DEITY AND MORALITY

With regard to the Naturalistic Fallacy

Burton F. Porter

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

DEITY AND MORALITY

This page intentionally left blank

DEITY AND MORALITY

With regard to the Naturalistic Fallacy

BURTON F. PORTER

Volume 31

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1968

This edition first published in 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1968 George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-65969-7 (Set)
eISBN: 978-0-203-52926-3 (Set)
ISBN: 978-0-415-82218-3 (Volume 31)
eISBN: 978-0-203-53399-4 (Volume 31)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer
The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

DEITY AND MORALITY

With regard to the Naturalistic Fallacy

BURTON F. PORTER

London
GEORGE ALLEN AND UNWIN LTD
RUSKIN HOUSE MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1968

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, 1956, no portion may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Inquiries should be made to the publishers

© *George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
in 12 on 13 point Bembo type
BY UNWIN BROTHERS LTD
WOKING AND LONDON

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to tender my gratitude to the following individuals who served as catalysts for numerous ideas expressed in this work.

Professor Gilbert Ryle, Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in the University of Oxford, Professor R. M. Hare, White's Professor of Moral Philosophy and Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, the Rt Rev. Ian Ramsey, Bishop of Durham, Mr Basil Mitchell, Tutor in Philosophy, Keble College, Oxford, Professor A. D. Woozley, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of St Andrews, and Rev. Professor N. H. G. Robinson, Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of St Andrews.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS *page*

I. THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY 11
A. *The Nature of the Fallacy* 11
B. *The Application of the Fallacy* 14

II. DAVID HUME 25
A. *Hume's Philosophical Position* 25
B. *Hume's Theological Position* 32

III. DIVINE COMMAND, GOODNESS AND OBEDIENCE 42
A. *Hume's Fallacy and Theological Naturalism* 42
B. *Kierkegaard's 'Paradox of Faith'* 48

IV. DEITY AND MORALITY 58
A. *Mediaeval Attitudes* 58
B. *Contemporary Thoughts* 64

V. THE DOCTRINE OF INEFFABILITY 73
A. *Mystical Knowledge* 73
B. *Rudolph Otto's 'Numinous'* 84

VI. RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND POETIC LANGUAGE 90
A. *Revelation and Inspiration* 90
B. *Myth and Images* 100

VII. THE 'LOGICAL PARALLELS' APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE 110
A. *Anomalistic Language and Analogy* 110
B. *Religious Language: Its Logical Behaviour and Ontological Status* 111

VIII. 'GOD IS GOOD': AN ANALYTIC PROPOSITION 121
A. *The Essential Goodness of God* 121
B. *Connotation and Denotation* 126

IX. THE CONNOTATION OF PROPER NAMES 134
A. *Proper Names and Descriptive Terms* 134
B. *Proper Names and General Meaning* 139

	page
X. THE CONCEPT OF GOD	151
A. *Comparative Conceptions of Deity*	152
B. *Analytic Propositions: Real or Verbal*	156
APPENDIX: AN ANALYSIS OF THE KEY TERMS INVOLVED	159
A. *'Is', 'Fact' and 'Description'*	159
B. *'Ought', 'Value' and 'Normative'*	164
INDEX	172

Chapter I

THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

A: THE NATURE OF THE FALLACY

The criticism which has since been labelled the naturalistic fallacy was first described by the eighteenth-century empircist David Hume, in a small but celebrated paragraph in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. This passage reads as follows:

'In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a god, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but it is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the reader; and am persuaded that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.'[1]

The standard interpretation of Hume's point is that non-moral premises cannot logically entail a moral conclusion. It is a common procedure in many moral systems to begin with statements

of fact concerning God's commands, human behaviour, or the natural world. Then it is maintained that *because* of these facts men ought to act in a particular way; because something is the case certain consequences follow for human conduct. Nowell-Smith, in outlining this fallacy, says that the answers to practical questions are deduced or derived from statements about what men are and in fact do.[2] This is judged to be illegitimate reasoning since the conclusion of the syllogism contains something which is not in the premises, namely, a moral prescription. The introduction of an *ought* in the conclusion is invalid unless *oughts* (rather than facts) appear in the premises.

