Introduction

Neil Sinclair

The naturalistic fallacy has been variously understood as the claim that:

(i) Moral concepts can be defined or analyzed in terms of non-moral, natural, or metaphysical concepts.
(ii) Moral terms are synonymous with non-moral, natural, or metaphysical terms.
(iii) Moral properties are identical with non-moral, natural, metaphysical, or complex properties.
(iv) Substantial moral conclusions (or "oughts") can be derived from wholly non-moral premises (or "is-es").

Most commonly those who use the phrase "naturalistic fallacy" use it to attribute to their opponents one of these views, and to make the accusation that such a view is "fallacious;" i.e., false. (i) and (ii) are *semantic forms* of the alleged fallacy, (iii) gives various *ontological* forms, and (iv) an *inferential* form. They are distinct because there is a distinction between elements of thoughts (concepts), elements of sentences (terms), elements of the world (properties), and inferential moves (derivations). Sometimes the fallacy is formulated in terms of a single moral notion (such as goodness), other times it is taken to extend to all moral (or evaluative or normative) notions. G. E. Moore – who coined the phrase – formulated his arguments in terms of goodness, but took them to apply to all moral notions, since (he held) all other moral notions can be defined in terms of goodness.

That the naturalistic fallacy can be multiply interpreted is perhaps part of the reason why proudly proclaiming avoidance of it is such an enduring trope of ethics. But it must also be because to reject the fallacy in any form is to give voice to a compelling thought: *that there is something special about ethics.* Those who commit the fallacy are accused of denying this special status, of conflating the moral (special) with the non-moral (not-so-special), of failing to recognize the autonomy or practicality of ethics, or of trying to leap the

chasm between facts and values. To assert that the naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy has therefore become a hallmark of the career-conscious professional ethicist, eager to show that her subject cannot be assimilated to natural science, theology, or anything else.

Precisely what makes ethics special is of course controversial, and different ways of conceiving this specialness correlate to different ways of avoiding the alleged fallacy. Non-naturalists – such as Moore – find the distinctive nature of ethics to reside in the fact that it cognizes a *sui generis* realm of simple (i.e., partless) non-natural properties. They are thus primarily concerned to reject ontological forms of the fallacy. Emotivists, prescriptivists, and other non-cognitivists find the distinctive nature of ethics to reside in its practicality, since (they hold) ethical judgments do not cognize any realm of properties at all; rather, they are persuasive expressions of emotion or disguised prescriptions. Such views sidestep entirely ontological forms of the fallacy (since there are no moral properties to misidentify) and conspicuously reject its semantic forms: moral concepts are irreducible because they play a distinctive practical, action-guiding role. A middle ground is provided by synthetic naturalism. Like all ethical naturalists, synthetic naturalists hold that moral properties are a type of natural property, that is, they embrace an ontological form of the fallacy. But they maintain the specialness of ethics by siding with both non-cognitivists and non-naturalists in rejecting its semantic forms. On this view, moral concepts cannot be analyzed in non-moral terms, but they nevertheless refer to natural properties, providing a distinct mode of presentation of such properties.

All of these views reject at least one version of the naturalistic fallacy. Other options are less dismissive. Analytic naturalists are naturalists who accept that moral concepts *can* be analyzed into non-moral concepts: they thus embrace both semantic and ontological forms of the fallacy. And many evolutionary ethicists claim not only that human moral practice can be adequately understood from an evolutionary perspective, but that doing so allows us to discern appropriate rules for human conduct. They thus embrace the inferential form of the fallacy. For such views, the task is to explain why their opponents are wrong to think that these forms of the fallacy are in fact fallacious (i.e., false) and to explain (or explain away) the sense that ethics is special.

