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## For a Renewal of an Old Departure in Ethics

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## For a Renewal of an Old Departure in Ethics

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BY HENRY B. VEATCH

NOT INFREQUENTLY NOWADAYS ONE HEARS BITTER COMPLAINTS DIRECTED against ethics of the current academic variety: "Why, it isn't ethics at all. It never even gets around to properly ethical questions. So far from telling us what we ought to do, or how we ought to live, it trails off in endless discussions of the meaning of the word 'good,' or in countless arguments about whether expressions containing words like 'ought' and 'ought not' are used in the same way as ordinary imperatives, whether they admit of being contradicted, whether they can be true or false, etc." Moreover, what all these charges seem to boil down to is that questions as to the meaning and use of ethical terms just aren't the substantive questions of ethics: this may all be meta-ethics, but it certainly isn't ethics!

Very well, then, suppose that one wants to do ethics and not just meta-ethics. Suppose, further, that in doing ethics one proposes to do the very sort of thing that Charles Stevenson in his influential book, *Ethics and Language*, expressly refrained from doing — i.e., suppose one proposes to do ethics and not merely an analysis of the language of ethics<sup>1</sup> — just how is one to go about doing it? What is one to say? Where is one to begin? After all, the enterprise has lately become so unfashionable that one scarcely knows how to get started.

Perhaps, though, the best way to start when one does not know

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1944); p. 1.

how to get started is just to start. Indeed, the least that can be said for fools is that they do rush in where angels fear to tread. So let us plunge *in medias res* with two quotations, the one from Jane Austen and the other from C. P. Snow.

Sir Walter Elliott, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; . . .

Vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliott's character: vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth, and at fifty-four was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did, nor would the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliott, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.<sup>2</sup>

I looked round Nightingale's sitting-room. It was without feature, it was the room of a man concentrated into himself, so that he had nothing to spend outside; it showed nothing of the rich, solid comfort which Brown had given to his, or the eccentric picturesqueness of Roy Calvert's. Nightingale was a man drawn into himself. Suspicion and envy lived in him; they were part of his nature. But he had been unlucky, he had been frustrated in his most cherished hope, and now envy never left him alone.

He was forty-three, and a bachelor. Why he had not married, I did not know: there was nothing unmasculine about him. That was not, however, his abiding disappointment. He had once possessed great promise. He had known what it was to hold creative dreams: and they had not come off. That was his bitterness. As a very young man he had shown a spark of real talent. He was one of the earliest theoretical chemists. By twenty-three he had written two good papers on molecular structure. He had, so I was told, anticipated Heitler-London and the orbital theory; he was ten years ahead of his time. The college had elected him, everything seemed easy. But the spark burnt out. The years passed. Often he had new conceptions; but the power to execute them had escaped from him.

It would have been bitter to the most generous heart. In Nightingale's, it made him fester with envy. He longed in compensation for every job within reach, in reason and out of reason. It was morbid that he should have fancied his chances of the tutorship before Brown, his senior and a man made for the job; but it rankled in him after a dozen years. Each job in the college for which he was passed over, he saw with suspicion as a sign of the conspiracy directed against him.

His reputation in his subject was already gone. He would not get into the Royal Society now. But, as March came round each year, he waited for the announcement of the Royal elections in expectation, in anguish, in bitter suspiciousness, at moments in the knowledge of what he might have been.<sup>3</sup>

Now, surely, no one could read either of these accounts without readily recognizing Sir Walter Elliott to be an ass, and Nightingale to be a man whose whole life has become infected, twisted, and miserable as a result of the kind of creeping consumption that is so often brought on by envy, resentment, and self-pity. Indeed, one has only to hear accounts of the actions and behavior of men like this, and one finds oneself most naturally and almost inevitably passing moral or ethical judgments upon them. Oh, it is true that in making such judgments, we would, any of us, recognize that in given instances, perhaps even in most instances, our judgments might be mistaken; and yet we would none of us doubt for a moment — at least not in our everyday lives and outside of such academic poses as we may strike in lectures and learned articles — that such judgments are in general quite as warranted and quite as reliable as the judgment that the tree outside my window is a maple and not an elm, or that the noise which I hear in the street is that of a motor-bike and not an automobile.

