Ruth Benedict, in her defence of moral relativism, focuses on the concept of normality, claiming that “The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good.” (p. 488).

One must be careful here, since the word ‘normal’ has two very different meanings. On the one hand, it can refer to what is common, typical, or average. In this sense, a person who is exceptional in some respect is automatically not normal. Joe Sakic, for example, has exceptional hand-eye coordination, and is therefore not statistically normal in this respect. But there’s nothing wrong with his hand-eye coordination, of course – quite the opposite.

The second sense of ‘normal’ means healthy, proper, or good. This is the sense that Benedict is using. Its opposite is abnormal – we wouldn’t say, I think, that Sakic’s hand-eye coordination is abnormal, since that suggests that he has some kind of disorder. On the other hand, sickle-shaped red blood cells, cataracts, and violent mood swings are considered to be abnormal.

Sometimes a statement involving the word ‘normal’ might be ambiguous. Suppose we hear, for example, that it’s normal for men at age 80 to have prostate cancer. Does this mean that prostate cancer is part of the natural aging process in men, or merely that such cancer is very common in this group? Probably the latter is intended, although it’s not certain.

This second sense of ‘normal’ is the normative sense. A norm is a rule or standard that ought to be followed, but is not invariably followed. (The law of gravity isn’t a norm, since we can’t help obeying it!) A norm describes what is right or good, which may be different from how they are in fact. Some norms are moral rules, for example. Normative terms, i.e. those used to make normative claims, include good, right, valid, correct, proper, healthy, normal, natural, and legitimate. One the negative side we have bad, wrong, invalid, incorrect, improper, unhealthy, disordered, diseased, abnormal, unnatural and illegitimate.

We find normative claims in many different contexts, including:

- Biology – physical health and disease, study of normal functions
- Logical thinking – in math proofs, for example
- Scientific reasoning – drawing reasonable conclusions from data
- Knowledge – justified, or warranted belief
Morality – living a good life, i.e. “flourishing”, or doing the right thing

In this course we will focus on morality, as that’s the kind of normativity that philosophers have traditionally studied. Yet, according to some philosophers at least, normative claims are sufficiently similar to one another that we should expect a single theory of all of them. It will not do, on this view, to give a theory of moral normativity that cannot account for other kinds of normativity. Thus, while we won’t be committed to this unified perspective, it will be worth asking, for any proposed account of moral normativity, to what extent it can be generalised to cover other kinds.

Further, a common approach to moral normativity is to reduce it to ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ in some way. For example, James Rachels claims that “Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives” (from *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, p. 40). Even if this is accepted, however, then it doesn’t really solve the problem of what normativity is all about. For by ‘reason’ he seems to be referring to logical thinking, which is just another (perhaps equally mysterious) realm of normativity.

What is normativity all about?

Do normative claims have truth values? If so, then what makes them true (or false)? How can we discover the (probable) truth of a normative claim? Or are normative claims merely a product of culture, akin to social taboos, so that they have no significance beyond a particular tribal group?

There are many views on these questions. The best way to map them out, I believe, is to consider the different views about the origin of human beings, and ask which accounts of normativity each one allows. (Interestingly, there are some views of normativity that don’t seem to fit well with *any* theory of human origins!)

1. NATURALISM

Naturalism allows three broad approaches to normativity, which may be combined:

(a) *Normativity is socially constructed.* This view is sometimes called relativism, since norms exist only relative to a particular culture. We see this view put forward very strongly in some normative realms, but very rarely in others. A disease or disorder, for example, is traditionally defined in teleological terms, as a departure from proper physiological function. More recently, however, it is sometimes defined as a condition that is seen as undesirable, within some culture. Thus, Benedict claims, epileptics are diseased in our culture, but gifted in some other cultures. Even in our own culture some argue that deafness isn’t a disorder, that some forms of autism aren’t disorders, and so on. If one is part of a culture (e.g. Deaf culture) that accepts and celebrates the condition, then it isn’t a disorder there, at least.
[A brief aside: What are we to make of this passage, found on a web site?

“Disability Pride represents a rejection of the notion that our difference from the non-disabled community is wrong or bad in any way and is a statement of our self-acceptance, dignity and pride. It signifies that we are coming out of the closet and are claiming our legitimate identity. It's a public expression of our belief that our disability and identity are normal, healthy and right for us and is a validation of our experience.”

There are many normative words here, such as ‘wrong’, ‘bad’, ‘legitimate’, ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ and ‘right’. What is meant by them? Are they to be understood in terms of social acceptance, God’s design plan, or in some other way?

We also see the claim of social construction applied to moral normativity, of course, and also (more recently) to norms of scientific thinking. (See the work of some workers in SSK, ‘sociology of scientific knowledge’.) So far, however, it’s only rarely applied to the strict logical thinking that appears in mathematical arguments. Not too many analytic philosophers are attracted to the view that logical rules are social conventions. (I once attended a talk by a sociologist entitled “What does SSK have to say about 2+2=4?” and, sure enough, the speaker said that it was an arbitrary convention. The audience of analytic philosophers was not pleased.