The naturalistic fallacy burst onto the philosophical scene in a haze of dismissive rhetoric and youthful exuberance. G. E. Moore was just 30 when his first book – *Principia Ethica* – was published in 1903. In it, Moore accuses almost all previous ethical writers of committing the fallacy. These include the famous evolutionary ethicist Herbert Spencer, about whom Moore writes:

> It is, of course, quite possible that his treatment of Ethics contains many interesting and instructive remarks ... But the above discussion should have made it plain that, if what we want from an ethical philosopher is a scientific and systematic Ethics, not merely an Ethics 'based on science'; if what we want from an ethical philosopher is a clear discussion of the fundamental principles of Ethics, and a statement of the ultimate reasons why one way of acting should be considered better than another – then Mr Spencer's 'Data of Ethics' is immeasurably far from satisfying these demands. (§33)[1]

Later, Moore remarks of British Idealist T. H. Green that his "*Prolegomena to Ethics* is quite as far as Mr Spencer's *Data of Ethics*, from making the smallest contribution to the solution of ethical problems" (§84). Aristotle's ethics is accused of "gross absurdity" (§106). And J. S. Mill is guilty of making "as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire" (§40). Henry Sidgwick alone is credited with avoiding the fallacy (§14). But Moore was not an unreflective egotist, and later turned his critical ire on his earlier self, describing *Principia* as "full of mistakes and confusions" (Moore 1993: 2). He hoped to rectify at least some of these confusions in a preface to a never-completed second edition, but this too went unfinished, and was only published posthumously in 1993. It is partly these confusions, and unfinished clarifications, that have led to the proliferation of interpretations of the fallacy. As Richard Joyce notes (Joyce 2006: 152–153), it may be too late to reclaim any single interpretation as *the* naturalistic fallacy. Understanding the fallacy in the contemporary context requires sensitivity to this diversity, rather than eradication of it.

Principia Ethica contains two innovations essential to understanding the fallacy. The first is a division between two branches of ethics – what is nowadays referred to as the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. In the preface Moore begins:

> It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to one very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer. (Moore 1993: 33)

---

[1] All chapters in this volume refer to *Principia* using the 1993 edition and Moore's section numbers. For the prefaces, page references are to Moore 1993.

He goes on to distinguish two types of ethical question. (And since Moore took "good" to be the fundamental ethical notion, these turn out to be two types of question about good.) First, that concerning which kinds of things are good (§3). Second, concerning definition: How is "good" to be defined? (§5). Moore took this last to be "the most fundamental question in all Ethics" and his posing of it marks the beginning of that distinct discipline concerned with the ultimate foundations or meanings of ethics, rather than the content of its edicts. Moore's answer, of course, was that "good" cannot be defined – and that to think it can is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. In this way Moore not only began the conversation that is nowadays called "metaethics," but also took his exposure of the naturalistic fallacy to be its first and last word.

The second innovation is Moore's argument for thinking that the naturalistic fallacy *is* a fallacy, the so-called "open question argument." Roughly, it is this (§13). If "good" *could* be defined or analyzed in terms of another property, call it N, then the question of whether a particular thing that was N is also good would be without "significance" – or closed. That is, it would be immediately answerable by anyone who understands the terms "good" and "N." But this question is not closed – it is significant – and moreover this applies to any proposed definition. It follows that "good" cannot be defined or analyzed in other terms – it is its own thing. Moore took this argument to support the ontological thesis that goodness is a *sui generis*, non-natural, property. Others take it to support only the semantic thesis that moral concepts such as **good** are irreducible. Non-cognitivists, for example, take the relevant questions to be open because moral concepts are *practical* in a way that other types of concept are not. Some non-Moorean non-naturalists concur that practicality is part of the explanation for why the relevant questions are open, but take this to suggest the existence of *sui generis* moral properties. Synthetic naturalists accept semantic irreducibility, but couple it with the claim that, as a matter of non-conceptual fact, moral properties are natural properties. All these views therefore respect the spirit of the open question argument. Other positions – such as modern versions of analytic naturalism and certain types of evolutionary ethics – are not so respectful, attacking (among other things) the narrowly introspective notion of analysis that Moore's argument seemed to assume.

The chapters that follow explore these and other themes relating to understanding the naturalistic fallacy. Collectively they set out the textual basis, intellectual background, multiple interpretations, historical influence, and continuing relevance of the naturalistic fallacy.

