

In "The Naturalistic Fallacy" William Frankena argues that G. E. Moore begs the question in claiming that naturalists have committed the naturalistic fallacy. According to Frankena, when Moore objects that the naturalists are committing the naturalistic fallacy, Moore means that they have treated two properties as if they were one. Thus Frankena paraphrases Moore as saying "it is a mistake to confuse or identify two properties. If the properties really are two, then they simply are not identical" (Frankena, 7). But of course the entire question in dispute between Moore and the naturalists is whether the properties really are two, or whether they are just one.

Frankena is treating Moore as if he were a first year philosophy student who, upon hearing an argument about the identity of indiscernibles ('if two objects share all their properties, then they are identical'), concludes that the answer is trivially obvious. The student argues that after all, if they were two objects then they can't be identical. But there are people who think that the question of whether the identity of indiscernibles is true is a substantive one, and such people often think that this student's argument has focused on an irrelevant aspect of the way the identity of indiscernibles is commonly expressed. Once the identity of indiscernibles is rephrased into proper logical form as ' $\forall x \forall y (\forall F (Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x = y)$ ' the student's argument falls harmlessly away.

Frankena treats Moore as someone who has focused on an irrelevant aspect of the way the naturalistic thesis has been formulated: Goodness is identical to some *other* property. Thus Frankena interprets Moore as making the obvious claim that of course two properties can't be identical, because if they were identical, there would only be one property. Frankena thinks that once the naturalistic thesis is expressed more carefully as "Do the word 'good' and the word 'pleasant' mean the same thing?" or "Which characteristics are other than goodness, which names stand for characteristics other than goodness?" Moore's argument will fall harmlessly away.

In this paper, I will argue that Frankena's criticisms do not apply to the naturalistic fallacy as it is described in two sets of passages near the beginning of *Principia Ethica*. These are the passages in which Moore originally introduces and explains the naturalistic fallacy. I will argue that Moore's argument in these passages is not, as Frankena thinks, captured by '(F ≠ G → F ≠ G) & (F = G → F = G)'. Rather, Moore is dispensing with arguments which he attributes to the naturalists by showing them to be fallacious. For instance in the first set of passages I will examine, Moore's argument is as follows:

- (1) $\exists F \exists G ((Fx \equiv Gx) \ \& \ F \neq G)$
- (2) Hence $\sim \forall F \forall G (\forall x (Fx \equiv Gx) \rightarrow F = G)$
- (3) Hence anyone who concludes that F is identical to G solely on the basis of the fact that F and G are coextensive is committing a fallacy.

If the premise that F and G are coextensive validly implied the conclusion that F is identical to G, then it would hold universally. But there are some instances in which it does not hold; hence the argument is invalid. If the naturalists are going to support their claim that two properties are identical, they are going to need to appeal to something over and above the fact that the properties are coextensive.

The second set of passages I will examine parallel the first except that Moore claims that the naturalists are inferring that F is identical to G on the basis of the fact that F has the property G. That is, they equivocate between the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity.

In discussing the passages, I will show that Moore is begging the question neither in claiming that the naturalistic fallacy is fallacious nor in claiming that the naturalists commit the naturalistic fallacy.

Let us now turn to the two sets of passages. The first set is where Moore first introduces the term 'the naturalistic fallacy'. He says:

It may be true that all things which are good are *also* something else, just as it is true that all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other,' but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'naturalistic fallacy' and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose. (Moore, 10)

Frankena interprets this passage as saying that good is not anything other than good and the naturalistic fallacy is the act of saying that something distinct from and other than good is good (Frankena, 5). His interpretation places heavy weight on the fact that Moore says 'all things which are good are *also* something else'.

But this interpretation fails to explain several of Moore's comments. For instance, in this passage Moore seems to be claiming that we cannot validly infer from the fact that goodness is coextensive with some property F that goodness = F. Moore seems to be stressing the fact that the naturalists get confused *because* F is coextensive with goodness. His objection thus is not that goodness is not identical to the proposed candidate. Rather, his objection is that the naturalists have used a fallacious inference to reach their conclusion.

What does Moore need to do to show that the inference is fallacious without begging the question against the naturalists? After all, if Moore's argument that the inference is fallacious just consists in his claim that goodness isn't identical to whatever the proposed candidate is, then he is begging the question. That is, if Moore argues for (1) as follows, then Moore has begged the question against the naturalists.

