

# Naturalist Fallacy

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## Naturalist Fallacy

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy, Ethics

### 1. Core Definition

The **Naturalist Fallacy** is a pivotal concept in moral philosophy that challenges the notion that something is inherently "good" simply because it is "natural," or conversely, that something is inherently "bad" because it is "unnatural." This fallacy arises from the mistaken attempt to derive ethical conclusions directly from factual or descriptive premises about the natural world or human nature. It posits that one cannot logically move from a statement of fact (an "is") to a statement of value (an "ought") without introducing a bridging premise that itself contains a value judgment. The essence of the fallacy lies in the unjustified leap from an observation about the world to a prescription for human behavior or a judgment of moral worth.

The fallacy is often invoked when individuals or groups seek to justify their beliefs or behaviors by appealing to what they perceive as natural. For instance, arguments suggesting that certain social structures, gender roles, or even dietary practices are morally right because they are "natural" exemplify this type of reasoning. The underlying assumption is that nature provides an infallible moral compass, and by merely observing its workings, one can deduce universal ethical principles. However, critics of the Naturalist Fallacy contend that the concept of "natural" is ambiguous and often loaded with pre-existing biases, making it an unreliable foundation for ethical claims. Furthermore, many aspects of the natural world, such as disease, suffering, and predation, are not typically considered "good" in a moral sense, highlighting the problematic nature of equating naturalness with goodness.

A crucial aspect of the Naturalist Fallacy highlighted in its initial formulation is the subjective extension of these beliefs. This means that individuals tend to project their personal feelings and preferences onto the concept of "naturalness," assuming that "what feels good or right is thus natural." This subjective interpretation can be particularly insidious, as it allows personal desires and inclinations to masquerade as objectively verifiable truths about the natural order. When individuals believe that whatever they personally feel is good and/or right is also necessarily proper and acceptable because it feels "natural," it can lead to a dangerous justification of self-serving or even harmful and deviant behaviors, as the moral imperative is derived not from reasoned ethical principles but from an uncritical acceptance of subjective experience labeled as natural.

### 2. Origins in G.E. Moore's Philosophy

The term **Naturalist Fallacy** was prominently introduced and critically examined by the British philosopher George Edward Moore (1873-1958) in his seminal 1903 work, *Principia Ethica*. Moore's primary aim in this work was to clarify the fundamental questions of ethics, particularly

concerning the definition of "good." He argued against the prevailing ethical theories of his time, which he categorized as "naturalistic," for attempting to define "good" in terms of some natural property, such as pleasure, utility, or even evolutionary fitness. Moore posited that "good" is a simple, non-natural, indefinable property, akin to the color yellow - it can be perceived but not broken down into more basic components.

Moore's critique was directed at various ethical naturalists who sought to reduce moral properties to empirical or metaphysical properties. For example, he challenged hedonistic utilitarianism, which defines good as pleasure, and evolutionary ethics, which equates good with what promotes survival or biological fitness. Moore contended that any attempt to define "good" by identifying it with a natural property commits the Naturalist Fallacy because it fails to capture the unique, irreducible nature of moral goodness. He argued that if "good" were truly identical to a natural property, then the statement "X is good" would merely be a tautology (e.g., "Pleasure is pleasure"), which he believed to be demonstrably false in ordinary moral discourse.

The significance of Moore's contribution lies in his assertion that ethical propositions are distinct from factual propositions and cannot be derived from them without error. His work laid the groundwork for much of 20th-century meta-ethics, shifting philosophical attention from what things are good to the nature of "goodness" itself and the logic of moral discourse. By isolating and naming the Naturalist Fallacy, Moore provided a powerful analytical tool for scrutinizing arguments that attempt to smuggle evaluative conclusions into descriptive premises, thereby influencing subsequent generations of moral philosophers and shaping debates about moral realism, non-naturalism, and the autonomy of ethics.

