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**Logic and the Basis of Ethics: A critical evaluation with  
respect to the Naturalistic Fallacy**

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## Abstract

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Arthur Prior (1914-1969) was a New Zealand philosopher who worked primarily on Logic and is often referred to as the father of tense logic. In 1949, while lecturing at Canterbury University in Christchurch, New Zealand, Prior published *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, in which he developed a historical background of the 'issue' as he called it of describing character and conduct by using ethical predicates. Prior believed that when one attempts to describe character and conduct using terms such as 'good' and 'bad' one will likely resort to giving a definition of those terms to support their use in a situation, and then one will be guilty of fallacious reasoning since those terms are indefinable. Prior makes reference to almost fifty philosophers and others over the course of about one hundred pages, but spends more time on G. E. Moore and Ralph Cudworth than many of the others he covers. In this thesis I will critically evaluate Prior's arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, in particular those that relate to Moore, Cudworth, and the naturalistic fallacy. There is a long-standing debate about the naturalistic fallacy because while some argue that it is obviously a fallacy, others argue that it is not a fallacy at all, thus the aim in this thesis will be to consider whether Prior's arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy are confused and to illustrate the nature of the scholarly controversy.

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## Introduction

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The issue is, roughly, this: We all sometimes describe conduct and character (and perhaps other things; but we shall not here be concerned with other things) as 'good' or 'bad', or as 'right' or 'wrong'. Some hold that there is nothing out of the ordinary about what these words refer to – that they either merely express the feelings of the person using them or refer to some 'natural' characteristic of the objects to which they are applied, such as their conduciveness or otherwise to survival...Others hold that ethical predicates – words like 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong' – represent qualities which are *sui generis*, in a category on their own, different from all 'natural' qualities.<sup>1</sup>

We do indeed describe conduct and character by using ethical predicates such as 'good' and 'evil,' 'right' and 'wrong.' Most would agree with the claim that Mother Teresa was a good person, while Hitler was evil. And many would surely support the assertion that in most cases lying is wrong, while telling the truth is right. But what exactly does it mean to call someone or something 'good' or 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong'? How does one go about defining such ethical terms? It is suggested above, and it is the central theme of a branch of philosophy called *naturalism*, that by calling someone or something good, one might merely be expressing a feeling, or referring to a *natural* characteristic that the person or thing possesses. However, these options seem lacking. When one asserts that Mother Teresa was a *good* person one is neither simply expressing a subjective feeling, nor is one merely referring to a single natural property she may have possessed. These two options are insufficient and do not convey all that the term 'good' entails. Similarly, when one calls Hitler evil, one is using an ethical term to sum-up a myriad of negative beliefs and claims about both his conduct and his character. By using the terms 'good' and 'evil' one is not merely suggesting one thing or another. The terms are used to imply a multitude of concepts and ideas. Ethical predicates are simple terms used to convey complex messages.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior, A. N. (1949) *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. vii

We all know how to use these terms in everyday language and how they may be applied to maintain a distinction between a behaviour and character. When a child acts in a naughty manner we might say that the child has been bad, while intending to convey the meaning that the child has temporarily behaved badly, but that the character of the child is good. For us to be able to employ such a difference – the difference between good and bad in regard to conduct and character – in day-to-day language suggests that ethical terms are not merely names used to refer to the feelings of the one using them. Furthermore, given that one can be of a good character, and yet act badly, ethical predicates do not seem to simply refer to a characteristic someone or something possesses. The other option suggested in the quote above, and belonging to the *non-naturalist* doctrine, is that ethical terms might represent qualities unlike any others and that these qualities are in a category of their own. While at first glance this option may look preferable one must consider what sort of qualities would be so different from all others that they would be in their own category. So, the question remains, how ought one to define ethical predicates – and in particular how ought one to define ‘good’?

This is a thesis that examines a discussion that was popular in the middle of the last century. It became popular because so many philosophers had tried their luck at adopting one of the options given in the quote above in order to prove, essentially, that words like ‘good’ either refer to a natural property, or they do not. One philosopher gave a historical account of the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, examining arguments ranging from the seventeenth century to modern twentieth century theories. That philosopher was New Zealander, Arthur Prior (1914-1969). Prior was a noted logician and is often referred to as the father of tense logic.

