3 Moral Realism: Naturalism and Reductionism

3.1 Introduction

This chapter has a number of aims. First, I explain a little about what naturalism is and why someone might wish to be a naturalist. I then discuss a hugely influential argument given against naturalism. We will see that it faces a number of problems, one of which sets the scene for modern naturalism. In doing that we will see that naturalism comes in a number of varieties: one important distinction is between reductionist and nonreductionist types. I offer arguments against both. At the end I return to the material in the previous chapter and show why we have two relationships in play: that between moral properties and humans, and that between moral properties and the natural world.

In case it is not clear, all of the positions discussed here are types of realism. The key issue concerns the characterization of moral properties in relation to the natural world.

3.2 A naive naturalism and the motivation for adopting it

(a) A naive naturalism: Modern versions of naturalism have become very sophisticated. They have done so partly in response to the argument I canvass in the following section. In order to introduce that argument we need to think about the type of position it was attacking. I resist the urge to give a definitive characterization of naturalism right now, simply because it will spoil the
power of the argument, and destroy the narrative of this chapter. Definitive characterizations will come later.

Despite those opening words, we can say that moral naturalists think that one can, in a sense of the term to be explored, ‘identify’ moral ideas with natural ideas, or recast the former in terms of the latter. For example, imagine we note that an action – such as the licking of a lollipop – is pleasurable. Further, we note that its pleasure is the main reason why it is good. Here I mean ‘good in general’, not just ‘morally good’, although a next step for hedonic utilitarians would be to say that if handing the lollipop to a child maximizes pleasure in a certain case, then your act of sharing is morally good and, further, morally right. From this sort of case and our speculation, we might then become confident and claim that we have some idea of what goodness is in general, namely the maximization of pleasure. When we want to find out whether an action is good, all we need to do is find out whether it maximizes pleasure.

We would, of course, have to supply arguments for this identification. Beyond any worries with specific arguments, there is an obvious worry with this specific proposal as it stands. One can imagine actions that maximize pleasure but which do not seem to be good. A commonly given counter-example is one where we kill someone whom no one cares about, and in doing so we generate much pleasure for ourselves, so much so that this action maximizes pleasure. That action cannot be morally good, surely?

This worry is a good one. But, in the next section I discuss an even grander worry with the whole idea of trying to recast moral notions as wholly natural notions.

For now, this gives us a sense of what naturalism is, namely the claim that moral ideas can be recast as natural ideas. But, what is meant by ‘natural’ here?

(b) Natural?: ‘Pleasure’ is a good – and classic – example of a natural phenomenon. Pleasure might be understood in a moral or evaluative way, but here we understand it naturalistically and nonmorally. We can define pleasure (loosely) as the positive feeling and/or idea one gets when something happens. That doesn’t seem to be a moral or evaluative notion, although it is the sort of thing that can be morally significant, as we saw in the lollipop example.