But just what is it that is implied by the fact that we do seem to make moral judgments so readily and so naturally and with such confidence as to their being in the main sound and warranted? Must not the implication be that there really is a difference between living well and living foolishly, between making something of our lives and making a mess of them? Oh, it's true that if you put a rhetorical question such as this to a professor of philosophy, he might prove a bit stuffy and pedantic and refuse to give the expected affirmative answer. He would doubtless mutter something about logical entailments and then go on to observe that the mere fact that all men everywhere tend to make certain kinds of judgment certainly does not entail that such judgments are either true or warranted.

Still, philosophy professors notwithstanding, one cannot help thinking of Lincoln's dictum that while you can perhaps fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, you can't fool all of the people all of the time. And certainly, there is no denying the fact that human beings generally do seem to recognize that the living of their lives is something that they may do

<sup>2</sup> *Persuasion*, Ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *The Masters* (New York, 1959), Ch. 5, pp. 44-45 (Anchor edition).

either well or badly. And perhaps when pressed further, they might even acknowledge that there presumably must be a kind of art, or "know-how," so far as the living of one's life is concerned, much as there is an art or know-how when it comes to performing such more specialized activities as practicing medicine, running a farm, driving a car, or playing the fiddle. Indeed, just as there is a real distinction between a good doctor and a poor one, or between a good driver and a bad, why would there not also be a real distinction between a good man and a bad?

But alas, driving out meta-ethics is much like driving out the devil: it escapes through the door, only to slip back in through the window. For no sooner does one try to get on with the business of ethics, as if it were nothing more nor less than a sort of art of living, comparable to and yet in its own way different from such other arts as those of medicine, engineering, gardening or what not, than one immediately finds one's way blocked at the outset by a number of difficulties which are like so many roadblocks that meta-ethics would appear to have placed in the way of further progress in ethics itself. For how can one get very far with investigations regarding the right way to live as over against the wrong way, if distinctions between right and wrong, and good and bad, etc., are a purely relative matter? Or how can one intelligently go about trying to discover what the good life for a human being is, if the very idea of trying to learn about goodness from studying man's nature and the conditions and circumstances in which he finds himself — if the very idea of this sort of thing involves one in the so-called naturalistic fallacy?

Very well, then, suppose these roadblocks exist and that they are a real bar to anyone's getting on with ethics proper, cannot we get busy and clear them away? At least, that is the sort of task that I would like to set for myself in this paper, that of removing at least two of these roadblocks, viz., that of relativism on the one hand and that of the naturalistic fallacy on the other.

First, then, as to relativism. Now surely in this day and age it is hardly necessary to elaborate either on the evidence in support of ethical relativism, or on how, if relativism is true, there just would not be any objective basis for the moral judgments that we make concerning our own and other men's behavior. For as to the former, is it not simply the case that moral values and moral judgments are in fact relative to class, to culture, to locality, to age, to civilization, to psychological and physiological make-up, etc.? And as to

the latter, is it not equally true that from the fact of such a relativity of moral standards we are apt to conclude — not too cogently perhaps,<sup>4</sup> but with complete conviction nonetheless — that moral and ethical judgments just as such have no basis in fact whatever?

But now to all such relativistic and skeptical considerations in regard to morals and ethics, I would make bold to offer a simple and straightforward rejoinder: relativism in ethics simply cannot be maintained without inconsistency; or better, anyone who undertakes to deny the possibility of moral or ethical knowledge cannot avoid being inconsistent. But how so?

