

Making Sense of Moore's Non-naturalism

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ABSTRACT:

The main purpose of this paper is to unpack the significance of non-naturalism in Moore's analysis of moral properties and critically examine the feasibility of non-naturalism as an important thesis in the broader moral philosophical discourse. For this purpose I would first discuss why in first place a need was felt for non-naturalism in the moral philosophical discourses, and then I would discuss what non-naturalism, in general is. Having done that I would proceed to unpack Moore's account of non-naturalism and then would conclude on a critical note by bringing in the remarks of some of the prominent ethicists on Moore's account of non-naturalism.

Why non-naturalism?

Before Moore, it was Sidgwick's philosophy where we find elements of non-naturalism. It was the concept of 'ought' that Sidgwick declared as fundamental and he defines good in terms of ought. Though Moore took exactly opposite view and defined ought in terms of good, the basic inspiration remains the same i.e. to establish moral realism and the autonomy of ethics (In the main section we shall discuss these two in detail)ⁱ. Scholars, thus, in general defines non-naturalism in terms of an idea that moral philosophy is fundamentally autonomous from the natural sciences.

However, as far as Moore's analysis of good is concerned, it has also been argued that the larger aim of Moore's account of non-naturalism was to defend value-pluralism, the idea that there are many ultimate goods. According to Judith Jarvis Thomson, Moore is a foundational monist and normative pluralist. That is to say that, though believing in one absolute fundamental value i.e. good, Moore also believed that there are many different bearers of this value.ⁱⁱ Taking excessive demands for unity or system in ethics as bar to this kind of value pluralism Moore sought to refute this demand through his thesis of non-naturalism. It was Sidgwick who had used such demands to argue that only pleasure can be good, since no theory with a plurality of ultimate values can justify a determinate scheme for weighing them against each other.ⁱⁱⁱ But, writing in *Principia Ethica* Moore said that:

"to search for 'unity' and 'system,' at the expense of truth, is not, I take it, the proper business of philosophy.....main object is to arrive at some positive answer to the fundamental question of Ethics- the question: 'what things are goods or ends in themselves?' To this question we have hitherto obtained only a negative answer: the answer that pleasure is certainly not the *sole good*."^{iv}

Moore further argues that answers to all other questions such as what is the Absolute good or what is the human good also rests on answer to this particular question. And finally in his analysis of answer to this question he came to define what unmixed good, evil and mixed goods are. Thus he makes an effort to defend value pluralism and moral realism and the way, in which he does that, results in the thesis of non-naturalism.

Now, before we begin to unfold Moore's account of non-naturalism we will first see what this idea of non-naturalism in general is and why that any discussion on it leads (ultimately) to Moore's *Principia Ethica*.

What is non-naturalism?

Like any other doctrines and definitions of these doctrines the doctrine of non-naturalism and its definition too are subject to dispute. For, there is no single doctrine but a family of related but distinct doctrines has come to be referred to as non-naturalism. Michael Ridge is of the view that there is an epistemological, a semantic and a metaphysical thesis of non-naturalism.^v The view that moral predicates cannot be analyzed in non normative terms denotes the semantic thesis, the view that knowledge of basic moral principles and value judgements are in some sense self-evident denotes an epistemological thesis and the view that moral properties exist and are not identical with or reducible to any natural property or properties denotes the metaphysical thesis of non-naturalism. However it is important to note that each of these distinct doctrines, as said, are very much related to each other so much so that one is also seems to support the other. Interestingly, Ridge argues that it is in G.E. Moore's account of goodness as advanced in *Principia Ethica* that all these three conception of non-naturalism find their starting point. Also, there is hardly any disagreement that Moore's account of goodness as explicated in *Principia* is paradigmatically non-naturalistic account. Thus, it becomes indispensable to go back to *Principia* in order to undertake any inquiry on non-naturalism.

But, before we move on to unpack Moore's account of non-naturalism; there are few things which should be kept in mind. First, Moore himself never clearly put forward a form of non-naturalism in *Principia Ethica*. Second, Moore can be seen to arrive at a conception of non-naturalism through different ways and it is important to examine what these different ways have in common. On the basis of these two insights, in the following sections it will be argued that it is against the backdrop of 'naturalism' that Moore came to establish his thesis of non-naturalism, while never having claimed to establish one. This he did with the help of two self-coined philosophical concepts viz... naturalistic fallacy and open question argument. Basically he used these two as tool against naturalism. Thus an analysis of Moore's non-naturalism is necessarily an analysis of these two concepts and whatever limitations non-naturalism as a moral discourse may be said to have, they can be said to arise, not solely but primarily, from the defects that ethicists have found with these two concepts. Then, It will also be argued that despite of whatever limitations it has, its significance in larger moral philosophical discourses cannot be underplayed.

