

**An Appraisal of Naturalism in Contemporary Meta-Ethics**

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None of the following has been submitted previously for any degree or other qualification to this or any other university or institution; nor has any part of it been contributed by another party than the author, excepting passages which are enclosed in quotation marks and referenced by footnote; nor has any part of it been published.

## **Dedication**

To our friends who comprised 'The Recreators',  
with whom the inspiration for this thesis was given its first expression

Hold thou the good: define it well;  
For fear divine Philosophy  
Should push beyond her mark...

-Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, liii.

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## **An Appraisal of Naturalism in Contemporary Meta-Ethics**

### **Dissertation Abstract**

*The view that ethics is a discipline which can operate within the constraints of naturalism, whereby all principles, properties and terms are accessible to natural science, can be subdivided into logical, semantic, and synthetic. Logical naturalists defend the naturalist claim with an appeal to the validity of the logical progression from premises without moral terms to conclusions with them. Semantic naturalists defend it with an appeal to an analytical equivalence between certain nonmoral and moral expressions. Both of these approaches have been thoroughly criticised in this century. Relatively recently, naturalists have begun to defend their naturalist thesis not from either of these perspectives, but with a direct appeal to synthetic facts which can be employed or referred to in scientific explanations. Effective critique of naturalist theories of this newer type involves examination of both the scientific and the ethical claims made. One such synthetic naturalist approach to ethics is the evolutionary naturalism proposed by Michael Ruse. Critique based on a thorough examination of both the science of sociobiology and the moral philosophy involved in Ruse's theory yields informative conclusions, rendering his theory implausible from both perspectives. In light of this case study, a general strategy of argument can be developed which has potential for critique of other naturalistic ethical theories as well. This strategy is the Argument from Moral Experience, which operates by comparing descriptive claims regarding the fundamental nature of morality that are presented or implied by ethical theories, with the fundamental nature of morality as it is actually experienced. If arguments of this type are sound, they can be used in an exploration of whether or not naturalism is an appropriate perspective for morality to be understood and explained properly.*

# An Appraisal of Naturalism in Contemporary Meta-Ethics

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- B. Varying Levels of Justification of the Naturalist Claim
- C. The Relationship Between These Levels

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# An Appraisal of Naturalism in Contemporary Meta-Ethics

## Specific Outline

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**An Appraisal of Naturalism in Contemporary Meta-Ethics**

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning of the seventeenth century Sir Francis Bacon mourned that science in his time was so embryonic that it could not even distinguish between what is good to wish for in life and what is not; but he spoke of a future where a complete science would remedy this situation.<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later, René Descartes, delighted with recent scientific discoveries, was led to assert that 'all things, to the knowledge of which man is competent, are mutually connected in the same way', and so the same method is sufficient for understanding everything we are able to understand.<sup>3</sup> He wrote of 'morals' as one of the most important areas that would someday be elucidated by the growing science.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of that century, John Locke too came to the conclusion that the new science would provide the keys for understanding morality, and explained something of what the new scientific ethics might look like when it was developed.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of 'science' has certainly been scrutinised and heavily debated since those early modern years. Some of today's prominent scientists and philosophers hold ideas about the nature of science which are

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<sup>1</sup>Cross-referencing in this thesis follows the following rule: capitalised Roman numerals refer to chapters, capitalised letters to sections, and Arabic numerals and lower-case letters to subsections. (E.g. 'see IV.B.3a').

<sup>2</sup>Bacon (1603), Preface.

<sup>3</sup>Descartes (1637), 16.

<sup>4</sup>ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup>The general belief is asserted in Locke (1689), IV.iii.18-20; the outline of his ethical theory is proposed in II.xxi.31-47.

very different from those of the early pioneers;<sup>6</sup> whilst others describe the significant and meaningful continuity which has been maintained through the centuries.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the relationship between the science of Bacon's day and that of our own, we are nearing four hundred years since the first of the confident prophecies above, and it may be interesting today to discuss the same issue in our own terms. Can science (however it might be understood today) provide all the raw materials which ethics requires in order to describe morality?<sup>8</sup> This thesis will be an examination of this question and a contribution to the search for an answer.

Such an exploration could only be helpful, however, if it is sensitive to the historical backdrop of such questions at this point in the history of philosophy. We are presently at the end of a century during which this type of question has been asked and answered by a great number of philosophers. Sensitivity to this history will affect at least two aspects of an exploration in this area: the terminology used, and the arguments presented.