Well, if I mistake not, the sort of inconsistency to which the denial of ethical knowledge leads is one to which contemporary ethical writers and philosophers generally have perhaps paid but too little attention. For the relevant inconsistency here is not an inconsistency of the more usual type. Indeed, it is not like the more familiar kind of inconsistency that is involved in attempts to formulate a position of general philosophical skepticism. For example, "I know that there is no knowledge," or "It is true that there is no truth." Clearly, in the very formulation of such statements one contradicts oneself.<sup>5</sup> And yet in the formulation of a position of skepticism in regard to ethical knowledge, there is no such inconsistency involved. For instance, "I know that there is no knowledge in matters of ethics," or "It's true that ethical judgments cannot be true in the usual sense" — such statements are not self-contradictory at all.

Where, then, does the inconsistency arise? I suggest that it arises not in any properly theoretical context, but solely in what I would call the practical or, if you will, the existential context of the skeptic's own being and existence. Thus, suppose a man asserts that all ethical judgments, or all value judgments, are without any real warrant or foundation. Still having made the statement, the

<sup>4</sup> The point here is that the mere fact that all men, or at least most men, tend to disagree in their moral or ethical judgments — this fact as such does not entail the conclusion that there is no truth in matters of ethics and that ethics is a purely relative matter. But once again, the mere absence of logical entailment hardly suffices to convince any one that he does not have good reason to suspect the very possibility of a genuine knowledge in matters of ethics, considering that it is disagreement rather than agreement that is the rule when it comes to ethical judgments.

<sup>5</sup> It is well known that the possibility of such self-contradiction might be denied, supposing that one were operating with a system of logic having some such thing as a theory of types or its equivalent as one of the built-in features of the system. But this difficulty can simply be disregarded in the present context.

man cannot just cease to exist. He must go on living, which is to say he must go on making choices. But to make a choice is to make at least an implicit value judgment to the effect that what he does finally choose is somehow better or preferable or superior to the alternatives he rejects. And yet by hypothesis, our ethical skeptic has already declared that no value judgment has any legitimate foundation. What, then, of his own value judgments, which he cannot help making and which, in making, he cannot help supposing to be in some sense warranted and true?

Now when caught in a predicament of this nature, the ethical skeptic tends, I believe, almost invariably, albeit usually quite unwittingly, to resort to a most curious device. He tends to adduce his own very skepticism concerning the warrant for any value judgment as being itself the warrant for the value judgments that he himself makes. It is as if he were more or less unconsciously trying to justify himself along some such lines as these: "Since all judgments as to the better course of action for one to follow, or the course one ought to follow, are without foundation, it therefore would seem that the only sensible thing for me to do (*sc.* the better thing for me to do, or the thing that I ought to do) is thus and so."

Indeed, I believe I can even document this curious kind of inconsistency that attaches to ethical skepticism by means of two examples that may not be altogether unfamiliar. Thus, for one, consider the interesting and excellently written little book entitled *Patterns of Culture*, by the distinguished American anthropologist Ruth Benedict. In that book Professor Benedict is strong in her advocacy of what might be called an ethical relativism: all of our value judgments, she says in effect, all judgments as to what we ought or ought not to do, are relative to the particular culture of which we are a part, and hence are quite without warrant in the nature of things. And yet curiously enough, having thus made her case for the utter relativity of morals, Professor Benedict then proceeds to point a moral of her own. It is the moral of tolerance. And, apparently, her argument seems to be to this effect: since all judgments as to how men ought to act are purely relative to their culture, and so are without foundation, therefore what men ought to do under the circumstances is to cultivate an attitude of greater tolerance to people of other cultures than their own. In other words, the judgment that there is no basis for ethical judgments becomes itself the basis of an ethical judgment.

And by way of a second example I can cite the less distinguished,

but rather more notorious, case of the late unlamented Benito Mussolini. For unlike Professor Benedict, Mussolini did not use his ethical skepticism as a ground for justifying an ethics of tolerance. No, as he himself put it in his *Autobiography*:

There is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity. . . . From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.<sup>6</sup>

Once again we see how the characteristic inconsistency of the ethical relativist is clearly exhibited: for it is Mussolini's utter skepticism in regard to all rights and wrongs that supposedly provides him with what he apparently thinks is a justification for the swaggering assertion of his own right to enforce his way on everyone else.