Moore's account of non-naturalism

As we have seen, apart from value pluralism, there are two main theses that Moore sought to defend: moral realism and autonomy of ethics. It is in the backdrop of these two main objectives

that we will proceed to unpack Moore's account of non-naturalism. On one hand the realist side of his non-naturalism is revealed from the fact that according to him fundamental moral judgements ascribe the property of goodness to states of affairs. Moore seems to have taken this realism for granted. Writing in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Thomas Hurka argues that:

".....he (Moore) was doubtless influenced by the grammar of moral judgements, which have a standard subject-predicate form. But it may also be relevant that, at least early on, the only subjectivist view he seems to have been aware of was the naturalist one according to which to say "x is good" is to report the psychological fact that one approves of x."^{vi}

Moore's main contention was that this kind of views doesn't leave room for moral disagreement, since what I report that approve of x and what you report that disapprove of it can both be true. Late in life he encountered the non-cognitivist emotivism of C.L. Stevenson, which says that moral judgements express rather than report feelings and therefore can conflict. He initially conceded that this anti-realist view had as good a claim as his own to be true, but shortly after reverted to his earlier non-naturalism, saying he could not imagine what had induced him to consider abandoning it.

Coming back to the second thesis of autonomy of ethics, we shall find that it was in the preface to the first edition of *Principia* itself that Moore made his intentions clear. He writes:

"One main object of this book may, then, be expressed by slightly changing one of Kant's famous titles. I have endeavoured to write Prolegomena to any future Ethics that can possibly pretend to be scientific. In other words, I have endeavoured to discover what the fundamental principles of ethical reasoning are; and the establishment of these principles, rather than of any conclusions which may be attained by their use, may be regarded as my main object."^{vii}
(underlines are mine)

Basically, the ideal is 'science' which is autonomous as far as fundamental principles are concerned. Similarly, autonomy of ethics is the idea that moral judgements are *sui generis*, neither reducible to nor derivable from non-moral, that is, scientific or metaphysical judgements.

However, it is through an analysis of Moore's analysis of goodness that one can arrive at the proper understanding of this particular objective and thereby of non-naturalism. Therefore, in order to make this exercise simple yet fruitful we would first look for those premises where Moore talks about 'good/ness' (and though there are many we shall pick only those which may make our task of unpacking non-naturalism easy).

In *Principia Ethica* Moore writes:

"....What, then, is good? How is good to be defined? ...to What is good? my answer is that good is good and that is end of the matter... and to How good is to be defined? my answer is that it cannot be defined. ...My point is that good is a simple notion, just as yellow is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to anyone who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is. ...Good, then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is

good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word.”^{viii}

Thesis: autonomy of ethics, as clearly be drawn from this excerpt, is expressed in terms that the property of goodness is simple (as the term yellow is) and unanalyzable (for it is simple; there are no part to it in terms of which it can be analyzed), and in particular is unanalyzable in non-moral terms. This means the property is “non-natural”. Now, what is to be called a ‘non-natural’ property is a contentious issue. ‘Non-natural’ properties are defined as opposite to ‘natural’ properties, but there is no agreement on what is to be defined as ‘natural’ property. Moore writes:

“By nature, then, I do mean and have meant that which is the subject-matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology. It may be said to include all that has existed, does exist, or will exist in time. If we consider whether any object is of such a nature that it may be said to exist now, to have existed, or to be about to exist, then we may know that that object is a natural object, and that nothing, of which this is not true, is a natural object.”^{ix} (Underlines are mine)

Thus it becomes clear that Moore defines natural properties in terms of those properties which 1) are subject matter of the natural science and psychology 2) can exist by themselves in time. Apart from this, in his discussion on Mill’s Utilitarianism in Section 39 of *Principia Ethica* Moore also defines natural property in term of those properties which ‘can be known only a posteriori’.^x All these characterization of ‘natural’ property met with severe criticism and Moore himself in his later editions of *Principia* abandoned this way of characterizing ‘natural property’. Moore tried to try to finesse this point by holding that natural properties need not actually be the subject matter of the natural sciences but instead only must be fit for investigation by the natural sciences.^{xi} In this way, to say that a property is ‘non-natural’ is to say that it is distinct from any of the properties studied by sciences. Thus according to Moore goodness is simple and unanalyzable for it is non-natural and those views that denied this committed what he dubbed ‘the naturalistic fallacy’, which is the first tool against naturalist.

Moore claimed that naturalists (for example hedonists such as Jeremy Bentham, evolutionary ethicist such as Herbert Spencer, and metaphysical ethicist such as T.H.Green) were guilty of what he called the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. In particular, Moore accused anyone who infers that *X* is good from any proposition about *X*’s natural properties of having committed the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Assuming that being pleasant is a natural property, for example, someone who infers that drinking beer is good from the premise that drinking beer is pleasant is supposed to have committed the naturalistic fallacy.

To take Moore’s own example, consider a particular naturalist claim, such as that “*x* is good” is equivalent to “*x* is pleasure.” If this claim were true, Moore said, the judgement “Pleasure is good” would be equivalent to “Pleasure is pleasure”! But, Moore argues, someone who asserts the former means to express more than that uninformative tautology. The same argument can be mounted against any other naturalist proposal: even if we have determined that something is what we desire to desire or is more evolved, the question whether it is good remains “open,” in the sense that it is not settled by the meaning of the word “good.” We can ask whether what we desire to desire is good, and likewise for what is more evolved, more unified, or whatever.^{xii} This is particularly an example of ‘open question argument’ that is the second tool which Moore specifically uses against naturalist. Nonetheless, the intuitive idea, says Ridge, is that evaluative

conclusions require at least one evaluative premise that is to say that purely factual premises about the naturalistic features of things do not entail evaluative conclusions. Moore himself focused on goodness, but if the argument works for goodness then it seems likely to generalize to other moral properties.

