What is naturalism? And why is it interesting?

Two sorts of naturalism

The term "naturalism" is used differently by different philosophers. One common distinction:

Metaphysical Naturalism: Everything that ultimately exists can be explained in *natural* entities and properties. Here the "natural entities and properties" are those that are described by the natural sciences.

- Says that there's no room in reality for "supernatural" or "spooky" stuff.

Methodological Naturalism: In investigating the world, we should rely principally (perhaps entirely?) on the sorts of methods used by the natural sciences.

- Typically associated with the idea that science and philosophy are a continuous enterprise, investigating the world through similar methods.

Q: What is the relation between these two sorts of naturalism? Does one entail the other?

Why is naturalism philosophically interesting?

One reason why naturalism gives rise to philosophical puzzles is that many properties seem difficult to "locate" in a purely naturalistic worldview. (This is what Jackson calls a "location problem".)

First Example: *Moral properties*.
In everyday life we often talk about what people *ought* to do; we often describe actions as *good* and *bad, right* and *wrong*, *permissible* and *impermissible*, *justified* and *unjustified*. But can we reduce these moral properties to the sorts of properties described by the natural sciences?

The reason why this question is puzzling – and a source of continuing disagreement among philosophers – is that there seem to be good arguments both for and against the idea that we can reduce moral properties to natural properties.

Arguments for a reduction of the moral to the natural:

> **Theoretical Simplicity:** Occam's razor enjoins us not to postulate entities beyond necessity. If we can somehow show moral properties to be identical to properties whose existence we already believe in, then we'll have a simpler worldview.
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> - That is, suppose that $N_1...N_n$ are the natural entities/properties that appear in our best scientific theories. And suppose $M_1...M_i$ are the moral entities/properties that appear on our best moral theories. If we can somehow show $M_1...M_i$ to be identical to some subset of $N_1...N_n$, then

we'll be committed to the existence of fewer things than we would be otherwise.

Connections Between Moral Properties and Natural Properties: Moral properties don't simply float free of the natural properties. Rather, the two seem to be intimately connected. In particular, moral properties seem to *supervene* on natural properties. For example, suppose two people, A and B, perform the exact same action (e.g., robbing a bank). And suppose their two actions have the exact same consequences (both steal the same amount of money, both of their thefts cause the exact same amount of pain/inconvenience, etc.). And suppose that they committed this action with the exact same state of mind/intentions. Then it would seem that their two actions have to have the same moral status – it couldn't be the case that A's action was good, but B's action was bad.

Arguments against a reduction of the moral to the natural:

***Is-Ought* Gap:** Many have had the thought that there is an important gap between descriptive judgments about the world (statements of the form, "X is F"), and normative judgments (statements of the form, "X *ought* to be the case", or "So-and-so *should* do Y"). The idea that there is such a gap can be traced back to Hume:

> In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. – *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

Some philosophers have thought that this is-ought gap spells trouble for any attempt to reduce moral properties ("oughts") to natural properties (which belong to the realms of "is"s).

So we have, on the one hand, some seemingly compelling arguments that lead us to think that some form of moral reduction is possible (or at least desirable), and, on the other hand, some seemingly compelling arguments that lead to think that no form of moral reduction is possible.

This tension forms the heart of much work in metaethics. But we arguably see a similar tension in the epistemic domain:

Second Example: *Epistemic Properties*
In everyday life we often talk about what people *ought* to believe; we often describe beliefs as *rational* and *irrational, justified* and *unjustified;* we also evaluate them based

on whether they amount t*o knowledge*.   But can we reduce these epistemic properties to the sorts of properties described by the natural sciences?

Many of the arguments that we looked at in the moral domain work here as well:

Arguments for reduction:

> **Theoretical Simplicity:** If we can somehow show epistemic properties to be identical to properties whose existence we already believed in, then we'll have a simpler worldview than we would if thought that epistemic properties are *sui generis*.

> **Connections Between Epistemic Properties and Natural Properties:** Like moral properties, epistemic properties seem to supervene on natural properties. For example, suppose two people, A and B, form the same belief in the exact same way. Suppose that A and B hold this belief for the exact same reasons, and that they have the exact same information available to them. Then, arguably, their two beliefs have to have the same epistemic status – it couldn't be the case that A's belief was justified, but B's belief was unjustified; similarly, it couldn't be that A's belief qualifies as knowledge, but B's doesn't, etc.

Arguments against reduction:

> **Is-Ought Gap:** Epistemology is concerned – at least in part – with what we *ought* to believe. But if "ought"s can't be derived from "is"s, then how can epistemic "ought"-claims be derived from the sort of facts described by the natural sciences?

Qs:
1) In what other domains might we expect to see an analogous "location" puzzle?
2) Is there any reason to think that a naturalistic reduction is more viable in one domain than another? Take, for example, ethics and epistemology. Is there any reason to think that a reduction of the epistemic to natural will be more successful than a reduction of the moral to the natural? Or will the two reductive projects stand or fall together?