Part of an Argument for a Naturalistic Ethics

(Part of the Sunday Session at Rewley House on 23 June 2002)

The leaflet for this Sunday session said:

'Many philosophers have believed that morality is somehow natural, but their attempts to unpack that 'somehow' have usually ended up in the supernatural, for example in religion or mysticism.

'With the arrival of the enlightenment the search for a fully scientific explanation of a natural morality gathered momentum but produced no philosophically convincing result for two main reasons: the lack of a clear idea of how humankind fits into nature and the observation by David Hume that we do not appear to know how logically to get from facts to values, from 'is' to 'ought'. It seems we cannot justify any of our moral judgements with anything like philosophical rigour.

'The publishing in 1859 of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection seemed to many to confirm how humans are a product of entirely natural processes, but the apparently positive implications of this for any naturalistic ethics seemed to be neutralised by the publication in 1903 of Principia Ethica, in which G. E. Moore stated a further, allegedly fundamental, problem: any attempt to define or analyse in empirical terms the meaning of 'good', the most basic idea in morality, is bound to commit the 'naturalistic fallacy' because goodness is a non-natural property and is unanalysable.

'This is still the situation. Attempts to explain morality as part of nature go on, but continue to founder on the seemingly inexorable rocks of the is–ought gap and the naturalistic fallacy.'

This part of the wider argument for a naturalistic ethics was an attempt to show that we can navigate the 'inexorable rocks' fully naturally to reach greater insight into what morality is really about.

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I take ethics to be the attempt to answer the question 'How ought we to live?' in terms of both private (personal) and public (e.g. politics) morality. In my opinion present moral theory, such as it is, does not enable us to justify any of our moral beliefs. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that we teach our children not much in the way of moral theory, but only practice, only our own society's intuitive moral code. What I am seeking is a foundation, an underpinning theory. I am looking for what 'good' means; not what things are good, but why they are perceived as good.

When I began to address the problem twenty-odd years ago, I had already arrived at the conclusion that morality is basically about behaviour and behaviour about survival; that is, I saw morality as fundamentally biological. I became particularly interested in how the naturalistic approach had accelerated during the enlightenment, and I found much to support my tentative beliefs; for example, Spinoza's equating God with Nature, Hutcheson's 'The moral sense is simply a natural tendency to approve certain affections which tend to the public good', and Charles Darwin's 'Any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts…would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man'.

But one fly in the ointment was Hume's pointing out how, in moral discussion, one moment we are talking about what *is* the case and the next about what *ought* to be. This leap from 'is' to 'ought' is usually imperceptible, he says, but it is 'of the last consequence'. Hume did not so much say that we cannot justify the leap, but rather that habitually we don't.

Then in 1903, in his book *Principia Ethica,* G. E. Moore pointed out that in morality there are steps not only that we do not take but that *cannot* be taken. For Moore, ethics is 'the general enquiry into what is good'; also, 'What is this good?' is 'the most fundamental question in all Ethics. Unless this first question be fully understood, and its clear answer clearly recognised, the rest of Ethics is as good as useless from the point of view of systematic knowledge'. Very promising. But then he said, '…good is good, and that is the end of the matter'. Propositions about 'good' are all synthetic, never analytic, which presumably means there can never be an equally simple, single-word tautology for 'good'. Good is an absolutely simple notion, like yellow; it is not complex; it is not composed of any parts and so is unanalysable. Moreover, good is 'non-natural'. Moore did not argue these points much; rather, they were intuitive assertions.

For Moore, not only is good non-natural, but any attempt to define it in natural terms will fail, will commit what he called the 'naturalistic fallacy'. For example, if someone tried to define 'good' as meaning something natural, some X, we could then ask, 'But is X good?', and that question would seem meaningful ('significant' is the word Moore used). That is, intuitively, 'good means X' could never be a tautology; whether or not X is itself good would always remain an open question.

There is a large literature on all of this, especially on the naturalistic fallacy, and Moore admitted later to many 'confusions' in his thinking. Nevertheless, he always maintained the naturalistic fallacy and the non-definability and non-naturalness of 'good'.

