Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View is a detailed, original and impressive analysis of the underlying structure of how we ordinarily talk and think about morality and our own minds. It is undeniable, according to Maynard Adams, that everyday life involves making moral judgments, evaluating moral claims as valid or invalid, disagreeing about moral matters even when all relevant facts are known, and giving moral arguments that are meant to persuade rather than cajole. It is also clear, he thinks, that we have feelings and emotions that we assess as fitting or unfitting, regard as rationally incompatible, and attempt to influence in others by offering them reasons rather than mere propaganda.

Perhaps without realizing it, Adams argues, we have long been speaking and acting as if there is a moral aspect of the world that we gain knowledge of through our feelings and emotions. Adams thinks that the study of ordinary language and commonsense is not just “local dictionary making” for its own sake\(^1\); he instead regards analytic investigations into the way normal people speak and think as a guide to what is real, to what he calls the “categorial” features of reality (\textit{ENMW} 9).\(^2\) Our everyday language and understandings make basic distinctions, he argues, that reveal the most fundamental features of the world as it is, such as properties, physical objects, sets, minds and values (\textit{ENMW} 18). Natural language and commonsense are the best guides we have to the nature of reality, according to Adams, because they have developed over time in response to influences exerted on us by the external world, not only through our perceptions but also through our feelings, emotions and desires (\textit{ENMW} 212).

\(^1\) Adams cites Stephen Toulmin (1950) and Stuart Hampshire (1949) as adherents of this approach.

\(^2\) I will abbreviate references to Adams’ (1960) \textit{Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View} as \textit{ENMW} followed by a page number.
The analysis Adams gives of common moral practice, which he sees as a kind of fossil record of the external world, leads him to reject naturalism in ethics and the philosophy of mind. Naturalism, as he understands it, is the view that the nature of reality and “all dimensions of human experience” can be captured by concepts that could play a role in a scientific explanation (ENMW 12). Adams argues that moral language and moral concepts presuppose further ontological features beyond those that could figure in a complete scientific account of the world (ENMW 14-15) and he claims that our emotions, feelings and attitudes have a semantic component that cannot be explained in scientific terms. These two forms of non-naturalism are related, according to Adams, because he thinks that a correct analysis of our affective mental states reveals the presence of objective values, which have a causal influence through our feelings and emotions.

Working from virtues and shortcomings he identifies in three prominent naturalist theories that, as he sees it, nonetheless fail to capture common moral language and understanding, Adams develops a rich, complicated and comprehensive theory of the nature of morality and the mind that rewards close and sustained study. Although his view is far too complicated to try to summarize well, getting a sense of how the whole thing hangs together is necessary to understand and evaluate its main moral, epistemic and metaphysical claims, appreciate the kinds of support the theory is given, and assess it relative to alternative approaches.

Adams eventually judges that his own theory is more faithful to ordinary experience than the others, but he shows remarkable originality and subtlety in fastidiously developing a novel competitor to this own view, which he calls ‘logical naturalism.’ Amazingly, there are really two novel theories of morality proposed in Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View, their
details are given roughly equal space there and Adams is quite torn between them. He
downplays his contributions to logical naturalism, emphasizing instead the work of Stephen
Toulmin, Kurt Baier, Stuart Hampshire and other ‘good reasons’ theorists, but there are key
respects in which that view is his own creation. After explaining and partially assessing the
main features of the theory Adams ultimately prefers, my plan is to suggest a way of reconciling
it with logical naturalism that retains the main features of the both. The amendments I propose
to logical naturalism bring together the two ethical theories that Adams thought he was forced to
choose between, by providing a way of extending his preferred view with the aspects of logical
naturalism that Adams admired most.

Adams describes *Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View* as a concerted attempt
to reconcile commonsense morality with a scientific conception of the world. What finally
drives him to non-naturalism there, however, is not so much his metaethical investigations into
the meaning of ethical terms, the existence of moral facts, their possible nature and their relation
to science. He works primarily from the other end, within normative ethical theory, to try to
articulate general moral principles that underlie, explain and justify particular moral judgments.
When this attempt fails, in the form of logical naturalism, to deliver the most basic moral
principles on which specific moral claims normatively depend, he argues that there must be a
vast plurality of basic reasons. From these ethical considerations, Adams draws the metaethical
conclusion that this diversity of basic normative considerations, which was must posit in order to
make sense of commonsense morality, can only be deeply vindicated by an assortment of non-
natural moral facts. Some may doubt whether there are such easy transitions from normative
ethical theory to metaethics, but the basic problem in normative ethics of whether commonsense

---

3 Toulmin (1950), Baier (1958), and Hampshire (1949) did not see themselves as naturalists or as attempting to
ground morality in human nature; a central theme of their work, moreover, is to expand the notion of a ‘logical’
argument beyond deductive validity.
morality can be systematized and unified by one or a few fundamental values or principles is of central importance for understanding the nature of morality, addressing seemingly intractable moral disagreements and assessing the prospects of normative ethical theory as distinct from metaethics and mere moral advocacy. Adams began to work out a novel way of codifying commonsense morality but he also raised some of the deepest challenges to any normative ethical theory that aims to do so. It is worth considering, therefore, whether there are some ways of improving logical naturalism that could also be used to supplement his own view. The amendments I propose push the view towards a rationalist and constructivist account of reasons in which a rich and substantive notion of rationality is the most primitive normative notion that picks out which facts are reasons for what and explains why those normative relations hold. While the resulting view may no longer be naturalist in Adams’ sense, there are aspects of it that may be amenable to those, including Adams, who seek an underlying normative structure for the splendid diversity found in commonsense morality. We continue Adams’ legacy by developing and refining the paradigmatic theories he regarded as most promising, working out their details as best we can, and comparing them one to another in a way that is sure to reinforce our confidence in whatever view we ultimately find most reasonable.

1. Objective value-requiredness

The non-naturalist account of the nature of morality Adams proposes is a complicated, structured and multi-layered theory grounded in his feel for ordinary language and experience. While I cannot do full justice his view here, I will try to explain two of his most important claims, that objective values are part of the fabric of reality and that our feelings and emotions

---

4 There is a long history to this debate over whether morality or normativity more generally is codifiable. Act-utilitarians, including Jeremy Bentham (1996: [1789]) and arguably John Stuart Mill (1998: [1863]) claimed that morality boils down to maximizing happiness while Immanuel Kant (2002: [1785]) argued for the various formulations of his Categorical Imperative; Aristotle (2000) and other virtue ethicists, along with contemporary moral particularists such as Jonathan Dancy (2004), abjure simple moral principles in favor of a plurality of basic virtues or reasons.
provide us with knowledge of them. In doing so, I will also highlight how Adams adapts his metaethical conclusions to commonsense morality as he sees it.

Adams’ methodology is to begin in everyday experience by examining what it means to say, as we commonly do, that a person ought to act in some way, and then to examine the theoretical presuppositions of this class of claims. When we tell someone that she ought to do something, Adams suggests, we give her an imperative, we tell her to do it – “brush your teeth!”, “go to bed!”, etc. (*ENMW* 132-5). And when an imperative is given to us, we usually ask for and expect reasons why we ought to comply with it, and we regard imperatives that lack such support as improper – “but why should I brush my teeth?”

