CHAPTER 7

Does analytical moral naturalism rest on a mistake?

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More than a century ago, G. E. Moore famously attempted to refute all versions of moral naturalism by offering an extended inference consisting of the open question argument followed by the charge that moral naturalism commits a “naturalistic fallacy.” Although there is consensus that this extended inference fails to undermine all varieties of moral naturalism, the open question argument (OQA) is often vindicated as an argument against analytical moral naturalism. By contrast, the charge that analytical naturalism commits the naturalistic fallacy usually finds no takers at all. In this paper we argue that analytical naturalism of the sort recently proposed by Frank Jackson (1998, 2003) and Michael Smith (2000) does after all rest on a mistake – though perhaps not the one Moore had in mind when he made the naturalistic fallacy charge.

Analytical moral naturalism is roughly the doctrine that some moral predicates and sentences are semantically equivalent to predicates and sentences framed in non-moral terms. One attraction of analytical naturalism is that it promises to deliver a naturalistic account of the content of moral judgment that leaves no ground for objections inspired by the OQA – which argues, in brief, that no matter how much purely descriptive information is available about an action, it’s still an open question whether that action is right or its end good, or whether we ought to perform it. Analytical naturalism attempts to accomplish this by resorting to conceptual analysis for moral predicates and sentences. Given this doctrine, it is at least possible that there are some such a priori or conceptual equivalences. If so, it is at least possible that the moral reduces to the natural in an a priori or analytical way. But our version of the OQA challenges this claim by showing that the reductions envisaged by these analytical naturalists are open to doubt on a priori grounds. We further

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contend that, in the dialectical context created by a properly construed OQA, a “digging in the heels” defense of such reductionist strategy would in the end beg the question against the Moorean.

A live option, at least since Moore’s day, for moral realists who wish to reduce the ethical to the natural has been the doctrine that moral terms and judgments could be replaced, without significant loss, by purely descriptive terms and judgments. Moore, of course, traced the doctrine back to J. S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Herbert Spencer, Edvard Westermarck, and others. But for unambiguous representatives of what we shall hereafter call ‘analytical naturalism’ Moore needn’t have looked farther than the work of contemporaries such as Ralph Barton Perry and F. C. Sharp. Perry (1970 [1926]: 138) famously argued that ‘x is valuable’ is semantically equivalent to ‘interest is taken in x’. And Sharp (1928: 409–11) defined ‘good’ as ‘desired upon reflection’, and ‘right’ as ‘desired when looked at from an impersonal point of view’. In Moore’s day, Allan White rightly noted, the OQA against analytical naturalism amounted to neither a straw man nor flogging a dead horse.

Even so, it might reasonably be asked, what do those dinosaurs have to do with analytical naturalism now? Perhaps the reductive programs of analytical naturalists have by now been discredited? Not at all – as can be seen from the work of such formidable representatives as Jackson and Smith. Jackson (1998, 2003) develops a version of that doctrine, which he calls ‘analytical descriptivism’, in connection with his defense of moral functionalism. And Smith (2000) outlines a parallel version of analytical naturalism in the course of suggesting what is for him the only naturalistic moral realist account of the content of moral belief that can safely dodge the bullet aimed by the OQA against naturalistic moral realism. To both of them, this argument fails, and for similar reasons, but we’ll put that aside for the time being to consider first what their accounts have in common. For both Smith and Jackson, the most plausible version of ethical naturalism is analytical and has a realist gloss. It holds the conjunction of two theses:

1 On Moore’s view, Spencer took ‘conduct that is more evolved’ to be semantically equivalent to ‘conduct that has a higher ethical sanction’ (Moore 1993b [1903]: section 29, 97–98), and Westermarck advocated a form of psychological naturalism according to which ‘right’ means ‘arouses feelings of approbation’ and ‘wrong’ means ‘arouses feelings of disapprobation’ (Moore 1922b: 312). Whether analytical naturalism can be found in Mill, as Moore claims, is of course controversial (see, e.g., Hall 1950: 51; Warnock 1960: 28–40; and West 1997). But Bentham is another story. He did after all write that words such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, and ‘ought’ have meaning only when interpreted in terms of the principle of utility. Moreover, he defined ‘right action’ as ‘an action that is conformable to the principle of utility’ (1988 [1789]: ch. 1, section 1 ff.).
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(1) Some moral properties are identical to natural properties.
(2) Moral predicates and sentences could be replaced without significant loss by purely descriptive predicates and sentences.