Prior’s most significant achievement was the invention and development of tense logic. Tense logic involves two new modal operators, ‘It will be the case that’ and ‘It has been the case that’. Prior used his tense logic to articulate theories about the structure and metaphysics of time, and to mount a robust defence of freewill and indeterminism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Copeland, B. J. (2007) ‘Arthur Prior,’ from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*



Although Prior was primarily focussed on Logic he also published papers on Ethics, in particular on the subject of the logic of ethics. One of his more substantive Ethics publications is *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1949); it is in this book that Prior develops a historical background of the 'issue,' as he calls it, of describing character and conduct by using ethical predicates. The book itself is written in such a way that it is extremely difficult to untangle the arguments within it. Prior makes reference to almost fifty philosophers and others over the course of about one hundred pages. So one often feels at times that arguments have been rushed or thrown in with too little explanation, and this is an uncomfortable feeling for a first time reader – unfortunately the discomfort does not let up on one's subsequent readings either.

One of the most challenging tasks when reading *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is to be able to discover what it is Prior is actually arguing or at least what exactly he wants us to take away from the book. He states in the introduction that it is not his intention to settle the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, though does tell us that he is a non-naturalist. However, throughout the book he does not really develop his own argument as to why the non-naturalist's way of thinking is the correct route to follow. By declaring himself a non-naturalist from the beginning he left himself open to the criticism that he must have had a reason for choosing this side and it seems odd that he would not give an explanation or argument behind that reasoning. From this one can only assume that the point of the book was not really to persuade us one way or the other but to present the facts in a historical context. This is well and good, but throughout the chapters what is presented seems to attack naturalism more so than it does non-naturalism. The first chapter is an account of one of the better-known criticisms of naturalism, the *naturalistic fallacy*, and it is the discussion of this fallacy that sets the tone for the rest of the book.

The naturalistic fallacy is famously described by the twentieth century philosopher G. E. Moore in his 1902 work *Principia Ethica* and is essentially the theory that because the ethical term 'good' is said to be indefinable any attempt by naturalists (or others for that matter) to define 'good' will result in committing this fallacy. It is argued by some that the naturalistic fallacy occurs because those who attempt to define 'good' do so in *natural* terms such as 'pleasant' or 'desired,' and because the term 'good' is *ethical* and not natural these attempts fail. Others argue that the naturalistic fallacy occurs through

trying to deduce ethical propositions from a set of non-ethical premises, which is similar, but not the same, as attempting to define an ethical word in natural terms. The nature of the naturalistic fallacy has been the subject of much debate because on the one hand there are those who claim that it is obviously a fallacy (sometimes for different reasons), and on the other hand there are those who argue it is not a fallacy at all.

Regarding fallacies Prior claims:

The exposure of fallacious ethical arguments is...a task which it seems to be necessary to perform anew in every age. It is something like housekeeping, or lawnmowing, or shaving. [But even] when we know beforehand that some system must be fallacious – that what it sets out to do, simply cannot be done – we learn something in the effort to discover just where the fallacy lies.<sup>3</sup>

Over the course of the nine studies in the book Prior accuses naturalists and non-naturalists alike of committing not only the naturalistic fallacy but also other fallacies, which he says are “not unlike” it. Despite spending much of his time making accusations with regard to fallacies and despite the thrust of the quotation above one of the points that I will highlight throughout my study is that Prior himself does not give an adequate explanation of how the fallacies he mentions work and how they differ from each other.

Prior makes an interesting reference to Aristotle in his introduction, the purpose of which may have been to hint at what his overall aim was:

[T]his particular controversy has a special interest for the logician, for the following reason: Aristotle divides the possible subjects of inquiry and dispute into three broad sorts – ‘natural’, ‘ethical’, and ‘logical’.<sup>4</sup> Ethical naturalism may be broadly described as the view that ‘ethical’ propositions and inquiries are in the end just a sub-species of ‘natural’ ones. But we shall find that both those who assert this and those who deny it frequently end up by identifying ethical propositions with logical ones. And this of course, imposes upon the logician the responsibility of showing that it is not possible to solve the difficulties of either side in this way.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, pp. x-xi

<sup>4</sup> The passage to which Prior makes reference is *Topics*, 105b19-29. Prior himself does not give the passage. I will discuss this further in part three of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, p. viii

More specifically, Prior's aim was to show us that "purely logical considerations" cannot settle the naturalist/non-naturalist debate since it is a mistake to identify ethical propositions and enquires with natural or logical ones. The purpose of Prior's reference to Aristotle may have simply been to indicate that there are three distinct categories of enquiry and that one ought to keep this in mind when considering the naturalist/non-naturalist debate. It may have also been to caution us about falling into fallacious reasoning, which he believed philosophers do fall into when they attempt to settle ethical issues by purely logical considerations. So Prior as we shall see is especially concerned to emphasise a separation between Ethics and Logic.