### 3. The Open Question Argument

Moore's primary philosophical weapon against the Naturalist Fallacy was his famous **Open Question Argument**. This argument aims to demonstrate that any attempt to define "good" in terms of a natural property will always fail because it leaves an "open question" that should, by definition, be closed if the identification were truly successful. For instance, if one proposes that "good" simply means "pleasurable," Moore would ask, "Is pleasure good?" If "good" and "pleasure" were indeed identical, this question would be meaningless, akin to asking "Is pleasure pleasure?" or "Is a bachelor an unmarried man?" However, Moore contended that the question "Is pleasure good?" remains a meaningful, open question for any reflective person.

The enduring meaningfulness of such questions, according to Moore, indicates that "good" cannot be analytically reduced to any natural property. No matter what natural property (e.g., "what promotes survival," "what is desired," "what causes happiness") is substituted for "good," one can always meaningfully ask whether that property itself is good. This continuous ability to ask "but is X good?" proves that "good" is not synonymous with X. The open question argument thus serves as

a test for identifying the Naturalist Fallacy: if an ethical property can be substituted by a natural property, and the resulting statement still allows for a meaningful question about the goodness of that natural property, then a naturalistic fallacy has been committed.

While influential, the Open Question Argument has faced its own share of criticisms. Some philosophers argue that it relies on a particular understanding of analytic definition that may be too restrictive. Others suggest that the argument simply shows that "good" is not *analytically* equivalent to any natural property, but it doesn't preclude the possibility that "good" might be *synthetically* identical to a natural property, similar to how water is synthetically identical to H<sub>2</sub>O. Despite these critiques, the Open Question Argument remains a cornerstone of non-naturalist meta-ethics and a powerful illustration of the conceptual distinction Moore sought to establish between facts and values.

#### 4. Key Characteristics of the Fallacy

The Naturalist Fallacy exhibits several key characteristics that distinguish it as a specific form of flawed moral reasoning. Foremost among these is the **conflation of descriptive and prescriptive statements**. It blurs the line between what *is* the case (a factual observation) and what *ought* to be the case (a moral imperative). For example, observing that humans are naturally aggressive does not automatically lead to the conclusion that aggression is morally good or that humans ought to be aggressive. The fallacy attempts to derive values directly from facts without an intervening moral principle.

Another defining characteristic is the **assumption that "natural" inherently equates to "good" or "right."** This implicit premise is foundational to the fallacy. It often relies on an unexamined idealization of nature, sometimes referred to as an "appeal to nature," where anything occurring in the natural world is deemed morally acceptable or even superior. This assumption ignores the reality that many natural phenomena are destructive, painful, or morally neutral from a human perspective. The mere existence of something in nature does not confer moral endorsement upon it.

Furthermore, the fallacy is often characterized by a **subjective extension, where personal feelings or desires are rationalized as natural and thus good**. As the source content highlights, there is a human tendency to believe that whatever one personally feels is good or right must also be objectively proper and acceptable if it can be framed as "natural." This allows for a self-serving justification of behavior, where individual preferences or instincts are elevated to universal moral principles by cloaking them in the guise of natural law. This characteristic makes the Naturalist Fallacy particularly prone to rationalizing behaviors that may be harmful or socially undesirable.

## 5. Distinction from the Is-Ought Problem

While closely related, it is important to distinguish the **Naturalist Fallacy** from David Hume's "is-ought problem." The "is-ought problem," famously articulated by Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), points out the logical gap between descriptive statements (what "is") and prescriptive or evaluative statements (what "ought to be"). Hume observed that authors often move from descriptions of how the world is to prescriptions of how it ought to be, without explaining how this new relation or affirmation is deduced. He essentially argued that you cannot logically derive an "ought" from an "is."

The Naturalist Fallacy, as articulated by G.E. Moore, is a specific instance or a particular type of transgression of Hume's general principle. Moore's fallacy specifically targets attempts to define ethical terms (like "good") using natural properties. Thus, while all instances of the Naturalist Fallacy involve an illegitimate jump from "is" to "ought," not all instances of the "is-ought problem" necessarily involve defining "good" in naturalistic terms. The "is-ought problem" is a broader meta-ethical observation about the logical relationship between facts and values, whereas the Naturalist Fallacy is a more specific critique of attempts to ground ethical properties in natural properties.