Very well, then, suppose that such arguments are convincing and that one cannot very well deny the possibility of ethical knowledge and remain consistent with oneself, still where does that get us? Certainly in one sense it does not get us very far. For merely to expose the inconsistencies involved in a position of ethical skepticism does not as such serve to rebut the specific difficulties that have given rise to such a position in the first place. Just the same, to recognize that one cannot consistently deny the possibility of a genuine knowledge of values, of oughts and such like, may at least give us reason to suppose that by diligently looking about us we can perhaps eventually achieve something on the order of a genuine knowledge of what is best for us as human beings, and of what we as human beings ought to be doing in the way of ordering and disposing our lives as intelligently and wisely as possible.

But, alas, no sooner does one make a statement such as the one just preceding, than one finds oneself right smack up against the second roadblock, that of the naturalistic fallacy. For consider the suggestion that "by diligently looking about us we can perhaps eventually achieve something on the order of a genuine knowledge of what is best for us as human beings, and of what we as human beings ought to be doing in the way of ordering and disposing our lives as intelligently and wisely as possible." The mistake here is all too obvious. Indeed, it is the sort of mistake that in the new fashion of philosophical parlance might be called a "category mistake": for in the very nature of the case, looking about us can only

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Helmut Kuhn, *Freedom Forgotten and Remembered* (Chapel Hill, 1943), p. 18.

acquaint us with what is so in fact; it cannot possibly acquaint us with what ought to be.

For that matter, the same sort of mistake would appear to attach to the entire proposal which I put forward earlier, that we might try regarding ethics as a sort of art or know-how with respect to the living of our lives. For any such proposal presupposes that there is a natural perfection or completion of human life, a natural end or goal, a naturally determined fullness of human existence, toward which human beings are naturally oriented or directed, whether they ever actually attain it or not, and even whether they be actually conscious of it or not, much as an acorn just is naturally ordered to the attainment of its complete development in the healthy, full-grown oak tree. Yes, it is only in the light of such a natural standard of human perfection that one can determine what are the naturally right and intelligent courses for men to follow if they are ever to achieve such a goal.

Clearly, though, in the light of the naturalistic fallacy, Aristotelian-inspired rhetoric of this sort may now be seen to be quite beside the point. For even if it were true that there were such a natural goal or natural perfection, so far as human life is concerned, that still would not have any bearing on ethics. Indeed, where could one find a more glaring case of the naturalistic fallacy than in just such an attempted equation of the natural with the ethical!

Yes, suppose that one were to play along with Aristotle and entertain for a time his definition of the good as that at which all things aim, or as simply the natural perfection of a thing; or, perhaps more metaphysically, as the natural completion or activity or *ἐνέργεια* of any potency or *δύναμις* whatever. Once more, would not the "fallacy" here or the "category mistake" be all too patent? For even supposing that there are natural tendencies in things, or potentialities that are naturally ordered to their characteristic perfections and fulfillments — and further, that we can to a certain extent come to know what these are — still, what possible grounds does all this give us for supposing these natural ends or objectives to be good or to be the sort of thing we ought to strive for? To infer that merely because a thing is natural, it is therefore good, is surely fallacious; it is the naturalistic fallacy in short.

Still, we need to be more specific if we are to sense the full import for ethics of this so-called naturalistic fallacy. Reduced to its simplest terms, the notion of such a fallacy derives its original force and plausibility, as I see it, from the quite obvious truth that in at-

tempting to define anything or to state what it is, we must assert the thing in question to be what it is and not anything else. "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." Such, it will be remembered, was the celebrated dictum of Bishop Butler which Moore chose as the epigraph of *Principia Ethica*. Nor can it very well be denied that such a dictum is unexceptionable.

