MORAL ARGUMENTS AND MORAL BELIEFS

J. J. MULHERN

Dpt. of Philosophy
Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr - Pennsylvania

It has become almost fashionable in the last ten years to disparage non-naturalism in ethics. Non-naturalism — whether ascriptivist, emotivist, or prescriptivist — depends, it is said, on maintaining the distinction of evaluation from description; and some writers wish to argue that the reasons given for maintaining this distinction are unsound.

Many of these writers might not be naturalists were they not quite so completely sold on two papers written by Philippa Foot in the late fifties. (1) In one of these, called "Moral Arguments," Mrs Foot advanced the thesis "that some things do, and some things do not, count in favour of a moral conclusion, and that a man can no more decide for himself what is evidence for rightness and wrongness than he can decide what is evidence for monetary inflation or a tumour on the brain." (2) Here she was concerned with several questions, but mainly, it seems, with that of the logical relations, such as they might be, that the conclusions of moral arguments have to their premisses. In the other paper, "Moral Beliefs," she proposed that, in order to qualify as moral, the beliefs stated in the premisses and conclusions of moral arguments would have to have an internal relation to their objects. (3) There is a considerable overlap of one paper's remarks upon the other's; but the former paper apparently was intended to deal with the inferential relations of other beliefs to moral ones, while the latter just as apparently was intended to deal with the status and character of moral beliefs.

For whatever reasons, these two papers have met very little opposition; and yet they are far from unobjectionable. In this essay, I shall indicate some of the points at which objections against them appropriately might be lodged. There may be

something of value after all in the naturalistic revival; my aim at present is merely to make it clear that Mrs Foot's arguments don't show it.

In "Moral Arguments," Mrs Foot sets out to consider two views of the relation that facts have to values — the view that factual premisses entail evaluative conclusions and the view that factual premisses count as evidence for evaluative conclusions. As her paper proceeds, the discussion of entailment swallows up that of the evidential relation, and Mrs Foot never actually reaches the latter. Her argument does have two parts, however, even if they are not as advertised. These are her rejection of disproofs of the entailment view, on the one hand, and, on the other, her presentation of an example which purports to be "an example of a non-evaluative premise from which an evaluative conclusion can be deduced." I shall deal with both parts.

Mrs Foot wants to say that the entailment view, on which factual premisses entail evaluative conclusions, has not been done under by the emotivists and prescriptivists, and that so far as their account of the matter goes, Hume's Law — no 'ought' from an 'is' — might as well not hold. According to Mrs Foot, "it may seem obvious that a non-evaluative premise could not entail an evaluative conclusion, but it remains unclear how it is supposed to be proved." (4) This, however, is not unclear at all. Entailments of this kind cannot hold because, briefly put, what is inferred from a premiss set cannot contain predicates not contained in the premiss set, if the inference is to be valid. The issue here is one of predicates. Let us suppose that the predicates $\varnothing_1, \varnothing_2, \ldots, \varnothing_n$ occur in a premiss set, but that $\varnothing_{n+1}$ does not so occur. The predicates in the premiss set are factual, while $\varnothing_{n+1}$ is evaluative. If $\varnothing_{n+1}$ does occur in a conclusion from the premiss set, the immediate propositional context (truth-functional atom) in which it occurs will have no content dependence upon this premiss set; that is to say, it will not be related intentionally to this premiss set rather than to any other premiss set. (This leaves open trivial cases such as that in which an occurrence of $\varnothing_{n+1}$ is induced by the use of, say, Addition, or by the writing

of a rule or zero-premiss conclusion or some other line containing $\varnothing_{n+1}$ that is not content dependent on the premiss set.) It will not be inferred from the premiss set, and certainly will not be entailed by this premiss set, although, of course, it may be materially implied by this premiss set, it, for example, the premiss set itself is inconsistent. So much for her announced treatment of the entailment view.

