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A new twist in secular moral philosophy, and its implications for Christian ethics and apologetics

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One of the most distinctive ways in which thoughtful Christians differ from the secular world is in their understanding of the nature of moral values, guidelines and decisions. Whatever the details of a Christian view of morality, woven into the reasoning somewhere inevitably are ideas concerning God: for instance, that our will should be in accord with His will (Mt 7.21, I Pt 4.2, I Jn 2.17).

On the other hand, moral philosophy as taught in most universities and published in most professional works is very different in its approach. As the Oxford philosopher Bernard Williams writes, "most modern ethical works, including this one" espouse a view of ethics "to be understood in worldly terms, without reference to God or any transcendental authority".¹ This is not a mere oversight on the part of professional moral philosophers, however. They have provided reasoned arguments for over three hundred years as to why the idea of God should be left out of an explanation of right and wrong.

Christians are faced with important and continuing challenges, then, from the arena of moral philosophy. If responding to these challenges seems more like apologetics than ethics, this merely highlights the close relationship that should exist between the two. Our morals relate to how we are to run our lives; if God is irrelevant here, for what else would He be relevant? Therefore, rather than withdrawing in silence, or else capitulating to secularisation, a response of serious consideration and interaction with differing views of morality seems necessary to the continued vitality of Christian ethics. In addition, it is simply more in line with the Christian mission on earth (Mt 5.13-16).

The particular challenge to be introduced here is the result of a new trend in secular moral philosophy which arose in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a trend which reanimates and redefines old objections to the Christian way of thinking about morality. To put this trend into perspective one must look first to a certain thread in the history of philosophy.

Ethical naturalism

The most common alternative to a view of morality that bears some relation to God and the supernatural is, not surprisingly, called *naturalism*. For most ethical philosophers (but excluding some followers of Aristotle and Aquinas), naturalism requires that science be the

source for our knowledge about morality, including its purpose and, perhaps indirectly, the nature of its guidelines. This is understandable, given that science is the means used to obtain information about nature, or the naturalistic.

Until recently, Christian apologists and ethicists might have been justified in assuring themselves that a naturalistic view of morality was flawed because of something called the “naturalistic fallacy”. Since science gives us only factual information (what *is*), whereas morality deals with values (what *ought to be*), isn't there a gulf between the two that prevents a naturalistic view of morality from going anywhere? In the seventeenth century David Hume presaged this argument when he criticised moral reasoning that contains several premises in the form of “is” statements, but then, subtly, a conclusion with an “ought” statement.² That this reasoning is fallacious is now called “Hume's Law” and is still widely accepted as providing a needed check to sloppy logic. This regulation by no means challenged naturalism seriously, however; Hume himself was a thorough naturalist about morality. Not until the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in 1903 did the “naturalistic fallacy” make its dramatic appearance.³ Moore and others after him claimed that because of the distinction between facts and values, any definition of a moral term such as “good” must itself contain other moral or evaluative terms. However, since science deals with nonmoral, factual information, it seemed impossible to provide any naturalistic definition for moral terms. To attempt such a definition was to commit this fallacy. Moore's discussion shaped much of twentieth-century philosophising about ethics, and naturalism remained in doubt as a view of morality.

The challenge: ethical naturalism rejuvenated

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, certain developments in the philosophy of mind and epistemology facilitated a new kind of naturalism, one which is immune to the naturalistic fallacy as G. E. Moore proposed it and even as later philosophers such as R. M. Hare and Simon Blackburn modified it. The older way of presenting naturalism (to which some nevertheless still adhere) had been a matter of definitions, of semantics. Hedonism was considered fallacious by Moore because it defined “good”

in terms of “pleasure”, and the first is a moral term whereas the second is nonmoral.

The new way of presenting naturalism, however, is based not on moral terms having certain definitions or meanings, but rather on empirical evidence. For example, is there evidence that what we humans consider good is in fact what is pleasurable to us? If so, a naturalist would claim, goodness and pleasure may be closely related in one of two ways. First, they may be exactly the same thing, even though in practice we may use the words “good” and “pleasure” in different ways and with different meanings. This alternative is often called *reductionism*. The second possibility is that goodness might simply be a natural and necessary property of pleasure, something like the way wetness is always a property of H₂O. This alternative is called *supervenience*. These two classes make up the main body of the theories in the rejuvenated field of naturalistic moral philosophy.⁴ So, no longer does the adherence to a naturalistic view of morality mean that moral terms are being defined in nonmoral (scientific, factual) terms. Critics of ethical naturalism must therefore resist the temptation to wield the naturalistic fallacy like a cudgel, bringing it down upon every view that links scientific facts and moral values. Because of the way the new theories are presented, they do not commit the naturalistic fallacy.

An implication of this naturalistic revival for Christian ethics is, of course, that there is a new basis for the old naturalist claim that God is unnecessary or even harmful to an understanding of morality. A related implication for Christian apologetics is that there is a fresh emphasis behind objections to the idea that morality is an indicator of the supernatural, or points to God.⁵

A Christian response

There are complex theoretical debates concerning the new naturalism which philosophers began in the early 1990's. For the Christian, however, the outcome of these debates is not crucial, for ethical naturalism as a whole, including both classes of the new form, has a very general and simple problem.

Naturalism operates by constraining the way its adherents see the world. With regard to morality, naturalism restricts the kind of information that can be used to explain moral guidelines and moral judgements. In particular, the infor-

mation must bear a relation to science, the study of natural phenomena, rather than to some transcendental or supernatural source. Whether or not this view is adequate is said to depend on whether the moral guidelines people espouse can be sufficiently explained under this restriction.