Although, given thesis (1), analytical naturalism is a kind of moral realism, the doctrine is clearly incompatible with the forms of moral realism advocated by non-naturalists and by the so-called Cornell realists. True, like Cornell realism, analytical naturalism is itself motivated by the success of science, considerations of ontological parsimony pointing to both the impossibility of properties and facts other than those that make up the world as conceived by science, and the conviction that the moral supervenes on the natural. But its thesis (2) commits analytical naturalism to holding that at least some moral predicates and sentences are content-equivalent to purely descriptive predicates and sentences – a claim that is at odds with the Cornell realists’ view that the relevant relation between the moral and the natural involves properties and facts only and is therefore solely metaphysical. On the other hand, each of the analytical naturalists’ theses entails the falsity of non-naturalism, according to which at least some moral predicates and sentences are not only not replaceable without significant loss by purely descriptive predicates and sentences, but express irreducible moral properties and facts.

Of concern here is a non-naturalist objection to analytical naturalism’s thesis (2) standardly raised by arguments along the lines of Moore’s OQA. If, as analytical naturalists contend, at least some moral predicates and sentences are conceptually equivalent to purely descriptive predicates and sentences, the possibility of replacing expressions in the moral vocabulary with purely descriptive expressions would be warranted a priori – although exactly which descriptive predicates and sentences might turn out to be the correct naturalistic replacements may well amount to an empirical matter of fact. Smith (2000: 29 ff.) develops a doctrine along these lines in the course of arguing that non-analytical naturalistic moral realism cannot adequately respond to the OQA. He notes that by abandoning the project of conceptual analysis in favor of a view according to which the relevant statements of identity between moral and natural properties and facts are necessary but a posteriori, Cornell’s style of naturalistic moral realism becomes unable to account for the content of moral belief. On Smith’s view, there might well be a posteriori identities between moral and non-moral properties as held by Cornell realists – say between the properties of rightness and maximizing utility. But the best argument that we could run in support of such identities would show
“that we in fact appealed to another truth, but this time one which is supposed to be known a priori, about the relation between rightness and certain natural properties” (Smith 2000: 29). In a similar vein, Jackson has it that there are a priori or conceptual entailments between moral and non-moral predicates and sentences, which follow a priori from the moral functionalist account of moral properties and facts. On his view, “[w]hat is a priori according to moral functionalism is not that rightness is such-and-such a descriptive property, but rather that A is right if and only if it has whatever property it is that plays the rightness role in mature folk morality, and it is an a posteriori matter what that property is” (1998: 151 ff.).

The first step in this analytical naturalist account, then, is a priori: namely, determining by analysis and reflection on our conception of certain moral predicates and sentences the conditions constraining the use of moral expressions, which would in turn constrain the naturalistic expressions that might qualify as replacements. But much of the remaining task facing the analytical naturalist is empirical, since it involves accounting for the content of moral judgment, which ultimately depends on being able to formulate correct statements of identity between expressions in both the moral and the descriptive vocabularies (Jackson 1998: 150; Smith 2000: 31). Since determining such semantic equivalences is likely to require empirical investigation and reasoned argument, there is logical space for the following reply to Moore’s OQA: given that identifying the relevant semantic equivalences is not, for analytical naturalism, an obvious matter, why should we think that the question of whether a certain equivalence holds will “always and genuinely” be an open question? That is, in response to the OQA, the analytical naturalist maintains that the correct conceptual equivalences between moral and descriptive expressions need not be trivial or obvious, but could be quite complex, and in need of negotiation (Jackson 1998: 150) or reasoned argument (Smith 2000: 31). Thus, if this reply is found compelling, the analytical naturalist program would appear beyond the reach of objections inspired by the OQA, none of which could therefore succeed against this version of naturalistic moral realism.