## **A. Terminology**

The Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore sought to pin a label on a certain group of those who believed that science could provide the key to understanding morality. In his seminal work *Principia Ethica* he elaborated upon their view, which he held to be erroneous:

'Ethics is an empirical or positive science: its conclusions could be all established by means of empirical observation

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<sup>6</sup>See Feyerabend (1995) for an account of the divergence of modern philosophy of science from the prominent seventeenth century thinkers. More specifically, Pickering (1992) documents some recent arguments against the early notion of science being an activity of 'reading from nature'.

<sup>7</sup>e.g. Stephen Hawking (1993), Preface; and Peter Medawar (1984).

<sup>8</sup>In this thesis (except when representing the ideas of others), 'ethics' will be synonymous with 'moral philosophy', or the philosophical enquiry into morality and moral issues, whereas 'morality' will be used for the actual process or capacity of contemplating moral issues and making moral decisions.

and induction... This method consists in substituting for "good" some one property of a natural object or of a collection of natural objects; and in thus replacing Ethics by some one of the natural sciences... By "nature", then, I do mean and have meant that which is the subject-matter of the natural sciences and also of psychology.<sup>9</sup>

Moore therefore concluded that the concept of 'natural sciences', and thus 'nature', was central to this view, so he categorised it as 'naturalism'.<sup>10</sup> For Moore, and for many philosophers before and since who have used the term, 'naturalism' means other things in addition to the bare notion that science provides the necessary raw materials for doing ethics; some of these are implied in this very passage.<sup>11</sup> But this one root aspect of his understanding of 'naturalism' does by itself provide a safe and appropriately inclusive understanding of the term, in the opinions of several who claim to be providing overviews of modern philosophy. For instance, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* describes naturalism in general as dependent on the 'natural',<sup>12</sup> which is defined as 'accessible to investigation by the natural sciences'.<sup>13</sup> When applied to ethics, then, naturalism becomes the idea that any ethical property or term is 'one that can be employed or referred to in natural scientific explanations'.<sup>14</sup> In a detailed history of naturalism, Philip Kitcher describes it as the attempt to use 'science to address the great questions of epistemology and ethics'.<sup>15</sup> 'Towards *Fin de Siècle* Ethics:

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<sup>9</sup>Moore (1903), 39-40.

<sup>10</sup>ibid. Unless otherwise stated, 'naturalism' in this thesis will be assumed to be applying to ethics alone (*ethical naturalism*). Other applications exist, the most common being *epistemological naturalism* (see Kitcher (1992)) and *metaphysical naturalism* (see Papineau (1993)).

<sup>11</sup>For example, neither the claim that the term 'good' must be substituted by a natural property, nor the claim that ethics is substituted by a single natural science, is entailed by the idea that science encompasses ethics. With respect to the former claim, one could believe that science renders ethics ungrounded in any properties. With respect to the latter, one could believe that ethics is not encompassed by a single science but is a field which incorporates the conclusions of many sciences.

<sup>12</sup>Lacey (1995a), 604.

<sup>13</sup>Lacey (1995), 603.

<sup>14</sup>Crisp (1995), 606.

<sup>15</sup>Kitcher (1992), 53. The relationship between epistemological and ethical naturalism is dealt with briefly in I.A, and I.B.2a.

Some Trends', another comprehensive paper which describes and assesses twentieth-century approaches to ethics, assumes this understanding of the concept as well.<sup>16</sup>

On this understanding of naturalism, the term is defined with respect to science. Another way of defining 'naturalism' is for 'nature' to be the fundamental idea instead, such that 'naturalism is something to do with nature'.<sup>17</sup> This route might be better because it does not beg any questions about the content of nature or the extent of its accessibility to science, for the term 'nature' admits of a great latitude of interpretation. In fact, one study (and this before the bulk of this century's debate on naturalism!) distinguished thirty-nine definitions of 'nature', twenty-seven of them explicitly normative in a way relevant to ethics.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps moral philosophers such as John McDowell and Peter Simpson, who have conceptions of 'nature' which are larger (to differing extents) than that portion of the world that science presents to us, should nevertheless bear the label 'naturalism'. This, in addition to being an etymologically more respectable move, would prevent the above philosophers from being construed misleadingly as 'supernaturalists' or 'nonnaturalists', when both of them firmly insist on the *naturalness* of goodness in some sense.<sup>19</sup> The imprecision of a definition of 'naturalism' in terms of 'nature' should perhaps be endured rather than evaded. But, since this thesis deals with the prospect of science providing the key to understanding morality, and since so many significant comprehensive works in recent years have used 'naturalism' to represent this prospect, such terminology will be retained here. Any

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<sup>16</sup>Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992), 165-180.

