

Review of *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Russ Shafer-Landau, Oxford University Press, 2003<sup>1</sup>

Russ Shafer-Landau's *Moral Realism: A Defence* is a book of remarkable scope and ambition. Shafer-Landau argues that moral properties are irreducible and that at least some non-trivial propositions about these moral properties are self-evident. Along the way, he discusses a battery of objections to anti-realist rivals and develops a distinctive account of moral reasons and motivation. The arguments are clear and engaging throughout. Given the book's impressive scope, I cannot begin to do it justice here. I shall summarise the main ideas of each the book's five main parts, raising some worries along the way.

Part One ("Realism and its Critics") is divided into two chapters, one on non-cognitivism and one on constructivism. Here Shafer-Landau deliberately favours breadth over depth, briefly summarising a wide range of objections both to non-cognitivism and constructivism. Unfortunately, (particularly in the chapter on non-cognitivism) each objection is developed very quickly and numerous important replies are not discussed. Shafer-Landau is quite explicit that much more could and should be said about each of these objections, but I wonder whether this shotgun approach was strategically wise even given difficult space constraints. It might have been more persuasive and interesting to pick just one or two crucial objections to non-cognitivism and then develop it (or them) in much greater depth, thereby moving the debate over that particular objection (or those objections) forward.

Part Two ("Moral Metaphysics") appeals to a version of Moore's famous "Open Question Argument" to motivate non-naturalism. Shafer-Landau insightfully argues that the really interesting distinction in this context is the reductionist/anti-reductionist distinction rather than the natural/non-natural distinction. The argument for non-naturalism appeals to the Open Question Argument as posing a kind of challenge for naturalists and maintains that none of the leading contenders can meet the challenge. Here the main players are Richard Boyd (whose account is on the model of a Kripke-Putnam account of natural kind semantics), David Brink (who emphasises referential intentions) and Frank Jackson (whose account focuses on platitudes surrounding moral concepts and a Lewis-style 'network analysis' based on those platitudes). After raising specific objections to each of these accounts, Shafer-Landau develops an account of how non-naturalists can explain the supervenience of the moral on the natural. The main idea is to understand natural properties as realising (or constituting) moral properties, so that any difference in moral properties must obtain in virtue of a difference in the natural properties realising (or constituting) those moral properties. Some objections are then raised to what Shafer-Landau takes to be standard anti-realist explanations of supervenience; most notably, Simon Blackburn's account is criticised.

The critique of existing forms of naturalism is interesting, but seems to leave out at least one important version of naturalism which purports to avoid the Open Question Argument and its descendants while being different from the accounts of Boyd, Brink and Jackson - Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's moral kinds semantics (as developed in his, "'Good' on Twin Earth, *Philosophical Issues*, vol. 8, 1997, pp. 313-323). Another minor complaint about section II is that Shafer-Landau seems not to characterise Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist explanation of supervenience entirely correctly. Shafer-Landau focuses on Blackburn's practical argument that a failure to exemplify consistent attitudes would make one's life go worse and argues that this is too contingent to justify a conceptual necessity like supervenience. However, Blackburn's main explanation of supervenience is semantic rather than practical, and appeals to the intended function of moral discourse. Blackburn argues that the point of moral discourse is to "guide desires and choices amongst the natural features of the world" (Blackburn 1988: 67) on the basis of their natural properties. In light of this function of moral discourse, it makes sense to impose a supervenience constraint on that discourse as part of the linguistic conventions determining the meanings of those predicates. If, for example, two possible actions are known by someone to be identical in their natural properties, then a discourse which allowed one to judge that there is a reason to perform the one action but not the other could not be understood as serving this function. For in that case, there would be no sense to be made of the claim that we are commending actions on the basis of their natural properties. Hence it should be no surprise that our linguistic conventions surrounding our moral predicates entail that anyone flouting supervenience is thereby making a semantic (and not merely a practical) mistake. Since this

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argument gives an expressivist explanation of why a supervenience constraint is actually built into the very *meaning* of our moral predicates it does not seem to make the basis of supervenience too contingent.

Part Three (“Moral Motivation”) argues both that moral judgements can motivate without the help of any independently existing desire and that it is conceptually possible to make a moral judgement without being motivated. These arguments are supposed to insulate non-naturalism from the Humean charge that beliefs about non-natural properties could not be intimately connected to motivation in the way that moral judgements supposedly are. One of Shafer-Landau’s more novel anti-Humean arguments maintains that we know from experience that we can form intentions on the basis of beliefs without the help of any desires. For we sometimes have mistaken beliefs about our own desires but form intentions on the basis of those false beliefs. Shafer-Landau suggests that the only desire one might invoke in these cases would be a “higher-order desire to act on the beliefs one has about one’s desires,” but insists that this is “a bit top-heavy.” (139) This argument is original and intriguing, but it seems to overlook another possibility. Perhaps the desire that does the work in these cases is not a desire to act on one’s beliefs about what would fulfil one’s desires, but simply a desire to fulfil one’s desires. It is not clear why a desire to fulfil one’s desires would not be enough here, rather than the admittedly top-heavy and convoluted desire to do what one believes would fulfil those desires. Just as my desire to quench my thirst and my false belief that what is in the glass would quench my thirst can lead me to form the intention to drink, presumably a desire to satisfy my desires plus a false belief that acting in a certain way would lead to the satisfaction of my desires can lead me to form an intention to do whatever I (falsely) think would satisfy my desires. A desire to act on one’s beliefs simply seems unnecessary here.