(b) Normativity is a product of biological evolution.

Despite the fact that Darwinism has been with us for over 130 years, the idea of seeing morality and other forms of normativity as biological phenomena is relatively new. (While there were some early investigations of this idea by Herbert Spencer, and Darwin himself, the idea didn’t gain much traction among philosophers until the 1970s.) Of course, as with the social construction view, the claim is that normative beliefs and practices are socially constructed, since there is no reality to normativity beyond humanity’s normative beliefs and practices. The main difference between the evolutionary and social approaches is that, from an evolutionary point of view, there is much less potential for normative variation across cultures. Since we humans are all closely related, indeed practically identical in biological terms, any evolution-based normativity will be fairly universal, across humans at least. (If we meet extraterrestrial intelligent beings, then their notions of the good life might be quite different from ours, but not thereby wrong.)

Evolutionary ethics, as it is called, is a very young field. Nevertheless there has been interesting work on the idea that social cooperation among humans has been selected for, and that moral rules have evolved as facilitators of mutually beneficial social interactions. The existence of altruism, the sacrifice of oneself for the sake of others, can (to some extent) be explained in evolutionary terms. There have also been evolutionary investigations of sexual ethics, including such topics as the evolution of rape, monogamy, infidelity, and taboos against incest.
An evolutionary ethicist is unlikely to claim that all of our normative beliefs are grounded in biology. More plausibly, there is some core of biological morality that is overlaid with socially constructed rules. Thus the social and biological approaches are not necessarily in conflict, although there may be argument about the extent of each one’s application.

The basic idea of evolutionary normativity is that a normal trait is one that has been selected for, in our evolutionary history. Epilepsy and deafness are thus probably not normal traits, since the possession of these traits probably did not increase the average number of offspring of their bearers. The traits of being able to stand upright, speak, think clearly, and cooperate with others, on the other hand, were surely selected for and hence are normal traits.

As with the social construction theory, there has not been much effort as yet to show that the rules of logic are products of evolution. Logical truths, for example (including mathematical truths) are seen as timeless and necessary, whereas biological evolution is a historical process, situated in time, and quite contingent (it could have turned out rather differently). This difficulty for evolutionary normativity tends to be “solved” by denying the normative character of logic altogether.

(c) Normativity doesn’t exist, or is an illusion.

There is a range of views of this sort, including Mackie’s anti-realism (pp. 499-510), Hume-style emotivist and expressivist views, and prescriptivism. The essential claim of such views is that there are no moral (or normative) facts, and so moral (normative) sentences do not have truth values.

An expressivist about normative sentences claims that they do not express propositions at all, but rather express the speaker’s attitudes. Thus, if your math professor tells you “Your proof is flawed,” she isn’t actually making any claim about it, but is rather expressing disapproval of it. Her sentence is therefore roughly equivalent to “Your proof … oh dear!” (and she grimaces).

Mackie, on the other hand, views normative sentences as trying to express moral facts, but failing to do so since no such facts exist. Moral sentences thus have a status similar to sentences of fiction, having subjective meaning but no objective meaning. Another way to think about Mackie’s view is that he regards moral statements roughly as an atheist regards theological statements. When an atheist hears a theologian say, “God tends to align himself with the poor and the oppressed”, he recognises that the theologian is intending to say something meaningful and true, but thinks that he fails in this attempt since there is no God for his statement to be about.

One may wonder whether this third option (c) for naturalists, of eliminating normativity, is really a separate option at all. Don’t options (a) and (b) eliminate normativity as well? Consider, for example, naturalized epistemology, which is the attempt to see epistemology (the study of knowledge and rational belief, including scientific knowledge)
as part of psychology, and hence to study it using scientific methods. According to Quine, one of the founders of naturalized epistemology, when we bring epistemology into psychology its central question is no longer “what makes a belief justified?” but rather “how do humans form beliefs?”, “why do humans regard some beliefs as rational?”, and so on. In other words, the normative aspect of epistemology vanishes, as it becomes just another field where science aims to describe and explain phenomena.

A similar situation arguably exists with ethical and other kinds of normativity. If one defines a wrong action as one that society disapproves of, for example, then this seems to be consistent with Mackie’s view. Mackie will surely accept that each society does indeed abhor some kinds of action, so what does Mackie deny that the relativist accepts?

Moral facts, for Mackie, must be objective, or “part of the fabric of the world”, rather than being features of human society. Also, ethics involves categorical imperatives, i.e. it issues unconditional, authoritative commands. The notion of authority is central here, for it expresses for Mackie what is lacking in naturalistic analyses of moral values. Society may disapprove of this action, but so what? Who cares? Society (if such a cohesive entity even exists) has no authority over me. It has no right to tell me what to do, or to think.

The concepts of authority and normativity are closely linked for Mackie, as he seems to see a norm as something that legitimately orders us around, or tells us what to do. A norm is not just a suggestion, something we can follow if it suits us, but is obligatory. Society apparently lacks this authority, and can only exert psychological pressure.

