just as there is an interesting question about how vision works, and listing more things that we know in this way does not make the question less interesting.

It is this question, among others, that I think my reductionism helps me to make progress with in moral epistemology. Like many non-reductive intuitionists, Huemer is so caught up with his responses to moral skeptics, that he proceeds on the assumption that the only reason why we might be puzzled about how moral intuition works, is as part of an argument that it doesn’t. Yet clearly, without worrying that vision doesn’t work, there are a whole realm of interesting questions that we can ask about how it does. What I find problematic not about intuitionism in general, but about its pairing with non-reductive realism, is that the combination is better suited to ruling out explanations of how intuition works, than for offering them.

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Sturgeon (2006).

The first lynchpin in Huemer's argument is therefore a non-sequitur. Rather than being an argument against synthetic reductionism, a metaphysical view, it is an argument against an optional epistemological concomitant of synthetic reductionism. But his other argument is more direct:

On the face of it, *wrongness* seems to be a completely different *kind* of property from, say, *weighing 5 pounds*. In brief:

1. Value properties are radically different from natural properties.
2. If two things are radically different, then one is not reducible to the other.
3. So value properties are not reducible to natural properties.

[...] To illustrate, suppose a philosopher proposes that the planet Neptune is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I think we can see that that is false, simply by virtue of our concept of Neptune and our concept of symphonies. Neptune is an entirely different kind of thing from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. No further argument is needed. (94)

There are two ways of reading this argument, depending on what we take Huemer to mean by 'radically different'. In one sense, of course, evaluative properties *are* radically different from non-evaluative properties: they are *evaluative*. If 'evaluative' picks out any property, then it is a property that all and only evaluative properties have. This difference may even be 'radical.' Three-dimensional shape properties are quite different from two-, one-, and zero-dimensional shape properties, and set-theoretical and logical properties. But that doesn't show that three-dimensional shape properties can't be reduced to lower-dimensional shape properties, along with set-theoretical and logical properties. Read in this sense, premise 2 is false.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, we can interpret 'radically different' in such a way as to make premise 2 true, by interpreting it to mean whatever it takes to substantiate Huemer's *dualism*. But on that reading, the argument is just as I have described. The argument for his conclusion is that it *seems true*. Now don't get me wrong: I was fine with Huemer's contention that justification does not require more than believing what seems to be true, absent defeaters. Unlike Huemer, who was concerned

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<sup>4</sup> See Schroeder (2005).

to argue not only that his view is true, but that opponents are not justified in their own views, I am happy to grant that Huemer is justified in his view. My point is a small one: this is not an *argument*. To say that your opponent's view seems false to you is not to point out a problem with that view. It certainly falls significantly short of grounds for attributing cognitive bias to those who disagree with you.

It may, of course, encourage the rest of us to reflect and notice that reductionism seems false to us, too. In that case, we should need some positive evidence for reductionism, sufficient to outweigh its unintuitiveness. But since Huemer never considers the positive arguments in favor of reductionism, he doesn't put us in a position to assess this tradeoff. In fact, however, I see no evidence from Huemer that reductionism *does* seem false. Reductionism about *wrongness*, after all, is the thesis that there is *some* analysis of *wrongness* in terms of non-evaluative properties. It is not the thesis that *wrongness* is the property of weighing five pounds. Nor is it the thesis that *wrongness* is the property of being round, or that of being positively charged (229). These theses *do* seem false, and rightly so, but then again, they were never candidate theories.

Finally, even if it did seem that reductionism is false, Huemer's own epistemology requires that we look at the balance of competing considerations, before concluding that reductionism is *in fact* false. Take the case of water. Huemer claims that it does not seem to us that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O. But this is hard to assess. It does seem pretheoretically obvious that splitting a drop of water must always yield smaller drops of water. But the thesis that water is H<sub>2</sub>O entails that this is false. It entails that water is made out of smallest bits. But water does not seem to be made out of smallest bits; it seems to be continuous. That water is H<sub>2</sub>O is a theoretical hypothesis that is acceptable in virtue of its explanatory benefits. Reductionism, likewise, adverts to be a hypothesis that is acceptable in virtue of its explanatory benefits.

#### 4

Like many other non-reductionist intuitionists, Huemer does not appear to be interested in these explanatory benefits. It is enough for him to have provided arguments that some things really are right or wrong, and that we can think about which ones and why in pretty much the way that things normally proceed in moral theorizing. Where he and I part ways is not that we disagree about these things. It is that he thinks this is where metaethics ends, whereas I think it is where it begins. Granted, some things are right and wrong. Granted, we

sometimes know which. Granted, we think about it in something like the way that Huemer describes. *Why*, then, is this a way of acquiring knowledge? How do our thoughts and words manage to be *about* morality? What explains the fact of supervenience? In what way does the fact that an action is an intentional killing make that action wrong?

As I see it, what is problematic specifically about intuitionism paired with non-reductive realism, is that these views are more about saying what can't be explained than about saying how to explain it. That doesn't mean that they aren't true. Perhaps these things can't be explained. But the attempt to give the explanation is *productive*, in a way that the thesis that one cannot be given is not.

In opening, I noted Huemer's sociological explanations—cynicism, political correctness, and scientism—of what has led philosophers to reject non-reductive intuitionism. As long as we are in the business of speculative sociology, let me add my own conjecture to the mix: it is that non-reductive intuitionism is a view constituted by a lot of 'not's. It is characterized more by its resistance to the answers to explanatory questions in ethical theory, than by any positive answers of its own. So there is simply not much to do, in the intuitionist research program, other than to argue against other views and rebut objections, as exhibited by the structure of Huemer's book. Noncognitivism and reductionism, on the other hand, are lively research programs, which open new questions and set new challenges. Moreover, though Huemer insists that non-intuitionist views are all really just clever restatements of the view that nothing really matters, the most active research programs in both noncognitivism and reductionism are really *all about* accepting everything that Huemer believes is important, but being able to explain it, as well. More philosophers advocate such views than intuitionism, I conjecture, at least in print, because *they leave more for philosophers to do*.

In closing his book, Huemer tells us that he doesn't expect his arguments to convince anyone. Cynics, science-glorifiers, and the politically correct will 'continue to reject moral realism'. 'If they are philosophers, they will devise clever ways of trying to work around my arguments in this book' (248). I'll resist saying that Huemer's dualism seems false to me; the claim that reductionism seems false to him doesn't worry me sufficiently. If we want to have a serious discussion about the merits of dualist versus monist realist views in metaethics, I say that we have to get down to cases, and consider actual reductive hypotheses. If that is a 'clever way' of 'working around' Huemer's arguments, then who's the cynic?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Jake Ross for discussion.

## References

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