

## THE ‘NATURALISTIC FALLACY’: AN ANALYSIS

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“Principia Ethica” (1903) of G. E. Moore sets a land mark in the discourse of the history of moral philosophy. More than a century passed, but the importance of this book remain as same as it was before. This is perhaps because Moore, in this book, commenced a new approach and at the same times a new dimension. Being a distinguished analytic philosopher his new approach was naturally analytical i.e. analysis of the ethical terms is fundamental and his new direction was consisted on the notion that ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of good. In his own words:

I am using it to cover an enquiry for which, at all events, there is no other word: the general enquiry into what is good.<sup>1</sup>

Two chief objectives of “Principia Ethica” were—O- I: rejection of Ethical Naturalism of Bentham and Mill on the basis of two arguments one of which is known as the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ and the other is called as ‘Open Question Argument’. O-II: establishment of a new theory which is named as ‘Ethical Intuitionism’ as a basis of Moral Value Judgments.

In this paper I have tried to fulfil—firstly, to show the source of the notion of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ has already been underlying in Humean ethics in section—I; secondly, a resume on Moore’s analysis of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ in section—II;

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, 1922, P-6

thirdly, an account of some new formations of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ by Fred Feldman in section—III and lastly, some criticism against the notion of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ in section—IV.

### **Section—I**

It has been mentioned earlier that Moore has rejected Ethical Naturalism on the basis of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’, but the root of this fallacy lies in the background of Humean Ethics; because David Hume was the first person who clearly demonstrated the distinction between fact and value. The fact and value dichotomy, introduced by Hume has been recorded as the central issue of 20<sup>th</sup> century ethics. Hume draws our attention to the following points:

- Moral Value Judgments are neither subject to cognition nor subject to factual justification.
- The methods to be followed for justification of Moral Value Judgment are perfectly different from the factual method followed in historical or scientific justification.
- Values are not types of facts like natural objects or things; and hence, value properties are not natural properties.
- Consequently, Moral Value Judgments cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed in the same manner in which the factual judgments are confirmed or disconfirmed.
- Moreover, Moral Value Judgments are neither translatable into factual judgments, nor derivable from factual premises.
- And hence, there is an unbridgeable gap between *fact and value*.

Being empiricist it is not difficult for Hume to trace the distinction between fact and value from his commitment to empiricism. He has to accept that knowledge comes through experience; and experience is the basis on which we should arrange the

ontology. The slogan of Hume’s empiricism is “No impression, no idea”—I can have the idea of ‘x’, if and only if I have an impression of a sensation of ‘x’. Hume asserts the existence of all matters of fact on the ground that we have an impression of the same. What we call moral value is something which cannot be sensed. In other words, we cannot expect to have an impression of moral value. The result is that moral value or goodness falls outside the world of fact. It is not the case that Hume would banish all values either from our discourse or from our mind.

Moral Value Judgments are made, although these are not included in the sensible world of fact. In Hume’s opinion value is a projection of sentiment and it is not a fact as we ordinarily understand it. Moral Value Judgments can never be derived from factual judgments. Therefore, he says,

There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgement of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species.<sup>2</sup>

Hume explains the distinction between fact and value by giving emphasis on the contrast between a judgment of a fact and a judgment of value. He has also in the opinion that factual judgments cannot be the basis of moral value judgments, because moral value judgments do not fall within the sphere of experience or within the sphere of understanding.

It is customary to point out that a factual judgment is otherwise known as ‘is’ judgment. A judgment of value, on the other hand, is not a factual judgment. It is called as an

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<sup>2</sup> Hume, David: *An Enquiry Concerning The Principles of Morals*, [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org), downloaded at 11:00 a.m. on 12.01.215, P-03

‘ought’ judgment. Hume’s opinion is that these two judgments are based on two different kinds of relation which entails the impossibility of getting a value conclusion from the factual premise or premises. The transition from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ or from ‘fact’ to ‘value’ or from ‘description’ to ‘prescription’ are illegitimate.

The last line of the above paragraph is very important, because the terms ‘is’ or ‘fact’ or ‘description’ does not belong to the same category where the terms ‘ought’ or ‘value’ or ‘prescription’ belongs. For Hume, if someone tries to pass from one category to another category it will be treated as illegitimate. What is illegitimate from the point of view of Hume can be regarded as the source of committing the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’.