<sup>17</sup>Ruse (1995), 1. Ruse does later become more precise.

<sup>18</sup>Lovejoy and Boas (1935), 447-456.

<sup>19</sup>See P. Simpson (1987), pp. 1, 5 for his definition of naturalism, and ch. 7 for his broad understanding of the natural; and McDowell (1995a) for a criticism of a definition of naturalism which is tied to science.

conclusions, therefore, cannot be seen to relate to the question of whether goodness is natural, unless 'natural' is defined in terms of science.

One idea often linked with naturalism is cognitivism.<sup>20</sup> Cognitivism is the belief that there is a primary cognitive element to morality (that moral judgments are capable of truth and falsity).<sup>21</sup> Noncognitivism, then, is its opposite, namely that morality does not primarily involve something cognitive (that moral judgments are incapable of truth and falsity).<sup>22</sup> Although it is true that many naturalists have been cognitivists in the past, many contemporary naturalistic theories of ethics hold that morality does not primarily involve a cognitive aspect. Philosopher Peter Railton has made the point that 'One can be a cognitivist without being a naturalist (as, for example, the Intuitionists were) or a naturalist without being a cognitivist (as, for example, some contemporary expressivists are)'.<sup>23</sup> If we were to presuppose cognitivism at this point, simply because many naturalists have been cognitivists, this would ignore the great variety of theses which have been produced by those naturalists who are not cognitivists. For example, Michael Ruse called his recent book *Evolutionary Naturalism*, and in it disagreed with theorists who insist on truth and falsity in ethics, instead saying that 'No ethical statement is true'.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this exploration will cover moral philosophies of both cognitivist and noncognitivist persuasions.

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<sup>20</sup>Among those who have assumed that naturalism involves cognitivism are Moore (1903), ch. 2, esp. pp.37-39; Mackie (1977), 32-33; Mayo (1986), ch.3; P. Simpson (1987), 1; and Pigden (1991), 421.

<sup>21</sup>Pigden (1991), 421; Harrison (1995a), 625.

<sup>22</sup>Some, such as Hare (1989a), 96, prefer to utilise the distinction of descriptivism/non-descriptivism rather than cognitivism/non-cognitivism, which is logical or conceptual instead of epistemological.

<sup>23</sup>Railton (1993), 315. This point is also made by David Wiggins (1993), 301.

<sup>24</sup>Ruse (1995), 271.

These issues, as well as others,<sup>25</sup> are potential sources of ambiguity in an understanding of naturalism, and will result in the fact that not all philosophers cited in this thesis will agree on the definition or boundaries of naturalism. Indeed, some notable critiques of 'naturalism' have actually been composed by thinkers who themselves are within the bounds of naturalism as defined here. This does not mean that their arguments are inconsistent; it simply requires a study of naturalism to be meticulous. There are several varieties of naturalism, but thanks to much recent work the domain is capable of precise organisation. The terms and arguments of avowed naturalists must be examined in the light of any relevant distinctions in order to place them correctly. Critics of naturalism must be examined in this way as well, which will clarify the ranges over which their critiques are applicable. All of this will be undertaken in the first two chapters and applied in the remainder of the thesis. Potential for ambiguity in the term 'naturalism', then, rather than being an obstacle to philosophy, can aid it by acting as a reminder of the necessity of rigour and care.

The present study can be seen as a description of ethical naturalism and a contribution to its critique. Naturalist theories, by definition, hold ethics to utilise only principles, properties and terms that are 'accessible to investigation by the natural sciences',<sup>26</sup> and are therefore based on 'the kinds of facts that science could countenance'.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, if the anachronism can be overlooked, Bacon, Descartes, and Locke may be interpreted as believing that naturalism was the proper way for ethics to operate, and that someone someday would prove this by

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<sup>25</sup>Other distinctions are between reductive and non-reductive naturalism (see I.B.3); analytical (logical and semantic) and synthetic naturalism (see I.B); and *a priori* and *a posteriori* means of justifying naturalist claims (see I.A, B.2-3). Still another is the distinction between methodological and substantive naturalism, which will not be elaborated here but is described first in Railton (1989), 155-57, and then in more detail in (1993) and (1995), 86-7. It may suffice here to say that the definition opted for in this thesis is intended to encompass both sides of all four of these distinctions.