Everyday ‘ought’ statements, according to Adams, are almost always concealed practical arguments that say an imperatival conclusion is “prescriptively required” (*ENMW* 134) either by certain facts in conjunction with other imperatives or by certain facts alone. When we meaningfully assert that someone ought not torture the suspect, Adams thinks we are actually giving a disguised practical argument the premises of which may be implicit, elliptical or taken for granted in the relevant context, such as “if we signed an international agreement not to torture and if we must honor our agreements then, do not torture him!” or “if torture will cause him excruciating pain, then do not do it!” If someone says that we ought not torture the person, but she cannot give reasons for her objection then, according to Adams, what she says is meaningless because it is not a well-formed moral statement. On his view, the claim that we ought not torture the suspect is valid just in case that conclusion, in its imperatival form, follows

---

5 There is of course a long history of equating claims about what we ought to do with imperatives. Kant (2002: [1785]), for example, argued that the supreme principle of morality, when addressed to imperfect rational agents, can be expressed in the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative. In the 20th Century, R.M. Hare’s (1952) “universal prescriptivism” characterizes ethical statements as prescriptions rather than descriptions.

6 Similarly, when someone claims that some book is just relevant, we do not understand what is being said unless we know what the book is supposed to be relevant to (some social movement, set of values, life-experiences, or the like), which we can often elicit from implicit background assumptions.
from the assumed premises that are themselves true or valid. Reasons are the facts that figure into valid arguments of this sort (ENMW 124), e.g. the fact that we signed an agreement is a reason not to torture him, as is the fact that doing so would cause him severe pain.

Some ‘ought’ statements are what Adams calls ‘tautological practical arguments’ because they mean that certain supposed facts along with one or more imperatives logically entail the conclusion in the form of an imperative. For example, Adams contends that from this fact: “taking organic chemistry is necessary in order to attend medical school” and this imperative: “attend medical school!” the following imperative follows in virtue of a logical connection between premises and conclusion: “take organic chemistry!” Or, the more specific imperative to respect children is justified by subsuming it under the more general imperative to respect persons along with the fact that children are persons.

‘Ought’ statements that are tautological practical arguments derive from purported facts and other imperatives, which in turn may be derived from further imperatives in conjunction with still other supposed facts. When these hierarchical arguments are fully stated, Adams thinks they must terminate in foundational imperatives that are not justified on the basis of other ones. Whenever we assert that someone ought to act in some way, we therefore presuppose that there are basic imperatives that underlie and justify our normative claims in conjunction with relevant facts.

How are we to understand the nature of these basic imperatives, which are supposedly needed to explain the surface features of ordinary morality? Adams is not as concerned with their content – whether the Principle of Utility or the Categorical Imperative is the supreme

---

7 Adams favors what is now called a ‘buck-passing’ account of ‘ought’ (Scanlon 1998) according to which if some action ought to be done then this is so in virtue of some other properties of the action (its conduciveness to overall utility, the way it shows respect, etc.) – that an action ought to be done is not an extra reason to do it.
principle of morality, for example – as he is interested in whether they exist and, if so, what sort of principles they are.

A. Logical naturalism

Adams discusses at length the possibility that foundational imperatives, on which all other imperatives ultimately rest, are simply axioms that are taken for granted in virtue of being constitutive parts of human nature. It may be a necessary feature of human beings, for example, that we are deeply committed to principles that enjoin us to “make the fulfillment of everyone's aims and desires as far as possible compatible” (Toulmin 1950: 137) or to “maximize satisfactions and minimize frustrations” of our own desires (Baier 1958: 301). Toulmin and Baier did not actually hold such a view – they regarded commitment to their respective principles as a necessary feature of practical reasoning rather than human nature – but logical naturalism in the form Adams suggests is an intriguing way of trying to capture ordinary moral experience on a naturalist foundation. This view may be considered naturalist in the following respects: It rejects “an objective value-requiredness in reality” (ENMW 152), it takes as foundational the contents of a cluster of natural beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that we supposedly have as human beings, and it treats moral claims as nonetheless subject to rational evaluation in virtue of how well they represent the logical relations between (a) the imperatives that are essential to human nature, (b) those that can be derived from the foundational ones and (c) descriptive facts (ENMW 100, 129).

Adams raises two significant challenges to logical naturalism. First, he wonders whether there is a sufficiently robust “stockpile” (ENMW 154) of foundational imperatives in human nature to account for all the evidently valid ‘ought’ statements there are or to explain all of the ordinary ways in which we recognize exceptions to imperatives, reject others and adopt new
ones. If all valid ‘ought’ statements are to derive from a set of foundational imperatives (in conjunction with descriptive facts) then those imperatives must be very robust. However, the more substantive we make foundational imperatives to account for the wide variety of correct ‘ought’ claims there are, the less plausible it seems that accepting these imperatives is a necessary requirement for counting as a human being.

The other main problem for logical naturalism, according to Adams, is that it cannot explain the authority that commonsense attributes to valid moral claims (ENMW 162). If all such claims are ultimately grounded in our contingent human nature, Adams wonders, why would we have reason to comply with them, what would make them normative for us?

**B. Adams’ Non-naturalism**

Adams admits that there are *some* authoritative imperatives that we accept in virtue of our human nature, but he doubts that they are robust enough to generate all of the moral claims that we regard as valid in ordinary life. Some foundational imperatives, he concludes, must therefore be grounded in something other than human nature and the natural world more generally.

Adams proposes a non-naturalist alternative to logical naturalism according to which the vast majority of foundational imperatives are conclusions of “natural practical arguments.” Arguments of this sort claim that certain purported facts alone, without any other imperatives, “normatively demand” an imperatival conclusion in virtue of a “real,” rather than a logical, connection between premises and conclusion (ENMW 116). ‘Ought’ statements of this kind, he explains, can be stated as conditionals: “if certain facts obtain then perform some action.” For example, according to Adams, “one ought to help the poor” means something like “if helping the poor makes them happy then help them!” or, equivalently, “helping the poor makes them happy, so help them!” (ENMW 120). Adams contends that the non-natural connection asserted by such
statements and the arguments they express is an “objective value-requiredness” between the antecedent facts and the consequent imperatives – according to him, *some facts all by themselves simply require certain actions or state of affairs*(ENMW 152-3).

Whereas G.E. Moore’s (1993 [1903]) famous non-naturalist theory regards ‘good’ as a simple, unanalyzable and non-natural *property* had by things such as pleasure or friendship, Adams suggests that there are valid natural practical arguments that hold in virtue of real, non-natural normative *relations* between facts and ways the world ought to be. The world is littered with normative relations of this sort, according to Adams, so he concludes that foundational claims about how the world ought to be can be used as premises to justify a wide variety of more specific imperatives, which derive their normative authority from objective normative features of reality.