## Section—II

To get a vivid picture of the claim that the source of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ lies in Humean ethics, let us resume Moore’s notion of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’. In *Principia Ethica*, Moore represents a different view regarding the basis of Moral Value Judgments. He agrees with Ethical Naturalistic philosophers on the point that moral values like *goodness* are not beyond cognition, but opposes their notion that such moral values are definable in terms of natural property. Moore thinks that those Ethical Naturalistic philosophers, who have treated moral values like *goodness* as definable ones in terms of natural property have committed the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’.

Having believed that any property other than ‘goodness’ is different from ‘goodness’, Moore does not allow any moral property to be identified with a natural property. On the basis of this assumption, factual properties are categorically differentiated from the moral value properties and thus, for Moore, these two can never be identified.

The principal theses of *Principia Ethica* are that the primary business of ethics is to enquire into the extensions of the properties ‘good’ and ‘bad’; that ‘good’ is a simple unanalyzable non-natural quality; that philosophers who have identified good with pleasure, or progress in evolution, or any other natural property, have committed what Moore calls the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’; that a similar fallacy has been committed by the philosophers who have identified

good with some metaphysical entity, or in general attempted to derive ethics from metaphysics.....<sup>3</sup>

Moore at first attacks the naturalistic method of defining a value predicate such as *good*. A definition, for Moore, is an analysis of that, which a word stands for, and he has an almost chemical conception of analysis; to analyse something is to break it down in to its component parts. After breaking it into its component parts, if we adjoin these parts proportionately, then it is possible to reverse into definiendum. From this point of view, if we try to give the definition of *good* we have to analyse it, that is to say, we have to break it down into its component parts. But it is impossible to analyse *good*. Moore has said,

What, then, is good? How is good to be defined? Now, it may be thought that this is a verbal question. A definition does indeed often mean the expressing of one word's meaning in other words. But this is not the sort of definition I am asking for. Such a definition can never be of ultimate importance in any study except lexicography. If I wanted that kind of definition I should have to consider in the first place how people generally used the word 'good'; but my business is not with its proper usage, as established by custom.<sup>4</sup>

Moore's main contention in the preceding quotation is that the value predicates are not analysable; that is to say, these cannot be broken into factual units without losing their sense. The Ethical Naturalists hold that they can discover the value properties like *good* in the domain of factual properties without losing the real meaning. This, being impossible, forces committing of the 'Naturalistic Fallacy'.

Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are "good". But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining "good"; that those properties, in fact, were simply not

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<sup>3</sup> Ayer, A.J.: *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, P-42

<sup>4</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, 1922, P-6

other, but absolutely are entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’.....<sup>5</sup>

To illustrate this point, it would be very useful, if we consider an example of Moore. The term horse, he says, can be understood through these component properties that make up a horse, such as: legs, head, and heart, liver etc. all arranged in a definite order or proportion. That is, one can define the term horse by identifying and distinguishing the various components constituting that which the term designates. But property good cannot be analysed in this way, because it has no parts: factual or non-factual. But ignoring this fact when the ethical naturalists try to analyze properties like good, commit the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’.

Moore has given another example to clarify this point, that of yellowness. A physicist can think that yellow is always accompanied by a certain vibration of light. But this is nonsensical, because when we assert that something is yellow, we do not mean anything about vibrations. The colour word is the name of a property perceptible to the normal eye, not the name of something measured in physics. Similarly, although, it is impossible to state ‘what is good?’ besides being good, that does not mean *good* is identical with some *good things*, we may notice a correlation between good things and pleasantness. But this correlation would not indicate that good means pleasant. To identify light waves with colour, pleasantness with goodness is equally to commit a fallacy, in Moore’s view; for it betrays a misunderstanding of the meaning of the terms.

Moore says,

When they say that “Pleasure is good.” we cannot believe that they merely mean “pleasure is pleasure” and nothing more than that.....<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, 1922, P-6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P-12

No difficulty need be found in my saying that “pleasure is good” and yet not meaning that “pleasure” is the same thing as “good”, that pleasure means good and good means pleasure.....There is no meaning in saying that pleasure is good, unless good is something different from pleasure....<sup>7</sup>

From the above discussion it is clear that Hume’s empiricism is rather rigid in forcing to place value in a world far beyond the empirical. Moore’s allegation against Ethical Naturalism that it commits the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ is an outcome of the development of Hume’s empiricistic position.