In rejecting the OQA, Jackson writes, “[W]hat exactly is supposed to be always and genuinely an open question? Any and every identification of rightness, say, with some descriptive property? But this claim could be no objection to moral functionalist styles of analytical descriptivism. The identifications of ethical properties with descriptive properties offered by moral functionalism are one and all a posteriori” (1998: 150). See also Jackson (1998: 145, n. 10).
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After all, Jackson seems to have a point in replying to the OQA by pointing out that “it is true that a sufficiently rich descriptive story leads a priori to an act’s being right; but this will be a clear case of an unobvious a priori or conceptual entailment, precisely because of the complexity of the moral functionalist story” (1998: 151). Likewise, according to Smith’s response to the OQA, although it is an a posteriori matter which property plays a certain moral role, the constraints on the property that could play that role can be settled only a priori because they are to be determined either by stipulation in the act of reference-fixing itself, or by reflection on the meaning of the words (Smith 2000: 29). In many cases, coming up with the correct analysis of the relevant constraints on moral concepts would be open to “reasoned argument,” and therefore might appear to be an open question. But that’s simply because the task at hand is not obvious or trivial. If so, any such conceptual analysis may be correct yet open to reasoned argument. But this is only owing to the fact that its correctness doesn’t depend on its being either open to reasoned argument or obvious. In fact, conceptual analyses of moral concepts are likely to be open to reasoned argument about “what the complex set of constraints on the use of the word being analyzed is and whether or not this complex set is entailed by the proposed analysis” (Smith 2000: 31).

Thus there appear to be good reasons, argued independently by both Jackson and Smith, to think that the OQA has no intuitive force against the doctrine that some a priori or conceptual equivalences obtain between the building blocks of moral and purely descriptive language. Given this doctrine, other things being equal, some sentences ascribing moral predicates to actions, things, or states of affairs are content-equivalent to some sentences ascribing purely descriptive predicates instead. Needless to say, if this is plausible, then given a common assumption about the parallel between linguistic and mental content, an analytical naturalist account of mental content along similar lines would also be plausible.

We turn now, for the remainder of this paper, to the analytical naturalist claim that some conceptual equivalences hold between *predicates* (not sentences) in the moral and non-moral vocabularies. On Smith and Jackson’s account, since such equivalences are likely to be unobvious, the theory that countenances them is therefore unaffected by Moore’s OQA. But we think that a modified inference, the OQA*, in fact raises a priori doubts about the analytical naturalist’s claim that moral expressions such as ‘good’, ‘ought’, and ‘right’ could be replaced without significant loss by predicates in a purely descriptive vocabulary. Our OQA* begins by supposing the truth of at least one such statement of equivalence. Let’s
suppose that the moral predicate ‘right’ expresses a concept that is equivalent to that expressed by the purely descriptive predicate ‘N’, where ‘N’ stands for whatever naturalistic predicate will turn out to denote the natural property that plays the rightness role in the ordinary conception of rightness. As far as our OQA* is concerned, what that predicate and the naturalistic property it denotes are could be currently under negotiation. Furthermore, these questions could end up being settled in mature folk morality, as Jackson predicts, by the convergence of our ordinary conceptions on the relevant predicates and properties. Let’s assume that now N stands for a complex (possibly infinite) disjunction where the moral predicate ‘right’ is satisfied by action A just in case A is either utility-maximizing, or what we desire to desire, or conducive to maximal preference-satisfaction, etc.