Critical analysis of Moore's account of non-naturalism

So far we have seen that, in order to defend moral realism and autonomy of ethics Moore proposed the doctrine of non-naturalism. The peculiarity of his doctrine lies in the fact that he himself nowhere in his writings proposes a form of it. Rather it is through his normative discourse of naturalism that non-naturalism came into existence as an ethical doctrine. There are the two key elements of this doctrine; naturalistic fallacy and open question argument. It is through the discussion on naturalistic fallacy that we arrive at the distinction between natural and non natural properties and open question argument reveals to us the fact that to define any non-natural property (here, good is taken as example) in terms of natural property is to left with an uninformative tautology, where the question what is good remains 'open'.

However, the doctrine on non-naturalism in general and these two key elements in particular faces severe criticism. Thomas Baldwin, writing in his famous essay "Ethical non-naturalism", argues that "although Moore surrounds his presentation of ethical non-naturalism in *Principia Ethica* with a rhetoric that leads one to associate the theory with a conception of values as abstract object of ration intuition, that rhetoric does not work in the actual argumentation of *Principia Ethica*"^{xiii}

As far as naturalistic fallacy is concerned, Bernard Williams presented most systematic and significant account of criticism. In his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, he writes:

"...those who attempted to define goodness were said to commit the naturalistic fallacy. It is hard to think of any other widely used phase in history of philosophy that is such a spectacular misnomer. In the first place, it is not clear why those criticized were committing a fallacy (which is a mistake in inference) as opposed to making what in Moore's view was an error, or else simply redefining a word. More important, the phrase appropriated to a misconceived purpose the useful word 'naturalism'. A naturalistic view of ethics was previously contrasted with a super naturalistic view, and it meant a view according to which ethics was to be understood in worldly terms, without reference to God or any transcendental authority. ...Aristotle's outlook is naturalistic in this sense Views that are naturalistic in this broad, useful sense do not necessarily commit the 'naturalistic fallacy'."^{xiv}

Similarly, W.K. Frankena argues that, to suppose that whenever someone is metaphysically or semantically confused he is guilty of a 'fallacy' robs the term of its more standard and useful meaning.^{xv}

Another key element the open question argument also met with many objections. For example, Charles R. Pigden in his Essay *Naturalism* argues that, the open question argument cannot support Moore's conclusions about the distinctness of goodness as a property. Science, the objection runs, uncovers many non-analytic property identities; for example, water is identical to H₂O even though the terms "water" and "H₂O" are not synonymous. For, he continues, "...

‘water’ expresses a pre-scientific concept accessible to children and savages ... ‘H₂O’, by contrast, expresses a scientific notion.... People don’t find out that water was H₂O by mediating upon meanings. ... So too with goodness and pleasantness.”^{xvi}

Nonetheless, in the face of such sharp criticism too, the significance of non-naturalism cannot be underplayed. For, even after a century after the publication of *Principia Ethica*, ethical naturalism is typically still under-stood by academic philosophers as....some variant that Moore himself defines it to be.^{xvii} In this way non-naturalism emerges all the more significant for it essentially results from Moore’s conception naturalism and its following criticism. Thomas Baldwin claimed that, “twentieth century British ethical theory is unintelligible without reference to *Principia Ethica*; its history until 1960 or so being, in brief, that although Moore was taken to have refuted ‘ethical naturalism’, Moore’s own brand of ‘ethical non-naturalism’ was thought to make unacceptable metaphysical and epistemological demands; so the only recourse was to abandon belief in an objective moral reality and accept an emotivist, prescriptivist or otherwise anti-realist, account of ethical values.”^{xviii} Thus when analyzing Moore’s non-naturalism even in the face of severe criticism, one cannot underplay its profound significance for larger moral philosophical discourses, for better or worse, Moore’s discussion of non-naturalism profoundly shaped 20th century meta-ethics.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Hurka, Thomas, "Moore's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* /
- ⁱⁱ Mason, Elinor, "Value Pluralism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hurka, Thomas, "Moore's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- ^{iv} Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp.270-271.
- ^v Ridge, Michael, "Moral Non-Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
- ^{vi} Hurka, Thomas, "Moore's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- ^{vii} Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p.15
- ^{viii} This has been taken from various sections of *Principia Ethica*.
- ^{ix} Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Sec. 26, p.40
- ^x Ridge, Michael, "Moral Non-Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- ^{xi} Ridge, Michael, "Moral Non-Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- ^{xii} Moore, *Principia Ethica*, pp. 62–69
- ^{xiii} In Ian Hacking (Edt.) *Exercise in Analysis: Essays by Students of Casimir*, 1985. Pp. 23–45.
- ^{xiv} Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* , pp. 134-135.
- ^{xv} Taken from Frankena, W., 1939. "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind*, 48: 464–477.
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