2. Affective-conative states

Having argued that our ordinary assertions about what people ought to do presuppose objective value relations in the world, Adams takes another route to his version of ethical non-naturalism, one that begins with a non-naturalist analysis of a variety mental states.

Thinking, as he uses the term, is not equivalent to believing, but is instead the most general mental act in which one asserts to oneself some proposition p, with the aim of being correct in doing so, and one accepts that proposition as well (ENMW 188, 191). There are a variety of forms that thinking can take, according to Adams. To *perceive* that p is to assert p to oneself with an eye to being correct in doing so on the basis of sensory input, and to accept it because of what one senses. To *believe* that p is to think that p on grounds that are “entirely conceptually represented” (ENMW 191).
Adams contends that desires, feelings, and emotions involve thinking as well, so they too have a cognitive aspect. But unlike perceptions and beliefs, the semantic content of conative states cannot be expressed with declarative sentences; imperative ones must be used instead. To have a desire, according to Adams, is to accept an imperative, such as ‘x be F!’, which involves being disposed to comply with that imperative. To accept an imperative, in turn, is to accept an ‘ought’ statement on the basis of accepting the conditional that the statement expresses, namely ‘if certain premises hold then an imperative is normatively required’, and also to accept those premises.

The fullest explanation of a desire thus involves accepting, perhaps only implicitly, a potentially very complicated practical argument. For example, according to Adams’ analysis, my desire for a cup of coffee involves the following: (1) I accept an imperative to keep working; (2) I accept that a cup of coffee is necessary for me to do so; (3) I accept the conditional that if I must keep working and if a cup of coffee is necessary for me to do so then I must have a copy of coffee; so (4) I accept an imperative, on the basis of (1), (2) and (3), to have a cup of coffee.

This analysis, which Adams extends to emotions and feelings, connects with his account of ‘ought’ statements – if ‘ought’ statements are practical arguments and if desires are practical arguments that one accepts then to have a desire is to accept an ‘ought’ statement.

Most of our everyday desires are subsidiary ones, which means a further desire figures as one of its premises – my desire for coffee is grounded in a more basic desire to get back to work, for example. The further desires that figure in the explanation of subsidiary ones can themselves be disguised arguments of the same form. My desire to keep working might amount to the following: (1) I accept an imperative to satisfy a certain deadline, (2) I accept that a necessary means for me to do so is to continue working, (3) I accept the conditional that if I must satisfy
that deadline and if continuing to work is the only way for me to do so then I must keep working, so I conclude that (4) I must continue working. On Adams’ view, my original desire for coffee presupposes my desire to keep working, which in turn presupposes my desire to meet a deadline.

Adams argues that this sort of regress, in which our desires are based on further and further desires, must terminate in foundational desires that are not explained by more basic ones. My desire to meet a deadline may presuppose my desire to do well at my job, which in turn may presuppose a desire to live a flourishing life, which may be a basic that need not be grounded in any other one.

How we are to understand these foundational desires, which Adams claims are presupposed by all subsidiary ones? Once again it is this central issue, in slightly different form, that leads Adams to expand, refine and ultimately reject logical naturalism in favor of the view that desires and other conative states involve accepting that certain purported facts, all by themselves, prescriptively require certain things. And because he thinks commonsense treats some desires, feelings and emotions as valid or justified, Adams is led to conclude that these mental states can yield knowledge of an objective moral reality.

A. Logical naturalism

Adams raises the same basic criticisms to logical naturalism as he did before, arguing that desires that are most plausibly considered part of human nature are too anemic and lack sufficient authority to underlie and explain all or most of the subsidiary desires we have in our everyday lives.

Adams is tempted by the logical naturalist way of explaining foundational desires, so he tries to specify on their behalf some foundational imperatives that we may accept as part of our nature as human beings and so may be used to explain a variety of subsidiary desires. In virtue
of our nature as rational creatures, Adams claims that we accept the “fundamental imperative” to have good reasons for what we think and do. Adams thinks this desire by itself, however, is too general and indeterminate to play the requisite role in explaining our subsidiary desires (ENMW 141), so it must be supplemented with other ‘piggy-back’ principles of rationality that may be part of our human nature as well, including:

- do not sacrifice a greater good for a lesser one; do not sacrifice a great good in order to avoid a small evil; do not suffer a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser one…
- if you claim that the fact that a proposed action of another would hurt you is, apart from other consideration; a good reason for the act's not being done, and if you expect him and others to recognize it as such, then acknowledge that the fact that some proposed act of yours would hurt another is, apart from other considerations, a good reason for your act's not being done (ENMW 145).

Adding in these additional foundational desires does not provide much help in accounting for most of our subsidiary desires, according to Adams, because he interprets all of these ‘piggy-back’ imperatives as mere tautologies – for example, the imperative not to sacrifice a greater good for a lesser one is a tautology because on Adams’ construal ‘x is better than y’ just means ‘x ought not be sacrificed for y’. Once again, Adams worries that the imperatives that are plausibly considered part of human nature are not sufficient to account for commonsense morality.

**B. Adams’ Non-naturalism**

Adams sees no alternative but to turn to non-naturalism in order to explain the wide variety of desires there are. He supplements the fundamental rational imperative and the ‘piggy-back’ ones with foundational desires that are separate from human nature yet not necessarily
derived from other desires. These further desires amount to accepting that if certain accepted
facts obtain then they alone normatively demand an imperative. Primary desires, as Adams calls
them, are supposed to be “cognitions of an objective value-requiredness in reality” (ENMW 193). When I desire food, for example, I think that I ought to eat on the basis of an internal “value-
perception,” which is a “sensation that a state of affairs involves a deficiency, a lack—that it is
not as it ought to be” (ENMW 192). When I am in pain, I perceive that my condition,
characterized descriptively, is not as it ought to be (ENMW 194-5). When an artist desires to
make a change to his work, he examines its descriptive features and sees that it is not as it ought
to be. Other primary desires involve thinking that something ought to be the case on the basis of
one’s beliefs rather than sensations – we “feel” (ENMW 195) that the propositional content of
our beliefs normatively requires some imperative. A preference for one thing over another is
thinking that it is “more like what is required” (ENMW 215) by the supposed facts then the other
thing. To morally approve of an act is thinking that it ought to be done on the basis of the
purported facts while morally disapproving of an act is thinking that those facts require that it
ought not to be done (ENMW 92).

According to Adams, each of us has a hierarchy of desires with a foundation that consists
both of primary desires, which we accept on the basis of our factual beliefs and putative
perceptions of natural facts, and of rational desires that are inherent in our human nature, such as
the one enjoining us to have good reasons for what we do along with the “piggy-back”
tautologies. All subsidiary desires can then be derived from the combined set of foundational
ones in conjunction with our beliefs and perceptions.