In the first chapter, I begin at the beginning by locating the fallacy within the context of the other claims Moore defends in *Principia Ethica*. I explore the notions of "definition" and "analysis" as Moore understood them and set out in detail the multiple interpretations of the fallacy and open question argument. I then take a broad view of the influence of the fallacy on the century of metaethics that came after Moore, covering topics such as the non-cognitivist appropriation of the open question argument, the mid-century Humean turn in which the inferential form of the fallacy was dominant, and the fallacy's role – at the end of the century – in framing new forms of naturalism. Finally, I argue that these multiple strands of influence demonstrate that, to a large extent, contemporary ethics – and metaethics in particular – can be understood through the framing lens of the naturalistic fallacy.

The following chapter – by Fred Feldman – is a close study of the text that launched a thousand interpretations: *Principia Ethica*. Helpfully explicating some stylistic oddities that cloud interpretation (such as Moore's loose way with the use/mention distinction), Feldman argues that there is a consistent – ontological – interpretation of the fallacy in Moore. Feldman also discusses what Moore might mean by "natural property" and argues against interpreting Moore himself as offering an inferential (Humean) form of the fallacy.

The next three chapters take us back before the beginning, considering Moore's writings pre-*Principia,* his influences, and his antecedents. Consuelo Preti argues that the charge of naturalistic fallacy has roots in Moore's anti-psychologistic view of ethical judgment, which takes such judgments to be directed at mind-independent objects. It is the threat of psychologism that, Preti argues, Moore seeks to head off by taking those objects to be non-natural. Thus: "To thwart *any* hint of psychologism from creeping into ethical concepts . . . is at the heart of what Moore had in mind when deploying the naturalistic fallacy."

Charles Pigden's chapter considers the connections between Moore's charge of fallacy, the Humean inferential thesis that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," and the fact/value dichotomy. Pigden distinguishes two interpretations of Hume (Logical Autonomy and Semantic Autonomy) and considers Moore's influence (or lack of it) in popularizing the latter. He goes on to trace the connections between the Humean thesis and non-cognitivism, highlighting (as does van Roojen's chapter) the Moorean themes in twentieth century arguments for non-cognitivism.

Michael Ruse's chapter also begins before *Principia*, with the brand of evolutionary ethics Moore accused of committing the naturalistic fallacy. Ruse traces Moore's antipathy to such views to Sidgwick. Post-*Principia*,

Ruse finds that the perceived prospects for evolutionary ethics correlate with the perceived importance of the fallacy. When, in the 1960s, the orthodoxy was that to commit the (inferential form of the) fallacy was a travesty, evolutionary ethics was not given a chance. The re-emergence of a plausible evolutionary ethics since then has coincided with new understandings of the fallacy as well as new ways of getting around it.

The next two chapters focus on "practical" versions of the open question argument and demonstrate how Moore's views feed the flames of contemporary debate. Mark van Roojen's chapter examines the way in which non-cognitivists appropriated the open question argument and semantic forms of the naturalistic fallacy. The key move was to postulate an emotive or expressive type of meaning that, non-cognitivists claimed, explained the openness of Moore's questions. But by further specifying this type of practical meaning (e.g., by locating it in the commending force of moral judgments, as Hare did) non-cognitivists also took the open question argument to refute Moore's own non-naturalism, for they held that no descriptive predication could have the practical import of moral terms. In a cruel twist, van Roojen discusses the possibility of open question–style arguments against non-cognitivism, based on the openness of questions such as: "Susan believes that murder is wrong, but does she disapprove of it?"

William FitzPatrick's chapter seeks to reinvigorate the open question argument on behalf of non-reductive realism. He begins by examining existing critiques and responds by reconstructing the argument. This reconstruction takes the argument to support the claim that moral properties cannot be ontologically reduced to (other) natural or metaphysical properties (though whether they are natural is left open). But whereas Moore's original argument (if it works) takes us to this conclusion by telling us about the meanings of moral terms, FitzPatrick's version takes us to non-reductive realism by revealing details of what it is to be a rational deliberating agent. FitzPatrick's principal targets are reductive naturalists who think that moral properties can be identified with natural properties. According to FitzPatrick, such views still commit the naturalistic fallacy, because they misunderstand the normative (deliberation-settling) nature of the moral properties that agents attribute in evaluation.