R. M. Hare, who died recently, discussed the naturalistic fallacy at length, insisting it would always bite any attempt at a natural morality. If 'good' was defined, it would inevitably always appear in the definition. A mathematical analogy: In any moral equation we cannot isolate 'good'; we cannot solve the equation to end up with 'good' on only one side.

But surely what we want most is not a narrow definition of 'good'. We want to understand it. We want to know what ethics is *about,* how it fits into the world. We want ethics *explained.*

However, in the hundred years since *Principia Ethica,* and certainly in the last fifty years or so, almost all we have had is logical analysis of the language in which morality is expressed, with lateral thinking inhibited by what Moore said cannot be done. Hare's last book, *Sorting Out Ethics,* illustrates this well. At the end of the hundred years we are little further forward.

But are philosophers there only to clarify logically propositions advanced by others? Are they to venture no propositions, no speculations, of their own? Remember, Kant said the message of the enlightenment was 'Aude sapere': Dare to understand. Dare to speculate. Too much logical analysis produces conceptual paralysis; also, seemingly it has to seek nothing short of certainty. But by now we have surely learnt that uncertainty seems to be inherent in the universe and therefore that probability is all we can expect. Logical analysis is useful, even necessary, but it is not sufficient.

Nevertheless, by whatever philosophical route, the basic problem is still how to justify moral judgements, how to get from 'is' to 'ought'. That is:

What *is* the case,

Plus something we intuit as '*value*', (To be 'good' is somehow to be 'of value'.)

Plus some kind of '*force*', some kind of *drive* (→) arising from that value,

Produces '*ought*' (= moral 'obligation')

Where does this value come from? And how does it generate moral force/obligation? Non-natural, analytic philosophy cannot tell us.

So, back to basics. Where we need to start is with what it is to be a human being, to be a participant in what we call 'life', to be part of the organic process.

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At this point on 23 June we went through the example of a naturalistic theory of morality (C-theory) outlined in two issues of *The Philosophical Society Review: 1993 – Weekend on the Virtues, and 1997 – Choosing Between Moral Theories*. The main conclusions of these, relevant to the present subject, were:

(a) In relation to morality the most important conclusion is that one of the main – perhaps the main – characteristic of the organic process is its ability to sustain itself in the face of changing environments. Mechanisms have evolved to help with this, such as replication and natural selection, and these are all means to one thing: the continuing of the process.

(b) This drive to continue matters for morality because every organism is a manifestation of it. It is the motive force underlying every act, every bit of behaviour of every organism.

(c) Every emergent organic property was blindly selected to produce the same, equally-blind effect: to increase the probability that the process would continue.

(d) This seems teleological, but it is not. There is no ultimate telos pulling the organic process from without; there is only proximate push, instinctive self-drive from within.

(e) For morality, then, as for every other bit of organic behaviour, there is only one aim, one answer to 'What is it for? What is the good of it?' and that is 'to increase the probability that the organic process will continue'.

(f) Mere continuing is therefore ultimately all there is. Let us call it 'C' to emphasise that fact, and the drive behind it '→C'. Morality is thus only one of a range of behaviours that have evolved as expressions of →C. Morality is a subset of our general →C behaviour and essentially no different from the rest of it.

(g) The heart of morality is the meaning of 'good' (and, derivatively, bad, right, wrong, just, etc), and what we are doing when we use such language is intuiting a putative meaning for 'good'. 'Good' is the most fundamental of our concepts and deeply intuitive in all of us. When we call something 'good', what we are really saying is that it makes, or is likely to make, a contribution to C. That is, good is always instrumental, and a thing is good only in as much as it is of instrumental utility towards increasing the probability that the organic process will continue. (1)

(h) Good is entirely internal to the organic process; things are good only in as much as they contribute to C; one thing is better or worse, more right or wrong, than another only in as much as it makes a greater or smaller contribution to (or against) C. The organic process itself is neither good nor bad; its existence is just a brute, contingent fact to which the universe appears to be indifferent; we have no evidence that this earthly process plays a part in any larger scheme of things.

(j) In other words, the existence of life on earth matters not one iota except to those things that are part of it. Good and bad have no meaning when applied to the process itself or to anything outside it. Whether or not the process continues does not matter at all: it, and therefore C and →C, have no intrinsic, objective value.