Adams’ striking claim is that whenever we are have desires, feelings and emotions –
whenever we prefer a night at home to a loud party, morally approve of the President’s actions or
want a cup of coffee – we are thinking, perhaps implicitly and without realizing it, that certain putative facts all by themselves normatively demand certain imperatives. Adams argues that the deep structure of our own minds, which is revealed in the ways we evidently understand, talk about and treat our desires, emotions, feelings and other mental states, includes a basic commitment to “objective value requiredness” in the world (ENMW 97).

Adams offers the following support from commonsense for his non-natural conception of affective-conative states, in which desires and feelings are not just motivationally efficacious urges but involve accepting imperatives and complex arguments:

(1) In everyday life, we rationally assess the desires, feelings and emotions of ourselves and others as correct or incorrect, valid or invalid, fitting or unfitting, perverted or not, etc. Desires are subject to rational assessment in virtue of their relation to one another or to other mental states, says Adams, but we also tend to evaluate primary desires apart from these formal relations. When we say that the desire of a sadist to hurt others for its own sake is improper, we mean, according to Adams, that he ought not cause others pain for its own sake and that he is incorrect to think otherwise. When we have a desire, Adams suggests, we are striving to accept valid ‘ought’ statements, which he describes as the “fitting” objects of our desires (ENMW 170), so he regards as perverted desires that deviate from their proper objects. Desires, according to Adams, are therefore “not subject to being described and explained in terms of causal laws and antecedent conditions” (ENMW 92) because if they were “simply natural occurrences” then they could not be rationally assessed in the ways we assume they can be. On his view, a person’s desire can be valid if she accepts an imperative that follows from premises that are themselves true or valid. Her desires can be invalid if the supposed facts that figure into the justification of
the desire are not true, if a primary desire that figures in its justification is not actually required by the relevant facts, or if the imperative does not logically follow from its premises.

(2) In everyday life, suggests Adams, we regard desires as incompatible in a way in which ordinary events cannot be – natural events can causally oppose one another but they cannot be logically inconsistent. On Adams’ account, desires can conflict with one another when they involve accepting logically inconsistent imperatives.

(3) We regularly treat certain desires as providing reasons, according to Adams, but we do not regard all desires as reason-giving. The best way to account for the difference, Adams claims, is that we regard some desires as valid or correct, which leads us to treat them as generating claims on others, whereas we think that other desires do not generate such reasons because they do not have a fitting object. If desires were explainable in natural terms, however, he thinks that they could not generate reasons of this sort.

(4) Finally, Adams points out that a common feature of everyday life is that we try to offer other people good reasons to change their attitudes, to abandon some and to adopt others, in an effort to guide them in their own deliberations and practical reasoning. If desires were only natural events, our efforts would merely amount to goading, cajoling, inducing or causing others to alter their attitudes, whereas on Adams’ analysis, we persuade others by calling into question the premises that figure into their desires, offering new premises, suggesting which ones we take to be stronger or weaker, and so on.

3. Establishing commonsense

Adams develops his interrelated theories of morality and the mind by analyzing our ordinary language and commonsense to reveal their underlying structure and presuppositions: When we assert that a police officer ought to help a stranded motorist, we mean in part that she
ought to help the distressed person because doing so is, at some level, “prescriptively required” by a set of supposed facts. And when the police officer forms a desire to help the person, she necessarily thinks that her help is “prescriptively required” by a set of purported facts as well. What Adams has tried to show, in other words, is that if there are any valid ‘ought’ statements or if there are valid desires then there must be “objective value-requiredness” in the world.

There are limits, however, to the analytic mode of argument that Adams employs, which cannot establish that there is anything in reality that our words refer to or that our concepts pick out. We may ordinarily speak and think as if the world is a certain way, perhaps without fully understanding that we are doing so, but bringing these presuppositions to light does not show that the world actually is as we assume it to be. Our ideas of ought and desire may entail a commitment to real normative relations, but these concepts and their components could be illusory – perhaps commonsense is incorrect, maybe there are no valid ‘ought’ claims and no actual desires in the requisite sense. Even if Adams’ analytic arguments are valid, the world may nonetheless consists merely of natural properties and relations, although there may be some benefit to keeping up the illusion that it is has the moral and mental aspects that we think it does.8

Adams’ way of dealing with this problem is to reaffirm his confidence that analyzing common language and concepts not only clarifies our ideas and reveals their presuppositions, it also serves as a reliable guide to the nature of reality itself. According to him, the external world has influenced and shaped our understandings and use of language, not only through our perceptions but also through our desires, feelings and emotions, which he thinks give us knowledge of objective normative relations (ENMW 212). If we further assume that the world is a teleological system designed by God, in which “value-requiredness is the force of nature [and]

8 Mackie (1990) and Kant (2002: [1785]) raised similar concerns about analytical arguments.
causality is to be conceived in terms of it” (*ENMW* 207), then we can explain in more detail how objective value relations, mediated by our desires, emotions and feelings, have had a causal influence on our language and ideas (*ENMW* 212). In any case, if ordinary people speak and think as if there are real normative relations in the world that move them to act, what better evidence could there be, Adams wonders, that “objective value-requiredness” is a “categorial feature of reality” that we gain knowledge of through our “affective-conative states” (*ENMW* 128, 213)?

4. **Logical naturalism revisited**

As with any complicated, multifaceted and subtle philosophical theory, there are various questions that might be raised about it – one might quibble, for example, with Adams’ account of naturalism or wonder how to explain the logic of imperatives if such claims cannot be true or false; one might ask whether subsumption is the only way to justify moral principles, think that imperatives are necessarily addressed to agents rather than sometimes simply claims about what ‘ought to be’ and insist on drawing a distinction between moral and prudential ‘oughts’; someone could raise doubts about whether desires are necessarily had under ‘the guise of the good’, whether they essentially involve accepting imperatives or complicated arguments and even whether we regularly evaluate the desires of others, as opposed to assessing their intentions or actions; and many people will have deep reservations about whether an analysis of ordinary language and commonsense reveals the structure of reality. While there is some value in criticizing philosophical theories and refining them in response to specific objections, as Adams admirably did over a remarkable career, belaboring such concerns may lead us to miss what is most inspiring and enduring about Adams’ approach to philosophy, which is the coherent,
systematic and unified manner in which it approaches a wide variety of some of our most
difficult philosophical problems. Throughout his work, Adams abjures one-off counter-
examples and easy refutations in favor of constructing and studying whole theories and assessing
how well they fit with commonsense (ENMW 131-2). Perhaps no theory will do so perfectly –
we may even find that our theoretical reflections lead to improvements in on our common
understandings10 – but Adams recognized that the main questions of philosophy tend to hang
together in a way that requires us to compare, assess and sometime even combine systematic
theories or world-views.

In this same spirit, my plan now is to suggest some ways of improving logical naturalism
in response to the concerns raised by Adams and then to show how it can be combined with
Adams’ own view in a way that captures the main advantages of both.