Nevertheless, in order to render such a principle, which seems true enough in itself, at the same time applicable to actual, concrete claimants to the title of being no less than the defining characteristics of "good," Moore proposed his open question test. Thus, suppose that with Aristotle one were to claim that the good is that at which all things aim, or with the hedonists that the good is simply the pleasant, or with R. B. Perry that the good is just the desired, then Moore's open question test could be applied and each of these respective claims could be shown to be invalid. For suppose in a given instance that something is aimed at, or is pleasant, or is desired, is it not always meaningful to ask whether the thing in question is, after all, good?

Moreover, if such a question is thus meaningful, if it is an open question in other words, then there is no possibility of merely equating the goodness of a thing with its being aimed at, or its being pleasant, or its being desired. And the reason is that any definition of good can only take the form of an analytic truth; and an analytic truth must needs be a truth the opposite of which would be simply inconceivable and self-contradictory. In contrast, a synthetic truth is a truth which, though true, is only contingently true, or a truth the opposite of which is at least conceivable and not self-contradictory. Consequently, if, on the application of the open question test, it turns out that it is meaningful to raise the question as to the correctness of the proposed definition of "good" as being that at which something aims or that toward which it tends, then such a definition turns out not to be a definition at all, because it is not an analytic truth. At best, it is but a synthetic truth.

Such, then, is the character of the fallacy. But just what is its import for ethics? Well, the story is almost too well known to bear repeating of how Moore, when he started applying his open question test, found it served to rule out not merely such proposed defining properties of goodness as "pleasant," "desired," etc., but any and all natural properties as well. And not only any and every natural property, but any and every metaphysical property, too. Hence Moore concluded that goodness could only be a "non-natural" prop-

erty. But, unfortunately, save for the intuitionists, it seemed that God alone could ever know a non-natural property, considering that it could not be anything that one would ever encounter either in the world of nature, or in that of supernature, or even in that of being generally. Yes, in the face of such sweeping eliminations, one might begin to wonder whether even the divine capacity would be adequate for the discernment of these mysterious, non-natural properties. And in fact, ever since Moore, the consensus has tended to be that goodness just is not any kind of a property at all, natural or non-natural. And by saying that goodness is not a property, what apparently is meant is that when one asserts that something is good, one is not describing it, so much as commending it, or recommending it, or grading it, or trying to get someone else to approve of it, or manifesting some sort of pro-attitude toward it, or what not. Moreover, the upshot of all this would seem to be that goodness, to say nothing of all the various other moral and ethical notions like rightness, wrongness, oughtness, etc., either have come to be deprived of any status in reality at all, or at least their status in the real world has been so seriously compromised, as to render it exceedingly difficult to determine in just what sense a thing may be said to be good really and in fact, or to be right or wrong or what ought to be or what not.

Thus once again, and just as in the case of relativism, it would appear to be a set of meta-ethical considerations that have had the effect of undermining any such thing as a science of ethics. It is as if the very idea of an objectively grounded and warranted knowledge in regard to matters of ethics had been rendered dubious, if not impossible. How, indeed, can I or anyone else be said to know that Sir Walter Elliott was an ass, or that Nightingale had ruined and wasted his life? In so far as these are moral judgments, can they be said to reflect what is really the case as regards Elliott or Nightingale, or do they only reflect our own feelings or attitudes toward them, or our attempts at warning others not to be like them?

But now granted that the naturalistic fallacy has thus turned out to be a device which recent practitioners of meta-ethics have employed in such a way as to discredit the very possibility of an ethical or moral knowledge, or at least to compromise and severely restrict the knowledge claims of the traditional discipline of ethics — granted all this, is there any way in which this roadblock of the naturalistic fallacy can be cleared away from the path of ethics? I think there is. And to this end I should like first of all to make use of certain

criticisms which Professor Frankena made against the notion of the naturalistic fallacy several years ago.<sup>7</sup> For it does seem to me that these criticisms are patient of an interpretation which would quite effectively dispose of the naturalistic fallacy as a meta-ethical device.