(1a) Goodness is coextensive with pleasure yet not identical to pleasure

Therefore,

(1) $\exists F \exists G ((Fx \equiv Gx) \ \& \ F \neq G)$

In order for Moore not to beg the question he must look at a particular instance of (1) which does not involve those very properties whose status is in dispute. And this is just what he does. Moore says that it is fallacious to infer from the fact that “all things which are yellow produce a certain kind of vibration in the light But a moment’s reflection is sufficient to shew that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow” (Moore, 10). Moore is offering the following premise from which (1) can be validly inferred:

(1b) The property of being yellow is coextensive with the property of producing a certain kind of vibration in the light, but the property of being yellow is not identical to the property of producing a certain kind of vibration in the light.

Thus it seems to me that as Moore describes the naturalistic fallacy in this passage, he is not begging any substantive ethical questions. First, that the naturalistic fallacy is fallacious has been demonstrated using an example upon which both Moore and the naturalists can be presumed to agree. His argument has in no way rested on the assumption that the two properties which were in dispute were not identical. However, I would like to point out that this is not the particular sense in which Frankena claimed that Moore begged the question. Frankena agrees that the naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy, but he thinks Moore has begged the question as to whether the naturalists committed the naturalistic fallacy. But on my interpretation of the naturalistic fallacy, Moore has an adequate response to Frankena’s charge. Since whether the naturalists really used these premises is a question of textual evidence and interpretation and not of ethics, Moore cannot have begged any substantive ethical questions in interpreting them thusly. Moore may be mistaken as to what arguments the naturalists put forward

to support their contention about goodness, but to be mistaken is not necessarily to beg any questions.

The second set of passages I wish to examine occur in section 12 of *Principia Ethica*.

Moore says

If I were to imagine that when I said 'I am pleased,' I meant that I was exactly the same thing as 'pleased', I should not indeed call that a naturalistic fallacy, though it would be the same fallacy as I have called naturalistic with reference to Ethics. (Moore, 13)

Here, Moore is objecting to philosophers who make inferences of the following sort: knowledge has the property of being good; therefore, the property of being knowledge is identical to the property of being good. That is, they equivocate between the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity. There is another passage which supports this reading. In section 24, Moore says "[all theories which commit the naturalistic fallacy] confuse the first and second of the three possible questions which Ethics can ask" (Moore, 38). They have confused the questions 'What is good?' with 'What is the good?'. They have confused the question of what property goodness is and the question of what the things which have the property are. Attempting to elucidate, Moore says

When a man confused two natural objects with one another, defining the one by the other, if for instance, he confused himself, who is one natural object, with 'pleased' or 'with pleasure' which are others, then there is no reason to call the fallacy naturalistic [although it is still the same fallacy]. (Moore, 13)

It seems rather strange but what Moore seems to have in mind is a case in which a person identifies herself with the properties which she has. She infers from the fact that she

has certain natural properties that she is identical to or is composed of those very natural properties.

Moore's argument could be formalized as follows:

- (1) $\exists F \exists G$ (G is predicable of F & $F \neq G$)
- (2) Hence $\sim \forall F \forall G$ (G is predicable of F $\rightarrow F = G$)
- (3) Hence anyone who concludes that F is identical to G solely on the basis of the fact that G is predicable of F is committing a fallacy.

If the only instance of (1) which Moore could cite involved goodness and whatever property had been proposed by the naturalists, then Moore would have begged the question against the naturalists. The naturalists wouldn't accept that instance as an example in which the two properties were not identical because the naturalists think that in fact they are identical. Instead Moore would have to offer an uncontroversial case upon which he and the naturalists would agree. And this is just what Moore does. He says:

It is a very simple fallacy indeed. When we say that an orange is yellow, we do not think our statement binds us to hold that 'orange' means nothing else than 'yellow', or that nothing can be yellow but an orange. (Moore, 14)

This example is slightly different in that Moore is using the clearly substantive 'an orange' instead of something which could be either substantive or predicative like 'knowledge'. But the example could easily be reformulated as saying that when we say that orange is pretty, we do not think that our statement binds us to hold that 'orange' means nothing else than 'pretty'. Here, 'orange' could be used as a property or as a short form of the substantive 'the color orange'.

And as in the former example, whether the naturalists really equivocated between the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity is a question of textual evidence and interpretation. Moore need beg no substantive ethical questions on this issue.

It seems to me then, that what Moore is objecting to in these sets of passages is not simply the naturalists' claim that some property F is identical to goodness, but that the naturalists reach this conclusion from certain premises using a certain inference. He shows that the inference is fallacious by producing another argument of the same form which he thinks the reader will find fallacious. Since the same inference, when used in uncontroversial cases, yielded false conclusions, the naturalists need some further premise to ensure that the conclusion is true in the particular case of goodness.