Adams rejects logical naturalism, which he saw as the last and best hope for reconciling
ethics with a scientific conception of the world, because of his skepticism about whether
commonsense morality, in all of its complexity, can be logically deduced from a meager set of
principles of human nature in conjunction with non-moral facts – some aspects of the moral life
will be left out, he thinks, by a subsumptive model of justification with such meager starting
points. Adams would prefer a deeper and more unified normative explanation for the various
reasons we recognize in daily life, yet without one that he finds plausible, Adams is forced to
settle for a large and potentially conflicting plurality of moral relations that lack an underlying
and unifying structure.

The issue of whether and to what extent morality can be structured and systematized was
made prominent in the 1930’s by the work of W.D. Ross.11 Ross proposed a list of seven prima

10 Adams does not explicitly mention this possibility but it seems that he might allow for it.
11 The most influential of these is Ross (2002: [1930])
facie duties that can each count for or against a particular act, but they do not by themselves determine what our duty is all-things-considered when conflicts arise among them. There is no underlying principle that justifies individual prima facie duties, according to Ross, nor are there any strict priority rules for resolving conflicts when they arise. If I promised to help my neighbor in some way but could do him slightly more good by breaking the promise, Ross thinks I have a prima facie duty to keep my promise and a prima facie duty to do whatever good I can, but there is no deeper justification that explains why these features of my situation ground prima facie duties or an explanation for how these duties are morally related to one another, leaving me to rely on good judgment to decide what I ought to do all things considered.

It seems quite sensible to say that we have prima facie duties to keep our promises and do good for others, and in everyday contexts an analysis of this sort may be quite sufficient to explain our situation, but on reflection we may seek a deeper account of why these features of an act count in its favor – why do we have reasons to keep our promises or to help one another, is it because doing so conduces to overall utility or is allowed by those maxims that could be willed as universal law? There is something disconcerting about Ross’ answer that these various prima facie duties are simply self-evident, lacking any unifying explanation that justifies them as a group. Ross himself is not immune to the philosophical drive to explain why certain prima facie duties are justified. If we ask, for example, why there is a prima facie duty against lying, Ross’ view is that such a duty is derivative from the basic prima facie duties of non-maleficence and fidelity – it is only those acts of lying that harm others or that violate an implicit promise to tell the truth that we have a prima facie duty to avoid.¹² But there is no underlying explanation for why these further principles are themselves prima facie duties.

¹² (Ross 2002: [1930]: 54-55)
It may be that we should accept something close to Ross’ view as the default position in ethical theory – our moral experience is incredibly rich and diverse, so we have to resist the tendency, which has been rampant in the history of ethics, to over-generalize, cut corners and dispense with important aspects of common morality in the service of finding the supposed supreme ethical principle that picks out which facts are moral reasons and explains why they are so. A dominant trend in contemporary moral philosophy is to take Ross’ corrective against over-simplifying moral phenomena very seriously. At one extreme is moral particularism, which goes beyond Ross in holding that morality has no need for moral principles of even a *prima facie* kind because, according to them, there are no non-moral features of acts that always count for or against doing them – reasons are very sensitive to context, so a non-moral fact that counts in favor of doing something in one set of circumstances may in another context count against doing it or count not at all in another.\textsuperscript{13} Less radically, Thomas Scanlon’s version of moral contractualism takes as given a hodgepodge of generic reasons individuals have from their points of view and employs a carefully specified social contract procedure to construct a set of moral principles that no one could reasonably reject.\textsuperscript{14} If we ask why there are reasons for us to maintain our privacy, insist on fair treatment, maintain bodily integrity, and so on, all of which we surely have, Scanlon doubts that there are any underlying principles that can “yield all of the claims about reasons that seem evidently correct,” which leads him to endorse substantive realism about reasons in which “there always remain substantive normative questions about ‘What is a reason for what?’ which must be faced, and answered, directly”.\textsuperscript{15} Although Adams developed logical naturalism as an attempt to structure commonsense morality, he became skeptical of its ability to do so successfully, which led him to accept that the world contains an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} (Dancy 2004: Chapter 3)
\item \textsuperscript{14} (Scanlon 1998)
\item \textsuperscript{15} (Scanlon 2003: 203)
\end{itemize}
inescapable set of normative relations or reasons that are not explained by anything more basic.¹⁶

Perhaps Ross, Scanlon and Adams are correct – maybe there is no underlying and unifying structure to the wide variety of reasons we have – yet if we keep in view the complexity and diversity of commonsense morality, there are several advantages to testing the limits of a unifying strategy along the lines of logical naturalism. For one thing, such a view would offer a parsimonious way of bringing together the staggering variety of apparently unrelated reasons that are evidently correct. Some of us may also have metaphysical qualms about positing so many diverse and unrelated moral relations in the world while others may simply hope for more structure and systematicity in a normative ethical theory that can explain why certain facts are reasons and others are not. A more structured ethical theory may also help us to resolve difficult ethical questions, including ones about how competing reasons compare to one another or whether certain facts are reasons at all, by specifying a common perspective from which such questions can be decided.

This is a soaring ambition Adams had for logical naturalism, but he recognized that achieving it depends crucially on the details of what specific moral principles are treated as basic and how successfully we can derive a wide variety of commonly recognized reasons from those standards. Adams did not attempt to work out such specifics, but he showed that we can make some progress by outlining a theory and raising initial challenges to it that, if they can be partially met, allow others to continue working out the details.

The main problem with logical naturalism, Adams saw, is that it seems too anemic to generate all of the moral claims and reasons that commonsense treats as valid. Logical

¹⁶ Other prominent philosophers, besides Dancy, Scanlon and Adams, who accept such a view include Raz (2005); Parfit (2009).
naturalists think that justified claims about what we ought to do logically derive from imperatives that are constitutive of human nature together with non-moral facts; and they think that what makes a fact a reason is that it figures essentially in such derivations. But why should we accept, Adams wonders, that human nature has a sufficient “stockpile of imperative premises” (ENMW 154) to explain, for example, why we ought to avoid torture, help our neighbors or refrain from humiliating others, let alone all of the reasons we have to protect the environment, sample fine wines or learn Mozart’s sonatas? Even if human nature were robust enough to do the job, we would still need to explain why those axioms have normative authority in virtue of their constitutive role in human nature – the trouble is that our nature, it seems, is arbitrary and contingent, appropriately resisted at times, and rarely reason-giving in and of itself.

Adams found himself choosing between a seemingly anemic and non-authoritative set of principles on the one hand and, on the other, giving up his hope of specifying a unified structure for commonsense morality and admitting that there are a wide variety of basic and non-derivative normative relations in the world. I aim to take a few initial steps beyond logical naturalism to see whether it can be made more acceptable to commonsense and perhaps even used to provide further structure to Adams’ own ethical theory, thereby combining the virtues of both views. Actually, the amendments I propose may render ‘logical’ and ‘naturalism’ inappropriate labels for the view, but these revisions retain some of the spirit of logical naturalism, which is to specify an underlying and unified framework that provides justification for the plurality of reasons that we recognize in reflective commonsense.