Mrs Foot goes on to advocate what she labels an evidential view, maintaining that "there may be the strictest rules of evidence even where an evaluative conclusion is concerned." (5) This position, however, depends upon a discussion of rudeness and offence-giving which is constructed along entailmental lines. Mrs Foot offers for consideration "the assertion that those [aforementioned] conditions of offence are fulfilled — let us call it O — and the statement that a piece of behaviour is rude — let us call it R" as part of her analysis of what it means to say that "reference to offence is to be included in any account of the concept of rudeness." (6) This already suggests entailment; and Mrs Foot goes on to remove any lingering doubts about what she means. To quote at length:

I conclude that whether a man is speaking of behaviour as rude or not rude, he must use the same criteria as anyone else, and that since the criteria are satisfied if O is true, it is impossible for him to assert O while denying R. It follows that if it is a sufficient condition of P's *entailing* [italics mine] Q that the assertion of P is inconsistent with the denial of Q, we have here an example of a non-evaluative premise from which an evaluative conclusion can be deduced. (7)

Speaking of "the strictest rules of evidence" and speaking of "P's entailing Q" are, then, for Mrs Foot, but two ways of summarising her treatment of what she would have us think of as the evidential view — a view which is, however, entailmental.

Evidential or entailmental, her example amounts to this: 'Rude', she claims, is an evaluative word which "can only be used where certain descriptions apply." Thus "reference to offence is to be included in any account of the concept of

rudeness." The choice of 'rude' for her example is an unfortunate one, since, if we can trust the Shorter OED, most of the senses of 'rude' are descriptive rather than evaluative. But this is of little consequence. Even supposing an evaluative sense for 'rude', it is easy to see that we do not have here a legitimate transition from fact to evaluation. For if the transition is a good one, that only shows that either the apparently factual premiss set is not really only factual or the apparently evaluative conclusion is not really evaluative. (8)

There is a simple test which shows that one of these alternatives must be verified. It consists in asking whether, if the supposed evaluative conclusion entails an imperative, any supposedly factual premiss set also entails one. If the conclusion entails an imperative, then either the premiss set must entail one also or it won't entail the conclusion; if the premiss set does not entail an imperative, then the conclusion must not entail one either or it won't be entailed by the premiss set.

Assume that Mrs Foot's R, which has the form '∅ is rude', entails an imperative of the form 'refrain from doing ∅'. Does O also entail an imperative ? Her formulation of it leaves us in doubt. She says: "The right account of the situation in which it is correct to say that a piece of behaviour is rude, is, I think, that this kind of behaviour causes offence by indicating lack of respect." (9) The question is, then, whether all behaviour that causes offence by indicating lack of respect ought to be refrained from. And, of course, the right answer will be in the negative. There are times when one need not refrain rfom causing offence by indicating lack of respect; there are times when no respect is called for, when no indication of respect is called for, and when whoever takes offence at not being shown respect is in the wrong. Indicating lack of respect is to be avoided, so far as I can see, only when, to begin with, respect is due, and when, in addition, an indication of respect is due. Thus, a piece of behaviour that merely causes offence by indicating lack of respect need not always be refrained from; and a premiss of the form '∅ causes offence by indicating lack of respect' need not entail an impera-

tive of the form 'refrain from Ø'. If we take O this ways as not entailing an imperative while R does entail one, then O will be non-evaluative and will not entail R.

O can entail on imperative, however, if it is recast in the form 'Ø causes offence by unduly indicating lack of due respect'. The catch is that when O is written this way, it comes out as forthrightly evaluative; and then, even though O now may entail R as well as the imperative 'refrain from doing Ø', there is no passage from a factual premiss set to an evaluative conclusion.

I conclude, then, that Mrs Foot has failed to make out a case for either the evidential or the entailmental view of the relation that the factual premisses of moral arguments are supposed to have to their evaluative conclusions.

In her other epoch-making paper of the late fifties, called "Moral Beliefs," Mrs Foot adopts an argumentative standpoint slightly different from that of "Moral Arguments." At least two features of "Moral beliefs" are not parralleled closely in "Moral Arguments." One of these is Mrs Foot's method of trying to show the falsehood of the assumption "that some in dividual may, mithout logical error, base his beliefs about matters of value entirely on premisses which no one else would recognise as giving any evidence at all." ([11]) The view she is attacking here can be stated less ambiguously as the view that someone may accept what noone else would accept as evidence for evaluative conclusions; and she wants to argue against this that indeed noone may accept what noone else would accept as evidence for evaluative conclusions.