In effect, Professor Frankena seems willing enough to accept Moore's notion that any definition would in the nature of the case have to be an instance of analytic truth, and he also seems to go along with Moore's open question test as a means of determining whether any proposed definition is in fact a definition or not. However, moving to the question of a possible definition of "good," Frankena suggests that a convinced hedonist or a convinced adherent of the interest theory of value might each propound as a definition of "good" either "'Good' means simply 'pleasant,'" or "For anything to be good means for it to be desired." Moreover, when the open question test is applied to these definitions, the hedonist or the advocate of the interest theory could perfectly well insist that their definitions had passed the test perfectly. After all, to a convinced hedonist "good" does mean "pleasant" and nothing else; nor need he admit for an instant that there is meaning to the question of whether a given experience might be pleasant and yet at the same time not be good.

To be sure, Frankena himself seems to imply that, so far as he can determine, goodness is not a natural property like being pleasant or being desired. And yet the difference between goodness and such natural properties is not anything that can be established by the argument of the naturalistic fallacy. Rather, supposing that *on other grounds* one can establish that goodness is not a natural property, *then*, Frankena feels, one could show that it would be committing the naturalistic fallacy to define goodness in terms of a natural property: one would be declaring goodness to be something that it was not. But the point of Frankena's criticism is that the argument of the naturalistic fallacy, so far from being a meta-ethical device that rules out *a priori* the very possibility of trying to find out by means of ethical enquiry what goodness is, is, instead, an argument that becomes applicable only as a result of ethical enquiry and only after one has already determined in one way or another what goodness is, in contrast to what it is not.

So much for the one criticism. But there is, I believe, an even more far-reaching criticism of the naturalistic fallacy argument than

<sup>7</sup> W. K. Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind*, XLVIII (N. S., No. 192), 464-477.

Frankena's. For Frankena, it will be remembered, seemed to acquiesce in Moore's understanding of definition as analytic truth and in his suggestion of the open question test as a criterion of such definition. And yet when these two latter points are rather more closely scrutinized, I wonder if they will not turn out to be strangely self-destructive, not merely with respect to Moore's own efforts to understand goodness, but also with respect to any and every effort to understand anything whatever for what it is.

Once more, be it remembered that Moore chose as the motto for his own undertaking Butler's dictum, "Everything is what it is and not another thing," and that the task which he set himself was the specific one of finding out what goodness is. Moreover, he construed this task as meaning that his primary quest would be for a definition of "good." And yet no proposed definition of good seemed to meet the criteria of definition. On the contrary, all such definitions as "The good is that at which all things aim," or "The good is simply the pleasant," or "The good is any object of any interest" — all of these definitions seemed to commit the naturalistic fallacy. And why? Simply because, Moore thought, it is always meaningful to ask whether the pleasant is, after all, necessarily good, or whether it is not at least conceivable that something might be an object of interest and still not be good, or whether, just because something is naturally aimed at, that necessarily makes it good. And as long as it is meaningful to ask these questions, as long as such questions are at least significant, then the proposed definitions cannot possibly be definitions. For a definition can only be an analytic truth and an analytic truth, it would seem, must be one the opposite of which would be self-contradictory and hence literally inconceivable. Accordingly, if a proposed definition of "good" might conceivably be false, if its opposite is at least meaningful and conceivable, and hence not self-contradictory, then one just does not have a definition of "good."

Now what could be more cogent than this? And yet note that the upshot of it all is to make of definitions little more than tautologies.<sup>8</sup> For clearly, if a truth is such that its opposite is simply inconceivable and patently self-contradictory, in the manner of "A is non-A," then that truth itself can be no other than a mere tautology of the form "A is A."

<sup>8</sup> It should be apparent from the context that this word is being used in its everyday sense, rather than in the technical sense of "true by the truth-table test."