### Section—III

Fred Feldman in a draft paper (2016) named the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’: What It Is, and What It Isn’t’ reconstructs the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ which may be summarized in the following table:

NF	A person commits the Naturalistic Fallacy iff he or she identifies some evaluative property with some naturalistic or metaphysical property.
NF(i/o)	A person commits the Naturalistic Fallacy iff he or she purports to derive an ‘ought’ statement from premises that are all ‘is’ statements.
NF(c):	A person commits the Naturalistic Fallacy iff he or she says that intrinsic goodness is a complex property.

The basis of the above mentioned reconstruction lies in the essential use of three subsequent controversial notions:

The first of these is the concept of the *evaluative property*. Moore took intrinsic goodness to be an evaluative property; similarly for moral obligatoriness and moral rightness; and similarly for beauty. Additionally, in a discussion of Mill’s Proof (cited in passage E above), he seems to be assuming that the property of being desirable is an evaluative property. Some will recognize these as *normative* properties. Others – perhaps those who

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<sup>7</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, 1922, P-6

believe in a “fact/value gap” – will say that these are all properties from the “value” side of the gap.

The second controversial notion is the concept of the *natural property*. Yellowness, being something we desire to desire, being more evolved, etc. are all cited by Moore as natural properties. He took a few stabs at saying what makes it correct to categorize a property as natural, but (as he himself made clear in the Preface) his stabs missed their mark. I will return to this later. At any rate, properties in this group belong on the “fact” side of the fact/value gap.

The third controversial notion is the concept of the *metaphysical property*. These are properties that are somehow associated with “supersensible realities”. Perhaps they are properties such as the property of being approved by God. Moore says (in C above) that whereas we can observe natural objects with our senses, we can at best infer the existence of metaphysical objects. They are “supersensible”.<sup>8</sup>

The first formulation of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ lies on the distinction between evaluative property and naturalistic or metaphysical property. Value properties cannot be treated as naturalistic or metaphysical properties because the mode of understanding a natural or metaphysical property is not same of understanding a value property. Natural or metaphysical property is a matter of description, whereas value property is a matter of prescription.

The second formulation is also a result of the distinction between factual property and value property. The judgment based on factual property is called a factual judgment (‘is’) and the judgment based on value property is called a value judgment (‘ought’). In formal logic the conclusion can be derived from the premise or premises following the logical rules. If both the premise or premises and the conclusion are factual judgments then there is no question of committing the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’, again if both the premise or premises and the conclusion are value judgments then there is no question of committing the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’. The ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ is committed only when someone tries to get a value conclusion from a factual premise or premises vice-versa.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://people.umass.edu/ffeldman/> on August 15, 2016 at 12:00 noon

The third formulation rests on the notion that ‘goodness’ is a simple property. As ‘goodness’ is a simple property it is un-analyzable. If someone tries to analyze it, he must commit the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’. In fact, ‘goodness’ is a matter of intuition.

### **Section—IV**

Although Fred Feldman’s analysis is excellent, it seems that there are some difficulties regarding the new formations of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ which are as follows:

#### **Difficulty-I**

From the formulation mentioned above, it is clear that goodness is neither a physical object nor a concrete event but it is a name of an evaluative property. A property is an attribute which must be attached with a physical object or concrete event. For example: when it is said that ‘The pen is nice.’ niceness is an attribute which is attached with the physical object pen. Here the word nice is used as an adjective. It can also be used as noun when it is said that ‘Niceness is a quality.’ The point is this—the term nice whether it is used as an adjective or as a noun; it has no independence existence without attaching it to a physical object. Similarly in case of morality, when the term good whether it is used as an adjective or a noun it must exist in relation to a concrete event. When it is said that ‘This human action is good.’ a human action which is a concrete event is evaluated as good. Being a concrete event, a human action is a natural phenomenon and it is subject of evaluation. ‘Goodness’ is non-natural (evaluative) property. Here a natural event (a human action) is qualified by another non-natural (evaluative) property and there is no question of any fallacy. But when this property i.e. goodness (evaluative property) is identified by another natural property the question of the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ is raised. It seems to be absurd. If there is no fallacy in the first step that is when a natural event is cognized by another non-natural (evaluative property) then there should not be any scope to raise the question of fallacy in the second step where goodness is identified by another natural property.

Natural Event	Property	Natural Event
To help the poor	Good	Pleasure
No Fallacy		Why fallacy?