In attempting to prove her point, Mrs Foot introduces what she uses the words "internal relation to an object" as the name for. If she can show that certain attitudes have internal relations to their objects, then she will be able to show, she thinks, that certain evaluative conclusions have to be accompanied by certain attitudes, and that any evidence which tends to separate an attitude from its proper object is so far not acceptable either as evidence against the evaluative conclusion in question or as evidence for competing evaluative conclusions. A moral attitude is supposed to have an internal

relation to an object whenever that attitude could not logically be found "in combination with any object whatsoever." ([12])

The examples Mrs Foot offers in lieu of analyses provide grounds for inferring that ,on her view, there are some objects with which only a pro-attitude, or only a con-attitude, can be found, and these objects are such that the appropriate attitude must be found with them if any attitude is found with them at all. The relation of attitude to object is a matter of logical necessity rather than of mere fact. A moral attitude has an internal relation to an object whenever it has any relation to that object. If a moral attitude occurs, then its object must be of a certain sort: if the object is not of that sort, then the moral attitude in question must not occur.

Mrs Foot sometimes writes as if each moral attitude had this internal relation to a single object only. But she certainly means that a given moral attitude, such as commendation, has an internal relation to more than one object and indeed to all the objects in a certain range. Her point is then that there are classes of objects to which pro-attitudes, such as commendation, or con-attitudes, such as condemnation, are inteally related. So when Mrs Foot denies that "it would make sense to think of anything as the subject of such 'commendation'," ([13]) she presumably means that there are classes of objects whose members it would not make sense to commend but whose members it would make sense to condemn. Following this line of argument, it is correct to rephrase one of her thematic remarks this way: "I wish to say that this [nonnaturalist] hypothesis is untenable, and that there is no describing the evaluative meaning of 'good', evaluation, commending, or anything of the sort, without fixing the [range of] object[s] to which they are supposed to be attached." ([14])

There is a construction under which it is true that, from the logical point of view, only certain objects can be objects of commendation, for only objects of evaluation can be objects of commendation. It would make no sense to think of just anything as an object of commendation, since it would make no

sense to think of a non-evaluable object as an object of commendation. This merely makes the familiar and correct semantical point that the range of applicability of 'commendable' is limited to objects of which 'evaluable' is true. But this correct semantical point has the effect of disallowing Mrs Foot's assumption. Of an object that is evaluable, it makes sense to say that it is commendable if and only if it makes sense to deny this, even though the affirmation and denial cannot both be true. If it makes sense to commend, it makes sense to condemn; and if it makes sense to condemn, it makes sense to commend. Thus, even though an object is evaluable, commendation will not be internally related to it, if for this it is required that the commendation be related to the object as a matter of necessity rather than as a matter of mere fact. For it will make sense to commend an object only if that object sensibly could be condemned. So from the logical point of view, even if noone else would accept an item as evidence for, say, commendation, it always will at least make sense for someone to accept it, provided that the object about which evidence is given is itself evaluable.

Insofar as Mrs Foot's argument against the assumption "that some individual may, without logical error, base his beliefs about matters of value entirely on premises which no one else would recognise as giving any evidence at all" — insofar as her argument against this depends upon the notion of what she uses the words "internal relation to an object" as the name for, so far that argument fails.

The second distinctive feature of "Moral Beliefs" is the quite general charge against non-naturalism in ethics that, if it is true, "it follows that a moral eccentric could argue to moral conclusions from quite idiosyncratic premisses." ([15]) Because, for the non-naturalist, "an evaluation is not connected logically with the factual statements on which it is based" ([16]) — and don't the last eight words beg the question? — it is supposed to follow, if Mrs Foot may be taken seriously, that just anything can serve as basis for evaluation.

