



Fall 2002

Avoiding the Super-Naturalistic Fallacy: Practical Reasoning and the Insightful Undergraduate

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Gimbel, Steven. (2002) Avoiding the Super-Naturalistic Fallacy: Practical Reasoning and the Insightful Undergraduate. *Journal of Thought* 37(3):33-43.

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Abstract

It has become cliché to say that today's students are moral relativists. With the twin movements of ethics across the curriculum and critical thinking across the curriculum sweeping the Academy, one might think that we are in a good place to start making inroads towards creating careful and willing discussants of contemporary moral issues out of our students. Unfortunately, the reverse is far too often true. Associated with the standard sort of introduction to ethical theory, there is a regularly arising trap that brings with it the worst of all possible results - the alienation of our very best students from the topic of the course and the reinforcement of the most naive form of ethical subjectivism. The source of this alienation from the ethics course is identifiable by students who have taken the critical thinking course; it is the entrenched commitment to an oversimplified picture of moral deliberation which we justify through a specific version of false alternatives that I call the super-naturalistic fallacy. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

curriculum, ethical subjectivism, moral deliberation, Introduction to Ethics Course

Disciplines

Philosophy | Philosophy of Mind

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Introduction

It has become cliché to say that today's students are moral relativists. With the twin movements of ethics across the curriculum and critical thinking across the curriculum sweeping the Academy, one might think that we are in a good place to start making inroads towards creating careful and willing discussants of contemporary moral issues out of our students. Unfortunately, the reverse is far too often true. Associated with the standard sort of introduction to ethical theory, there is a regularly arising trap that brings with it the worst of all possible results—the alienation of our very best students from the topic of the course and the reinforcement of the most naive form of ethical subjectivism. The source of this alienation from the ethics course is identifiable by students who have taken the critical thinking course; it is the entrenched commitment to an oversimplified picture of moral deliberation which we justify through a specific version of false alternatives that I call the super-naturalistic fallacy.

The pitfall, however, can be avoided without radical modifications to the content of the standard introduction to ethics course, if we pay attention to the sources of the subjectivism that the students bring into the classroom. By understanding the appeal of subjectivism, we are able to better account for the real structure of practical reasoning in our classroom. We can, and I will argue should, keep the canon in place; but our approach to these works in the standard sort of introduction to

ethical theory requires rejecting the old picture of a classical moral science, of static theoretical systems and their competing definitions of moral rightness, and replacing it with a new dynamic, observer-dependent system that puts open-minded moral consideration instead of deterministic algorithms at the heart of the course.

A Standard Introduction to Ethical Theory

By “the standard sort of introduction to ethical theory,” I mean a class which begins by dispelling the specters of subjectivism and cultural relativism, showing that moral rightness and wrongness are more than mere personal or social preferences, and then seeking to determine what else must be added for a robust, applicable ethical system through an appeal to the ethical canon. One by one—virtue-theory, consequentialism, deontology, rights, justice, and care-based systems—are introduced to try their hand at filling the void; first intuitions are collected to make the option plausible, and then other intuitions are collected to make it seem problematic. Finally, a challenge from Nietzsche or Moore asks the student to consider, after all of the work has been done, whether the question was worth asking at all.

Let me be clear that I think that this sort of class is extremely valuable, especially, but not only, for philosophy majors. Ethics is the door for many to initially feel the force of philosophical investigation. It may be because ethics needs no motivation—students walk into the class already possessing a sense that the subject is important if not interesting. The need to think deeply and carefully about foundational issues is a much easier sell in ethics than elsewhere in the field, and perhaps for that reason, is often much more eye-opening to some students of the more general need to question underlying assumptions. It is out of a desire to keep this door open, that I argue the standard approach must be altered to avoid the alienation of the most insightful students.