## Difficulty-II

NF	A person commits the Naturalistic Fallacy iff he or she identifies some evaluative property with some naturalistic or metaphysical property.
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In the above mentioned New Formulation the term identifies has been used. But the meaning of the term identifies is not clear. The term identifies and the term identical is not same in meaning. To identify a physical object or a concrete event, some properties are needed through which a particular physical object or concrete event is separated from other physical object or concrete event. Similarly in the case of a property, (simple or complex) some distinctive identification marks or signs are needed to distinguish a property (simple or complex) from other property. Two properties can be regarded as identical if and only if these have common identification marks or signs. Again a simple property may be identified through more than one identification marks or signs. Because there is no fixed rules like:

This simple property must be identified through this particular simple identification mark or sign.

So, there is a provision that ‘goodness’ may be identified through one or more than one identification mark such as happiness or pleasure or positive interest or happiness, pleasure, positive interest etc. To identify one property with another there is no need that two properties must be identical. It is just like understanding. But this New Formation shows that the term identify has been used in the same way through which the term identity is used. It seems to be illegitimate.

A person could do that while not committing the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’. (Consider a person who says that intrinsic goodness is identical to moral obligatoriness. This person identifies intrinsic goodness with something that is distinct from itself, but he or she does not commit the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’.)

### Difficulty-III

NF(i/o)	A person commits the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ iff he or she purports to derive an ‘ought’ statement from premises that are all ‘is’ statements.
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The above mentioned New Formulation is simply an expansion of the presupposition of fact-value distinction. This expansion is totally a different issue. In case of understanding a value property with the help of natural property, the question of ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ arises. But in logic it is impossible to show any valid argument through which a Moral Value Judgment can be derived from factual judgments. Logical rules do not permit it unless the fact-value distinction is over ruled. Some contemporary moral theories such as Moral Realism admit the existence of evaluative facts. In that case, there would be no problem regarding the question of committing ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ or the question of ‘How to derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’?’

### Difficulty-IV

NF(c):	A person commits the ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ iff he or she says that intrinsic goodness is a complex property.
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The above new formulation also is not free from question. If it is admitted that intrinsic goodness is a simple property then it is not illegitimate to understand this simple property with the help of more than one distinctive identification marks or signs. This New Formulation admits that intrinsic goodness can be understood through moral obligatoriness. Moral Prudence is also another distinctive identification mark or sign through which intrinsic goodness can be understood. If this is accepted then simplicity of intrinsic goodness would be doubtful. The following table helps us to get the point.

Intrinsic Goodness	Moral Obligatoriness
Intrinsic Goodness	Moral Prudence
Moral Obligatoriness	Moral Prudence

## Difficulty-V

Moore's theory is based on the some presuppositions

P-1	Ethics is a general enquiry into what is good
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Moore in his 'Principia Ethica' has mentioned that the main task of ethics is to find out the meaning of good and in this process he attacks his previous theories of Mill, Bentham, Kant etc.

I intend to use 'Ethics' to cover more than this a usage, for which there is, I think, quite sufficient authority. I am using it to cover an enquiry for which, at all events, there is no other word : the general enquiry into what is good.<sup>9</sup>

Mill and Bentham are trying to provide an action guiding universal rule which is subject to empirical verification for all the human beings. On the other hand, Kant is trying to present an action guiding universal rule which is based on reason. In this purpose they have used the term good. It is found that what is important to Moore is not so important to Mill, Bentham, Kant etc. It is doubt full whether Moore has successfully rejected his previous theories by showing the committing of 'Naturalistic Fallacy' alone. For this reason it is observed that Ethical Naturalism has been revived in some form or other by different moral philosophers.

P-2	Good is a unique, simple, indefinable, unanalyzable
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According to Moore, good is unique, simple, indefinable and unanalyzable. It is known through intuition. Being unique, simple, indefinable and unanalyzable good is beyond the definition and the analysis. As good is a unique property and it is known through intuition, any kind of definition of good is impossible. So, there is no need of introducing the concept of 'Naturalistic Fallacy'. If a property is considered as unique, simple, indefinable, unanalyzable and known through intuition it impossible to express it by using another word. Moore himself says in his book, "Good is good" and that is the end of the matter.'

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<sup>9</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica* , Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1922, P-2

If I am asked ‘What is good?’ my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.<sup>10</sup>

But Fred Feldman himself thought that the notion of intrinsic goodness can be understood through the notion of moral obligatoriness which is a violation of Moore’s own thesis.

(Consider a person who says that intrinsic goodness is identical to moral obligatoriness.)

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<sup>10</sup> Moore, G. E.: *Principia Ethica* , Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922, P-6