The OQA* can now be deployed to raise a priori doubts about whether a moral predicate such as ‘right’ is content-equivalent to a naturalistic predicate (of whatever sort). For, given this argument, the claim that ‘right’ can be replaced without significant loss by a predicate or predicates falling within N seems open to doubt on a priori grounds. To support this, the OQA* first considers a certain naturalistic predicate (or predicates) that might be a candidate for replacing ‘right’ without significant loss. It then contends that the sort of judgment involved in assessing that putative equivalence of predicates is based initially on a self-ascriptive comparative judgment of content. Judgments of that sort are plausibly regarded as a priori in the sense that their epistemic justification requires neither evidence nor inference from evidence. Clearly, if such are the grounds for doubting a proposed naturalistic replacement, that doubt would be a priori. Once OQA* makes it plausible that there are after all a priori grounds for doubting a purported naturalistic replacement for ‘right’, the argument then maintains that its steps could be iterated for other suitable candidates for naturalistic replacement of ‘right’ – or of ‘good’, ‘ought’, and the like. If this is correct, then it is open to a priori doubt whether any moral predicate could be replaced without significant loss by a naturalistic predicate or predicates.

On the issue of how the alleged equivalences between moral and non-moral expressions are going to be settled, Jackson seems confident that this will be the outcome of a mature folk morality. Smith is similarly optimistic in holding that, at the end of day, there will be convergence in reasoned argument about the a priori constraints that govern the ordinary conception of some moral terms. On his view, determining the actual naturalistic property (or properties) that plays the role of rightness in that conception is also an a posteriori matter (2004a: 31 ff.).
Obviously, we should expect a great number of currently known and unknown candidates for naturalistic replacements of ‘right’. Thus, perforce, the OQA*, if compelling, would render its conclusion plausible at best. To run this argument, we need not make comparative judgments of content about every candidate for naturalistic replacement of a moral predicate: as a plausibility argument, simply making them for a representative number of such candidates would suffice. In addition, there is plainly no need to make comparative judgments of content about a putative replacement of ‘right’ with, say, ‘being a cabbage’ (Parfit 2011). But we need to consider those candidates that have some chance of being naturalistic replacements of a moral predicate – for example:

Utilitarian

The moral predicate ‘right’ can be replaced without significant loss by the purely descriptive predicate, ‘utility-maximizing’.

An OQA* could now be deployed to raise a priori doubts about Utilitarian. For evaluating the alleged content-equivalence triggers the standard Moorean question, construed as: is ‘maximizes utility’ content-equivalent to ‘right’? To answer this requires that one first make an a priori comparative judgment of content for both predicates, which starts out with selfascriptive comparative judgments of content of the form: are my tokens of ‘M’ content-equivalent to my toks of ‘N’? The intuitions elicited in response to the Moorean question are initially first person, since they require that one compare one’s conceptions of the content of the predicates involved. They are therefore epistemically privileged intuitions, for under normal circumstances and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, their epistemic warrant requires neither investigation of the environment nor inference from evidence – provided of course that one understands the moral and non-moral predicates involved, and has no reason to doubt that one is a competent user of them (or to think that one’s intuitions about their contents are atypical and therefore irrelevant to the folk conception of them).

Similar Moorean questions could be deployed to generate parallel doubts about other putative content-equivalences between ‘right’ and purely descriptive predicates. Adequate answers to such questions would, at least initially, require access only to the concepts in one’s own mind, together with a priori generalizations of the resulting intuitions about sameness and difference in their content. There is now dialectical space to claim that the doubts about putative content-equivalences that such questions generate are warranted a priori: as argued above, they rely on
intuitions that, under normal circumstances and in the absence of contrary evidence, require no empirical investigation (though they are defeasible by empirical evidence). In addition, those intuitions seem generally true, provided there are no reasons to think that one is not competent with the concepts involved. Arguments along similar lines could be run to generate a priori doubts about other putative naturalistic equivalences of ‘right’, ‘good’, ‘ought’, and the like. Since Moorean questions are likely to elicit a priori doubts for each proposed naturalistic equivalence of moral predicates, the burden is now on the analytical naturalists to produce reasons strong enough to overcome such doubts.