A. Constructivism

It may seem implausible that one or a few basic principles of human nature could yield the great diversity of moral reasons that exist if we assume that those reasons are supposed to
follow by *logical deduction* from fundamental axioms along with non-moral facts. For example, Philippa Foot once thought that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives that can be deduced from a basic principle of instrumental rationality along with facts about what people want and what it takes for them to get it.\(^{17}\) Such a view is implausible, however, because it cannot capture the categorical nature of morality we recognize in commonsense – we are sometimes morally required to do things that we do not want to do.

A different model of justification, which has come to be called *constructivism*, holds that certain reasons are justified in virtue of the attitudes, commitments and choices of actual or hypothetical agents. The idea is to specify a conception of the person and then to imagine how agents of that sort, on their own or together, would reason about, react to, or render judgment on some normative issue or problem under certain specified conditions. We then regard their deliverances as true or reasonable *because* they result from a justified procedure of construction. Constructivists think that certain procedures are not designed to *discover* which normative claims are *already* valid; instead, the validity of at least some reasons, principles, values or other normative claims *consist in* being the result of a justified procedure. For example, Rousseau argued that states are legitimate *just in case* and *because* reasonable people who were concerned to advance their fundamental interests in freedom, happiness and self-perfection would agree to them\(^{18}\), while on some interpretations, David Hume claimed that a virtue is a trait that would be approved of by normally functioning human beings who considered its likely effects on other people\(^{19}\).

The metaphor of *construction* raises questions about what is to be constructed, what materials are to be used, and who is doing the constructing. Constructivist theories can differ

---

\(^{17}\) (Foot 1978)
\(^{18}\) (Rousseau 1997 [1762])
\(^{19}\) (Hume 2000 [1739]). For a reading of this sort see Tiberius (2002)
with regard to what is supposed to be constructed – John Rawls, for example, sets out to
construct principles of justice for a well-ordered society.\textsuperscript{20} The materials of construction include
the motivations of the agents of construction, the information they have available to them and the
circumstances in which they are to make their decisions – the parties in Rawls’ Original Position
are assumed to be moved to secure primary goods for themselves under a Veil of Ignorance that
blocks out specific features of who they are. And the agents who are doing the constructing may
be hypothetical persons concerned to maximize their own good or they can be actual ones who
are intelligent, reasonable, sympathetic and conscientious.

My first amendment to logical naturalism, then, is to supplement the ‘logical’ model of
justification with a constructivist one. Rather than regarding reasons as primitive and basic, a
modest step toward constructivism is to interpret a reason as any fact that is picked out by a
principle resulting from a justified procedure of construction.

The success of this strategy will depend on the details of the procedure of construction
and its ability to generate the reasons we recognize in everyday life, but even at this abstract
level we can see that constructivism has several advantages that make it more likely than logical
naturalism to be successful at this task. First, unlike logical naturalism, which relies on
deductive justifications in which the conclusions it can yield have to be contained in certain
principles of human nature along with relevant facts, constructivism can provide ampliative
justifications in which the conclusions it can justify need not follow logically from the
conception of the person, and the choice procedure it specifies need not be algorithmic or
mechanical. Instead, on some versions of constructivism, parties employ their reasoning
abilities, interpret and apply basic commitments, and exercise judgment under conditions that are
favorable for doing so and thereby settle on conclusions that are justified in virtue of being the

\textsuperscript{20} (Rawls 1999b)
result of a justified procedure. For example, in Rawls’ classic paper “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics” he imagines a set of sufficiently intelligent, knowledgable, reasonable and sympathetic judges rendering stable and unanimous judgments that are justified because they are “more likely than any other judgments to represent the mature convictions of competent men as they have been worked out under the most favorable existing conditions.”21

A second feature of constructivism that makes it more likely to capture the reasons recognized in commonsense is that it can make use of levels of justification that constrain one another and vary in what (if any) non-moral facts figure into the deliberations of the parties. This allows a constructivist theory to be very sensitive to particular contexts, as commonsense morality often is, while also providing a deeper and more unified justification for the various reasons of daily life. For instance, in Rawls’ theory of justice, the most basic, general and exceptionless principles of justice are chosen in the Original Position by parties who know very little about themselves or the situation in which they live. Once these principles are settled on, the parties are provided with more information as they choose a Constitution tailored to their own society within the constraints of and guided by the basic principles of justice; particular pieces of legislation are then chosen with even more facts at hand within the confines of and guided by the chosen Constitution; and the same goes for choosing administrative rules for implementing the agreed upon legislation. This allows Rawls to say, example, that regulations about the size, location and availability of wheelchair ramps in public buildings can include all sorts of exceptions, qualifying conditions, and very specific requirements, but what justifies them in the first instance is that they would have been selected at the administrative stage within the confines of the more general Americans with Disabilities Act, which in turn would have been chosen at the legislative stage within the limits of the US Constitution, which would have been

21 (Rawls 1999a: [1951]: 10)
chosen at the Constitutional stage within the standards set by the most basic principles of justice that are meant to apply to any and all democratic societies.

Finally, some may be skeptical about whether our best efforts at specifying a justified procedure of construction will yield all or most of the reasons that commonsense treats as correct – how do we go about specifying, in a non-arbitrary way, the motivations of the parties, the information they have available, the context in which they make their decisions and so on, and how can we be sure that the procedure will yield the reasons recognized by commonsense? One strategy constructivists can employ is to distinguish between, on the one hand, the content and structure of a constructivist theory and, on the other, the methods used to arrive at the theory itself. We not only have considered judgments about justified moral decision procedures, we also have commonsense judgments about what is a reason for what, which things are valuable and so on. These more practical judgments can be used to adjust the constructivist procedure, and our judgments about that procedure may lead us to abandon some of our commonsense judgments. We can work back and forth in this manner, making adjustments to our procedure and to our ordinary normative judgments, but from the standpoint of the final theory that we would endorse after careful reflection, the correct constructivist procedure may unify and justify a wide variety of reasons from everyday life.

In sum, constructivism can distinguish between the standpoint of ordinary people on the streets, who make particular normative judgments, from the perspective of reflective people, who are thinking about the more general principles, values and facts that provide reasons for or against particular judgments. Then there is the perspective of the moral theorist who proposes a constructivist procedure to try to account for and justify these mid-level normative considerations, and ultimately the specific reasons of everyday life. Along the way she also
attempts to justify her procedure itself, both by the plausibility of its constitutive features and its success at generating the kinds of conclusions that we would endorse on due reflection.

**B. Substantive rationalism**

The second amendment to logical naturalism arises from the concern that whatever is supposed to unify and justify the reasons of commonsense must itself be authoritative, yet human nature (as suggested by the logical naturalist) seems arbitrary, contingent and not always reason-giving for us. Various other proposals have been made for the most general and unifying normative concept, including God’s will, natural teleology, sympathy, and enlightened self-interest, but one idea that has captured much attention is that rationality is what grounds all reasons.