The alienation arises from three sources, (1) the intuition of moral subjectivism attached to a belief in the existence of real moral disagreement, (2) the attraction to multiple ethical systems as presented in the classroom, and (3) the feeling that ethical theory as it is approached in the classroom is a faulty reductionist project, but not possessing the vocabulary to avoid being snookered by the instructor. These three combine to frustrate the insightful student in a fashion similar to that of the discussants of Socrates. They will admit being bested in the argument, but will not be convinced that their view was treated fairly. The insightful student is left feeling that something is wrong and more is being done to obfuscate or oversimplify than to clarify. This results in

alienation and a retreat to the initial view the student held that there is no deep sense of moral deliberation, it is all a matter of personal taste. In addressing the deep subjectivist sympathies of students, one must acknowledge that they stem from several seemingly well-grounded factors; the strongest being (a) the legitimate and desirable penchant for tolerance, and (b) the recognition that there are authentic moral disagreements that, due to the lack of an obvious form of empirical resolution, appear to be intractable. Pointing out that tolerance requires an open-minded, but critical consideration of all viewpoints and not the simple ignoring of all dissenting opinions is often sufficient to allay the concern in (a). The second factor is also easily undermined when it is shown that the existence of authentic moral disagreement implies that there is more at issue than mere personal preferences. Under the weight of these arguments and exposure to whichever highly intuitive means of moral reasoning with which the class begins, the student will surrender his/her subjectivism. But lingering is the need to explain the continuance of moral disagreement and moral doubt in light of the clear, intuitive, and straightforward naturalistic and metaphysical systems proposed.

This concern reappears and becomes more vicious when it moves from ethical disagreements about issues to meta-ethical disagreements about how moral reasoning is to proceed. The student is exposed to several different forms of moral reasoning and finds him/herself taken in by the intuitive nature of each, only to then partially reject each on the basis of argument by intuition. They think, "Sure, there is nothing wrong with lying to my best friend to get her to a surprise party, but what would happen if everyone always lied?" "Don't I owe it to my friends to be truthful, but would I be that way if I really cared about them and our relationship?"

From such internal monologues, every teacher of ethical theory has been asked by multiple students, "Can't I be a utilitarian sometimes and a Kantian at other times?" We dutifully respond that one cannot. "One view holds that the context of the action is central to moral judgment, while the other considers it irrelevant. It is either important or it isn't. It can't both matter and not matter." The insightful student's desire for meta-ethical synthesis is reduced to a violation of the principle of the excluded middle. The insightful student realizes the undesirability of contradiction and so admits defeat. S/he does not need John Locke to tell him/her that only children and idiots would doubt the law of non-contradiction. But at the same time, the insightful student realizes that "real world" moral deliberation does change with the situation and it seems only right that certain systematic concerns are more germane in certain contexts and less in others.

In these gray cases, the meat of contemporary moral issues courses,

the concern of the insightful undergrad re-emerges. We are aware of it. Indeed, we consciously stoke it. It is this bothersome state that we exploit for passionate in-class discussions. One will always have a dyed-in-the-wool Kantian rule-follower and at least one steadfast utilitarian to spark lively debate that makes the classroom breathe with discussion. It is perhaps out of fear of losing this that we perpetuate this ruse of inconsistency. We play upon the undergraduates' inability to separate ethical from meta-ethical concerns and play philosophical three-card monty sliding back and forth between levels to make the systems seem forever at odds, all the time knowing that s/he is correct that we do engage in both and do somehow seem to figure out which is appropriate when. The result of the instructor's fear of the loss of vigorous classroom discussion is the alienation of the potentially most insightful participants from the discussion.

What the insightful student is picking up on is an error in reasoning that is at the heart of the structure of the class. What an introduction to ethical theory course does is consider the question, "What are the criteria for determining the truth values of 'ought' sentences?" We look under the hood of each system and see how its central principles prescribe the assignment of truth values and then determine the legitimacy of these principles. The means by which we assess meta-ethical principles is modeled after the received view for testing purported laws of nature; it is a moral version of hypothetico-deductivism.

In scientific reasoning, hypothetico-deductivism begins with the positing of a potential law of nature. We then derive consequences from that law and a set of initial conditions. We bring about those initial conditions in the controlled environment of the laboratory and check to see if the predicted result occurs. If the results are found in agreement with the hypothesis, then the suggested law gains inductive support. If the results are not in agreement, then the hypothesis is falsified. Acceptability is a matter of empirical adequacy.

Meta-ethical principles, e.g., the principle of utility and categorical imperative, bear certain formal resemblances to scientific laws under the received view of laws of nature.¹ Such principles (1) are universal generalizations, e.g., $(\forall x)(x \text{ maximizes overall utility} \rightarrow \text{one ought to do } x)$ or $(\forall x)(x \text{ is a person} \rightarrow \text{one ought never treat } x \text{ as a means})$; (2) they do not mention particular individuals, places, or times; and (3) they support counter-factuals—if you had been in a bar in Germany in 1932 and saw Hitler, These similarities make it seem quite reasonable that a similar means of verification would be warranted. What we do to test these meta-ethical sentences begins with a process of moral ratiocination deriving moral consequences. We then test the consequences in the

gedanken-laboratories of our moral intuitions. If the result matches our intuition, it receives a degree of confirmation; if not, it is falsified. Acceptability is a matter of intuitive adequacy.