As we saw above Prior thinks of exposing fallacious arguments as something that must be done in every age. It is as tedious a need as it is to mow lawns or shave. I think this shows very much so that his aim is to make us aware that fallacies happen, they happen in every century and we all need to be aware of the tendency to fall into such traps. He seems to think that we need to be vigilant in our development of arguments so as not to lead ourselves down the path to the naturalistic fallacy, or fallacies like it. However, a number of philosophers do not find Prior's own arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* convincing. One of the aims in this thesis will be to consider whether Prior's arguments are flawed, or inconsistent, and to illustrate the nature of the scholarly controversy.

In a review of Prior's book, W. K. Frankena commends Prior's discussion of the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, but counters it with the criticism that "it is hard to see just what it adds up to, or how it is related to his treatment of the naturalistic fallacy."<sup>6</sup> Charner Perry also gives a similar criticism in his review stating that

...his [Prior's] doctrines, despite their apparent clarity and plausibility, do not constitute a clear and adequate solution of the problems with which he deals. They evidently involve assumptions and distinctions which are not recognized or examined, they raise a number of difficult questions about logic, ethics, and the relation between the two, and

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<sup>6</sup> Frankena, W. K. '[Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4. (Oct., 1950), p.555

apparently solving problems which are not sufficiently analysed they confuse rather than clarify the issues.<sup>7</sup>

This quote is a fine summation of the problem with *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* but it is this very problem, the lack of clarity, which has made an analysis of it so challenging and so worthwhile. Prior made a contribution to philosophy both in *Logic and Ethics*, and my purpose is to offer a critical evaluation of *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* so that we may come to better understand the precise nature of Prior's contribution. In this thesis I have one over-arching aim, and that is to give a critical evaluation of Prior's arguments with respect to the naturalistic fallacy. If, as some of Prior's critics insist, the naturalistic fallacy is not in fact a fallacy, then it becomes crucially important to examine this part of Prior's claim.

One of the downfalls in the book is that Prior makes reference to far too many theories in the small amount of space (approximately 100 pages) he allows himself. I do not want to make the same mistake, so in order to give a clear and concise account of Prior's arguments I have chosen to limit my study to Prior's treatment of G. E. Moore and Ralph Cudworth. Of the many philosophers' theories he canvasses Prior spends more time on a certain few. Moore and Cudworth are among the ones to whom he devotes lengthy discussions, so it makes sense to analyse whether Prior's arguments regarding them were fair, and then examine how those arguments relate to the naturalistic fallacy.

This thesis, then, will be divided into four parts:

1. Part one will involve a close textual analysis of G. E. Moore's arguments concerning the term 'good,' found primarily in his *Principia Ethica*, followed by Prior's account and criticisms of Moore's theory.
2. Part two will involve a close textual analysis of Ralph Cudworth's *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*. In this part it will become apparent how Moore and Cudworth's arguments differ. There will also be a discussion of the way in which Prior criticised both Moore and Cudworth's

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<sup>7</sup> Perry, C. '[Untitled] Reviewed work(s): *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*,' in *Ethics*, Vol. 62, No. 1. (Oct., 1951), p. 71

arguments and why he accused them of arguing in the same way despite their seemingly different arguments.

3. Part three will be primarily concerned with Prior's own arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy and its consequences. This part will also involve a detailed discussion of the structure of selected fallacies drawing on W. K. Frankena's article 'The Naturalistic Fallacy.'
4. Part four will be a culmination of the information accumulated throughout the previous sections and will involve a close textual study of Prior's arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* specifically regarding Moore and Cudworth.

There are serious questions to consider about Prior's interpretation of Moore and Cudworth. And there is a long-standing debate about his analysis of the naturalistic fallacy. In this thesis I look at each in turn with the purpose not to resolve the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, (though it will serve as a rebuttal to the non-naturalist's claim that so many commit the naturalistic fallacy) but to analyse the arguments found within Prior's book. This thesis will be constructed with the intent to show that while Prior may have been correct to caution that purely logical considerations cannot settle the naturalist/non-naturalist debate, his arguments in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* against philosophers such as Moore and Cudworth regarding fallacies, especially the naturalistic fallacy, may be confused and perhaps even flawed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In this thesis the paths that Prior believed led to committing the naturalistic fallacy will be outlined. One of these paths is through deducing ethical propositions from non-ethical premises. I will not go into detail here but must make note that in a later article 'The Autonomy of Ethics,' in *Papers on Logic*, Prior retracts his claim that this leads to committing the naturalistic fallacy. Although this is an important point it only strengthens my claim that Prior's arguments regarding the naturalistic fallacy in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* seem somewhat confused.