Construed in this way, the OQA is beyond the reach of the responses to it offered by Jackson and Smith, given that the argument does not depend on the relevant question’s being open when it is significant or not trivial (or, alternatively, closed when it is insignificant or trivial). A priori warranted claims need not be trivial: what characterizes them instead is that they can be settled without empirical investigation. The OQA* is therefore immune to Jackson and Smith’s line of reply to Moorean arguments that starts out by observing something that Moore seems to have missed: namely, that a conceptual analysis could be correct but neither obvious nor trivial. In the case of the conceptual equivalences between moral and purely descriptive predicates countenanced by analytical naturalists, the Moorean question might appear open while being in fact closed. Does this challenge our argument? We think not, since we can concede the possibility that our selfascriptive comparative judgments of content could on occasion be mistaken. Given resource limitations such as time and concentration-span, we could mistake for an open question one that is in fact closed. But the OQA* is not offered as a refutation of analytical naturalism: it’s merely a plausibility argument against it, resting on well known reasons in the literature on knowledge of content to the effect that, under normal circumstances and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, self-ascriptive comparative judgments of linguistic and mental contents depend on no empirical investigation and are generally not mistaken. We submit that there appear to be a priori grounds to doubt that purely descriptive candidates could replace moral predicates such as ‘right’, ‘good’, and ‘ought’ without significant loss.

On our view, comparative judgments of content are a priori warranted, in the sense of being non-evidential. They might also be generally true, provided the thinker is a competent user of the concepts involved. For similar claims in the case of self-knowledge, see Boghossian (1994); Burge (1996, 1998); and Davidson (1991). But cf. Jackson 1998.
Again, our OQA* is a plausibility argument against the versions of analytical naturalism favored by Jackson and Smith, rather than a refutation of them. Although the idea of reconstructing the OQA as a plausibility argument against analytical naturalism is not new, we know of no previous attempt at grounding the openness of the Moorean question on the apriority of first-person, comparative judgments of content. Our argument may be summarized as follows:

OQA*

(i) If ‘right’ could be replaced (without significant loss) by ‘maximizes utility’, then whether ‘maximizes utility’ and ‘right’ are content-equivalent is not open to doubt on a priori grounds.

(ii) But whether ‘right’ and ‘maximizes utility’ are content-equivalent is open to doubt on a priori grounds.

Therefore,

(iii) It is reasonable to believe that ‘right’ cannot be replaced (without significant loss) by ‘utility-maximizing’.

(iv) Steps (i) through (iii) can be iterated for great number of purely descriptive replacements of ‘right’.

Therefore,

(v) It is reasonable to believe that ‘right’ cannot be replaced (without significant loss) by purely descriptive terms.

(vi) Steps (i) through (v) can be iterated for a great number of purely descriptive replacements of ‘good’, ‘ought’, and other moral terms.

Therefore,

(vii) It is reasonable to believe that ‘good’, ‘ought’, and other moral terms cannot be replaced (without significant loss) by purely descriptive terms.