The problem with naturalism, however, is that just because *an* explanation of *some* set of moral guidelines has been offered, this in no way suggests that the particular set is the *correct* one or the explanation *complete*. There are two parts to this response, relating to correctness and completeness respectively.

An explanation offered by naturalistic moral philosophy is always based on a description of someone's or some group's actual moral beliefs or feelings. It is a truly scientific approach, utilising description rather than prescription even when it comes to something so prescriptive as morality. The question that presents itself here, of course, is: whose morality will be chosen for examination and explanation? There is nothing in the naturalistic world-view that allows one to adjudicate between two coherent sets of beliefs in this regard. Even where there is great similarity among people in their positions on moral issues, these positions are often held for very different reasons. Naturalistic philosophy ignores the question of *what should we believe is right and good*, except for establishing consistency among those beliefs, and instead focuses on the much easier question of *how do we describe what people think is right and good*. The scientific approach of the naturalist is limited to description and refinement of morality as it is instantiated in particular people; and yet this role seems to fall far short of what moral philosophy could be. It is certainly the case that a consistent set of guidelines can be described from a naturalistic perspective which some people will call "morality". For instance, one could live so as to maximise the amount of pleasure or minimise the amount of pain experienced in one's community. Even if most people were found to adhere to this view, and even if it were not inconsistent internally or with any natural facts, it would still remain to be shown whether that set of guidelines is the correct one and why, or even whether, there is any correct one. Here we need *evaluation* of worldviews, not mere *description*, and naturalism cannot help us much

here insofar as it is tethered to descriptive science. A Christian view of morality, on the other hand, permits evaluation of views and adjudication among entire sets of moral guidelines, according to theological principles such as love and God's purpose for humanity. A non-Christian might object to these transcendental principles, but once alternatives are offered, one is no longer acting under a strictly naturalistic framework.

Let us imagine, on the other hand, that all the differences that exist among people with respect to their moral values are found to be nothing more than the results of inconsistency within the views of particular individuals. Perhaps only one set of moral beliefs is consistent internally and with all known natural facts, even if this has not been widely realised. Even then, where moral philosophy need not adjudicate among coherent sets of beliefs because there is only one, naturalism still has a problem. Additional explanation might be possible beyond the point where naturalistic explanation of morality must cease. Moral values might have something naturalistic in common, and yet it might be too much of a short-cut to claim that the thing they have in common is all that can be said about morality. Put another way, two phenomena may be indistinguishable on one level, and yet have two different extensions or explanations on another level.

C. S. Lewis once (in another context) called this situation "transposition", and described it as the necessary result when something is adapted from a richer medium (such as the supernatural) to a poorer medium (such as the natural).⁶ For a natural illustration, a certain set of sensory phenomena such as gooseflesh, increased heart rate, and increased blood flow to muscles and brain, can be elicited by any one of such diverse emotions as cold, fear and pleasure. Because of this, one cannot describe an emotional state based solely on the set of sensory phenomena observed; more than one explanation is possible since many emotions can be transposed into a single set of sensory phenomena. Likewise, a naturalistic explanation of morality does not settle the question of whether there is an extension to a supernatural level, and what the nature of that might be. For example, suppose that natural science could describe the human feeling of inner peace or "well-being", and sup-

pose that this feeling was found to be produced whenever someone does or witnesses something they consider right or good. This might be considered an overwhelming vindication of the naturalistic perspective on morality, but in reality it would be nothing of the sort. Certainly one of the possible explanations is that moral goodness is nothing more than a reflection of our peaceful feelings. However, other explanations are just as plausible, where this feeling is only part of what it means to be right or good, or perhaps the feeling is just a by-product of something which is right or good for another reason altogether. Surely the matter of which alternative is the correct one deserves attention, but it can receive none from a naturalistic viewpoint. Far from rendering a supernatural level of explanation of morality implausible, naturalistic philosophy just ignores it from the start.

Conclusion

Christianity continues to retain its vitality and the integrity of its central truths after two thousand years of the machinations of philosophy, the last three hundred years of which have been increasingly atheistic. In the same way, the Christian view of morality as bearing an important relation to God and His purpose for humanity continues to remain intact despite intense scrutiny and new philosophical trends. In fact, since naturalistic philosophy is increasingly committed to understanding the natural aspects of moral discourse and practice, there is a real possibility that this enterprise could actually enrich Christian ethics and apologetics. No level of explanation is irrelevant to the Christian, even if it by itself is incomplete. One must then go further, however, by discovering precisely where the naturalistic world-view falls short in its portrayal of moral value and goodness, in order to remedy that deficiency from the holistic, tenable and enduring perspective of the Christian faith.

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²Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. H. D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, 1948), III.i.1.

³Moore, G.E., *Principia Ethica*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), ch.1.

⁴Examples of the two types respectively are: Brandt, Richard B, 'Science as a basis for moral theory', in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 200-14; and Brink, D, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵See Kreeft, Peter and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 72, for a brief exposition of this apologetic idea.

⁶Lewis, C.S. (1944), 'Transposition'. In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. W.Hooper (NY: Macmillan, 1980), 54-73.

Books for Further Reading

Singer, P, ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). (particularly chapters 8 & 37)

Sorell, Tom, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science* (London: Routledge, 1991)

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A more detailed description of naturalism in moral philosophy is forthcoming by the author in the journal *Ethics*.

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