The chapters by Susana Nuccetelli and Connie Rosati assess the prospects, in the face of Moore's charge of fallacy, for the types of reductive ethical naturalism developed in the 1970s–1990s. Such views identify moral properties with natural properties, either via *a priori* analysis (analytic naturalism) or *a posteriori* investigation (synthetic naturalism). The contemporary

orthodoxy is that the naturalistic fallacy has a higher rate of infection among analytic naturalists than synthetic naturalists. Nuccetelli assesses whether this is so, by considering whether the open question argument still bites against Frank Jackson's form of analytic naturalism. Her conclusion is that it does, when construed as an abductive argument. She further suggests that this version of the argument (unlike, perhaps, Moore's) does not presuppose a conception of analysis where for an analysis to be correct, it must be transparent.

Rosati takes a slightly broader perspective. She identifies Moore's target claim as the view that goodness supervenes on natural properties, but is not reducible to any natural property of a certain class. This leaves open the possibility of reductive naturalism, but only so long as it captures the distinctive *normativity* of moral properties. Like FitzPatrick, Rosati takes this point about normativity to be the key insight of Moore's charge of naturalistic fallacy. She argues (contra FitzPatrick) that versions of naturalism (such as those of Sharon Street and Peter Railton) that identify moral properties with natural properties *that are agency-involving* at least hold out the prospect of capturing this normativity. She ends by noting that capturing this normativity seems to be a problem for all metaethical theories, thus demonstrating how the fallacy continues to act as a structuring force on contemporary metaethics.

Christian Miller's chapter pursues structurally similar issues, transposed to the field of theological ethics. These views take God's nature and actions to ground moral properties. They were the sorts of views in Moore's sights when he criticized "metaphysical ethics" in chapter IV of *Principia*. Miller explains how modern theological views often follow synthetic naturalism in taking moral properties to be identical with other properties (in this case, theological properties) while denying that moral terms can be analyzed in other terms. They thus avoid the semantic form of the fallacy while denying that the ontological form *is* a fallacy. Miller discusses Robert Adams' view that theological ethics can help preserve a "critical stance," that is, a stance from where we can always challenge the *value* of any action or object – and that this is the key insight of Moore's open question argument. There are interesting connections here with the various versions of the "practical" open question argument discussed by van Roojen, FitzPatrick, and Rosati.

Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons' chapter begins by examining Moore's methodology. He often suggested that the claim that goodness is a *sui generis* non-natural property can be established by introspecting the distinctiveness of good from other ideas (e.g., §13). Thus Moore seemed to take the debate between non-naturalism and opposing views to be phenomenological. Non-

naturalist realists since Moore extended this line of argument, taking their view to be the best explanation of moral phenomenology. Horgan and Timmons resist this line of argument, urging that the "realist-seeming" aspects of moral deliberation can in fact be accommodated on a non-cognitive basis. They coin "the non-naturalistic fallacy" as the fallacy of supposing that our moral phenomenology has realist ontological purport – a fallacy of which Moore was arguably guilty.

In his chapter, the final of the volume, Adam Carter steps outside metaethics to consider the potential application of Moore's charge of fallacy to a distinct area of normativity, viz. epistemology. Carter suggests that positions that self-describe as "naturalist" in epistemology are not directly analogous to the ethical naturalist positions Moore targeted. Nevertheless, a version of the naturalistic fallacy may bite – albeit in an unexpected place. Carter suggests that "norm-localist" versions of epistemic relativism face the problem of moving from their interim conclusion that all epistemic principles are equally unjustified to their final conclusion that all epistemic principles are equally justified. One way of doing so would be to infer claims about which principles are justified on the basis of claims about which principles are followed. But this would seem to commit an inferential form of the naturalistic fallacy: for we would be deriving an epistemic "ought" from a customary "is." In this way, Carter demonstrates that the structuring power of the naturalistic fallacy extends beyond ethics.