A confused move in this direction is Steven Ball’s 1988. His attempt to vindicate the OQA against analytical naturalism fails on two counts: on the one hand, he neglects to invoke a priori grounds for semantic intuitions of the sort at work in the OQA. On the other, he fails to recognize that the OQA (charitably reconstructed) is at most a plausibility argument. Charles Pigden (2007) does construe the OQA as a plausibility argument, but he thinks that an adequate OQA would proceed ‘piecemeal’ by invoking a posteriori grounds against each proposed semantic analysis. Thus he takes Moorean questions to raise a posteriori doubts about naturalistic replacements for moral terms by invoking evidence from third-person intuitions about the lack of synonymy with the moral predicate. And although Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2009: 235) also ascribe to the OQA “considerable intuitive force,” they take it to be “closely related in spirit” to their Moral Twin Earth case, thus resulting in an argument that is stronger than the one proposed here. Cf. Nuccetelli and Seay (2007a).
We believe that the OQA* puts the burden of argument on analytical naturalism. What turns dialectical space this way is the appeal to an a priori warrant for Moorean intuitions about the failure of content-equivalence in candidates for replacement of moral terms such as Utilitarian. Given that warrant, the burden of reason rests with the analytical naturalists, who must not only make a compelling case for the possibility of their reductive analyses, but also explain away a priori doubts generated by the OQA*. Merely claiming that correct but non-trivial analyses are possible is not sufficient to overcome those doubts.

Whether moral predicates such as ‘right’, ‘good’, and ‘ought’ are a priori or conceptually equivalent to some purely descriptive predicates, then, seems open to a priori doubt. We’ll now show that, in the dialectical context created by the OQA*, the claim that such conceptual equivalences hold amounts to a pattern of dialectical failure, which we shall call ‘the analytical naturalist mistake’. The type of error we have in mind is a dialectical phenomenon of failure that Moore would perhaps have done better to point out rather than raise the naturalistic fallacy charge against. In fact, our account of what has gone wrong with the analytical naturalists’ defense of their reductive program can make sense of Moore’s confused remarks about the naturalistic fallacy in chapter 1 of *Principia Ethica* (1993b [1903]: section 12, 64–66). Although his claim to have found a special type of fallacy identifiable as “naturalistic” may well be unjustifiable, his skepticism about certain analyses of ethical naturalists – as well as of other analyses featuring only purely natural terms, or where one term is ethical and the other metaphysical – might be justified on different grounds. Surely we are entitled to be suspicious of any conceptual equivalence whose proponent is unable to overcome a priori doubts about that equivalence. Interpreted in this way, Moore was clearly right in criticizing ‘Pleasant is the sensation of red’ and ‘Goodness is what’s commanded by God’. Likewise, we are entitled to reject attempted definitions which, in the context of a certain debate, are dialectically abusive in some sense – as in the rather obvious case where abortion is defined as ‘a form of infanticide’, or ‘a killing of an unborn baby’. Plainly, in the context of the debate over the moral status of abortion, the claim that ‘killing fetuses’ and ‘killing babies’ are conceptually equivalent could not overcome a priori doubts raised by an OQA-inspired objector.

On our view, the analytical naturalist commits a parallel dialectical mistake. For he maintains that, once all negotiations about the content and reference of moral predicates such as ‘right’, ‘good’, and ‘ought’ are
settled (allegedly by convergence of individual conceptions), those predicates will turn out to be equivalent to certain purely descriptive predicates. By advocating such equivalences, he presupposes that he has some evidence or some reason to dismiss the a priori doubts arising from a properly construed OQA. As mentioned above, he dismisses Moore’s OQA on the grounds that a conceptual equivalence could be correct but not trivial or in need of reasoned argument. But that’s not an objection to OQA*, whose Moorean question suggests that, for all we can tell now, at least from the first-person perspective, moral predicates do not seem conceptually equivalent to purely descriptive predicates. Thus, the analytical dialectical mistake is simply that of begging the question against a great number of philosophers, from non-naturalists to moral nihilists, who have found some version of the OQA persuasive. In the end, analytical naturalism might turn out to be true, but analytical naturalists must first discharge the burden of reason – which involves producing evidence or reasons that have enough force to overcome OQA*-inspired a priori doubts about the possibility of the proposed reductive program. Until then, non-naturalists and moral nihilists (i.e., skeptics and non-cognitivists) confronted with this sort of tactic in metaethical debate can dismiss the analytical naturalist proposal by simply showing that it begs the question against reasoning along the lines of OQA*.