This suggestion strikes many people as implausible. Rationality may be sufficiently authoritative, but it has long been regarded as too slim a basis on which to ground substantive normative claims and reasons – rationality may require us to pursue our ends effectively, for instance, but it does not tell us whether we have better reasons to pursue push-pin over poetry, dishonesty over integrity, selfishness over altruism. Largely under the influence of Hobbes, Hume and modern economics, philosophers are used to thinking about rationality as a formal notion that is concerned with consistency and coherence among mental states, which implies that there is otherwise no rational assessment of what we believe, intend or prefer. For example, rationality requires us to avoid contradictory beliefs but it does not tell someone whether she should abandon her belief in absolute space and time or her belief that there is no such thing, although she certainly has reasons to maintain one of those beliefs over the other; rationality tells us to take the believed necessary means to our ends or give up the ends but does not say whether we have more reason to buy the arsenic we believe is necessary to kill our neighbor or

\[22 \text{ (Broome 2010)}\]
simply to abandon that nefarious intention; a fully rational person organizes and schedules her ends efficiently but rationality otherwise gives her no direction about whether she should put her career on hold now to have children or wait a few years before doing so; and rationality may require us to have whatever desires we believe we have most reason to have but it does not tell us whether our desire for a cigarette is supported by the best reasons even if we (perhaps erroneously) believe it is. When Adams himself searched for principles of rationality on behalf of logical naturalism, all he could find were formal ones as well: One of them simply amounts to the general requirement to act with good reason while the ‘piggy back’ principles are merely tautologies lacking content.

According to formal conceptions of rationality, we are above rational reproach as long as our mental states fit together consistently and coherently, no matter how wrong, vicious, wacky or unjustified our beliefs, intentions, plans and projects may be, which is why it seemed so clear to Hume that “Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger” for there is presumably no rational contradiction in such an unreasonable preference. On this view, despite their common etymologies, the relationship between particular reasons and our capacity for rationality is not very close. Formal rationality cannot generate reasons to have particular mental states because its requirements are conditional, they leave us with options about how to resolve incompatibilities among them – all things equal, we are no less rational for abandoning one contradictory intention over the other, for example, or adopting an attitude we think we have most reason to have as opposed to simply abandoning that judgment. What we have substantive reasons to do or think is a separate matter from good

---

23 Kant (2002: [1785]) calls this principle the Hypothetical Imperative.
24 Rawls (1999b) calls rational principles about scheduling our ends “counting principles.”
25 (Scanlon 1998)
26 (Hume 2000 [1739]: 416)
mental house-keeping, so Adams and many others see no alternative but to regard reasons as real normative relations that are not explainable in terms of rationality.

Suppose we accept that rationality conceived formally cannot be the unifying normative notion. Is there another way to give ultimate normative priority to rationality? One possibility is to expand the thin idea of rationality to include substantive aspects as well as formal ones – in addition to logical and instrumental principles, perhaps rationality includes requirements about the content of our mental states along with various other abilities and dispositions.

There is a long history, running through Plato, Aristotile, Leibniz, and Kant, of regarding reason or rationality as something more than mere consistency and coherence of mental states. One strand of this rationalist tradition, prominent in Plato, Leibniz, and Ross, includes within rationality the capacity for rational insight into an external moral order along with a rational disposition to act accordingly. Contemporary philosophers, including Adams, tend to reject this way of thinking, which was in some ways driven by metaphysical speculations rather than ordinary moral experience.

Suppose instead that we employ Adams’ methodology and begin with our commonsense idea of what it is to be a rational person and the ways we regularly talk about such people. We may find that there are other substantive abilities and motivations, which do not involve rational insight into a world of Forms, that may be more plausibly included in a thick conception of rationality.

Adams’ began his metaethical inquiry into ethical naturalism by examining our rich, everyday notions of ‘ought’ and ‘desire’, working to draw out their underlying presuppositions, which he saw as reflecting the nature of reality itself. Suppose we do the same with our shared idea of ‘rationality.’ In doing so, we may uncover yet another basic normative feature of the
world; and if the set of rational capacities and dispositions that are part of our common notion of rationality turn out to be substantive and authoritative enough then we may also reveal a metaphysical dependency in which reasons are constituted by rationality rather than basic and unexplained normative relations of the sort Adams thought they were. The resulting extension to Adams’ moral theory could achieve his unfulfilled aim of unifying reasons while also retaining other non-natural aspects of his view that he thought were necessary to capture commonsense morality.

Our everyday idea of rationality is very complicated and difficult to explain, but we can at least start easily enough in ordinary language, where the term ‘rational’ can encompass both rationality in the formal sense of being logical or acting for one’s own good and also reasonableness in the sense of being sane, judicious, fair-minded and sensible. We say, for example, that driving a hard bargain can be quite rational, because it is in one’s interest, though it is sometimes unreasonable, because it is unfair to take advantage of someone’s inferior bargaining position.27 A reasonable person is willing to listen to reasons offered by others as such and to reciprocate with them when they are willing to do the same whereas a purely rational person is only ready to do these things if this promotes his interests. A further difference is that we treat reasonableness is a moral notion that we commonly regard as a virtue and associate with moral sensibility while rationality, in the economists’ sense of being logical and effectively furthering one’s own good, is not regarded as a moral idea at all.

Like many others, Adams may have been too quick to assume that the formal idea of rationality that philosophers, economists and rational choice theorists tend to use is the whole of rationality, whereas a key virtue of his methodology is to be cautious about over-simplifying ordinary notions. Our common and substantive idea of rationality does not involve having

27 (Rawls 1999b)
rational insight into an external moral order, but it does include requirements, capacities and dispositions beyond having consistent and coherent mental states. Nor is rationality in this ordinary sense just altruism; instead it involves having one’s own ends, loyalties and commitments, but also possessing a willingness to reciprocate with others by sacrificing one’s interests on the basis of principles that are justifiable to everyone who is willing to do the same. Aristotle, Kant and Rawls were arguably working from this more substantive idea of rationality, but we need not accept their particular conceptions of it to continue examining our common notion and its relationship to particular reasons.

The second amendment to logical naturalism is to replace human nature with substantive rational nature, which includes formal rationality along with reasonableness, and treat it as the unifying normative notion that grounds moral reasons.

5. **Constructive rationalism rather than logical naturalism**

Taken together, the two amendments I proposed on behalf of logical naturalism suggest a constructivist normative theory in which reasonable and rational agents, who have substantive commitments, attitudes and dispositions in virtue of their nature as such, exercise their powers of reason to settle on basic principles and values that in turn pick out which facts are reasons for what. This is only a modest sketch of how one might go about trying to unify, justify and explain the amazing variety of reasons of everyday life without having to admit that a great many of them as basic and ungrounded. This way of proceeding fits with Adams’ methodology, which is to paint with broad strokes initially, check to determine the plausibility of filling in more details, and ultimately compare entire theories holistically rather than piece by piece. We may even find that at a certain stage of development our theories can be combined in ways that are advantageous to both.
If we return to Adams’ two main challenges to logical naturalism, we find that *constructive rationalism* can begin to accommodate both of them. These revisions may require us to give up on naturalism of some kinds, but that may be a conclusion Adams would be willing to accept.

