

The Naturalistic Fallacy

At the turn of the twentieth century, G. E. Moore contemptuously dismissed most previous “ethical systems” for committing the “naturalistic fallacy.” This fallacy – which has been variously understood, but has almost always been seen as something to avoid – was perhaps the greatest structuring force on subsequent ethical theorizing. To a large extent, to understand the fallacy is to understand contemporary ethics. This volume aims to provide that understanding. Its thematic chapters – written by a range of distinguished contributors – introduce the history, text, and philosophy behind Moore’s charge of fallacy and its supporting “open question” argument. They detail how the fallacy influenced multiple traditions in ethics (including evolutionary, religious, and naturalistic approaches), its connections to supposed dichotomies between “is”/“ought” and facts/values, and its continuing relevance to our understanding of normativity. Together the chapters provide a historical and opinionated introduction to contemporary ethics that will be essential for students, teachers, and researchers.

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Preface

Philosophy was invented in 1995. At least for me. This was the year I acquired my first philosophy book: a copy of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, the revised edition including the preface to the second edition, edited by Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge University Press, 1993). This was an odd choice, since *Principia* was not on the syllabus for any of my classes. But from the little philosophy I had read, I received the distinct impression that for many purposes ethics began with Moore and I was anxious to get to the source. This impression was not entirely inaccurate: at least one branch of ethical theory – metaethics – can rightly claim its origins in *Principia*.

I do not remember making it much past the first chapter of *Principia* in 1995. Moore's style is methodical and sometimes repetitive, and my enthusiasm waned. But it is this chapter that contains most of the arguments that would nowadays be characterized as metaethical – including the arguments for the conclusion that most of the ethicists who came before Moore had committed “the naturalistic fallacy.” This fallacy – which has been variously understood, but almost always as something to avoid – was perhaps the greatest structuring force on metaethics after Moore. To a large extent, to understand the fallacy is to understand contemporary metaethics. The present volume aims to provide that understanding.

Together the chapters collected here address almost any question the budding researcher might have about the naturalistic fallacy. They consider its influence, influences, textual basis, intellectual foundations, and continued relevance to our understanding of normativity (that is, discourse that is “fraught with ought”). Together the chapters show that the naturalistic fallacy is much more than an intellectual artifact. It is a persistent guiding force on debates about the nature of ethics and other types of normativity.

When I came to study ethics at university, I began to encounter names whose work illuminated answers to the questions that Moore had so clearly asked. I feel immensely fortunate that I can now put faces to many of these names, and several of them have contributed chapters here. I am extremely grateful to all of the contributors – without their efforts the much easier task of collating the volume would not have been possible. I hope that by collecting these chapters together both they and Moore's texts will receive the continuing attention they deserve.

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In preparing this volume, I was immensely helped by Hilary Gaskin, Sophie Taylor, and Marianne Nield at Cambridge University Press. Thanks also to Hallvard Lillehammer, Jon Robson, Andy Fisher, and Zach Hoskins. Special thanks to Peter Gibson, who started it all back in 1995.