Part Four (“Moral Reasons”) develops an impressive case against the view that reasons presuppose suitable antecedently existing motivations - reasons internalism. Shafer-Landau’s discussion of why the inappropriateness of ‘brow-beating’ does nothing to motivate reasons internalism is especially original and persuasive. Shafer-Landau then develops his own account of moral reasons as ‘intrinsically reason-giving’ and argues that this should be no more mysterious or objectionable than the plausible idea that reasons for belief can be intrinsically reason-giving. Finally, we are given a discussion of disagreement and rationality which rightly focuses its attention on hypothetical disagreement amongst ideal judges as opposed to mere actual disagreement by non-ideal real people. Shafer-Landau argues that realism can accommodate such disagreement between ideal judges so long as we allow that there can be a plurality of equally ideal but inconsistent ways of getting at the moral truth. The point is not that moral truth is perspective relative, but that more than one perspective can provide equally good access to truths which are logically independent of those perspectives.

In the course of arguing against reasons internalism Shafer-Landau argues that rationality should be understood substantively as sensitivity to reasons rather than procedurally (a la Scanlon, e.g.) as a person’s attitudes conforming to his or her own judgements. However, the substantive account of rationality looks problematic. Imagine someone who is radically deceived by a Cartesian Demon. They may thereby be completely insensitive to their real reasons for action and belief (perhaps what they really have reason to do is to utter some curse which would free them from the demon’s hold) but intuitively such a person might be perfectly rational. Perhaps Shafer-Landau’s account should be understood as insisting only that rationality requires that one is sensitive to reasons in the sense of knowing what *would be* a reason in a given situation if one’s factual knowledge was correct and complete in all relevant ways; someone tricked by a Cartesian Demon could still satisfy this constraint. This still looks problematic, though. Someone raised in a culture in which everyone has perverse moral beliefs might rationally trust the testimony of those around them (their parents, friends, etc.) and thereby come in an entirely rational way to have false beliefs about what kinds of facts can and cannot be reasons for action. This would make them insensitive to many of their real reasons even when their factual knowledge was correct and complete in all relevant ways. Intuitively, this does not necessarily seem to impugn their rationality. So long as they act as they think they should, what we should say about such people is that they are tragically ill-informed. Ignorance (even of reasons for action) is not irrationality. Given the implausibility of Shafer-Landau’s substantive account of rationality, the argument against proceduralist accounts needs to be very strong.

However, the critique of proceduralism is unconvincing. Shafer-Landau’s objection is that while a charge of irrationality is a very strong sort of criticism, “there needn’t be anything criticizable about (say) failing

to conform one's desires to one's moral judgements" for when one's moral judgements are badly off target indifference to acting on them is to be encouraged rather than discouraged (169). However, a proceduralist can allow that it would be better for someone with perverse moral beliefs to fail to conform her attitudes to those beliefs than for her to stick with those beliefs and conform her attitudes to them. For on any account, it can sometimes be a good thing to encourage someone to act irrationally. Even a proceduralist should allow this; just imagine a case in which someone powerful credibly threatens something terrible unless we get someone to act irrationally. More radically, a proceduralist might insist that it is no part of her account that a state of affairs in which someone is irrational is thereby a worse state of affairs. The value of a state of affairs and the rationality of an agent may simply be radically distinct forms of assessment. This is consistent with Shafer-Landau's suggestion that a charge of irrationality is a "quite strong form of normative indictment." (168) For we do not have to understand normative strength here in terms of how much value is at stake (which, by the way, need not be very much in a given context even on Shafer-Landau's substantive account; this just depends on the strength of the reasons to which the irrational agent is insensitive, which will vary from case to case). We could instead understand the strength of an indictment in terms of how difficult it would be for one's interlocutor to give a plausible and consistent reply. The proceduralist can point out that irrationality in his sense is very difficult to refute in that it appeals to the agent's own point of view to show how he or she is going wrong by his or her own lights. Finally, the proceduralist can insist that there are more than two options to be evaluated here. In addition to the options of (a) having the agent stick with her perverse moral beliefs and conform her attitudes to them and (b) having the agent stick with her perverse moral beliefs and *not* conform her attitudes to them (the two options Shafer-Landau canvasses), we also have (c) having the agent replace her perverse moral beliefs with true ones and conform her attitudes to her newly acquired true moral beliefs. The proceduralist can insist that we should (all else being equal) prefer (c) to both (a) and (b) but allow that if we must choose between (a) and (b) that typically (b) is the lesser of the evils. To be fair, Shafer-Landau does not really need this definition of rationality for his larger project; his main points could plausibly be reformulated as points about what there is most reason to do. However, the question of how we should understand rationality is of considerable independent interest.

Finally, Part Five (Moral Knowledge) explores the threat moral skepticism might pose for moral realism and then argues that moral skepticism is (in effect) self-stultifying. Having defused skepticism, Shafer-Landau develops a moral epistemology based on the self-evidence of propositions about pro tanto reasons and reliabilism about verdictive moral judgements. This account is defended against an impressive array of objections. It might have been nice here to have seen the discussion of self-evidence put into a historical context, with some discussion of Sidgwick, but there is only space for so much.

In sum, this is a highly ambitious and engaging book which develops a number of novel arguments for what is sure to be a controversial set of mutually supporting and philosophically interesting positions. Its breathtaking scope is perhaps a double-edged sword in that it sometimes prevents the discussion from going into sufficient depth (as in the discussion of quasi-realism). Nonetheless, the book is hardly superficial, makes a number of original and important points, and is very much worth reading. It is also accessible and engaging enough to be useful for teaching advanced undergraduates.