Now A. C. MacIntyre holds that Hume pronounced this fallacy with tongue-in-cheek; that he never intended it to be considered seriously. In support of this view he states '. . . if the current interpretation of Hume's views on *is* and *ought* is correct, then the first breach of Hume's law was committed by Hume; that is, the development of Hume's own moral theory does not square with what he is taken to assert about *is* and *ought*'. He argues further that 'it would be very odd if Hume did affirm the logical irrelevance of facts to moral judgments for the whole difference in atmosphere—and it is very marked—between his discussions of morality and those of, for example, Hare and Nowell-Smith springs from his interest in the facts of morality. His work is full of anthropological and sociological remarks . . .'[3]

I am inclined to the view that Hume was sincere in his belief that the passage from *is* to *ought* is logically barricaded, but that this did not prevent him from occasionally committing the blunder which he himself described. However, that is neither here nor there. For our present purposes, I think we can adopt the following position: whether or not Hume was sincere in claiming to unearth a basic fallacy, and whether or not, assuming it to be valid, he stands charged with it, the very fact that numerous others have seized upon it as the disclosure of an authentic fallacy is sufficient justification for regarding it seriously. Thus we can take Hume's statement as a prototype of the view which countless others maintain even if Hume did not.

However, let us now return to the main stream of our inquiry.

Unfortunately for our task, Hume was not the only philosopher who is historically attributed with presenting this fallacy. A finding similar to that of Hume and actually coined *the naturalistic fallacy*, was repeatedly mentioned by G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*, in his polemical passages against naturalistic and metaphysical systems of ethics. Witness the following extracts:

'The naturalistic fallacy consists in the contention that good means nothing but some simple or complex notion that can be defined in terms of natural qualities.'[4]

In another section of the book he states the fallacy in greater detail:

'A mistake of this simple kind has commonly been made about *good*. 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. And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. 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*.'[5]

There can be little doubt that a certain similarity exists between these 'fallacies', both of which bear the label the *naturalistic fallacy*, however, some writers have supposed that they are identical. That is to say, it has been maintained that Moore's naturalistic fallacy is the same as that to which Hume pointed of attempting to derive or deduce an *ought* from an *is*. (Iris Murdoch seems to make this mistake in *The Nature of Metaphysics*.) This is a confusion, although of a forgivable sort since it is encouraged by Moore's misnomer of the fallacy which he elucidated. Moore, in fact, admits this point, that his title is inappropriate, but replies 'I do not care about the name: what I do care about is

the fallacy'. This reply, however, is not sufficient justification for what is in effect a highly misleading label.

Moore's version actually has both a broader application and an O. Henry twist. The point it makes is not against naturalists *per se*, but against any theory which equates or syncretizes any two notions logically distinct. As A. R. White points out, 'If following Moore, we divide all notions into natural and non-natural, there are mathematically four varieties of this failure to distinguish two notions, namely, by identifying (1) a natural with another natural notion, (2) a non-natural with another non-natural notion, (3) a natural with a non-natural notion, (4) a non-natural with a natural notion. Since Moore did consider *good* to be a non-natural notion, case (1) could not arise for *good*; and since case (2) is the identification of two non-natural notions, it would be misleading to give a fallacy committed here the name *naturalistic*.' In this way, he would have to limit the *name* 'naturalistic fallacy about good' to (3) and (4). This is the fallacy which Hume thought of as the confusion of *is* and *ought* or vice versa. . . . But to narrow the fallacy to (3) and (4) gives a misleading picture of Moore's method.'[6] Moore bears out this point when he states: 'It should be observed that the fallacy by reference to which I define Metaphysical Ethics is the same in kind; and I give it but one name, the naturalistic fallacy.'[7] And at another point, 'Even if (goodness) were a natural object, that would not alter the nature of the fallacy nor diminish its importance one whit.'[8]

In this work we shall concentrate upon Hume's version of the fallacy, i.e. the alleged impossibility of deriving value judgments from natural facts.

B: THE APPLICATION OF THE FALLACY

If the naturalistic fallacy is in fact a genuine fallacy in moral theory, then an extremely powerful and damaging idea must be confronted. For if moral philosophers are logically precluded from deriving moral values from naturalistic sources, that is deriving an *ought* from an *is*, values from facts, or evaluative

conclusions from descriptive premises, then ethical theories cannot rest upon the descriptive facts of experience; they must be in some sense autonomous.