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Coming back to the main argument, one frequent objection to any naturalistic theory of morality concerns instrumental v. intrinsic values. If natural morality is a matter of some X factor (e.g. →C), and if this X is instrumental in terms of something like biological utility, where does that instrumentality cease? What is the ultimate source of those values? The general opinion of logicians seems to be that instrumental value has to end somewhere; something ultimately has to have intrinsic value, i.e. to be of value in itself, not as a means to something else; mere instrumentality cannot go on for ever, all the way down.

But in C-theory, though things are good only in as much as they are of instrumental utility towards C, C itself – whether or not the organic process does continue – is value-neutral. It has no value, intrinsic or otherwise. It is just a brute fact about the universe. Instrumental value therefore does not have to end up, or point to, intrinsic value. It can end up at value-neutrality, and logically that is sufficient.

Ultimately, there is no objective value in morality or in anything else. There is no telos, no ultimate pull from without; there is only proximate push from within. There is only subjective value. *We* value →C, but only subjectively; its worth lies in its instrumentality; it has no intrinsic, objective worth. 'Good' is only what we *call* →C. 'Value' is something we impute to →C (imputare: to bring into the reckoning; to think in). →C in itself is not good; it is not 'of value' in the sense of good being an objective predicate. Thus, that for something to be good is for it somehow objectively to have something called 'value' is a subjective illusion. Note, however, that to say that something is an illusion is not to say that it does not exist, but rather that it is not what it seems. What it seems to us for something to be 'good' is for it somehow to be of 'value'. What it really is for something to be good is for it to be →C, for it to be of instrumental utility towards C. Any value we impute is in fact an unconscious apprehension of →C; we value →C subjectively and unknowingly; but nothing, not even C itself, has objective, intrinsic, real 'value'. What exists here is →C, not value.

Now, back to G. E. Moore. Is there no single-word tautology for 'good'? Surely there is, at least in C-theory. Under C-theory, good as →C is a scientific tautology: '→C' can replace 'good' in any moral proposition without loss or change of meaning. (That what we get is a 'single-symbol' tautology for 'good' is alright, since words are symbols.)

And what about Moore's 'good is non-natural'? There seem to be two possibilities:

(a) 'Good' is outside the laws of nature. If so, 'good' is non-causal, and so moral reasons are not causes. But surely the concept 'good' does in fact motivate much of our behaviour,

especially the bit we call 'morality', so it must be causal. And surely 'reasons' are what we take to be the causes of our beliefs.

(b) Alternatively, 'good' is non-natural because it is not real; for example, because its supposed value is illusory. But, under C-theory, though the concept of good as being of intrinsic value is illusory, the concept of good itself is not illusory. →C is the real, physical drive underlying morality, and so good as →C is real. What is unreal is intrinsic value. We invent value and attribute it to 'good' in ignorance of →C. Good as →C is real; good as 'of value' is not. For Moore 'Whenever [someone] thinks of 'intrinsic value', or 'intrinsic worth'… he has before his mind the unique object – the unique property of things – which I mean by 'good''. Moore associates 'good' with 'intrinsic value', with something that is in fact unreal, so in that sense good is non-natural. So Moore was at least half right on this particular point – but, ironically, only with the help of a naturalistic theory.

Next, back to the naturalistic fallacy. In biologising morality are we still making a logically invalid leap from scientific facts to moral values? Does 'good means →C' seem, as Moore thought, somehow 'significant'; that is, is it still somehow synthetic? Is it an open question? Can we still ask meaningfully, 'Yes, but is →C good?' We can certainly still ask that question, but the mere facts that we can ask it and that it sounds as if it makes sense do not mean that the naturalistic fallacy automatically bites.

If 'good means →C' is, under C-theory, a scientific tautology, '→C means good' must follow from it. But then, does '→C means good' have the same meaning as '→C *is* good'? Surely not. The sense in which we are asking, 'Yes, but is →C good?' is not whether '→C' and 'good' refer to the same thing, but rather that of 'good' being a predicate; that is, the 'is' indicates predication, not identity.