On our view, this is what Moore should have said on the question of where analytical naturalism goes wrong.7 Recognizing occurrences of the analytical naturalist mistake has a more modest cash value than Moore’s

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6 Jackson (1998: 151) envisages the possibility of persisting doubts stemming from the OQA, but he dismisses them as remnants of an obsolete view of moral language. He writes: “It may be objected that even when all the negotiation and critical reflection is over and we have arrived at mature folk morality, it would still make perfect sense to doubt that the right is what occupies the rightness role. But now I think that we analytical descriptivists are entitled to dig in our heels and insist that the idea that what fits the bill that well might still fail to be rightness, is nothing more than a hangover from the platonist conception that the meaning of the term ‘right’ is somehow a matter of its picking out, or being somehow mysteriously attached to, the form of the right.” Given the argument we are pressing here, such a “digging in the heels” defense of analytical naturalism is unpersuasive, since it seems to beg the question against a properly construed OQA. For a different but compatible reply to the “digging in the heels” defense of analytical descriptivism, see Horgan and Timmons (2009: 236). See also Jackson’s rejoinder (2009: 442 ff.).

7 Moore did express some reservations about the problem underlying what he called ‘the naturalistic fallacy’, but to him they were nothing more than the matter of how to label the mistake. “I do not care about the name,” he wrote. “[W]hat I do care about is the fallacy. It does not matter what we call it, provided we recognize it when we meet with it. It is to be met with in almost every book in Ethics; and yet it is not recognized; and that is why it is necessary to multiply illustrations of it, and convenient to give it a name” (Principia Ethica, ch. 1, section 12 [1993b [1903]: 65–66]).
original naturalistic fallacy charge, since we do not claim to have thereby refuted even the analytical variety of moral naturalism. We merely think that such recognition puts the onus on those favoring analytical naturalism to provide independent reasons that are strong enough to explain away a priori doubts about the possibility of replacing moral predicates such as ‘right’, ‘good’, and ‘ought’ with purely descriptive predicates without significant loss.

Our account has the consequence that, rather than its being Moore’s argument that begs the question (as W. K. Frankena famously alleged long ago), it is actually the reductive program of semantic naturalists that begs the question against the Moorean inference. But, then, why has that inference been thought by many to amount to nothing more than a petitio? For one thing, critics may have been misled by Moore’s own inflationary view about the number of reductive programs that have committed what for him appears to be an actual fallacy. As we have seen, he did claim to have found the fallacy in the work of many philosophers and social scientists, including controversial cases such as that of J. S. Mill. In addition, he seems to have conflated analytical and non-analytical varieties of ethical naturalism, charging that they all committed the alleged fallacy.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that critics have not always given the most charitable reading to Moore’s inference. They have notoriously evaluated the naturalistic fallacy charge in isolation from its dialectical context, which is an OQA properly construed as a plausibility argument against analytical versions of moral naturalism. Moreover, even if it makes no sense to charge that such theories commit a naturalistic fallacy, our contention has been that they do seem to rest on a mistake akin to the broader dialectical phenomenon of begging the question.

Let’s now take stock of our version of Moore’s extended inference. We have argued that OQA*, construed as a plausibility argument, is nonetheless strong enough to generate a priori doubts about the possibility of replacing moral predicates with purely descriptive predicates without significant loss. If we are right, then the reductive program of analytical naturalists such as Jackson and Smith does instantiate a pattern of dialectical mistake: one committed by any argumentative strategy that assumes the

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8 Critics of Moore who have read his naturalistic fallacy charge in this way include not only Frankena (1939) but also Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992); Ridge (2009); and Williams (1983).
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possibility of conceptual equivalences that are in fact open to doubt on a priori grounds. As a result, no such strategy could be cogent. A Moorean inference is thus shown to have some force against attempts to reduce the moral to the non-moral by means of taking some expressions in the moral vocabulary to be conceptually equivalent to others in the purely descriptive vocabulary.