First, Adams worried that logical naturalism cannot generate all of the reasons that are evidently correct in commonsense. I have suggested some reasons for thinking that a constructivist model of justification coupled with our substantive idea of rationality stands a better chance at doing so than logical naturalism. I have tried to show that by taking a few modest steps, those who are concerned to unify and explain the reasons of everyday life can avoid some of the most apparent obstacles to doing so. But whether in the end constructive rationalism can capture ordinary ideas about morality and value will depend on the details of the view, on the nature of reasonableness, the type of procedure employed, the motivations of the parties doing the constructing and much else. There are a variety of ways these might be filled in, but for purposes of illustration here is a sketch of how one kind of constructive rationalism might proceed:

We might say that rational and reasonable agents, just in virtue of their nature as such and not taking account of their other characteristics as human beings, have fundamental *self-regarding* rational interests in preserving, protecting, exercising and developing their powers of reason – it is part of being a rational agent in the fullest sense that one cares about one’s rational nature. Rational and reasonable agents are not just concerned about themselves, however, they are also willing to reciprocate with other rational agents by acting only on principles that are justifiable to them. At this abstract level, what determines whether a principle is justifiable to a fully rational and reasonable agent is her own fundamental rational interests. If we imagine
agents of this sort deliberating about which moral principles they all could agree to, we can suppose, for example, that each of them is extremely reluctant to sacrifice her self-respect or her continued existence because of her rational interests in protecting these aspects of herself. Each agent is also committed to finding principles that are acceptable to everyone. So any proposed principle that permitted agents to humiliate one another or kill innocent people would almost certainly be rejected by those who stand to lose – such principles are incompatible with the self-regarding rational concerns they each have. We can imagine that fully rational and reasonable people, who are only moved by their nature as such, would therefore agree on strong presumptions against certain forms of disrespect and killing as a way of protecting their own interests while giving the same protections to others. We could even proceed to give further content to the most basic and general other-regarding principles of rationality that would be settled on at this abstract level. We can imagine what principles would be selected by embodied reasonable and rational human beings who are living in our world rather than just rational and reasonable agents as such – it will be relevant at this stage, for example, that rational human beings have basic material needs that must be satisfied in order for them to persist and develop their rational capacities. By taking account of general facts about human nature and society, there may even be new duties that would be chosen as well – for instance, perhaps rational human beings necessarily pursue their own happiness, but in our world we need the help of others to do so. Because each one of us therefore has a rational interest in securing aid from other people, rational human beings would settle on a limited duty of beneficence to help one another sometimes and to some extent.
This is just a sketch of how constructive rationalism might be developed into a full theory of reasons, but it demonstrates some of the resources that are available for possibly doing so without over-simplifying commonsense morality.

The second objection to logical naturalism was to explain the authority of human nature, which means constructive rationalism will have to explain the authority of substantive rationality – why is rationality of that sort a source of normativity that can justify the reasons of everyday life through a procedure of construction?

It is notoriously difficult to explain why basic moral notions are authoritative. Indeed the same worry, it may seem, applies to Adams’ view as well – why do the metaphysical normative relations he describes have authority over us, why do they give us reasons to do anything? In the final chapter of Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View, Adams approaches this issue by speculating about whether his theory of reasons and value might be extended into a unified explanation of the entire world as a teleological system designed by God. Causation, he suggests, might be interpreted teleologically rather than mechanistically so that changes in nature are explained by what ought to be. Although he began with the question of how to fit value into a naturalistic view of the world, Adams came to think that “value-requiredness is the force of nature [and] causality is to be conceived in terms of it” (ENMW 207). Reasons are authoritative, according to Adams, in virtue of their role in God’s divine plan.

6. Conclusion

There may be more secular and metaphysically parsimonious ways of developing constructive rationalism that will explain the authority of rationality in different ways.28 If we accept Adams’ non-naturalist ethical theory, however, a version of constructive rationalism may

---

28 Kant arguably gave up on his ambition to argue from the notion of freedom to the idea of substantive rationality and instead concluded that rational agents implicitly recognize the authority of reason in common moral experience – this he called the Fact of Reason (Kant 2007: [1788]: 5:151-2; 155-6).
provide a welcome extension to his view by incorporating a unifying structure to commonsense morality while also strengthening his claims about the authority of reasons.

Suppose we follow St. Thomas Aquinas and think of God as supremely rational and supremely reasonable. God not only thinks logically and necessarily wills in accordance with the principles of instrumental rationality, but He is also supremely fair, just, wise and sensible. As the creator and sustainer of life, God has legitimate authority over us, which he exercises by addressing laws to us that are dictates of the divine reason. These laws are accessible by all reasonable and rational human beings, not by rational insight but by exercising our God-given capacities of reason, which allow us to understand and do what reason requires. In willing these standards, however, God is not subject to external constraints, but only to his own nature as supremely rational and reasonable.

Suppose further that, besides endorsing some general moral principles and values, God leaves more specific requirements, values and reasons to the choices of reasonable and rational persons who construct them by exercising their powers of reason well. God, we might say, exemplifies a substantive notion of rationality, but He allows rational and reasonable human beings to construct for themselves some of the more specific aspects of their moral lives, much as Locke suggested in the context of political theory. On this way of combining constructive rationalism with Adams’ own view, when a set of facts “prescriptively requires” a way the world ought to be, there is an explanation for why this is so, which appeals to rational and reasonable agents constructing moral principles that are part of God’s nature and also part of our own.

Some will doubt such metaphysical assumptions about a world that God directs through the normative relations he creates or the principles of His divine reason. But perhaps Adams’

---

29 (Aquinas 1964)
30 This is one way of understanding the political theory of John Locke (1988: [1689])
speculations about teleology serve another purpose, which is to emphasize how good and virtuous people should see the world, as progressing towards lasting peace, enlightenment, and moral perfection, whether or not we are moving very quickly in that direction. While it is far too easy to become socially alienated and cynical by the rampant injustice and vice we often observe, to be led towards selfishness and individualism by our materialistic and competitive culture, to tend towards depression and dejection by the dwindling status of the arts and humanities, and to become skeptical about meaning and value by the pervasive worship of science, Adams reminds us that good and virtuous people find a way to resist these temptations, they hold out hope for a better future, remain socially engaged and have faith that their efforts are not doomed to failure, and see human history as steadily improving toward a happy, just, peaceful and ethical commonwealth. Whether or not the world is actually structured in this way, having these laudable attitudes may be part of being a rational and reasonable person. If they are then Adams exemplified that aspect of rationality to a remarkable degree.

Works cited


---

31 The idea of reasonable hope and faith is discussed by Kant (1998); Rousseau (1997 [1762]); Rawls (2001).
32 These are some of the concerns Adams raises in *Ethical Naturalism and the Modern World-View*, in his subsequent book *Philosophy and the Modern Mind: A Philosophical Critique of Modern Western Civilization* (1975) and in various articles including “The humanities and their role in modern life” (1979).