It helps to remind ourselves here that, in conventional morality, we equate being 'good' with being 'of value', 'of worth'. The alleged open question is then, 'Yes, but is →C of value?'. As we have seen, value applies only within C, and then only instrumentally and subjectively. The question 'Yes, but is →C of value?' can therefore be 'significant' only within C. That is why questions like 'But is happiness good?' and 'But is the survival of the human race good?' seem somehow significant, somehow meaningful, somehow 'open'. Why? Because, inside C, subjectively they can be answered by 'Yes' or 'I don't know'. (It would be surprising if we, as participants in C, did not intuit such questions as meaningful and were not inclined to answer 'Yes'.)

However, as we saw, Moore made it clear that, when he talked of 'good' in morality, it was the concept 'good in itself' or 'intrinsic value' that he had primarily in mind, so the predicated good that he is referring to in the naturalistic fallacy is the intrinsic (objective) one. The naturalistic fallacy question is thus 'Yes, but is →C of intrinsic value?'. But C itself and everything outside it are of no value, intrinsic or instrumental, so in this domain the answer is a clear and emphatic 'No', and that closes the question.(2) The naturalistic fallacy does not bite C-theory. It bites only concepts that lie *within* the organic process.

That is why I prefer to speak of 'natural (or naturalistic)' morality, deliberately avoiding 'evolutionary morality'. In evolutionary studies life proper is often taken to have begun only with some emergent property such as DNA or perhaps replication, and so the significance of C, of looking at the whole of the organic process, remains hidden. Good as →C avoids this and so can answer a firm 'No' to Moore's and Hare's open question. (3)(4)

Finally, back to the original, basic problem, the is–ought gap. In conventional morality we go straight from is to ought, and the ought is seen as prescriptive, i.e. as containing moral obligation:

(a) Faced with this moral problem (what *is* the case),

(b) You (prescriptive) ought to do X (where X is the right thing to do under
 your society's moral code)

An analogy some attempts at a naturalistic theory of ethics use is that of thunder and lightning: You have just seen a flash of lightning, so (ceteris paribus) you ought to hear thunder. (The ceteris paribus is necessary for a full scientific analogy, i.e. assuming no vacuum intervenes, your hearing is not faulty, etc.) This is the scientific 'ought' and expresses a deduction from a scientific hypothesis about electrical discharges, etc. However, the analogy does not seem to do much work because the resulting 'ought' is not prescriptive; it is descriptive/predictive, i.e. we have gone from 'is' to 'ought', but with no prescription/obligation:

(c) Having just seen a flash of lightning (what is the case),

(d) If your relevant (i.e. hearing, etc) faculties are fully developed and intact,

(e) Ceteris paribus (e.g. no vacuum intervening),

(f) You (descriptive/predictive) ought to (i.e. you *will* *) hear thunder.

The attempts at naturalistic ethics I have seen get no further than this, partly because they are inhibited by fear of the naturalistic fallacy, but mainly because they do not present their theories as fully and unequivocally scientific. Their proponents think that the moral 'ought', though analogous to the scientific 'ought', is still somehow different; and that 'somehow' arises from their assumption that moral behaviour is something special, something that exists in some other realm, totally separate from the 'merely biological' behaviour of humans and other organisms, e.g. feeding, procreating, using tools.

Under good as →C the moral ought is fully and directly scientific in that all organic behaviour, including the bits we call 'moral', is hypothesised as an integral part of nature; there is no other realm. Thus, in natural morality, under C-theory, the process is:

(g) Faced with this moral problem (what is the case),

(h) If your relevant (i.e. →C) faculties are fully developed and intact *,

(j) Ceteris paribus (e.g. nothing is preventing you),

(k) You (descriptive/predictive) ought to (i.e. you *will* *) do X.

(* Note: The predictive 'will' in (f) and (k) includes probability; all is probability. Also, in practice (h) will depend on your society's culture. To what extent that culture's moral code is in fact →C will be an empirical matter. See Appendix A for a summary of this section.)