<sup>26</sup>Lacey (1995), 603.

<sup>27</sup>Pigden (1991), 422.

elucidating a truly naturalistic ethic. Of course, this connection across four centuries of thought is vague because clarification of the key term 'science' has been avoided. Because this notion is so varied in its meanings for philosophers today,<sup>28</sup> a philosophical definition will not be provided here. In general it could be described as the practice of describing and explaining the workings of the physical universe through the production of theories, which are supported by empirical evidence and coherence with other such results. It will be assumed that science is actually a conglomeration of many disciplines, each of which considers a particular area of the universe or level of explanation and applies similar kinds of criteria and methodology.<sup>29</sup> Instead of offering a particular, and therefore limiting, philosophical definition here, two things will be done during the course of the thesis. First, during discussion of naturalism in general, it will be assumed that the philosophers involved have unproblematic understandings of the nature of science. Views on the nature or extent of science *per se* will not be examined or challenged. Rather, views on the particularities of the connection between science and ethics will be the focus for the discussion. Second, when discussion concentrates on a specific naturalist theory, the particular kinds of scientific information appealed to for support of the theory will be taken into consideration, rather than examining the theory on the basis of a general notion of 'science'. If the particular theorist makes certain claims about the nature of science, these will be considered as well,

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<sup>28</sup>A way into the immense literature on this subject is Hacking (1983), which describes what has been called the 'fruitful confusion of post-Kuhnian thought' (Feyerabend (1995), 809). Also see the references in n6 above. The classic referred to is T. Kuhn (1962); for contrast see Popper (1959) and Nagel (1961).

<sup>29</sup>One relevant issue is the question of whether 'social science' is considered part of science. Sociological theories of ethics will not be examined in detail in this thesis, but will appear occasionally. Insofar as their proponents claim sociology to be a science, the issue will not be challenged here. Sociology, insofar as it is the description of the dynamics and statistics of cultures, is at least theoretically an empirical discipline and thus has potential for status as a science. The obstacles to objective conclusions could perhaps be characterized as 'practical difficulties' rather than 'intrinsic impossibility' (Nagel (1961), ch.15, esp. p.502).

so that the theory will be examined according to the particular theorist's conception of science where that is applicable. If and when this conception is controversial, it will be designated as such.

## **B. Arguments**

Sensitivity to the history of the issue of naturalism in ethics requires care not only in terminology, but also in the presentation of arguments. Various kinds of naturalism have been criticised vehemently in this century, and so no helpful examination of naturalistic theories can proceed blindly and assume that it is breaking new ground. This discussion will therefore begin with a more detailed exposition of naturalism, as well as an assessment of the scope of two prominent types of arguments which have been delivered during this century against naturalist theories. The first type of argument is often posed in terms of a dichotomy between 'is' and 'ought', and is of a logical nature: it claims that in light of certain conventions of logic, certain naturalist theories can be seen to be flawed. The second type of argument is often called the 'naturalistic fallacy'. It concentrates on semantics, or the meanings of words: it claims that the meanings of certain moral terms show many naturalist theories to be false. Given the limitations of these arguments' scopes, there may be a range of theories which lies beyond both criticisms; if this can be shown to be the case, theories in that range will be chosen to be discussed in the particular examination to follow. Consequently, this thesis will not primarily be a judgement as to the efficacy of famous arguments against naturalism; whether the 'is-ought' distinction and the 'naturalistic fallacy' are successful in their indictments is not the main issue here. The primary issues are the determination of the scope of those indictments, and a contribution to the effort of critical examination of

naturalist theories which evade those arguments, by claiming to operate on a different level than either logic or semantics.

After such an area of naturalism has been underscored, examination can proceed in the knowledge that the history of the discussion of naturalism has been properly taken into account. This examination will take place in a case study format. A naturalistic ethical theory of an evolutionary sort will be described and criticised in light of the interpretation of naturalism which was presented in the first half of the thesis. Reasons for choosing this particular scientific discipline, and the particular theory utilising this discipline, will be explained.

The critique offered in the case study will then be interpreted with the aim of producing a generalisable argument regarding naturalism. After any such argument has been recast in a general form, relevant implications will be drawn out. Then a suggestion will be made as to what the thesis's results taken together mean for naturalism and for moral philosophy as a whole.