Upon scrutiny it becomes apparent, however, that the charge miscarries. When the putative non-naturalist con-

trasts statements of fact with evaluations, he need not be saying anything about what qualifies as evidence for evaluative conclusions, any more than be need be saying anything about what qualifies as evidence for descriptive conclusions. To put it in other words: the non-naturalist's separation of fact from value requires at most only that what qualifies as evidence for evaluative conclusions should differ from what qualifies as evidence for descriptive conclusions. One ought to be even-handed in these matters. Does the separation of fact from value, as the non-naturalist sees it, require or imply or entail that just anything can serve as evidence for descriptive conclusions? Of course not.

It is clear, then, that what Mrs Foot thinks follows from non-naturalism in ethics does not follow after all. But on the other hand, the non-naturalist might accept on independent grounds the view that "a moral eccentric could argue to moral conclusions from quite idiosyncratic premisses." Indeed, what is so odd about this? It happens every day. And it doesn't justify our believing that, if we subscribe to the separation of fact from value, then just anything should serve as evidence for evaluative conclusions. Non-naturalists need not be moral eccentrics, though I dare say some of them perfectly well may be.

In summary: it does not seem that Mrs Foot, in "Moral Beliefs," has made out any case at all for logical naturalism. She has not shown that non-evaluative premisses entail or serve as evidence for evaluative conclusions; she has not shown that Hume's Law fails; she has not shown that noone may accept what noone else would accept as evidence for evaluative conclusions; and she has not shown that non-naturalism requires a permissive line on evidence for evaluative conclusions. It remains to be seen whether a case can be made out for her new naturalism.

Bryn Mawr College J. J. MULHERN

NOTES

(1) "Moral Arguments," *Mind*, lxvii (1958), pp. 502-513; "Moral Beliefs,"

Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1ix (1958-1959), pp. 83-104.

([2]) "Moral Arguments," pp. 504-505.

([3]) Thus she writes: "So far I have been arguing that such things as pride, fear, dismay, and the thought that something is dangerous have an internal relation to their object, and hope that what I mean is becoming clear. Now we must consider whether these attitudes or beliefs which are the moral philosopher's study are similar, or whether such things as 'evaluation' and 'thinking something good' and 'commendation' could logically be found in combination with any object whatsoever." See "Moral Beliefs," pp. 91-92. We are supposed to gather that she rejects the latter alternative.

([4]) "Moral Arguments," p. 507.

([5]) "Moral Arguments," p. 510.

([6]) "Moral Arguments," p. 508.

([7]) "Moral Arguments," p. 509.

([8]) This argument follows what J. R. Searle calls "the classical model" of arguments against the sort of move Mrs Foot makes. Searle himself apparently favours logical naturalism over the classical model. For his reasons, which I do not find compelling, see *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), ch. 8.

([9]) "Moral Arguments," p. 507.

([10]) Here she offers what seems to suggest that she has in mind an indirect proof of naturalism which would begin with a statement of the non-naturalistic position she hopes to prove false. The non-naturalistic position (~N), that evaluations are not connected logically with factual statements, is supposed to imply (A) that anything can serve as basis for an evaluative conclusion. (A) is resolved into two assumptions: (A_1) is that someone may accept what noone else would accept as evidence for evaluative conclusions; (A_2) is that someone may refuse to accept what everyone else would accept as evidence for evaluative conclusions. Mrs Foot believes that both (A_1) and (A_2) are false, and that hence (A) as a whole is false. It would follow that whatever implies (A) is false, including the non-naturalistic position (~N), so that the naturalistic position (N) would emerge victorious.

This appears to be the structure of her argument. In what follows I deal with her attempt to show that (A_1) is false but not with her attempt to show that (A_2) is false, since the lines on which her treatment of (A_2) can be dealt with are suficiently clear from my discussion of "Moral Arguments." I consider as well her apparent view that (~N) implies (A).

([11]) "Moral Beliefs," p. 84.

([12]) "Moral Beliefs," pp. 91-92.

([13]) "Moral Beliefs," p. 85.

([14]) "Moral Beliefs," pp. 85-86.

([15]) "Moral Beliefs," p. 84.

([16]) "Moral Beliefs," pp. 83-84.