Thus, if C-theory is correct, the 'ought' of conventional morality (b) is *not prescriptive,* i.e. there is no special moral kind of force generating moral obligation. Why? Because 'value' is an illusion, a purely notional property we invent. Subjectively, we think that for something to be 'good' is for it somehow to be 'of value', 'of worth', but, as we have seen, what 'good' really means is '→C'. There *is* a force generating the 'ought', but it is not a special moral force somehow prescribing, somehow generating categorical 'obligation'; it is the → in →C, the drive to continue that is inherent in every element of the organic process and that generates not prescription/obligation but description/prediction (2), i.e. it says (ceteris paribus) what (probably) *will* happen. Under C-theory, therefore, the (a) plus (b) of conventional morality is the same as the (g) plus (k) of natural morality. That is, conventional morality *is* natural morality, and what misleads us into thinking otherwise is our subjective lack of awareness of (h) and (j). Taking (j), i.e. ceteris paribus, as a standard element of all well-formed theories, it is in (h), i.e. in →C, that the true nature, the 'naturalness', of morality lies. →C is what takes us from 'is' to 'ought'. In other words, in our conventional morality there is always this unconscious linking premise. That is what confused Hume when he saw the apparently unjustified leap from 'is' to 'ought'. His alleged fact-value gap *does* have a logically valid bridge, albeit an unstated, unconsciously intuited one – and it is *natural*.

If C-theory is on the right lines, morality does not exist in some realm of its own; that is, there are not two worlds: morality and all the rest. Instead, there is only one world – the natural one – and morality is an integral part of it. This is summarised in Appendix B, showing how, under C-theory, what we have called 'the basic problem' (i.e. how to get logically from 'is' to 'ought') is solvable not in conventional, non-natural morality but only in natural morality. In particular:

(a) Value is subjective, i.e. a concept we invent. 'Good' is never an intrinsic, objective property. It always indicates instrumentality towards C.

(b) The drive/motivation that generates moral obligation is the → in →C. It is electromagnetism, one of the universal forces of nature, manifesting itself via carbon chemistry. We experience its causality as our intuited 'reasons' for acting.

(c) Ceteris paribus applies to all propositions.

(d) The 'ought' of morality is not prescriptive, evaluative, normative or categorical and carries no special 'obligatory' force. Like all the rest of our beliefs, it is hypothetical. It is the scientific 'ought': descriptive and predictive. It says what (ceteris paribus) *will* (probably) happen.

The remainder of the argument for a naturalistic ethics looked at how →C gets into us, genetically and culturally; how it expresses itself in social animals; how it might help contemporary conventional ethics; and how we should go about applying it in practice to our morality. However, I think we have gone far enough here for our primary purpose, which is to show that, with a naturalistic theory of ethics, we can successfully navigate the allegedly inexorable obstacles of the is-ought gap and the naturalistic fallacy. For a hundred years these have held theoretical morality in thrall. Perhaps a way forward, even a way out, may be emerging to show that morality is an integral part of our organic nature.

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(1) Note that this applies also to the use of 'good' in relation to inanimate objects. A good hammer is one that does its job efficiently, which is to act as a tool, and tools are used for biological purposes (e.g. to earn a living). A good hammer is thus also →C, though indirectly. Whether or not we exclude this use of 'good' from morality, limiting 'moral' to only part of the behaviour of our own species matters little. The instrumental goodness of the hammer and of our moral actions amount to the same thing in the end: →C.

(2) That is, it successfully avoids Hare's 'X will inevitably appear on both sides of the equation'.

(3) Hare's version of the naturalistic fallacy (see his *The Language of Morals, OUP, 1978, Ch.5)* has a second test awaiting those (possible, but for Hare likely to be very few) definitions/explanations of good that avoid 'good (as some X) on both sides of the equation': 'We have next to ask whether its advocate ever wishes to commend anything for being X' (in our case for contributing to C). 'If he says that he does, we only have to point out to him that his definition makes this impossible, for the reasons given. And already he cannot say he never wishes to commend anything for being X; for to commend things for being X is the whole object of his theory.' Here 'the reasons given' are that, 'Value terms have a special function in language, that of commending; and so they plainly cannot be defined in terms of other words which themselves do not perform this function; for if this is done, we are deprived of a means of performing the function'.

Hare's use of 'special' gives the game away here. As we have seen, in morality good is not equatable with value, but with biological utility (→C), and →C has no (intrinsic) value. Therefore, when we commend things, we are commending them not for being of 'value' but as being of biological utility; that is, evaluation is not involved. So, C-theory survives Hare's second test also.