Another way to view the distinction is that Hume's law is a logical principle stating that no normative conclusion can be validly inferred from purely factual premises without an additional normative premise. The Naturalist Fallacy, on the other hand, is Moore's argument that "good" is a simple, non-natural property, and any attempt to define it in naturalistic terms commits a conceptual error. Moore's argument assumes Hume's distinction but then goes further to argue for the unique, irreducible nature of moral properties themselves. While both concepts highlight the problematic nature of deriving values from facts, Moore's focus is on the *definition* of moral terms, whereas Hume's is on the *derivation* of moral imperatives.

## 6. Significance in Meta-Ethics and Beyond

The concept of the **Naturalist Fallacy** has had a profound and enduring impact on the field of **meta-ethics**, which is the branch of ethics that seeks to understand the nature of ethical properties, statements, attitudes, and judgments. Moore's argument challenged the foundational assumptions of many ethical systems, forcing philosophers to critically examine how moral values are established and justified. It solidified the idea that ethics might be an autonomous discipline, not reducible to psychology, sociology, or natural science, thus paving the way for non-cognitivist and intuitionist theories that deny the possibility of reducing moral terms to factual ones.

Beyond meta-ethics, the Naturalist Fallacy serves as a crucial analytical tool in various applied ethical debates. In **bioethics**, for instance, arguments against certain medical interventions or genetic modifications often appeal to their "unnaturalness." The fallacy helps to scrutinize such claims, asking whether "unnatural" truly equates to "immoral" or "bad." Similarly, in environmental

ethics, while recognizing the value of nature, the fallacy encourages careful consideration of whether environmental protection is justified purely by what is "natural" or by other moral considerations like human well-being, sustainability, or intrinsic value.

The influence of the Naturalist Fallacy also extends to broader discussions in social and political philosophy. Debates around social norms, gender roles, sexual orientation, and even economic systems frequently encounter appeals to what is "natural." By highlighting the fallacy, philosophers and critical thinkers can challenge arguments that seek to legitimize existing societal structures or prejudice merely by labeling them as "natural," thereby promoting a more rigorous and reflective approach to moral reasoning and social critique. It encourages a move away from uncritical acceptance of perceived natural states toward a principled justification of ethical positions.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its significant influence, the **Naturalist Fallacy** and Moore's arguments for it have not been without considerable debate and criticism. One common misunderstanding, and a point of contention, is the scope of the fallacy. Critics argue that not all appeals to nature are necessarily fallacious. For instance, arguing that certain nutritional choices are beneficial because they align with human biology is not necessarily a fallacy if the "goodness" (e.g., health) is explicitly defined and not implicitly assumed simply because it's "natural." The fallacy specifically targets the *definitional* reduction of "good" to natural properties, not all instances where natural facts inform ethical considerations.

Moore's **Open Question Argument**, while powerful, has also been scrutinized. Some philosophers, particularly proponents of ethical naturalism, argue that the argument only demonstrates that moral terms like "good" are not *analytically* equivalent to natural properties, but it does not rule out the possibility of a synthetic identity. Just as we discovered empirically that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, they contend that we might discover empirically that "good" is identical to some natural property (e.g., "maximizes human flourishing"). This view suggests that moral properties might be natural properties, even if we can't define "good" purely by concept analysis. Others question the intuitive force of the open question, suggesting that its "openness" might stem from a lack of complete understanding rather than a genuine conceptual distinction.

Furthermore, the very concept of "non-natural properties" has been a source of philosophical discomfort for many, leading to the "queerness argument" against moral realism: if moral properties are non-natural, how do we know about them, and what kind of strange entities are they? This has led to the development of alternative meta-ethical theories, such as error theory (which denies the existence of moral properties altogether), non-cognitivism (which holds that moral statements express emotions or commands rather than facts), and various forms of new ethical naturalism that attempt to integrate moral properties into a naturalistic worldview without

committing Moore's fallacy. These ongoing debates highlight the complexity of the relationship between facts, values, and the natural world, keeping the Naturalist Fallacy a vibrant and central concept in contemporary ethical philosophy.

### Further Reading

[G. E. Moore - Wikipedia](#)

[Principia Ethica - Wikipedia](#)

[Is-ought problem - Wikipedia](#)

[David Hume - Wikipedia](#)

[A Treatise of Human Nature - Wikipedia](#)

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