Surely, though, whatever may be its cogency or its currency, is not this a rather fantastic notion of definition? For is it really the case that there can be no talk of our defining anything — i.e., no talk of our coming to understand anything for what it is, no talk of our recognizing what pertains to the very nature of anything — without our being compelled to acknowledge that the definition in which such knowledge and understanding of what a thing is comes to be expressed and formulated, can be no more than a tautology which does not really tell us anything at all?

Now we all know it to be one of the key contentions of modern logic and semantics that a tautology is uninformative, that it tells us nothing about the world, that it does not even tell us anything about the very things which it itself is at least ostensibly a statement about. Thus, to use Professor Hospers' apt illustrations, "All black cats bring bad luck" is certainly a statement about black cats; but "All black cats are black," strictly speaking, does not say anything about black cats at all. And the reason, presumably, is that the truth of such a statement does not depend upon the content of the statement at all, but only upon its form. That is to say, the truth of "All black cats are black" does not depend upon anything that is distinctive and peculiar about black cats, but simply on the form of the proposition in which such an assertion is made. In other words, any statement of the form, "Anything that is an 'a' as well as a 'b' is an 'a,'" or "Every A is A" will be necessarily true, regardless of whether the statement happens to be about black cats, green dragons, the property "good," or even, for that matter, the non-property "good." For as Wittgenstein remarked — to cite the *locus classicus* — "I know, e.g., nothing about the weather when I know that it rains or does not rain."<sup>9</sup> In short, all such tautologies, and all such statements the opposite of which are self-contradictory — all such truths are no more than formal truths, or logical truths, or, if you will, linguistic truths. In any case, they give no information about the world, or even about their own subject matter.

But now it would appear that if we follow Moore in construing definitions as no more than analytic truths such that their opposites are simply inconceivable and self-contradictory, then we find ourselves confronted with a curiously ironical and even paradoxical result. For if definitions be no more than analytic truths, and analytic truths no more than tautologies, then a definition will be constitution-

<sup>9</sup> *Tractatus*, 4.610.



ally debarred, so to speak, not merely from telling us what anything is, but even from ever telling us anything about anything.

Indeed, to return to the case of Moore, we might even say that on this basis the very epigraph of his book, so far from being illuminating, turns out to be self-defeating and even systematically frustrating. For granted that everything is what it is, and not another thing, then unhappily, no sooner will one wish to know, or undertake to find out, concerning anything, just what it is, than his wish and his undertaking must needs be doomed *a priori* to failure and frustration. For presumably, the only proper and allowable answer to a question of the form "What is x?" has to be of the form "x is x." But any statement of this form will be no more than a tautology, and, as such, will not tell one anything about x at all, much less what it is.

Yes, we could even set up the paradox in this way: granted that everything is what it is and not another thing, then the necessary consequences, so far as knowledge is concerned, would be that no one could ever *know* concerning anything, what it is, simply because the form in which the statement of one's knowledge would have to be couched would be a form such as to render this very sort of knowledge impossible.

Apparently, then, the only way Moore was able to make his conception of the naturalistic fallacy a telling one was to base it on a notion of definition that could have no other effect than to render futile his, Moore's, own undertaking of trying to understand what goodness is and not to confuse it with anything else.

Not only that, but it would also seem to be a notion of definition that is quite implausible and untenable in itself. For just consider: Is it not perfectly reasonable for anyone of us, say, to be somewhat puzzled as to just what it means to say of something that it is good, much as we might be puzzled to know just what it is to be human, or to be an electron, or to be spatially extended, or to be religious, or to be in potency with respect to something, or what not else? Moreover, not only is it perfectly reasonable to ask such questions, but it is also perfectly reasonable to suppose that we might very well succeed in reaching informative and illuminating answers to such questions. In other words, that our conception of definition should be such that the very possibility of answers in such cases should be ruled out *a priori* is nothing short of fantastic.