In teaching the theories, we always begin with the stock examples that will make the system's principles appear well verified and then sock it to them with the old falsifying chestnuts. The existence of counter-intuitive instances falsifies the meta-ethical principle underlying the moral system under consideration mandating that we try again from square one with a new system. Each time, we draw in the student, get him/her excited, and then dash the hopes.

This lack of success is taken by G. E. Moore² to be evidence for the failure of the naturalistic program as a whole. Good does not reduce to any single natural property, the line goes, and therefore all attempts to find this sufficient property will fail and are to be labeled instances of the naturalistic fallacy. W. K. Frankena³ argues that Moore's conclusion that ethical terms are not reducible to non-ethical terms is less about whether ethical terms are reducible to natural terms, i.e., to be found in the world, but rather whether they are to be reduced at all. As such, Moore is not really positing the existence of naturalistic fallacy, but rather a "definist fallacy."

The genuine existence of such a reasoning flaw (call it what you like), Frankena argues, must be the conclusion substantial argumentation in favor of the atomic nature of basic moral notions. Simply repeating the mantra "Ought does not come from is" is surely insufficient. But such supporting argumentation is not provided by the moral intuitionists with whom Frankena takes issue. They are not therefore justified in using "the naturalistic fallacy as if it were a logical fallacy on all fours with the fallacy of composition."⁴

Yet, despite this problem, it is down Moore's path that we lead our students when ethical theory classes are taught according to the standard fashion. We leave them with Moore's conclusion, that 'good' is ultimately undefinable and instead of his more intricate intuitionism they retreat to naive subjectivism. They do not have the supporting argumentation that Frankena calls for, using only the increasing frustration that each seemingly promising option to define basic moral terms is quickly shown to fail.

But just as Lobachevski and Riemann denied Euclid's axiom of a single parallel in different ways, so too may we undermine the insightful undergrad's version of Moore's conclusion in asserting that the failure to develop a single sound and complete naturalistic ethic does not necessarily lead to the abandonment of the naturalistic project, but rather to the need for a more intricate naturalism. The oversimplification of the notion

of moral rightness to a single natural property, I will refer to as the super-naturalistic fallacy. Just as causal oversimplification is the error by which multiple causal factors are overlooked with one active factor fallaciously raised to the place of *the* cause of an effect, so too it is with ethical statements.

Toward a More Robust Notion of Good

In real life moral deliberation, we have multiple factors at work in assigning truth values to moral statements and what the canon does for us is to lay out and explicate those factors one by one and show why each is necessary and the others insufficient for a complete account of practical reasoning. We need to look at the ethical systems less in a hypothetico-deductive fashion and more through the lens of an ethical version of the semantic view of theories. The classical ethical systems give us models of moral reasoning that for a particular system is applicable in some circumstances and not in others. Understanding real life moral deliberation is understanding the complex interplay of those factors. This is what the insightful undergraduate would say, if s/he only had the vocabulary.

There are several options upon which to model our more robust notion of good. We could consider moral rightness to be a disjunctive notion. The standard example of such a term comes from Hilary Putnam's discussion of jade.⁵ If a mineral is either nephrite or jadite, two chemically quite distinct substances, then it is considered jade. On this approach, an act is morally good if it satisfies any one of the standard moral systems. This, however, is inappropriate for "good" as it is exactly those cases in which satisfy the principles of one system and fail to satisfy those of another that strike us as hard and therefore interesting. Requiring satisfaction of any moral system as sufficient for the goodness of an act would be far too permissive.

We could consider moral rightness to be an umbrella concept with the different ethical systems giving rise to a Wittgensteinian family resemblance relation among the acts we deem morally correct. This is too weak of a notion as well as it does not provide sufficient internal structure to support moral debate. We need to have a notion that is robust enough to make it clear how it is that when two people disagree over the moral permissibility of an action, one may be swayed to the other's point of view through rational means and reject his/her previous view.