There is a similar problem with the authority of our evolutionary history. Consider a human who is antisocial, and prefers to live an almost entirely solitary life. An evolutionary ethicist reproaches him, saying that the trait of social cooperation has been selected for in humans, so that his tendency to isolate himself is unnatural and wrong. The hermit is likely to respond that he doesn’t give a damn about his evolutionary history. It has no authority over him, and he will live exactly as he pleases. The hermit doesn’t seem to making any intellectual mistake in saying this. Indeed, the idea that we must do those things that helped our remote ancestors survive and reproduce seems extremely dubious. Instead, the evolutionary approach to ethics seems merely to describe and explain our moral urges, without justifying them. The normative aspect disappears.

As an example of this issue, consider the argument by anthropologists Thornhill and Palmer, in 2000, that rape has evolved as a (moderately successful) male reproductive strategy. (Rape can, after all, be a cause of pregnancy and hence may lead to spreading the rapist’s genes, including any rape-inducing gene.) On this view, rape has the ‘blessing’, as it were, of our evolutionary history. The tendency to rape was selected for, in our ancestors. The authors of this study were quick to point out that, while rape is therefore natural for humans, in some sense, that doesn’t make it morally permissible. To infer normative conclusions from biological premises is often condemned as an instance of the so-called “naturalistic fallacy”.
(Note that Thornhill and Palmer use the word ‘natural’ in a sense with no normative content. ‘Natural’, in this sense, means merely that there is no social or cultural component to it, so that it is purely biological. Clearly, a trait can be natural in this sense without being normal or healthy. Sickle cell anaemia, for example, is natural in the sense that it isn’t a product of culture, yet it isn’t healthy. You see how the terminology is rather tricky, as some words have multiple meanings!)

The dispute between Mackie and other naturalists thus appears to be largely semantic, i.e. they are disputing whether the word ‘moral’ can be applied to something generated by social acceptance or a process of biological evolution. For Mackie, none of this can count as morality, in the proper sense of the word, since it lacks authority.

2. THEISM

Theists tend to see God as the source of normativity in one way or another. Typically theists see normativity as grounded in some combination of:

(i) God’s own nature
(ii) human nature, as defined by God’s design plan for humans
(iii) God’s commands

E.g. love, generosity, honesty, and perfect rational thought are part of God’s nature. Having one wife, not having sex outside of marriage (many animals are promiscuous, but it’s fine for them as it’s part of their nature), having children, using our (lesser) reason to make judgements, working to earn a living, being physically fit, being the right weight, having two legs, not having cancer, etc. are part of God’s design plan for humans.

In other words, the concept of nature is central to theistic accounts of normativity. Such accounts tend to draw heavily upon Aristotelian concepts of virtue and eudaimonia (happiness, or flourishing). To be virtuous may be seen as following God’s commands, or having a God-like character, while to flourish is perhaps to attain the fullness of true humanity, i.e. to conform perfectly to one’s human nature. It is clear that virtue and flourishing are closely entwined, so that one certainly cannot flourish without virtue. (Although one can be pretty virtuous without fully flourishing, since one cannot flourish in a concentration camp, but one may be virtuous there.)

Virtue accounts of normativity have the virtue (!) of providing a unified account of normativity in all the different realms. To reason logically, for example, can be seen as being a virtuous thinker, which might be defined from some combination of divine and human nature.

Theists are also likely to agree with Mackie in seeing norms as having authority. For theists, God is the ultimate authority in everything and so moral laws must ultimately derive their authority from him. In the case of the divine command theory, this is especially straightforward. The moral ‘categorical imperatives’ that Kant refers to are
simply God’s commands to us humans. Since God has authority over us, his commands are also authoritative.

It is probably no accident that the present western culture, which mostly sees morality as socially constructed, is also suspicious of authority. What is authority? Authority is not mere power, but consists of the right to exercise power. For example, a kidnapper has the power to imprison his victim, and does so, but does not have the authority to do this. A criminal court in a democratic state, on the other hand, (arguably) has both the power and authority to send someone to prison. In other words, the court can imprison someone legitimately, having the right to do so. In our culture, authority is everywhere challenged, disputed, and called into question. From Mackie’s point of view this makes perfect sense.

Some theists, from Kant to the present, aim to capitalise on the difficulties (discussed above) that naturalists have in accounting for normativity. Alvin Plantinga, for example, says:

[Naturalism’s] Achilles’ heel (in addition to its deplorable falsehood) is that it has no room for normativity. There is no room, within naturalism, for right or wrong, or good or bad. Naturalism also lacks room for the notion of proper function for non-artifacts, and hence lacks room for the notion of proper function for our cognitive faculties. It therefore has no room for the notion of knowledge (Plantinga, ‘Afterword’, in James F. Sennett (ed.), The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader).

Looking Forward

As we look at the course’s readings on moral theory, I want us to refer to the issues raised in these notes. In thinking about the moral views of Benedict, Mackie, Plato, Kant, Aristotle, Hobbes, Mill and Nietzsche, we need to ask:

1. Can this approach be generalised to cover other kinds of normativity, such as in logic and science?

2. Does this approach fit into either a theistic or a naturalistic framework? Or both? Or neither? (Or some other framework?)