

The Philosophical Society

Naturalistic Ethics Sunday, 23 June 2002

PROGRAMME

9.45am	Registration	1.45pm	Non-Natural Persons ANN LONG
10.00am	A New Perspective? CHARLES BROWN	2.30pm	Some Interesting Implications? CHARLES BROWN
11.30am	Tea/Coffee	3.00pm	Tea/Coffee
12.00noon	Unnatural Animals PETER GIBSON	3.30pm	Panel Discussion
12.45pm	Lunch	4.30pm	Course disperses

This is a special one day meeting organised by The Philosophical Society to be held at Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford. The speakers are members of the Society. This is a new venture for the Society and we hope that you will be able to attend.

The Chairman will be the President of the Society, Marianne Talbot, Associate Tutor in Philosophy, OUDCE

The Subject

Many, indeed probably most, philosophers have believed that morality is somehow natural, but their attempts to unpack that 'somehow' have usually ended up in the supernatural, for example in religion or mysticism.

With the arrival of the enlightenment the search for a fully scientific explanation of a natural morality gathered momentum but produced no philosophically convincing result for two main reasons: the lack of a clear idea of how humankind fits into nature and the observation by David Hume that that we do not know how logically to get from facts to values, from 'is' to 'ought'. In other words, we cannot justify any of our moral judgements with anything like philosophical rigour.

The publishing in 1859 of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection seemed to many to confirm how humans are a product of entirely natural processes, but the apparently positive implications of this for any naturalistic ethics seemed to be neutralised by the publication in 1903 of *Principia Ethica*, in which G. E. Moore stated a further, allegedly fundamental, problem: any attempt to define or analyse in empirical terms the meaning of 'good', the most basic idea in morality, is bound to commit the 'naturalistic fallacy' because goodness is a non-natural property and is unanalysable.

This is still the situation. Attempts to explain morality as part of nature go on, but they continue to founder on the seemingly inexorable rocks of the is/ought gap and the naturalistic fallacy.

The Talks

Charles Brown has over many years propounded his own ideas on naturalistic ethics. This will be an opportunity to hear at first hand the basis of his framework and to probe any inadequacies that might still remain. He will attempt to show that we can navigate the 'inexorable rocks' fully naturally to reach greater insight into what morality is really about.

Peter Gibson will briefly explore the possibility that although humans are indeed part of nature, they stand outside the account of nature which has been developed in the last three hundred years, thus leading to some misunderstandings about such things as epistemology and morality.

Ann Long discusses the inadequacy of current theories of morality. The strength of theories of morality based in evolutionary ideas is their scientificity: the weakness is their reductionism, whereby the appeal is to a science appropriate to the study of human animals rather than a science appropriate to the study of human persons. The strength of theories of morality based in any of the alternative ideas currently around in moral philosophy is their recognition of the special and unique position of human beings: their weakness is a thoroughly unscientific approach whereby they can offer nothing which would be immune to a relativistic critique. We thus have inappropriate natural science and inadequate moral philosophy. What we need is appropriate and adequate moral science.

The Speakers

Charles Brown is a longstanding member of the Rewley House Philosophical Society, a former Chairman of the Society and a regular contributor to the society's Review. He is retired from business, and philosophy, especially the theory of morality, is now his main interest.

Peter Gibson is a former Chairman of the Philosophical Society. He lives in Amersham, and has taught Philosophy at the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, for eighteen years. His main philosophical interests are in the mind, epistemology and morality.

Ann Long's first degree was in economics, her second in psychology. Having worked first as a journalist, her return to work after the birth and early years of her three offspring was to lecturing in psychology in a college of further and higher education. Her special interests in philosophy are in moral and political philosophy – particularly in the philosophy of equality.

Suggested Reading

Jane Maienschein and Michael Ruse (eds.), *Biology and the Foundation of Ethics*, CUP, 1999; esp. Chs 8 and 11.

Simon Blackburn, *Being Good*; OUP 2001; esp. Ch 4.

G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Revised Edition), CUP 1993; esp. Chs 1 - 3 and Preface to the Second Edition.

John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (1957) and *The Form of the Personal* (1961)

Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (2000)

Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (2001)