An interesting option is to consider good to be a cluster notion along the lines that John Searle suggests for names.⁶ The name "Aristotle," for example, is a conjunction of several definite descriptions, e.g., founder of

the Lyceum, teacher of Alexander. Some of those descriptions, e.g., student of Plato, are more important than others, e.g., possible author of *Problemata*. This difference is reflected through a ranking scheme that attaches a weight to each description in the conjunction. In this way, if it turns out that Aristotle was not the author of *Problemata*, then our references to Aristotle will be relatively unaffected. On the other hand, if the person who wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not the student of Plato, then our references would be greatly affected. In this way, we could consider moral rightness to be a weighted conjunction of the various systems. This possibility will not quite work, however, as the different systems yield conflicting results in many contexts and when conjoined this would leave our notion inconsistent in every difficult case.

While insufficient, it does present us with a framework. The remaining move is to realize that when we talk about the truth value of moral statements, in real life we do not use a two-valued scheme, but fuzzy logic. We do talk about certain actions being better than others, of choosing the lesser of two evils, of an action being permissible but dangerously close to the line. We do not partition the set of possible actions with our moral principles, but draw out a continuum between absolutely morally forbidden and absolutely morally necessary.

From this point, we can liberalize Searle's notion to give us moral rightness as a dynamic term requiring the contextualized weighted input of several distinct factors, each coming from one of the standard moral systems. In this way we can legitimize the insightful student's desire for synthesis. It is important to make clear to the student that the writers proposing the different naturalistic systems were striving for completeness. But with the move away from a two-valued system of valuations that required a conjunction, the failure of completeness is no longer portrayed as reason for outright rejection. No longer will the undergraduate wonder why s/he had to spend so much time and effort struggling to understand a text that was just wrong anyway and thus in his/her mind worthless. When portrayed as a piece of the puzzle whose fit is yet undetermined, a much more interesting picture develops in the mind of the insightful student.

The change which must occur in the structure of the class is formally identical to that which occurred in the switch from classical to quantum mechanics. In old-fashioned classical mechanics, a description of a part of the state of a physical system is calculated from a combination of the initial condition of the system and a set of deterministic laws. By plugging the context into the laws we come out with one and only one unambiguous option of how it is rational to believe the world is. From the infinite number of possible states of the system, the immutable laws pick

out a unique state as the correct description for that system at a given time. Every system at an instant is in a particular state which is absolutely determinable by the laws.

In the same way, the usual approach to teaching ethical systems is as conveying the moral state "right" or "wrong" with absolute certainty upon actions. Just like Newtonian mechanics, what, say, act utilitarianism does is to select a particular act from among all possible acts and label it and it alone as the only acceptable choice given a set of initial conditions and deterministic ethical principles.

Quantum mechanics has the reputation of giving a bizarre picture of reality because it violates the classical notion that all of the measurable properties of a system, e.g., position, energy, or momentum, have determinate, unique values at every instant. You cannot plug initial conditions into Schrödinger's equation, the principle governing the theory, and get out a single deterministic arbitrarily accurate answer for the each property term in the set of values attributable to the system. This is not to say that you do not get a deterministic answer; you do, it is just that the deterministic answer, the so-called wave function, is a statistical combination of values. The laws do not pick out which of the values is the case for a particular property, but gives a catalogue of all possible values and tells you relatively how much the system is in that value. A quantum coin when flipped is not heads or tails, but is in a superposition of heads and tails. Based on the initial conditions, it might be an equally weighted superposition or not. Reality, according to quantum mechanics, truly is a weighted conjunction of contradictories.

All of this changes when we observe the system. When we look at the quantum coin after flipping, it "collapses" from this superposition of values into one or another of the states. Before looking, however, it really was existing as a combination of the states weighted by the initial conditions. That is not to say that the system was in every conceivable state. Some states are absolutely ruled out. The laws will not allow the system to have such a value at all. Among those that are allowed, some are much more heavily favored than others. Those that are more heavily favored are more likely to be the state in which the system finds itself when observed.

What the insightful student is claiming about ethics is that the quantum mechanical description is more appropriate for moral situations than the classical model. What we really do in moral deliberation is to consider all options and weigh them, some absolutely ruled out and others weighted more or less heavily. Those that are more or less heavily weighted are to be more or less preferred. When two options are equally, but maximally weighted, we have a conundrum.