To take but one example, suppose that with respect to human beings we ask just what it means to be human. Now surely human

nature is what it is and not anything else. Further, to suppose that being human is in any respect other than what it is would certainly involve one in self-contradiction. And yet does it follow from this that any statement as to what it means to be human, or what is involved in being human, is bound to be no more than a tautology which tells us nothing at all? For instance, suppose we say that man is a rational animal, and suppose that by our definition we intend no mere verbal definition of the word "man," but a real definition, then we would seem thereby to have ruled out all sorts of other accounts of human nature and other ways of characterizing human beings — other ways and accounts which might have occurred to us, but which now, by our present definition, are excluded as being false and erroneous.

Not only that, but we must also recognize that the definition we have thus finally arrived at may still be mistaken. That is to say, although we might be firmly convinced that it pertained to the very nature of man, or was a necessary part of the meaning of man to be rational, still, in all honesty and perhaps in all sanity, we can and should recognize that we might be wrong. Indeed, further experience may very well lead us to see that being rational is not a necessary feature of human nature after all.

In other words, our definition, both in virtue of what it rules out, as well as in virtue of the possibility that it might be wrong, is clearly informative. At the same time, for all of its informativeness and for all of its being more than any mere tautology or formal truth, our definition of man as a rational animal we must nonetheless consider to be such that it does no more than assert or declare, with respect to human beings, what they are. Hence to suppose human beings not to be this, but something else, would, on the basis of this definition, be to suppose them to be other than what they are. In other words, it would be a self-contradictory supposition.

But this is to say no more than that any definition, if it be a true definition of its definiendum, must be self-evidently true, or, in the rather more precise terminology of the Scholastics, it must be *per se notum* — i.e., the thing that is being defined can come to be known only through itself and not through another. And yet this in no wise implies that such a definition can be no more than a linguistic or formal truth, a mere tautology, which, in stating what the definiendum is, turns out not to inform us of what it is at all. No, the precise purport of the definition is to inform us of what the thing we are defining really is.

Now, admittedly, this is by no means a complete and adequate account of the nature of definition. And yet it surely suffices to show the untenability of that alternative notion of definition upon which the argument of the naturalistic fallacy rests. Moreover, once this latter and curiously far-fetched notion of definition is exposed for what it is, then the naturalistic fallacy itself turns out to be not so much a roadblock in the path of ethics, as a mere red herring. Further, the whole chain of meta-ethical consequences that has come to be suspended from the naturalistic fallacy as being the fixed point of nearly all modern English ethical theory — this chain simply collapses.

Suppose, indeed, that we briefly run over some of these consequences once again. As we saw, Moore himself started out determined to find out what good is. But confounded by his own device of the naturalistic fallacy, he concluded that one could not find out about goodness through any sort of investigation and inquiry concerning things in the real world. Rather, goodness is something that one can know only by intuiting it. For that matter, it is not even a property of things in the ordinary sense at all, but rather a "non-natural" property, as he called it. Little wonder, then, that thinkers who followed Moore carried this argument one step further and insisted that goodness is not a property at all. And though different ones meant different things by this, they all seemed to agree pretty much that when we call things "good," we are not thereby attributing to these same things any sort of feature or characteristic that may be taken to be actually present in them as they are in themselves and in reality. But if goodness is thus not to be found in the real things of the world, then it becomes difficult to see just how ethics can ever make good its claims to being a legitimate body of knowledge. Not only that, but there would not seem to be any real warrant or basis in fact for those everyday moral judgments which we pass on people of the like of Sir Walter Elliott or Nightingale.

Eliminate the naturalistic fallacy, though, and all these consequences that are so embarrassing and provide so many difficulties for present-day ethics just disappear altogether. And while, so far as the argument of this present paper goes, we are still far from having established what the good is, much less that it is that at which all things aim, still may we not hope that at least some of the barriers to carrying out such a properly ethical investigation have been removed? Perhaps it may once more be possible to do ethics in the rather more classical mode of a properly and genuinely cognitive

enterprise directed toward discovering and learning what the differences between good and bad, and right and wrong, really are. Exit meta-ethics, and re-enter ethics!