Moral judgments and prescriptions are certainly on a firmer footing when some aspect of public experience can be brought forward to serve as justification. If a moralist can say that *X* is desirable because it is desired, he is in a stronger position than the individual who declares that mankind possesses an intuitive assurance that *X* is a moral end. The naturalistic hedonist, for example, can point to such things as the catholicity of pleasure-seeking behaviours among men and the lower animals, the identification of the pleasurable and the good in numerous contexts, the customary presupposition of the legislator that pleasure should be fostered, etc. When challenged to support his contention that pleasure ought to be valued, the naturalistic hedonist can point to any or all of these facts.

The non-naturalist seems in a feeble position by comparison because he is confined to appeals to an arid rationalism or a vaguely-defined intuitive apprehension of goodness. Not only is the descriptive warrant more persuasive to what James calls the 'ingrained naturalism and materialism of mind', but it places ethics on a scientific footing. It may not be possible to achieve the certainty of the geometrician that Descartes desired, or the exactitude and precision of the physical sciences that Bentham sought, but at least the premises of moral syllogisms could be established by scientific means. All moral principles could discover their natural roots in data about the universe.

However, if the naturalistic fallacy is a legitimate and universally applicable criticism then all of these stable foundations are shattered. The naturalists are logically prevented from drawing upon the principal source of their strength.

Let us look briefly at the varieties of naturalistic ethical theories which are directly affected by this issue.

(*a*) In the first place the naturalistic hedonist is severely affected by this logical difficulty, for he declares that because it is an undeniable fact of experience that men do pursue pleasure and seek to avoid pain, we are justified in concluding that human

beings should pursue pleasure and avoid physical or psychological pain.

To numerous hedonists as well as non-hedonists it appeared obvious that the chief concern of mankind is the securing of pleasure, satisfaction, or happiness. Since men seek only that which they value, and value only that which they seek, it could be inferred that men do in fact regard the pleasurable as the good. The hedonist could say further that they are fully warranted in this assumption; what is directly and generally regarded as good *is* good. Unless we embrace a doctrine of the inherent depravity of man, the position that our normal tendencies can be assumed to rightly direct our steps appears very persuasive.

To the Cyrenaics the momentary, intense pleasures which men pursued were to be preferred. The inward flow of particular sensual pleasures should remain unimpeded by paltry considerations such as dishonour or discomfort, because the good life was composed of just these intense moments.

> 'Come, fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring
> Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling:
> The Bird of Time has but a little way
> To flutter—and the Bird is on the Wing.'[9]

To the Epicureans the pursuit of pleasure is both natural and inevitable—two facts which provide a base for the doctrine that the attainment of maximum pleasure is the moral end of life. Although eschewing the Cyrenaic insistence upon the desirability of intense sensual pleasures, and positing *ataraxia* or tranquil happiness as the supreme good, nevertheless the central hedonistic values are retained. A correct moral inference seemed possible and preeminently sensible from the fact that all living creatures have a natural impulse to take delight in pleasure to the proposition that pleasure ought to be pursued. 'We call pleasure the beginning and end of the blessed life. For we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us.'[10] Or again: 'every pleasure because of its natural kinship to us is good even as every pain also is an evil'.[11]

The Utilitarians in turn although eliminating the objectionably egoistic features of Greek hedonism by universalizing their ethical principles, nevertheless based their ethical hedonism on psychological hedonism. Jeremy Bentham clearly states this relationship in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation:*

'Nature has placed mankind under the guidance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects are fastened to their throne.'[12]

John Stuart Mill's bald statement of this connection is as follows:

'. . . the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do desire it. . . . No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good. . . .'[13]

Both Bentham and Mill therefore can be seen to embrace the principle that human behaviour is always motivated by pleasure and they employ this as the logical basis for their Utilitarian prescriptions. Like Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, the pleasurable and the good are thought to be identical.

(*b*) In a similar manner the Stoics, who were the arch intellectual rivals of the Epicureans, claimed to have discovered their values full-blown in certain natural facts. Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus all claimed that man could achieve the good by discovering what nature sought and ordering his life in accordance with it. The natural was thought equivalent to the good. ' "Life in agreement with nature" (or living agreeably to nature) was the end of life.' . . .