Like quantum mechanics, the observer is not outside the system, but

is an integral part of the system; it is from the observer that the weighting is determined. The different ethical systems in the canon all seem to pick out concerns which are more or less relevant in different cases. In clear cases, e.g., torturing babies for fun, the results of the systems converge to overwhelmingly select one possible action giving it near absolute weight. In the gray cases, there will be near even weights applied to different possibilities. That is to say, when we apply different systems to a tricky context, the action selected by the different systems differs.

But just as observing a quantum system causes it to collapse into one of the states, the world forces us to choose an action, i.e., causes us to collapse this "moral wave function" to one of the possible acts. When we judge, it is in accord with the weighting that the option should have, *all* systems considered. That is, for any given act, it is important how it affects me, how it affects those I care most about, how it affects everyone considered equally, the effect it would have if everyone always did it, and how it affects my development as a moral being. But different acts in different situations will make different concerns more germane than others. The insightful student is trying to express the fact that s/he is in a state of moral superposition and our decision about acceptable action must be based upon the weighting of the individual possibilities.

Does this "quantum ethical" hybrid eliminate the class discussion we so fiercely guard? Quite the opposite. What ends up being the topic of discussion is why this or that possible action is granted the weight that it is. In real moral conundrums, we do feel the force behind both the arguments to do x and the argument to do y which precludes doing x. But we also must make a decision. The interesting question is how are we to make *this* decision. Is rights talk really the most applicable means of moral reasoning in cases of animal testing? Why do utilitarian concerns trump duty in the case of lying to the murderer to protect an innocent? No longer are we asking, "Are all ethical statements universalizable, yes or no?" but which ones and why. What is it that differentiates between the cases where we find it crucial and those in which we think it irrelevant? What we get from this approach in moving from the semantic to the pragmatic is a more robust ethical discussion when we are inclusive of the different decision procedures into our discussion. They are virtually the same issues, but now we consider them in a broader fashion.

Conclusion

It is, I believe, a great advantage of this approach that it may be instituted without having to radically alter the nature or content of the standard type of introduction to ethical theory. The course may still

contain the canonical works without an anachronistic mis-reading to fit them into the scheme. The stage may be set with a discussion of the fact/value distinction leading to the question, "What do we mean by 'moral rightness' and 'moral wrongness'? How do we define these terms?" This question becomes more powerful when the easy definitions of subjectivism and moral relativism are eliminated.

The usual suspects are then rounded up. The systems are discussed in the usual fashion, but now the discussion ends with questions of applicability to cases rather than outright acceptability. The exception being David Hume, who is saved for last. Having all of the standard options on the table, the remaining question is the means by which we assign weights. Here is where the student's desire to understand the nature of long-standing moral disagreement in the face of centuries of philosophical discussion is not ignored, but explored. The student's initial draw to subjectivism is not truly out of a deep attachment to subjectivism, but from the empirical fact that people's moral priorities differ—a fact that seems to have no place in the traditional teaching of moral theory. When two people are engaged in what seems to be an intractable moral dispute, on this view, we can understand it as a disagreement about the relative weighing of the factors constituent of ethical deliberation.

Here is where Hume's "characters" seem to fit in most naturally. From a discussion of Hume, we may examine our framework and take a Humean slant to make a meta-ethical statement about weighting possible actions. Moral disagreement arises because the weights applied to the possible options are not determined by a deterministic algorithm, but is at least in part a matter of sentiment; sentiments which may change through intellectual reflection. This accounts for our moral doubt and moral growth in addition to moral disagreement. The new framework therefore does not cut off moral debate, but opens up the need for it and exposes the value of it. Students may now feel hopeful about moral discussion instead of despondent that the whole question is merely an intellectual quagmire. The personal aspect that the student sees attached to the moral is maintained without resorting to a closed-minded subjectivism. People may disagree about weights, but they also may rationally discuss, defend, and change their minds about them. Moral reasoning is now much closer to critical thinking in the mind of the student.

By adopting this focus, we do not dismiss the intuitions of the insightful undergraduate, but embrace them all leading not to alienation of the best students for the sake of fiery class discussion, but rather bring about more vigorous discussions in a more inclusive framework that encourages rather than discourages further thought and discussion on both the theoretical and applied levels.

Notes

¹ Reichenbach, Hans. *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

² Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ Frankena, W. K. "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind*. Vol. 48. 1939. pp. 464-477.

⁴ Frankena, p. 465.

⁵ Putnam, Hilary. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" in *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, VII (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).

⁶ Searle, John. *Speech Acts*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969).