I would like now to turn from my main argument and consider some reflections and objections. It should be noted that my interpretation of the naturalistic fallacy, like Frankena's own, captures the independence of the fallacy from particular considerations about naturalness. Frankena says "it is clear that the fallaciousness of the procedure which Mr. Moore calls the naturalistic fallacy is not due to the fact that it is applied to good or to an ethical or non-natural characteristic" (Frankena, 6). The fallacy as described in the two passages I examined does not depend on F and G being natural and non-natural, ethical and non-ethical. It is a purely general claim: if, solely from the fact that two properties were coextensive, it could be inferred that the properties were identical, then in any case whatsoever, if the properties are coextensive, they would be identical. And Moore has shown that this is false in some uncontroversial cases. Likewise if, solely from the fact that some property F is predicable of G, it could be inferred that the properties were identical, then in any case whatsoever, if F is G, it could be inferred that F is identical to G. And Moore has again shown that there is an uncontroversial case in which this is false. That Moore is looking at the particular instance of goodness can be explained by the interests of the opponents that he is

arguing against. The naturalists, or so Moore claims, committed this fallacy with regard to a particular property, goodness, which Moore thinks is foundational to Ethics.

It may be objected against my interpretation that in at least some cases, Moore clearly states that the fallacy consists solely in the act of “identifying the simple notion which we mean by ‘good’ with some other notion” (Moore, 58). Moore does not make any reference to an inference or the grounds for an inference in those other passages. In response I would grant that Moore does seem confused about what he takes to be the naturalistic fallacy. Different passages seem to suggest different readings. But nonetheless, I should like to point out that such passages are generally found later in *Principia Ethica*. In most of the passages in section 10 through section 12, where Moore is introducing and explaining the fallacy, he refers to reasons for why someone might think that some property was identical to goodness. Apart from the two passages I have looked at in detail, Moore also discusses the fact that people have thought that if a property was unanalyzable, then it could not be understood (Moore, 13). So from the fact that we understand what ‘good’ means, they inferred that it must be analyzable. And again Moore’s response is that this does not hold in the uncontroversial case of ‘pleased’.

Another objection which might be posed against my interpretation is that I have not really helped Moore’s overall project in any way. The objector would argue that I have undermined his conclusion that the property of being good is not identical to any natural property since on my reading, Moore has only shown that certain arguments do not support that conclusion. I have thus allowed the possibility that some other argument could be given by the naturalists which would validly imply that goodness was identical to some natural property. My response to this objection is that it is Moore’s open-question argument which purports to establish that no such argument can be given. The conclusion of the open-question argument is that when we consider

goodness and whatever candidate property that has been proposed by the naturalists, we shall come to understand that “we have two different notions before our minds” (Moore, 16). To show that an argument is fallacious is never to show that its conclusion is false, and hence, we should not expect the naturalistic fallacy to be used to support this conclusion. The open-question argument and the naturalistic fallacy are nonetheless related in the following way. If the open-question argument is sound, as Moore believes it to be, and if Moore also grants that the premises of the arguments I cited on behalf of the naturalists are true, which he seems to do, then he is committed to the arguments being fallacious. Hence, although the truth of the conclusion of the open-question argument is not implied by the naturalistic fallacy, the open-question argument does imply that any argument which denies its conclusion and yet has true premises must be fallacious. Hence, Frankena is also mistaken when he claims that “. . . . the definist *fallacy* has no essential connexion with the bifurcation of the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’” (Frankena, 7).

This seems to me to be a textbook example of argumentation. Not only do you offer an independent argument for your conclusion, but you also show, using uncontroversial counterexamples, how your opponents arguments are unsound. If Moore had merely concluded that his opponents arguments were unsound on the basis of his belief that the open-question argument was sound, his position would be no stronger than his opponents who could make a parallel claim about Moore’s open-question argument. One man’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens. But by pointing out the fallacies in his opponents arguments, Moore thus strengthens his overall position.

In conclusion, I have argued that as Moore has described the naturalistic fallacy in two passages, he has an adequate response to Frankena’s charge of begging the question. Whereas Frankena thinks that anyone who commits the naturalistic fallacy con-

fuses two distinct properties, I think that anyone who commits the naturalistic fallacy concludes that some property F is identical to some property G on the basis of inadequate evidence. In the two passages that I examined, Moore accuses the naturalists of fallaciously inferring from the fact that two properties are coextensive that they are identical and of fallaciously inferring from the fact that one property falls under another that they are identical. Neither Moore's demonstration that these inferences are fallacious nor his claim that the naturalists utilized such inferences in their arguments in any way begs any substantive ethical questions against the naturalists.

Bibliography

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