(4) See *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Biology, CUP ,1999, Ch.11,* for a logical analysis of how going from a descriptive 'is' to a descriptive 'ought' (e.g. (g) to (k) in Appendix A) does not commit the naturalistic fallacy: '…the naturalistic fallacy forbids only the derivation of a…normative 'ought' from a descriptive 'is' or a normative value from a descriptive fact. If there are ways of interpreting the notion of a value such that there are descriptive values, then the naturalistic fallacy does not forbid deducing them from descriptive facts'. C-theory shows that in morality the concept of value is an illusion and that the normative element, the thing morality is aiming at, the object of commendation, is in fact C. The 'descriptive values' discussed here are in fact →C.

Hare is therefore wrong when he says his second test for the naturalistic fallacy will show that any naturalistic theory of ethics will remove our ability to commend. All it removes is our ability to commend things for being 'of value'; that is, it removes evaluation arising from the idea that 'good' indicates the property of (intrinsic) value. Under C-theory we are still able to commend things because they have a particular property, but that property is '→C', not intrinsic value.

Of course, in moral discussion people are going to continue to use the words 'value' and 'evaluative' habitually, as an unconscious façon de parler, ignorant of the facts that they have no intrinsic content and that what they are really referring to is →C. That will not matter much provided we can get across to them the idea that it is 'value' as natural instrumentality in terms of biological utility that is involved, not as some mysterious,

non-natural, metaphysical entity that somehow has the property of 'intrinsicality'. The same will presumably apply to the use of 'norm' and 'normative'.

The man and woman on the Clapham omnibus will no doubt continue to aspire vaguely to the 'values' their culture embodies and try to pass them on to their children. Though the couple will remain unaware of →C, they will still feel its force acting on them in the form of feelings of benevolence, conscience, etc. That should be sufficient justification for them – unless they are students of moral philosophy.

Getting from 'Is' to 'Ought

1. Conventional

(a)   Faced with this moral problem (what is the case)

(b) You (prescriptive) ought to do X (1)(4)

2. Scientific

(c) Having just seen a flash of lightning (what is the case)

(d) If your relevant (i.e. hearing, etc) faculties are fully developed and intact,

(e) Ceteris paribus (e.g. no vacuum intervening)

(f) You (descriptive/predictive) ought to, (i.e. you *will* (2)), hear thunder

3. Natural (via C theory)

(g) Faced with this moral problem (what is the case)

(h) If your relevant (i.e. →C) faculties are fully developed and intact,

(j) Ceteris paribus (e.g. nothing is preventing you)

(k) You (descriptive/predictive) ought to, (i.e. you *will* (2)), do X (4)

(1) Where X is the 'right' thing to do under your society's moral code (e.g. keep your promise).

(2) However, note that this predictive will indicates scientific probability. All is probability. In practice most people's →C faculties will be less than fully/maximally developed, so (h) will be more like 'To the extent that your relevant (i.e. →C) faculties are developed and intact' and (k) '… (i.e. to the same extent you probably will) do X'.

(3) In practice this will depend on your society's culture. To what extent that culture's moral code is in fact →C will be an empirical matter.

(4) Under C-theory, what (b) is really saying is (k). That is, in both (b) and (k) the 'ought' is in fact a 'will'. There is no prescription/obligation; there is only description/prediction.

TWO WORLDS

A	B	C
The Basic Problem	**Conventional Morality**	**All the Rest**
	Supernatural Metaphysical Mystical Religious Non-natural	Natural
	Human personal/social	Remainder of world, incl. natural morality and human non-moral
What is the case	Event, state, situation	Event, state
Plus Value ('good')	Intrinsic Subjective	Instrumental Objective (?)
Plus Force (→) (Drive, motivation, obligation)	Reasons (universalizable)	Causes (Universal laws Electromagnetism Carbon chemistry)
Plus ceteris paribus	No conflictions No error or pathology	No conflictions
Produces 'Ought'	Moral obligation (Prescriptive/normative categorical)	Scientific 'will' (Descriptive/predictive hypothetical)

(If C-theory is correct, column B is subsumed fully into column C.)